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SERMON CCXXXV.

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THE ALARMING POWER OF SIN.

JEREMIAH, 13, 23. *Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then may ye also do good, who are accustomed to do evil.*

THIS passage, like some others in the sacred writings, is not to be interpreted in the strictest sense. Of the same description is the declaration of Christ; "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God." And yet rich men are saved; though the difficulties in the way of their salvation are many and great. So, in some instances, are men long accustomed to do evil, diverted from their courses of iniquity. But this is not usual. It is a truth which should affect the minds of every class of my audience, that,

THE LONG CONTINUED IMPENITENCE OF MEN AUGMENTS THE DIFFICULTIES IN THE WAY OF THEIR SALVATION.

This is the truth which I propose to illustrate in this discourse. And,

I. A most obvious thought which illustrates this general observation is, that *the habits of men are strengthened and confirmed by indulgence.*

It is a common remark, that the influence of habit is one of the most powerful in our mental constitution. We cannot explain this phenomenon; the fact we know; and it is of vast importance that we should know it. A repetition of the same thoughts and actions is so apt to ensure their continuance, that it is one of the most difficult things in the world to check this habitual operation of the mind, and give it a different direction from that in which it has been wont to flow. Even habits which relate to matters of indifference, become inveterate, and are with great difficulty modified and overcome. Especially are they obstinate, when they are under the control of some prevailing disposition, and fall in with the natural inclination of the mind.

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Now, the habits which distinguish wicked men, are all governed by a heart alienated from God and holiness : nor is any other thought or purpose grateful to their mind, except those which subserve its depraved inclinations. The longer such a man continues in his sinful courses, the more fully his mind becomes trained in these habits of resistance to all that is good. His thoughts have become so familiar with sin, that his native sinfulness is invigorated and fortified ; and to all the strength of natural corruption, he has added the growth and vigor of this moral training. His mind not only has by nature, a strong propensity to evil, an invariable tendency to depart from God ; but from every step in his course has acquired increased facilities in this downward career, and is more and more inclined to depart by every act of departure thus repeated.

Here is the sinner's danger, who is accustomed to do evil. The course of his thoughts has so long preserved a downward tendency, that the channel has become deep, and the current cannot easily be led off. He has been so long enchained by the fatal power of *habit*, that he clanks his fetters and loves his bondage. Who has the energy to vanquish this most irresistible power ? You might almost as well hope to persuade the wind or the storm, as such a man. Before the blasting, deadening influence of *habit* every effort, every thought, I had almost said, every hope of seriousness has withered. He is "hardened through the deceitfulness of sin." He is insensibly led on from one course of wickedness to another, till he is under a sort of necessity of sinning. He has taken so many steps in this downward road, and his progress has become so accelerated and impetuous that he cannot resist it. "All things are possible with God." And yet, how much more difficult is it for such a man to become holy, than for men over whom this progressive and silent influence of habit has not yet obtained the guilty predominance ! Such a man is the veriest servant of sin ; and however sensible or insensible he may be of his servitude, he is probably enslaved beyond the hope of deliverance.

II. *The influence of this world*, as men advance in life, usually becomes more perplexing, and a greater hindrance to their conversion. The greatest *outward* obstacle with which men have to contend in the work of their salvation, is the influence of the world. Here are the perplexities of business. Here are the allurements of wealth. Here are the smiles of friendship. Here are the blandishments of pleasure. Here are the corrupting influences of public opinion. Here are the pernicious tendencies of fashion and vain amusements. Here every thing that is noxious to piety is nourished and strengthened. The world is a soil luxuriant in sin, and fed only by putrescency and death. While the eye is pleased, the ear regaled, and all the senses delighted, there is every thing to corrupt and destroy.

