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SERMON CXXXIV.

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THE GOD OF THE CHRISTIAN AND THE GOD OF THE INFIDEL.

PSALM lxxxvi. 8.—*Among the gods, there is none like unto thee, O Lord.*

THE existence of a God is a fundamental principle of all religion. The mind, whenever this doctrine is presented to it, instantly perceives that it is grasping an idea of immense importance; and that, before it has paused to survey its momentous and infinitely extended bearings. But when considered in its relations to the material and the immaterial world, to every object in the wide range of thought, it gathers an interest which the mind, in its loftiest aspirings, is inadequate to comprehend; being a sort of dividing line between the territories of light and the territories of darkness; between a region illumined by the acknowledgment of the active presence of a God, and a region over which hang the clouds, and shadows, and curses of Atheism.

But it must be acknowledged that, while the existence of a God lies at the foundation of all religion, this momentous truth derives much of its importance from the character which is attributed to him. Laying out of view the gods of the heathen, to which our text may be supposed to have had especial reference, we all know that the Supreme Being has been invested with a variety of character by those who have professed their belief in the spirituality of his nature. I purpose in this discourse to bring before you *the God of the infidel, and the God of the Christian*; and to inquire *which is most likely to exalt the character of man; which best adapted to meet his necessities.*

I. *Let us compare the God of the infidel and the God of the Christian.*

1. The infidel's God is a being of *uncertain attributes*: the character of the Christian's God is *fixed and certain.*

If you cast an eye through the records of deism, you can hardly fail to be struck with the fact that there are scarcely two individuals who acknowledge the same God. Some of them have conceived of the divine Being in a manner imperfect indeed, but in some degree just; have uttered sublime senti-

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But remember, that in order that the Christian's God may become your portion, you must yield your hearts and lives to his service. It is not enough that you profess your faith in him, or even that you have some emotions of sublimity or rapture in meditating on his attributes. You must love him, trust him, obey him. Then, I repeat, you may be fearless in adversity; fearless in death; fearless amid the funereal fires of the world.

SERMON CXXXV.

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CHOOSING THE GOOD PART.

LUKE X. 42.—*And Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.*

Our blessed Lord, when he was on earth, partook largely of all the common sufferings of human nature. Though he was Lord of the creation, and could always have supplied his own necessities and those of his disciples by miraculous agency, yet, instead of availing himself of his divine power, he suffered many of his wants to go unsupplied, and for the supply of others he cast himself on the hospitality of his friends. There was a family at Bethany who were peculiarly endeared to him; who, in one case, at least, and probably in many others, experienced largely of his kindness, and with whom he seems always to have been a most welcome guest. Passing through their village on his way to Jerusalem, he called to see them; not in the spirit in which it is common to call upon people in these days, as a mere matter of ceremony, but from feelings of genuine affection, and with an earnest desire to do them good. The two sisters, Mary and Martha, seem both to have given him a most cordial welcome: though they exhibited their attachment and joy in very different ways: the one by endeavoring to provide for him an entertainment; the other by sitting at his feet, and listening to his instruction. Martha, observing the course which her sister was taking, in a moment of impatience, complained to the Master that she was left to serve alone, and begged of him the favor that he would bid Mary come to her assistance. But behold, Martha, who no doubt expected commendation, was met with rebuke! "Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: but one thing is needful. And Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her." Is there not reason to believe that if our Lord were now on the earth, he might often find occasion to offer a similar rebuke? And to be plainer still, is there not reason to believe that many a woman, and many a good woman too, loses much of the benefit to be derived from intelligent and pious visitors,

from the fact that, like Martha, she is cumbered about much serving; that she thinks more of providing a sumptuous entertainment than of having her soul refreshed by edifying and profitable conversation.

The commendation which our Lord bestowed upon Mary is contained in the words of our text:—"And Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her." Let us analyze this passage a little, and see what instruction we can gather from it.

I. The first thought which this passage obviously suggests is, that *religion is a matter of deliberate choice*. "Mary hath chosen that good part."

