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"PREACH THE GOSPEL TO EVERY CREATURE."

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**SERMON XII.**

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**THE SUPERIOR CLAIMS OF RELIGION.**

**MATTHEW, VI. 33.**—*Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.*

THERE is something strange and absurd in the characters of men. They boast of the dignity of human nature, and pride themselves on the rank they hold. Made the connecting link, in the chain of created beings, between superior intelligences and irrational animals, they assume the rule of earth. Sovereigns of this world, they aspire to immortality. And destined inhabitants of eternity, they would be the companions of the Eternal.

But they honor not God—he is far away. They are uninfluenced by futurity—it is veiled from their view. They abuse their authority—it is only human. They degrade their rank—it is first on earth. And they lessen their dignity—it is moral.

Thus men, believing themselves accountable—placed over this world—clothed with high authority—endowed with immortal spirits—and formed by

Deity, sin against God ; make no provision for the future ; trample on the rights of others ; sink to a level with the beast ; and disregard every obligation.

This they do by alienating their affections from heaven, and forming a supreme attachment to the world—by renouncing their allegiance to the Author of their being, and becoming the lovers of self, or devoted admirers of created objects. They turn away from the revealed realities of futurity, and fix their attention on the passing events of time. These, with no higher claims than momentary scenes, divert their immortal minds from those which are eternal.

Yes, men with immortal and ever expanding minds, will engage in any worldly enterprise with all the ardour of an anxious expectant of an immediate reward ; while they cannot be persuaded, by men or angels, self-interest or divine authority, to provide for their future welfare. The mechanic will spend days and months to build an earthly habitation ; but cannot be persuaded to accept a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. The agriculturist will pursue the same round of hard labor for years to obtain the treasures of this world ; but cannot be persuaded to lay up a treasure in heaven. The merchant will traverse sea and land in search of wealth ; but cannot be persuaded to seek the pearl of great price. The student will spend wearisome days and sleepless nights to acquire a literary fame ; but cannot be persuaded to ask the wisdom that maketh wise unto salvation. The physician will study long and practice much to

acquire the art of restoring the physical energies of a diseased body; but cannot be persuaded to apply the balm of Gilead to his own soul. The advocate of his country's laws, will employ his life to learn their principles and application; but cannot be persuaded to read, much less to obey the moral laws of heaven. And the herald of salvation will preach in season and out of season to gain the approbation of men; but cannot be persuaded to take up the cross and follow Christ. Any thing, but obedience to heaven—providing for eternity. Urge this, and men will cease their efforts.

Thus strange and absurd is the conduct of men. And it was to meet this peculiar feature in their characters, that Christ said to them, *Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.*

He was exhibiting the grand principles of that kingdom he came to establish, and which he affirmed was not of this world. And knowing the eagerness and unrivalled interest with which men pursue worldly objects, he boldly declared they could not serve God and mammon. In other words, they could not belong to his kingdom, while in the pursuit of the world as their chief good. Having laid down this broad principle, and knowing the superior claims of his kingdom to those of the world, he said, *Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.*

*The kingdom of God*, is here used for the kingdom of Christ; and also for the benefits of this kingdom. The cause is put for the effect, or the object for the benefits resulting from it. Instead of this world's goods, then, Christ would have men seek the blessings of his kingdom. *His righteousness*, is here used for that virtue, which entitles men to the favor of God. They are therefore required to secure Heaven's favor. *All these things*, refer to the necessary wants of this life; which are promised those who seek first the blessings and favor of God.

Varying the language of the text, its sentiment may be thus expressed: Seek first the benefits of Christ's kingdom, and the favor of heaven; and your present wants shall be supplied. Men then should renounce every worldly pursuit, and make provision for the future. Doing this, they have the promise of a supply of this world's goods: but in the pursuit of these, (which alas is the pursuit of most,) they have no promise or even prospect of any provision for eternity.

It shall be my object then to urge this course—a renunciation of worldly pursuits for those more worthy—for religion. This secures the benefits of Christ's kingdom, and the favor of heaven. It embraces all that is implied in seeking the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

I am aware that, urging this, I place myself in a most unwelcome attitude—that I shall have to encounter the native principles of the human heart, the prejudices of education, and the habitual practice of most. Nothing is more foreign from the practice of

men generally than religion. Nothing is more common than early prejudices strengthened against it. And nothing is more certain than that they are naturally destitute of it. Inclination, prejudice, and habit, then, are all arrayed against the object before me.

Success therefore may seem hopeless: yet there is an invisible, and all-powerful agent capable of subduing your hearts, removing your prejudices, and changing your habits. The Holy Spirit may effect an entire change in your feelings, views and pursuits—and unless this be done, your souls are assuredly formed for wo. And if you close your ears against the truth—bar him from your hearts, you bring this woful doom upon your own souls.