The man who is advanced even to the meridian of human life, is apt to have formed a thoroughly worldly character. His plans are on a larger scale ; his connexions are more extended ; his arrangements are more complicated than at earlier periods ; and consequently his cares multiply, his toil increases, his time is occupied, and in the midst

of all this overwhelming solicitude about the world, the concerns of eternity are lost sight of and forgotten. The *spirit* of the world takes deeper hold of him the longer he lives. He becomes more dissatisfied and more grasping. The love of money becomes so deeply imbedded in his heart, that it puts him well nigh beyond the reach of solemn and salutary impressions. If the young plead the pressure of care, and the want of time, and the influence of worldly associates, as a reason for their inattention to the concerns of religion, what shall be thought of these influences upon more advanced years? A multitude of men, who in their youth deferred the business of religion to a more convenient season, have seen with regret that the longer they have lived, and the more they looked for leisure and retirement, and the more they hoped to be removed from the influence of those who would ruin and destroy, —the more have their perplexities increased, and the more has every successive year contributed to throw obstacles in the path to heaven. A man in middle life may, now and then, feel powerful inducements to become pious; the grasp of the world may, for a short season, be partially relaxed; and he may withdraw himself for a little from his old companions, to think of the scenes of that invisible world to which he is hastening; but soon his courage and self-denial fail him, and he is soothed or frightened away from his purpose. Some golden bait, some earnest entreaty, some subtle stratagem, some unhallowed influence disheartens him, and he goes back again to the world. The world is still his idol. The men of the world are still his chosen companions. The pleasures of the world are still his selected joy. The concerns of time absorb the attention and exhaust the vigor of his mind. Having thrown himself into the current, he becomes weaker, and weaker, and though the precipice is near, he cannot now stem the tide and reach the shore.

Here is the danger of the men who are accustomed to do evil. They are immersed in sense. The moral atmosphere they breathe is poison. They are more and more endangered every hour they live. They have fallen into those "foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition." Conscience is laid asleep. The gates of that unearthly world seem closed upon them; the celestial city is almost hidden from their view. The glimpses of light they once enjoyed are dying away; and their eye fixes itself less and less on eternity.

III. As years increase, men *become less interested in the subject of religion, and more obdurate and averse to any alteration in their moral character.* The season of sensitiveness and ardent affection is gone by. The heart is no longer warm in any of its attachments. The moral perceptions have become inactive and heavy. The bosom is now rarely penetrated with the feelings of obligation, or any of those tender emotions which once invited or encouraged a religious influence. The mind loiters and the sluggish spirit becomes inactive and torpid. It possesses little of that unbiassed judgment, that teachableness which are the hope of earlier years; and not only is it more subject to prejudices and less docile, but more disposed to resist religious

instruction and turn from it in disgust. The Sabbath, the Bible, the sanctuary, the domestic altar, once so solemn and tender, by degrees lose their power to interest and affect them. Sermons, and prayers, and songs of praise, and Christian counsels that once addressed the youthful sinner with so much effect, have lost their persuasive influence. The heart has become listless and like adamant. Conscience has become so seared and hardened by its long-continued resistance of acknowledged obligations, that nothing rouses them. The only effect which the most powerful instructions or the best adapted means of grace are apt to have upon such a mind, is increasing insensibility and hardness, and greater boldness in iniquity. Men advanced in life have comparatively few convictions of their sin and danger; and those few they easily suppress; and pass carelessly along without God in the world, without the hope of his favor, or the fear of his wrath.

And with such a state of mind, they become more and more averse to any radical alteration in their character. Their enmity to God and their aversion to holiness become more deeply riveted. They often doubt whether there is such a thing as conversion. The name is an offence to them; and when they occasionally hear it mentioned, they perhaps turn it into ridicule. They cannot endure to be disturbed in their sins. When you urge the claims of piety upon them, they treat the whole matter with neglect and contempt. They have *made up their minds* to run the hazard of perdition, rather than be roused to the severe and dreadful effort of forsaking their sins.

