

Take Up the Challenge

by Alexander Maclaren

The sermon emphasizes the dangers of presumptuous sins, the necessity of divine assistance, and the hope for deliverance and holiness in the Christian life.

Scripture: Psalm 84:11, Isaiah 2:3, 1 Corinthians 13:13, Ephesians 4:13, 1 John 4:8

Topics: "Divine Love", "Spiritual Virtues"

Description

The Desert Fathers preach about the supreme trinity of virtues - faith, hope, and love, with an emphasis on the greatest being love, as God Himself embodies it. They use analogies like a ray, light, and circle to describe the unity and radiance of these virtues, highlighting their divine nature and transformative power. The sermon delves into the perilous task of speaking about divine love, cautioning against the dangers of expatiating on God without proper reverence and understanding. The virtues of love, dispassion, and adoption are compared to light, fire, and flame, forming a unified power that leads to divine knowledge and union with God.

Transcript

ANOTHER PSALMIST PROMISES TO the man who dwells "in the secret place of the Most High" that "he shall not be afraid for the terror by night, nor for the arrow that flieth by day, nor for the pestilence that walketh at noonday," but shall "tread upon the lion and adder." These promises divide the dangers that beset us into the same two classes as our psalmist does--the one secret; the other palpable and open. The former, which, as I explained in my last sermon, are sins hidden, not from others, but from the doer, may fairly be likened to the pestilence that stalks slaying in the dark, or to the stealthy, gliding serpent, which strikes and poisons before the naked foot is aware. The other resembles the "destruction that wasteth at noonday," or the lion with its roar and its spring, as, disclosed from its covert, it leaps upon the prey.

Our present text clears with the latter of these two classes. "Presumptuous sins" does not, perhaps, convey to an ordinary reader the whole significance of the phrase, for it may be taken to define a single class of sins--namely, those of pride or insolence. What is really meant is just the opposite of "secret sins"--all sorts of evil which, whatever may be their motives and other qualities, have this in common, that the doer, when he does them, knows them to be wrong.

The Psalmist gets this further glimpse into the terrible possibilities which attach even to a servant of God, and we have in our text these three things--a danger discerned; a help sought; and a daring hope

cherished.

A Danger Discerned

Note, then, the first of these, the dreaded and discerned danger--"presumptuous sins" which may "have dominion over" us, and lead us at last to a "great transgression."

Now the word which is translated "presumptuous" literally means that which boils or bubbles; and it sets very picturesquely before us the movement of hot desires--the agitation of excited impulses or inclinations which hurry men into sin in spite of their consciences. It is also to be noticed that the prayer of my text, with singular pathos and lowly self-consciousness, is the prayer of "Thy servant," who knows himself to be a servant, and who therefore knows that these glaring transgressions, done in the teeth of conscience and consciousness, are all inconsistent with his standing and his profession, but yet are perfectly possible for him.

An old medieval mystic once said, "There is nothing weaker than the devil stripped naked." Would it were true! For there is one thing that is weaker than a discovered devil, and that is my own heart. For we all know that sometimes, with our eyes open, and the most unmistakable consciousness that what we are doing was wrong, we have set our teeth and done it, Christian men though we may profess to be, and may really be. All such conduct is inconsistent with Christianity but we are not to say, Therefore, that it is incompatible with Christianity. Thank God! that is a very different matter. But as long as you and I have two things--viz., strong and hot desires, and weak and flabby wills--so long shall we, in this world full of combustibles, not be beyond the possibility of a dreadful conflagration being kindled by some devil-blown sparks. There are plenty of dry sticks lying about to put under the cauldron of our hearts, to make them boil and bubble over! And we have, alas! but weak wills, which do not always keep the reins in their hands as they ought to do, nor coerce these lower parts of our nature into their proper subordination. Fire is a good servant, but a bad master; and we are all of us too apt to let it become master, and then the whole "course of nature" is "set on fire of hell" The servant of God may yet, with open eyes and obstinate disregard of his better self, and of all its remonstrances, go straight into "presumptuous sin."

Another step is here taken by the Psalmist. He looks shrinkingly and shudderingly into a possible depth, and he sees, going down into the abyss, a ladder with three rungs on it. The topmost one is wilful, self-conscious transgression. But that is not the lowest stage; there is another step. Presumptuous sin tends to become despotic sin. "Let them not have dominion over me." A man may do a very bad thing once, and get so wholesomely frightened, and so keenly conscious of the disastrous issues, that he will never go near it again. The prodigal would not be in a hurry, you may depend upon it, to try the swine trough and the far country, and the rags, and the fever, and the famine any more. David got a lesson that he never forgot in that matter of Bathsheba. The bitter fruit of his sin kept growing up all his life, and he had to eat it, and that kept him right. They tell us that broken bones are stronger at the point of fracture than they were before. And it is possible for a man's sin--if I might use a paradox which you will not misunderstand--to become the instrument of his salvation.