To *choose* is an act of the soul which every one perfectly understands, and which cannot be made more obvious by explanation; inasmuch that if you should hear a philosophical lecture on the subject of choice, you would after all come back to your own consciousness to know what it is. We say then that religion is just as much an object of choice as any thing else. If you are hereafter to become religious, it is certain that you will choose to become so. If you remain in your sins, it is equally certain that you will choose to remain in them. There is indeed truth, yes, and glory too, in the doctrine of a divine influence; but that does not interfere at all with your freedom; it leaves you with the full power of choice,—with all the responsibilities of a moral agent.

This is the doctrine of the Bible. "Choose ye this day," says Joshua, "whom ye will serve." It is taken for granted in all the promises and threatenings of the Bible; in the terms on which salvation is offered; in the whole system of means and motives which the gospel exhibits. It is the doctrine of reason, and on it hangs the doctrine of a retribution. It is the doctrine of experience; for every one that has set his face towards heaven is conscious, and is ready to testify, that he has done it by a voluntary act; and notwithstanding all the cavils of irreligious men, I venture to say that every one who is walking in the way to death, feels, when he allows himself to reflect, that he is perfectly voluntary in the course he is pursuing. We will for a moment illustrate this truth, under two or three particulars.

There is choice connected with the assent which the mind yields to the divine authority of the Scriptures. I do not mean that the mind must not be determined in its judgments by the evidence which is actually before it, or that it is possible for a man to believe in one way when he perceives that the evidence preponderates in another; but then it may be and is a matter of choice with him, whether he will examine the evidence at all; and if so, whether he will examine it impartially, seeking divine guidance, and holding his mind in a state to admit the truth, whatever he may find it to be. One man chooses to investigate this subject with a teachable and humble spirit, and he sees evidence perfectly conclusive that the Bible is an inspired book. Another chooses to investigate it in an opposite spirit, and he decides against its claims to inspiration. The act in either case is perfectly voluntary.

And what is thus true of the evidences is not less so of the doctrines of Christianity. In a certain sense it is true that a man may believe them or not believe them as he pleases; because it is left at his pleasure whether to examine them or not to examine them, and whether to approach them with the spirit of a caviller, or the spirit of a decide inquirer. Some of you per-

haps know little of the Bible, and have never read it with any attention in the course of your lives, and of course can have no intelligent belief of its doctrines. Now if the reason of this is asked, what other reason can be given than that you choose to let the Bible alone; especially as you live in a land where the Bible is no rare book, and as you do not belong to a sect that prohibits or discourages the use of it? There are others among you who have made the Scriptures your constant study, and who meditate upon them when you lie down and when you rise up, and who have a thorough knowledge of their contents, and a full belief of their doctrines. And here again, what reason is to be given for this other than that you choose it should be so? Will any one of you say that he was conscious of more constraint in sitting down to study his Bible than in going out to attend to his worldly business? Did you ever dream that you had less liberty in the one case than in the other?

Again—there is the same exercise of choice in the soul's acceptance of a Savior. The two objects which present themselves with their claims to our supreme affection are, on the one hand, the Lord Jesus Christ, and with him all the benefits of his redemption, and on the other, this present world, with all that it has to bestow. Now the sinner, so long as he remains unrenewed, chooses the latter. He chooses it so intensely, if I may be allowed the expression, that he rolls it as a sweet morsel under his tongue. During this period this world seems to him every thing; it occupies the whole field of his vision; but Christ and his salvation—(they may be something good for aught he knows,)—but he does not discern their excellence and glory, and therefore he does not choose them. But under the enlightening influences of the Spirit, his views change; and the world dwindles to nothing, and Christ becomes all in all; and he chooses Christ as his portion now as deliberately as he chose the world before. - Let every Christian say whether I have not spoken to his own experience. Not that I would detract aught from the blessed agency of God's Spirit: no Christian will ever forget on earth or in heaven that it was by the grace of God that he became a new creature; but I venture to say that every Christian is conscious of having been as voluntary in the act of giving himself to God as in any other act of his life. And one proof of it among many is, that he condemns himself for not having done this act before.