Here too is the danger of men accustomed to impenitence. The scenes of eternity to such men have a melancholy and direful aspect. Every thing is conspiring to harden, deceive, and destroy them; and there is little probability that these augmented obstacles to their conversion will ever be removed. And they themselves deeply feel the weight of these powerful discouragements. Ask the sinner of forty, or fifty, or sixty years, whether his prospects are growing brighter; and he will tell you, that the longer he lives they are growing darker and darker. Clouds gather over his path. His sun is going down, and soon every beam of light will be withdrawn. This leads me to observe,

IV. *The thought of multiplied and long continued transgression is very apt to discourage all attempts at repentance.*

This is a temptation by no means peculiar to advanced years, but for which there is in the nature of the case stronger reason than at any previous period. The man who has been accustomed to iniquity is often led to see how his habits of sinning have become confirmed by indulgence; how the influence of the world has excluded well nigh every thought of God and heaven; how his obduracy and aversion to holiness have increased; and he very naturally becomes depressed and discouraged by these reflections. That guilty Deceiver, who "blinds the minds of them that believe not, and worketh in the children of disobedience," and employs all his power to ensnare and destroy, knows how to take advantage of their age, their character, and their condition, and not unfrequently suggests and gives these melancholy reflections a

weight and power that unnerve the courage, and prevent all effort for salvation. In former periods men somewhat advanced in years have paid some attention to the subject of religion ; but they have so often returned to a state of stupidity, and have so long neglected and abused the offers of the divine mercy, and the obstacles to their conversion have now become so multiplied, that they feel, for the most part, that it will be useless for them seriously to think of any alteration in their character. Not unfrequently they will tell you,—“ *Once the work might have been performed ; but it is now too late ; the favorable opportunity is past ; human life is but a dream, and the day of hope is gone by !*” There are seasons when the long catalogue of their sins, though it does not humble, depresses and discourages them. I have known men in this condition. And I could not refrain from sympathizing with their dejection, and being discouraged with them and for them. It is a dark—very dark problem, whether persons of this description will ever repent and believe the gospel. It is true that God’s mercies are infinite ; that those who seek him shall find him ; that the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth from all sin ; and that while there is life, there may be hope ; and yet a more hopeless condition this side eternity cannot easily be conceived, than the condition of such a man. The mournful truth may not be suppressed, that there is a deep gloom over all his spiritual prospects. What shall be said to the man who has passed the mid-day of human life ; who has grown old in thoughtlessness and sin, and begins now and then to throw his eye backward “over the desert of wasted years ?” Has he no reason to write bitter things against himself ? Can he recall the verdure of youth ? Can he plant flowers in the desert now ? Can he “stretch out the withered remnant of time,” and bring back the facilities of repentance he once enjoyed ? Is it an easy matter for such a man to arrest and renounce that obduracy of moral feeling, which has been growing upon him for half a century ? I may add,

V. *There is awful reason to apprehend that God will leave men of this description to perish in their sins.* No man is sufficient, in his own strength and without the grace of the Holy Spirit, even at the most auspicious period of human life, to break the bondage of sin and flee from the coming wrath. And if any class of men have special need of this divine influence, they are those who have been long accustomed to the paths of death. They have nothing to oppose to their deeply imbedded depravity, and if a sovereign God leave them to their own undirected and unsupported resolution, they must perish in their sins. It is his prerogative to arrest and bring the sons of men to the footstool of his mercy at *any period* of life ; and nothing may impose a limit to his sovereign power. His distinguishing and wonderful grace *may* pluck them as brands from the burning in defiance of all these obstructions. But will he do it ? Is there reason to hope, or to fear ? He can change the skin of the Ethiopian, and he sometimes does it. But does the analogy of his grace justify the expectation that this miracle of mercy will be often wrought toward the old and hardened offender ?