But there is another possibility quite as probable, and very often recurring, and that is that the disease, like some other morbid states of the human frame, shall leave a tendency to recurrence. A pin-point hole in a dike will widen into a gap as big as a church-door in ten minutes, by the pressure of the flood behind it. And so every act which we do in contradiction of our standing as professing Christians, and in the face of the protests, all unavailing, of that conscience which is only a voice, and has no power to enforce its

behests, will tend to recurrence once and again. The single acts become habits, with awful rapidity. Just as the separate gas jets from a multitude of minute apertures coalesce into a continuous ring of light, so deeds become habits, and get dominion over us. "He sold himself to do evil." He made himself a bond-slave of iniquity. It is an awful and a miserable thing to think that professing Christians do often come into that position of being, by their inflamed passions and enfeebled wills, servants of the evil that they do. Alas! how many of us, if we were honest with ourselves, would have to say, "I am carnal, sold unto sin."

That is not the lowest rung of the slippery ladder. Despotism ends in utter departure.

The word translated here, quite correctly, "transgression," and intensified by that strong adjective attached, "a great transgression," literally means rebellion, revolt, or some such idea; and expresses, as the ultimate issue of conscious transgression prolonged and perpetuated into habit, an entire casting off of allegiance to God. "No man can serve two masters." "His servants ye are whom ye obey," whomsoever you may call your master. The Psalmist feels that the end of indulged evil is going over altogether to the other camp. I suppose all of us have known instances of that sort. Men in my position, with a long life of ministry behind them, can naturally remember many such instances. And this is the outline history of the suicide of a Christian. First secret sin, unsuspected, because the conscience is torpid; then open sin, known to be such, but done nevertheless; then dominant sin, with an enfeebled will and power of resistance; then the abandonment of all presence or profession of religion. The ladder goes down into the pit, but not to the bottom of the pit. And the man that is going down it has a descending impulse after he has reached the bottom step and he falls--Where? The first step down is tampering with conscience. It is neither safe nor wise to do anything, howsoever small, against that voice. All the rest will come afterward, unless God restrains--"first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear," and then the bitter harvest of the poisonous grain.

A Help Sought

So, secondly, note the help sought.

The Psalmist is like a man standing on the edge of some precipice, and peeping over the brink to the profound beneath, and feeling his head beginning to swim. He clutches at the strong, steady hand of his guide, knowing that, unless he is restrained, over he will go. "Keep Thou back Thy servant from presumptuous sins." So, then, the first lesson we have to take is, to cherish a lowly consciousness of our own tendency to light-headedness and giddiness. "Blessed is the man that feareth always." That fear has nothing cowardly about it. It will not abate in the least the buoyancy and bravery of our work. It will not tend to make us shirk duty because there is temptation in it, but it will make us go into all circumstances realizing that without that Divine help we cannot stand, and that with it we cannot fall. "Hold Thou me up, and I shall be safe." The same Peter that said, "Though all should forsake Thee, yet will not I," was wiser and braver when he said, in later days, being taught by former presumption, "Pass the time of your sojourning here in fear."

Let me remind you, too, that the attitude which we ought to cherish is that of a confident belief in the reality of a Divine support. The prayer of my text has no meaning at all, unless the actual supernatural communication by God's own Holy Spirit breathed into men's hearts be a simple truth. "Hold Thou me up," "keep Thou me back," means, if it means anything, Give me in my heart a mightier strength than mine own, which shall curb all this evil nature of mine, and bring it into conformity with Thy holy will.

How is that restraining influence to be exercised ? There are many ways by which God, in His providence, can fulfil the prayer. But the way above all others is by the actual operation upon heart and will and desires of a Divine Spirit, which uses for its weapon the Word of God, revealed by Jesus Christ, and in the Scriptures. "The sword of the Spirit is the Word of God" and God's answer to the prayer of my text is the gift to every man who seeks it of that indwelling power to sustain and to restrain.