Hoping you may be induced to hear the truth, and believing the Spirit able to make it effectual to the pulling down of the strong holds of sin, and forming your souls anew for happiness—I will now urge *the superior claims of religion*, by showing that, compared with other objects, it is

1. More satisfying. The desires of the soul, composed of the imperishable materials of immortality, must be satisfied to render it happy. But what is there in the gross aliment of mortality to satisfy the desires of spirits ethereal? Will they feed on empty titles, gold and silver, or the pleasures of sense?

Cluster around them all earth's incentives to pleasure: let them mingle in the varied scenes of amusement—sport in unrestrained licentiousness—and indulge every unhallowed desire: let them

drink from the sparkling bowl—feast on the luxuries of the board—listen to the song of mirth—and delight in the charms of beauty : and will they be satisfied ? Ask the slumbering inhabitants of immortality buried in the bosoms of sensuality. Remove this smothering clay, and permit them to breathe their native element, and they will answer in the accents of lost souls—the pleasures of earth are unsatisfying ; they cannot render the soul happy ; they have filled us with sorrow.

Cast the treasures of earth at their feet : let their dominions extend over the globe—their coffers contain the wealth of the Indies—and their authority command the obedience of all : let them say to one come, and he cometh ; and to another go, and he goeth—to the third sit thou here, and the fourth stand thou there, and they obey : let them build mansions of wood and stone—be decked with gorgeous apparel—and wear the ensigns of nobility or even royalty : and will they be satisfied ? Summon the departed spirit of Alexander, or the proud spirits of the great and noble ; and in the language of souls burdened with mortality, or the intonations of those unearthed, they will answer—the riches of the world are unsatisfying ; they are only weights to sink us lower in wo.

Vest them in all earth's famed titles : let their names be known and published to the world : let their fame be sent forth on the wings of the wind ; echoing through the valley, along the mountains, over seas to distant lands—the earth's remotest bound : where the voice of man is heard, let their

fame be told : and will they be satisfied ? Say ye disembodied spirits of the ambitious leaders of ages gone by, or ye earth-bound souls of man's present tormenters. With one voice they utter the horrid language of famishing souls—the titles of fame are vain and unsatisfying ; they relieve not the hunger of the undying worm that torments us.

The praise of man, the wealth of earth, and the pleasures of sense, then, are unsatisfying : but not so with religion. Let the understandings of men be enlightened with the spirit of God—their wills made to bow in subjection to his authority—and their hearts filled with love to his person ; (which is the sum of religion ;) and their souls are satisfied. They feel safe under his protection—pleased with his government—and happy in his favqr. They can meet the evils of life with composure ; and like the good man,

—“ fasten their hands on the skies,  
And bid earth roll, nor feel her idle whirl.”

Say, ye blood-bought expectants of a glorious immortality, or ye sainted spirits around the throne of the Eternal—are ye not satisfied with religion ? Else, why this lisping of the song of the new born babes in Christ, and those loud hallelujahs of the redeemed to God and the lamb ? They speak the same language, and with a voice louder than seven thunders utter the satisfaction they feel in the possession of religion. This is also

2. More lasting. The soul, whose existence runs parallel with duration cannot be happy in the enjoyment of any thing that will cease to exist. What-

ever allurements it may hold out, or however exquisite the joy it occasions—it must be precarious; on which the soul may not fix for happiness.

But what is there durable composed of the wasting ingredients of matter, or wearing the stamp of time? Which of this world's enjoyments, will last while the soul would be happy? Will they accompany her, on her flight from earth, to eternity?

Gather around the hallowed spot where the soul bids earth adieu—and tell me what material object she bears away, or of which of all worldly enjoyment she partakes. Witness her unsuccessful efforts to compose herself as she takes her leave of this and that. Watch well the closing avenues of the dying body that she passes not unperceived. And when the struggle is over, and she is gone—tell me if she carried ought of earth with her. How then can she fix on any thing here for happiness? In what worldly enjoyment may she indulge as a source of lasting bliss?

Follow the soul into eternity, and through the portals of immortality look out upon a dissolving world—and tell me if you see here a remaining source of happiness. Behold the heavens rolled together as a scroll, and passing away with a great noise—the elements melting down with fervent heat—and the earth burning up. See all nature in commotion, at the sound of the angel swearing, by him who liveth forever and ever, that time shall be no longer. And when the wheels of time shall cease to roll, and the flames of the last fire shall burn no more—tell me if any earthly source of happiness remains for the soul.



On what worldly object or enjoyment, then, can she fix for permanent happiness?