If we look into the Bible, we shall find that most of the Prophets and Apostles, as well as those who were converted through their instrumentality, were called into the kingdom of God in childhood, or youth, or in the dawn and vigor of manhood. When the Holy Spirit so largely descended upon the Israelites in the wilderness, its influence was confined almost exclusively to the young. So it was under those peculiar dispensations of mercy, which visited that same people at the close of their captivity in Babylon, and immediately after the building of the second temple. The great body of those who were rescued from the bondage of sin, during that general work of grace on the continent of Europe and in the British islands at the period of the great Reformation, were persons who had scarcely reached the meridian of life. One of the distinctive features of all revivals of religion is, that they have prevailed principally among the young. Where the adorable and ever blessed Spirit has visited the same community frequently, and at several different and successive periods, it has been observed that the period during which his influence has been suspended has usually been long enough to allow a new generation to grow up and become the subjects of the work. It has also been remarked, that in ordinary seasons, the individuals who have occasionally been brought into the kingdom of Christ, with few exceptions, have been from those not habituated to impenitence. The multitude of those who have united themselves with the visible church of God, in our cities and in our villages, have been from classes of men under forty years of age. There have been fewer between thirty and forty, than between twenty and thirty; and when you go beyond forty years, like the scattered grapes in the outmost branches after the vintage is over, there is only here and there *one*. And the farther beyond this period, the fewer do they become. Sometimes there is one of a city, and two of a tribe. And as you descend into the more remote vale of years, it is a miracle of mercy, if you find a solitary individual. So it is, so far as my knowledge extends, for the most part all over the world. Almost the only exception to this remark is found in places where men have *never sat under faithful preaching* and never enjoyed a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit until late in life. In such places I have known persons brought into the vineyard at the eleventh hour. And this is also true of heathen lands. But even here, there are comparatively few instances of conversion from among those who have grown old in sin. Young women, like Catharine Brown, and young men, like Asaad Shidiak, and younger than they, these form the mass of conversions even in heathen lands.

So strongly is this truth impressed in the minds of those who are in the habit of observing the usual operations of the divine mercy, that you never hear a sermon on the importance of early piety, but the preacher enforces it. You never saw a Christian parent, or Christian teacher, but felt the weight of it, and urged it in his prayers, and was impelled by it to solicitude and tears for his youthful charge. Every Christian community feels it; and its uniform language is to speak of its children and youth as the *hope of the church*. There may be some

faint and trembling expectations from men who have crossed the meridian of life, but there is much fear and despondency. Go to the Bible and inquire what period of human life receives the marked tokens of the divine favor; and you will find intimations rich in encouragement and promise to the young, and most appalling to the old.

Here then is the danger of those who are accustomed to do evil. We see these facts, and they are inwoven with our own experience. And how tremendous the comment upon the sentiment of our text! In what direful abandonment does it leave the men who are accustomed to do evil! Ah! beloved hearers, dark and long are the shadows that hang over the prospects of those who have not thought of God and eternity before the best of their years are gone. God would have the lamp of piety lighted early. He would have the dew, the dawn, the flower of our existence. Since men who are accustomed to do evil have refused the calls of the divine mercy in the prime and vigor of their days, what wonder, if when they call, God should not answer? Since they declined his service when they were best capable of serving him, why should it be thought strange that he should hide his face from them, now that "the evil days come, and the years draw nigh, in which they have no pleasure?" Think you that he solicits those days of trembling, when "the almond tree flourishes, and the grasshopper is a burden?" Will he be put off with the faded refuse of a life spent in the service of sin? Does his righteous government afford encouragement for sinning after this sort? Is heaven a mere infirmary? Is the kingdom of God such a hospital as to open its gates to the decrepit, and the maimed, who can live no longer to the world and its lusts?