That will keep our passions down. The bubbling water is lowered in its temperature, and ceases to bubble, when cold is added to it. When God's Spirit comes into a man's heart, that will deaden his desires after earth and forbidden ways. It will bring blessed higher objects for all our affections. He who has been fed on "the hidden manna" will not be likely to hanker after the leeks and onions, however strong their smell and pungent their taste, that grew in the Nile mud in Egypt. He who has tasted the higher sweetnesses of God will have his heart's desires after lower delights strangely deadened and cooled. Get near God, and open your hearts for the entrance of that Divine Spirit, and then it will not seem foolish to empty your hands of the trash that they carry in order to grasp the precious things that He gives. A bit of scrap iron magnetized aligns itself with a magnetic field. My heart, touched by the Spirit of God dwelling in me, will turn to Him, and I shall find little sweetness in the else tempting delicacies that earth can supply. "Keep Thy servant back from," by depriving him of the taste for, "presumptuous sins."

That Spirit will strengthen our wills. For, when God comes into a heart, He restores the due subordination which has been broken into discord and anarchy by sin. He dismounts the servant riding on horseback, and carrying the horse to the devil, according to the proverb, and gives the reins into the right hands. Now, if the gift of God's Spirit, working through the Word of God, and the principles and the motives therein unfolded, and therefrom deducible, be the great means by which we are to be kept from open and conscious transgression, it follows very plainly that our task is twofold. One part of it is to see that we cultivate that spirit of lowly dependence, of self-conscious weakness, of triumphant confidence, which will issue in the perpetual prayer for God's restraint. When we enter upon tasks which may be dangerous, and into regions of temptation which cannot but be so, though they be duty, we should ever have the desire in our hearts and upon our lips that God would keep us from, and in, the evil.

The other part of our duty is to make it a matter of conscience and careful cultivation, to use honestly and faithfully the power which, in response to our desires, has been granted to us. All of you, Christian men and women, have access to an absolute security against every transgression; and the cause lies wholly at your own doors in each case of failure, deficiency, or transgression, for at every moment it was open to you to clasp the hand that holds you up, and at every moment, if you failed, it was because your careless fingers had relaxed their grasp.

The Challenge

Lastly, observe the daring hope here cherished.

"Then shall I be upright, and I shall be innocent from the great transgression." That is the upshot of the Divine answer to both the petitions, which have been occupying us in these two successive sermons. It is connected with the former of them by the recurrence of the same word, which in the first petition was rendered "cleanse"--or, more accurately, "clear"-- and in this final clause is to be rendered accurately, "I shall be clear from the great transgression." And it obviously connects in sense with both these petitions, because, in order to be upright and clear, there must, first of all, be the Divine cleansing and then Divine restraint.

So, then, nothing short of absolute deliverance from the power of sin in all its forms should content the servant of God. Nothing short of it contents the Master for the servant. Nothing short of it corresponds to the power which Christ puts in operation in every heart that believes in Him. And nothing else should be our aim in our daily conflict with evil and growth in grace. Ah! I fear me that, for an immense number of professing Christians in this generation, the hope of--and, still more, the aim towards--anything approximating to entire deliverance from sin, have faded from their consciences and their lives. Aim at the stars, brother, and, if you do not hit them, your arrow will go higher than if it were shot along the lower levels.

Note that an indefinite approximation to this condition is possible. I am not going to discuss, at this stage of my discourse, controversial questions which may be involved here. It will be time enough to discuss with you whether you can be absolutely free from sin in this world when you are a great deal freer from it than you are at present. At all events, you can get far nearer to the ideal, and the ideal must always be perfect. And I lay it on your hearts, dear friends, that you have in your possession, if you are Christian people, possibilities in the way of conformity to the Master's will, and emancipation from all corruption, that you have not yet dreamed of, not to say applied to your lives. "I pray God that He would sanctify you wholly, and that your whole body, soul, and spirit be preserved blameless unto the coming."

That daring hope will be fulfilled one day; for nothing short of it will exhaust the possibilities of Christ's work or satisfy the desires of Christ's heart.

The Gospel knows nothing of irreclaimable outcasts. To it there is but one unpardonable sin, and that is the sin of refusing the cleansing of Christ's blood and the sanctifying of Christ's Spirit. Whoever you are, whatever you are, go to God with this prayer of our text, and realize that it is answered in Jesus Christ, and you will not ask in vain. If you will put yourselves into His hands, and let Him cleanse and restrain, He will give you new powers to detect the serpents in the flowers, and new resolution to shake off the vipers into the fire. For there is nothing that God wants half so much as that we, His wandering children, should come back to Him, and He will cleanse us from the filth of the swine trough and the rags of our exile, and clothe us in fine linen clean and white. We may each be sinless and guiltless. We can be so in one way only. If we look to Jesus Christ, and live near Him, He "will be made of God unto us wisdom," by which we shall detect our secret sins; "righteousness," whereby we shall be cleansed from guilt; "sanctification," which shall restrain us from open transgression; "and redemption," by which we shall be wholly delivered from evil and presented faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy.

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