I might go on to say that there is equally the exercise of choice in all the Christian's growth in grace; in his prayers; in his social intercourse; in his attendance on the means of religion; in his improvement of the dispensations of Providence; in every thing, in short, that enters into his progress in the divine life. But instead of extending my remarks under this article, I pass to

II. A second general observation suggested by the text, viz. that *he who chooses religion chooses a good part*. "*Mary hath chosen that good part.*"

Is not this manifest when you consider that he who chooses religion chooses a portion *for his soul*? What is the body? Mere corruptible matter; destined ere long to become disorganized, and to remain so perhaps for ages. And the whole animal nature—what is it? It is that which proclaims to us that we are of the earth, earthly; that which would keep us silent, if a reptile should lift up its head from the dust, and claim to be our brother or our sister. Now in making this world your portion, you consult only the

interest of the body ; that on which the dignity of your nature least depends. But religion is a portion for the soul, the nobler part ; that spirit within a man which can dart from pole to pole, and rise from earth to heaven, and hold communion even with the Almighty Spirit. Turn your eye inward, O man, and commune with yourself. Analyze the operations of that principle, that spirit, that invisible something which you call your soul, and which emphatically constitutes yourself. Observe its amazing powers, capable of an indefinite and, for aught that appears, an eternal expansion. Mark its sublime aspirations ; its ethereal tendency ; its reachings down into the future as well as its excursions through the past. I have said that religion is a portion for the soul. And how ? By satisfying all the soul's desires, great and boundless as they are. By furnishing proper exercise for its powers, thus causing them to expand and brighten into angelic powers, and to approximate more and more for ever to the perfections of the Highest. If then the soul be the nobler part of the man, and if religion is a portion for the soul—an adequate portion—a satisfying portion, who will not say that he who chooses religion chooses a good part ?

Again—this is the good part, because *it is the right part*. There is an original immutable distinction between right and wrong. Men in the hardness of their depravity may strive to annihilate that distinction, but conscience nevertheless recognises it, and asserts it, and maintains it, though in doing so, it often makes war upon the passions. I will not agitate the question, as it is a mere question of metaphysics, whether this distinction be founded primarily in the will of God or in the nature of things : I assert nothing here but the reality of its existence : and I say that religion is a good part, because it is the right part, in reference to the grand distinction of which I have spoken. God, as a perfect Being, must love holiness and hate sin ; and in accordance with the perfection of his nature, he must and does require holiness and forbid sin ; and there is a principle in every man's moral nature which entirely justifies this grand feature of the divine administration. Now he who is truly religious acts in accordance with the will of God, with the moral character and government of God ; in short, in accordance with what every moral being in the universe feels to be right, and with what *is* right. I ask again then, in view of *this* consideration, whether he who chooses religion does not choose a good part ?

But observe still further, that in making this choice, *all the interests of the soul become identified with the interests of Jehovah himself*.

The views which God entertains of the characters of men are regulated by a regard to this broad and original distinction of which I have already spoken : those who are on the side of righteousness he regards his friends ; those of the opposite character, his enemies ; and these views determine his conduct towards them. There are qualifications necessary, you know, to introduce men to particular stations and societies on earth ; and there is a qualification necessary to introduce a man into God's gracious kingdom ; and that qualification is religion ; but the moment he is thus introduced, he has all the perfections of Jehovah pledged for his protection, and comfort, and ultimate triumph. His interest becomes Jehovah's interest. All God's gracious promises it becomes his privilege to appropriate ; promises which he can lean upon with joyful confidence in the day of adversity, in the day of temp-

tation, in the day of death. Can you doubt whether that be a good part which secures to you everywhere an Almighty protector and friend?