Such are some of the considerations which illustrate the truth contained in our text;—a truth specially designed to urge upon all a solemn attention to the great concerns of religion and the soul, now in an accepted time. In applying to some practical purposes the view which has been presented, I may therefore be allowed to address three classes of my audience. And,

1. What is the admonition which it addresses *to the aged*. To you, my venerable hearers, who are still without Christ and without hope in the world, it "holds up the hour glass of human life, and points to the few sands that remain." It directs your eyes to the vast futurity that is just before you, and on the wall which separates it from your view inscribes, "Thou art weighed in the balances and found wanting." It announces that what the means of grace could do for you, they have probably done; and that your day of merciful visitation has well nigh reached its last limits. Once, your years were full of promise; but this bright and unclouded morning is gone. Your sun no longer rises clear, serene, "full of beauty and full of hope;" but it has past its meridian, and is descending in a cloud. Observe that withered and solitary oak. It is stripped of its branches by the hand of time. The rains descend upon it; the sun throws his genial rays upon its top and upon its roots; but it has no life and verdure: and the more the sun shines and the rains descend, the more dry and seared does it become. Such is the aged sinner. His habits are so deeply rooted, and the

light of truth and the dews and rains of divine mercy have fallen upon him so long, that they serve rather to dry up his moral sensibilities, and leave him like fuel for the flames. The most fearful storms are often preceded by a death-like calm. Oh! this undisturbed, this imperturbable repose, here, just at the mouth of the grave, seems to me like the forebodings of the last tempest—like the premonitors of the second death.

My venerable friends, yours is no time for thoughtlessness and unconcern. God still waits that he may be gracious. And he may wait till the last sand of life has fallen. The divine mercy, whose ways are above our ways, and whose thoughts are above our thoughts, may follow you, till you descend to the tomb. And Christian tenderness may follow you. And I pray God, that ministerial solicitude and faithfulness may follow you. But Oh! how ineffably important to you is the present hour! Your *hoary hairs* may be even now “a crown of glory, if found in the way of righteousness.” With what emphasis may we say to you—“TO-DAY, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts!” I implore you, let not another hour be lost! This very call rejected, may seal your destiny.

2. Our subject addresses *those who are in middle life*. There are probably not a few in this assembly, who have no hope that they are the children of God, who are just crossing the mid-way of their earthly existence. Beloved friends, you occupy a post of danger. It would have been well for you, by a sincere and humble consecration of yourselves to God in your youth, to have become fortified against the temptations which assail every man in the midst of his days. The period most auspicious to the interests of your immortality is gone.

Already has the world gained an influence over you, which, whenever the day of repentance comes, will cost you many a severe struggle to resist. You have just reached that period of life when men form the most unjust estimate of earthly good, and when wealth, reputation, and power most fatally fascinate the mind. You have now stronger expectations of living, than you had in your youth, or will have in old age. You are now in the midst of your most important designs and pursuits, and probably at the zenith of your earthly glory. Every thing now conspires to turn away your thoughts from God and eternity. Your mountain stands strong. You occupy a lofty eminence; and, as I just intimated, it is a post of danger. Your feet stand on slippery places. More than half the inhabitants of this globe, have been swept into the grave since you entered upon the stage of life; and soon you will either be numbered with them, or with those whose impenitence and hoary age provoke God to abandon them. Why, then, shall not some of these worldly plans give way to the purpose of seeking the kingdom of God? Why shall not this enterprising spirit, subdued and softened by a child-like sense of your dependence, breathe its energy into the great pursuits and business of religion? Better be less knowing, less honorable, less affluent, than lose your souls. Better reduce your plans to a narrower compass, than be at last cast away. Better leave every other object unattained, than your eternal salvation. Bet-

ter give up every other hope, than the hope of heaven. O, what flood of sorrows will roll in upon you by and by, when you see that "the harvest is past, the summer is ended, and you are not saved!"