But let the soul fix on religion, and it shall endure while eternity lasts. She may be summoned from earth to the world of spirits; but this shall go with her. The earth may cease to be; but this remains the same. Religion flows pure from the inexhaustible fountain of eternal goodness, and therefore cannot fail. It is the reflected rays of the sun of righteousness, shining upon the benighted hearts of men; and while that beams in the moral heavens, this shall afford consolation to the soul. And the nearer she approaches the fountain of light, the greater shall be her joy. Her transit, therefore, from time to eternity, will only add to her happiness. What a source of bliss! It is pure, and it is everlasting. And religion is

3. More ennobling. The mind of man is formed for action, and capable of indefinite expansion. Its faculties may continue enlarging and embracing new objects without end. There are no bounds to the human mind. It may be ennobled with a knowledge of the yet unpublished record of eternity.

Where then is an ample range for the mind? The extended fields of art, and nature have their bounds. And though they are contemplated with delight; still there are other objects more ennobling.

Bring the works of art to the contemplation of the mind. Let it survey the useful and ornamental improvements to mitigate the sufferings, and meliorate the condition of the miserable descendants of the banished inhabitants of Eden—Let it see the

earth doomed by the curse of heaven to briars and thorns, yielding to the hand of culture,—vegetation waving and ripening, in all its luxuriance on the plain—minerals decomposed and amalgamated by a chemical process—animals tamed and rendered obedient, for the use of man—Let it reflect on the medicinal qualities that have been extracted and combined for the healing of diseases—the various forms of government devised for the protection of the weak—the moral machinery set in motion to relieve the burdened consciences of the guilty—the medium of communication with those at a distance—and the facilities for acquiring knowledge: and as it surveys these works, it will feel a conscious pride in its own worth, and be delighted—but they are soon exhausted.

Lead the mind over the widely extended and enchanting field of nature. Direct its thoughts to the waving spire, and the towering oak—to the worthless mote, and the precious metal—to the creeping insect, and the proud ruler—Guide it over the plain—through the wood—down the verdant valley—along the banks of the river—up the rugged mountain—across the mighty deep; and, on your way, point out the flowers, the feathered songsters, the roaming beasts, the meandering streams, the frightful precipices, and the finny monsters that add to earth's variegated scenery—Call its attention to the rumbling earthquake, the volcanic eruption, the vivid lightning, the rolling thunder, the raging tempest, and the foaming billows. From earth, conduct it through the empty fields of space up to the fountain of light;

and from the sun point out the planets, secondary planets, asteroids, and comets, that compose our system, playing around in perfect harmony. Leaving this system carry it to others; and from each fixed star survey the system it illuminates; until you have passed the fields of immensity, and fixed your stand on the common centre of all worlds and systems: and the mind will be filled with rapt astonishment—but here is the end of nature's works.

Now comes religion, in all her beauty and loveliness, to lead the mind, in its destined course, onward. She takes it to the very bosom of the Eternal: and unfolds the wisdom, power, and goodness that gave birth to nature and still sustains it. She exhibits his character, as pure, incomprehensible, and immutable—his perfections as infinite, which open a boundless field for the mind.

She then takes it on a survey of the Eternal's moral kingdom—embracing heaven, earth and hell. She describes the characters of their inhabitants, and makes known the laws that govern them. *In hell*, she points out the spirits of apostate angels, reserved under chains of darkness till the judgment, and the lost spirits of men, mourning their hopeless condition. On both of whom the moral government of God has no other than the hardening influence of despair. They are daily sinking deeper in wo, under the weight of the awful penalty of his law. *On earth*, she points to the hardened sons of wickedness, and the redeemed heirs of glory. Both are the unfortunate descendants of fallen man, and were under the wrath and curse of offended justice; but,

from these, the latter have been redeemed by the blood of Christ. The laws of God are alike binding on each. *In heaven*, she points to the angelic order of intelligences, who have remained perfect in favor with their Creator, and the glorified spirits of men washed white in the blood of the Lamb. Both enjoy all the happiness of which they are susceptible, and render cheerful obedience to the laws of heaven. This kingdom, reaching over the whole extent of this wide universe—containing such various characters—and with laws taking cognizance of each act of every individual, furnishes the immortal mind with ample range.

She next leads it over the kingdom of grace. Man, having rebelled against the moral government of God, was by justice barred from heaven. A new kingdom of grace was then instituted to provide for his return to the favor of his Sovereign, and the enjoyment of loyal subjects. This kingdom embraces all the ransomed of the Lord. They have been graciously pardoned and are entitled to all the untold glories of the upper world. *Grace* is their theme, and they will shout *grace* through eternity. It is by grace that they are what they are. And they will ever be learning the unspeakable value of this, which will influence them to sing in louder and yet louder strains, *grace—grace*. A theme on which the mind may dwell with rapture, forever.