And then again, remember that this is a *portion for eternity*. Do you envy that man whose laurels seem so bright and thick upon his brow, and whose splendid political, or military, or literary achievements have caused his name to ring through the world? Envy him not; for the grave that receives his body will receive his glory too. That is not a portion for eternity. Do you covet the condition of the man who in the pride of his heart counts up his millions, and moves in splendor, and riots in luxury? Believe me, there is nothing there which you need greatly to desire; for all that silver and gold is perishable, and it will be melted down, if not sooner, in the fires of the last day. Do you value the pleasures of friendship? These are indeed valuable; but unless it be a sanctified friendship, the enjoyment which it yields will not reach beyond the grave. But religion—it not only consults the best interests, and the loftiest, noblest desires of the soul, but it does this through eternity. It does much indeed in the present life. It drives away darkness; it delivers from the shudderings of guilt; it alleviates sorrow; it acts as a safe guide in difficulties; it secures to the soul communion with God; and stands by it as a helper in the dark valley, and lifts the curtain and lets in some light from heaven upon the eye that death is rendering blind to the objects of the world. I say religion does much for the soul here; but it is not till the soul lets go its hold upon the world that religion displays its noblest triumph. Oh, it is in heaven, where all is brightness to the eye, and all is melody to the ear, and all is transport to the soul, that religion does her best, her noblest work. And as the soul is immortal, so are the joys of religion immortal. As the soul is capable of an illimitable expansion, so religion is capable of ministering for ever to its increasing joy. Oh, what will not the soul gain from religion in its whole course through everlasting ages. I ask once more, does not he who chooses religion choose the good part?

III. I proceed to a third and last observation from the text, which is, that *he who possesses religion has that which he can never be deprived of*. “Mary hath chosen that good part which cannot be taken away.”

This is rendered certain by the promise of God. He has declared concerning his people, that none shall ever pluck them out of his hand; and that they shall be kept by the power of his grace through faith unto salvation. Hear the triumphant language of Paul. “Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather that is risen again; who is even at the right hand of God; who also maketh intercession for us.”—“For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Yes, there is the testimony of him who openeth and no man shutteth, and shutteth and no man openeth, to the truth that God’s people will be kept to the day of final redemption; in other words, that he who chooses religion for his portion chooses that which cannot be taken from him.

There is another consideration that evinces this, drawn from the nature of religion. We sometimes speak of religion as if it were something without the man; but then we speak of it figuratively: it is really something within him; or, may I not even say it is the man himself, renewed after the image of

Christ? An enemy might as well think to deprive a man of his understanding, or his conscience, or any of the faculties of his soul, as of his religion; for religion is nothing else than the impulse, the direction which the soul has received. You may confine a man in a dungeon; you may throw him into chains; you may bring him to the scaffold, or even light the fagots upon his body; but you cannot wrest from him his religion: that immortal spirit you cannot harm: that principle of divine grace in the heart you cannot reach; and you need not wonder if it should mock your impotent efforts, and even neutralize torture, and make him serene and joyful while the flames or the rack are liberating the spirit for its ascension to glory. Read the records of Christian martyrdom, and you will be convinced that I am not supposing an impossibility.

How unlike in this respect is this good part from any thing that is pursued or valued as a portion by the children of the world! Your riches take to themselves wings and they are gone. Your splendid mansions, with all that they contain, burn down at midnight. Your ships laden with the treasures of other lands go down in the dark ocean. The laurels which decorate your brow fall off, and the high ground of honour on which you had stood sinks from beneath your feet, and perhaps a grave is opened in which is buried even your good name. Health too—Oh how it flies before the withering power of disease; and those roses that bloomed with so much verdure and beauty fade; and the countenance grows pale, and the eye deathlike! And even life—life, on which every other earthly good depends—we hold it by so frail a tenure that it can scarcely stand before the touch of an insect. But not so with this blessed portion of the soul. Come poverty, come sickness, come bereavement, and religion will shine out upon those dark scenes, in all her brightness and all her majesty, just as the setting sun tinges with a hue of glory the evening cloud. Come death, that enemy at which nature shudders, and reason justifies the shuddering; come dressed in thy darkest attire, and armed with thy sharpest arrow, and moving as if there were vengeance in thy footsteps,—and religion will look thee in the face and smile: she will not resist, nor desire to resist thee in thy work; for what thou art doing is necessary to the accomplishment of *her* purposes; but she will protect the spirit whilst thou art exerting thy power upon the body; and then she will open the door of the sepulchre with one hand, and the door of the palace of the King of Glory with the other. Oh, the triumphs, the immortal triumphs of religion!