But,

3. Our subject addresses *the young*. Yours, my young friends, is the season of hope. Fully as your hearts are by nature set in you to do evil, the habits of iniquity, that are peculiar to older sinners, are not yet formed. Your minds are not irrecoverably engrossed by the world. There is no such obstinate aversion to the duties of religion, and no such absolutely disheartening burden of iniquity, as will hereafter oppress you. You have not yet been abandoned to fatal security, nor left to fill up the measure of your wickedness. You are not beyond the reach of instruction, of alarm, of counsel. You have not yet reached the giddy height of your prosperity; nor have you become so embarrassed by cares and society, as to shut out the hope of heaven. The Spirit of God has not departed from you; but lingers around your thoughts, and follows you to your retirement, and hovers over your pillow. This is eminently your day of promise. If you become early devoted to God, you may live to accomplish much for his cause and kingdom in the world; your influence and example may allure multitudes around you to the love and practice of godliness; and you may be delivered from the guilt of that destructive influence, which will plant thorns in your dying pillow. You may become eminently fitted for the service of God in this age of mercy, and be permitted to take a distinguished part in ushering in the glory that is soon to arise upon the earth. And what is an unspeakably sweet and precious thought, *you will become specially near and dear to Christ*. He will remember the kindness of your youth, and the love of your espousals. He will gather you with His arms, and carry you in His bosom. And when bitter troubles roll in upon you, He will be your hiding-place; and when enemies rise against you, He will cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you shall trust. He will furnish you evidence of your acceptance with Him such as is denied to the few that follow Him at a later period. He will give you a maturity of mind, a sweetness of expectation that will be like the breath of the morning, and like ointment poured forth. In future years you will have something to look back upon beside years of unmingled iniquity; and memory, which is the source of so much joy and woe, and which runs back with such wonderful spontaneity to the seasons of childhood and youth, will discover here and there some verdant spots in your career on which it delights to linger, because they are fragrant with the dews that descended upon the mountains of Zion. And when your Redeemer shall come to judge the world, He will look with peculiar complacency on those who devote the dawn of their existence to Him; and acknowledge, and crown and reward them in such a way as to evince to the universe that he has a special delight in early piety.

And now, amid all the earthly hopes you so fondly cherish, and which are empty and delusive, and which like bubbles rise for a moment on the stream, and then for ever disappear, why will you not,

in the morning of life, choose religion and heaven? You will not lament it when the days of darkness come. You will not regret it when you are old. You will not repent of it when you come to die. And when you stand before Christ in judgment, it will be no grief of heart to you to hear Him say, "*Them that honor me I will honor!*"

SERMON CCXXXVI.

BY REV. S. L. POMROY,
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THE UNCHANGEABLE GOD.

JAMES 1, 17. *With whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.*

EVERY syllable which inspired penmen have written respecting the character, will and purposes of God, ought to be contemplated by us with profound interest. We are the creatures of God. He made and upholds us by the word of his power. We are in his hands as clay in the hands of the potter. Our existence and our eternal destiny hang upon his word. We are, therefore, deeply concerned to know what God is, what he requires, and what we are to expect from him. Is he wise? Is he just? Does he exercise a watchful providence over his creatures? Does he care for men? Is he good? Will he always remain what he now is? These are questions of great moment, and none but God himself can give a satisfactory answer to them. In the scriptures, he has condescended to answer these and all other suitable inquiries respecting himself. To the question, whether God is ever subject to change, the text furnishes an unequivocal reply. It asserts the immutability of Jehovah in language which cannot be misunderstood. With him is *no variableness*; that is, no capacity or possibility of change, and as if this were not enough, it is added, neither *shadow of turning*—nothing which bears the most distant resemblance to change. The sentiment thus clearly taught in the passage before us, I propose to discuss on the present occasion. In regard to the nature of this attribute, I remark,

1. *It implies that God is unchangeable in his essence.* It is supposed there must be something, which may be said to constitute the divine essence, which is distinguishable from the divine attributes. Whatever this may be, we may safely assert respecting it, that it is uncreated, incorruptible, immutable, and eternal. Its immutability is inferred from the fact of its being uncreated. It always existed, and is therefore independent of every thing else. It is the cause of all other causes, and, therefore, beyond the reach of all extraneous or foreign in-