How ennobling is religion! It raises the mind to the contemplation of things unearthly and unending. Things in which it may ever be increasing in knowledge, and from which derive new enjoyments.

Then why not embrace it? Why not thus provide for eternity? Why not seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness? Will you seek ignoble, perishing, and unsatisfying objects before religion? Will you degrade your minds, and rob your souls in pursuit of objects less worthy? O that men would be wise!—that they would be pious!

But some may object, supposing it would deprive them of every pleasure. Religion however never did, and never can deprive any of a rational enjoyment. With this, you may participate in all, that distinguishes you from the irrational.

Some may imagine it would cast a gloom over their lives, and therefore object. Be assured however that religion never cast a shade over the mind, and bowed the head in melancholy. Not that the pious are never sad; but their religion is not the cause of it.

Others may object, meaning to embrace it at a future period. But that period may never come. And if it comes not, you are lost—eternally lost.

There is no valid objection to religion. Its claims are superior to all others, and its blessings have no parallel. It provides for the future, and elevates the soul with thoughts pure, on subjects high and eternal. Cease then to object, and *seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness.*

Such being the claims of religion, we learn, in conclusion, the *inconsistency* of those, who refuse to acknowledge them. They here act upon a different principle from what they do elsewhere. On other subjects, they act with reference to their welfare.

This they do uniformly. But here, they break away from their common course, and, like madmen, act in direct opposition to their own best interest. This they do not once, nor ignorantly; but understandingly and perseveringly. They will hear the benefits of religion described—listen to the voice of affection urging them to embrace it; and still refuse to comply with the solicitation, or secure the blessing. They will further believe that religion is all, that can render their souls satisfied and happy; and yet make no exertions to obtain it. This is an inconsistency that puts reason to the blush—that sets the common arguments of persuasion at defiance.

Shall this inconsistency baffle all efforts to make you happy in the pursuit of religion? Will you deliberately refuse to do what you know to be for your interest? Will you, believing religion is all that can provide for your happiness here and in eternity, ask who will show you any worldly good, or how it may be obtained? Will you thus neglect your eternal welfare in pursuit of any momentary good? If so, persuasion is vain. You may be urged no more. Your inconsistency is lamentable, and persisted in will be ruinous.

We further learn, the *certain misery* of those, who manifest an entire disregard to these claims. Their views are confined to the objects of this world. Not a desire reaches into eternity. Grant the utmost of all their wishes, and they would lay up no treasure for the future—for the disembodied soul. Earth is their home and earthly objects are all they seek. They draw not from the inexhausti-

ble fountains of knowledge and happiness, which lie beyond the narrow bounds of time. And as they enter eternity, every object of their pursuit will be removed—the source of every enjoyment dried up; and their souls must be dissatisfied and miserable. They are now fed on the beggarly elements of the world, and then will be tormented with an insatiable hunger after the aliment of immortality.

Will you thus limit your views and torment your souls? Will you bind them down to earth in full prospect of an undone eternity? This, indeed, is cruel! To inflict unnecessary pain, or wantonly murder is cruel. But in denying your souls the high and eternal objects of religion, you not only inflict pain; but bring on them all the horrors of the second death. You deliberately affix to them the seals of wo. What intensity must the recollection of this add to their torments in eternity? Is there one compassionate feeling in your bosoms—is there any mercy there; then stay—oh stay the ruthless hand—stain it not in the blood of your own souls! Be not your own destroyers! Oh do not so wickedly!

We learn, finally, the *complete happiness* of those, who respect the claims of religion, and make it the first object of pursuit. Their thoughts are not confined to earth. They look beyond, to things spiritual and everlasting. Things, that will endure when the earth, its objects, scenes, and enjoyments shall be no more. These command their affections—are the ground of their hopes—and the source of their

happiness. They must therefore be happy, **while** these shall last—even forever.

Break away, then, from the fascinating charms of sense—the transitory scenes of time—the alluring objects of the world, and embrace religion. Your earthly wants shall be supplied, your minds range unrestrained, and your souls feed on their native aliment. No adverse scene of time shall deprive you of joy; and no woful event of eternity cast a gloom over your minds, and fill your souls with sorrow. But they shall be led up to the bosom of the Eternal—over the whole extent of his moral kingdom—through the works of grace—onward to bliss everlasting: and there, in the robes of Christ's righteousness, and the favour of God, you shall drink of the fountain of life, and attune your voices to hymns of praise to God and the Lamb.