1. On a review of our subject, we remark, first, that *if sinners perish, the blame must be upon themselves*. Sinners in this world, when they are pressed with the obligations of religion, not unfrequently put their consciences to sleep by cavils respecting their inability, or the decrees of God; but at the judgment, if not before, they will see that all this was a miserable course of trifling, and that the reason why they are on the left-hand is, that they chose a course which they knew would prevent their being on the right; that the reason why they are not admitted to the joys of eternal life is, that life and death being placed before them, they madly chose death. Does the question arise, why all who are before me are not Christians? With the Bible in my hand, I dare give no other answer than that uncomfortable and condemning one, that it is because you do not choose to be Christians; in other words, you do not choose to yield yourselves to the influences of the Holy Spirit, or to make all the sacrifices which are involved in giving the heart to God. That

you would be willing to live a life of sin, and go to heaven when you die, admits of no question; but to deny all ungodliness and every worldly lust, and engage actively and perseveringly in the service of Christ—this is more than you choose to undertake. Say then, if you perish, where will the blame of your perdition rest, if it do not rest upon yourself? When God says to you, “Thou hast destroyed, or art destroying thyself,” what hast thou to answer? What answer will you be prepared to give, when that fearful charge shall ring in your ears, in connexion with the irrevocable sentence that dooms you to everlasting burnings?

2. You may gather some light from this subject, *in respect to the process of becoming a Christian*. It often happens in respect to persons under the awakening influences of God's Spirit, that they are exceedingly perplexed in respect to the course they shall pursue; in respect both to the nature of the desired change, and the means by which it is to be effected. But if what you have heard be correct, this difficulty must be in a great measure removed. What you have to do is to choose God as the portion of your soul; his service as the employment of your life; his will as the rule of your duty; his glory as the end of your actions. Now I admit that you cannot make this choice unless you really see ground for it; but if you do not see it, remember it is your sin, not your apology. Yield yourself then, I pray you, to solemn reflection on your own wretched condition as a sinner; on the character of God; on the law of God; on the reasonableness of the claims which he makes upon you; on the provision which he offers for your salvation; and in all this cast yourself on the influences of his Spirit, beseeching him to work within you both to will and to do. You see then that religion begins in reflection; and reflection, under a divine influence, leads to that decisive act by which Christ is chosen as the soul's everlasting portion.

3. Finally: *Happy they who have secured this good part!* Only let me be assured that a fellow-mortal is interested in Christ's salvation, and in the estimate which I form of his happiness, I will not ask whether he is a king or a beggar; whether he is clothed in rags, or in purple and fine linen; whether the dark cloud of affliction is hanging over him, or he is rejoicing in the effulgence of earthly prosperity. Because, whether his home be a cabin or a palace, whether his path through the world be planted with thorns or strewed with roses, I know on the authority of Eternal Truth, that ere long he will be a king and a priest unto God, will breathe the air, and rejoice in the beams, and join in the melody, and walk about the golden streets of the heavenly paradise. I know that there will be a crown upon his head, and that his heart will be full of ecstasy, while he casts that crown at his Redeemer's feet, and bows and sings and shouts with holy reverence and seraphic fire. Art thou afflicted then, Christian? Bear it without a word. Art thou poor? No, thou art heir to all the treasures of heaven. Does thy conflict seem sharp and bitter? God thy Redeemer is coming to terminate it quickly, and cause that spirit now struggling with corruption to rise, and soar, and range upon the plains of immortality. Oh is it any wonder that the dying Christian, with heaven in his eye and heaven in his soul, longs to depart? Is it any wonder that it is so often the last office of the faltering tongue to exclaim, “Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly!”