

# Retribution

by A.R. Benton

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*The sermon emphasizes the certainty of God's moral system and the consequences of sin, indolence, and dissipation.*

**Topics:** "Moral Accountability", "Consequences Of Sin"

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## Description

A.R. Benton preaches about the natural connection between cause and effect, emphasizing the certainty of reaping what one sows in both character formation and practical life concerns. He highlights the invariable consequences of moral actions, drawing parallels between the physical and moral systems of God's universe. Benton stresses the importance of understanding God's moral laws as immutable and certain, urging listeners to avoid the pitfalls of sin and embrace virtues that align with God's moral purposes. He warns against the dishonesties of life, the dissipation of life, and sowing to the flesh, emphasizing the inevitable retribution and consequences that follow such actions.

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## Transcript

"For what a man soweth, that shall he also reap."--GAL. VI: 7.

IN the formation of character, and in the practical concerns of life, it is of the highest importance to keep in mind the natural connection between cause and effect--between an action and its consequences. That there is a natural tie, which inevitably binds an act to its consequence, is a truth obvious in every department of nature. This, also, is the plain inculcation of our text--that whatever a man sows, that he also shall reap.

According to the reasoning of the apostle, it is no more natural to gather a crop after the kind of seed sown, than to look for definite and invariable results in our moral husbandry. Whatever of certainty in results is incorporated into the physical economy of God, the same certainty is an invariable constituent of his moral system; and it is as difficult to elude and baffle the latter as the former.

It is a pleasing truth for our contemplation, that the Great Designer of all things has given, in his physical universe, some intimations of what he is in his moral administration--that the excellencies of a spiritual life may be reflected from the relationship of earth; and that material [561] things may become to us sacred hieroglyphics, by which to read the things that are spiritual.

Upon this conception of the relation of the material to the spiritual, are the parables of the Savior founded. Like the tabernacle, which was made after the form of a heavenly pattern, so the earth, with all its forces and processes, is a copy and intimation of a higher state. Thus a harmonious and lasting unity runs through all the works of God, binding heaven and earth in one glorious universe--demonstrating the oneness of creative power, and the oneness of administration, by Him "who filleth all in all."

Nothing, perhaps, would deter more effectually from the commission of crime--nothing would restrain more vigorously the obliquities of human conduct, than a decided conviction that God's moral and spiritual laws are as immutable as his physical laws. No man, in contempt of the law of gravitation, plunges down a precipice; yet millions eagerly leap down all the steeps of sin into the very abyss of Tartarus and perdition.

Is it because men prize less highly, or conserve less carefully, their spiritual concerns? By no means. It is because the consequences of vice, folly, or shameless wickedness are not believed as being certain, and, by the constitution of nature, inevitable. Heaven and earth may pass away, but the word of God shall never pass away. His moral system will continue with its primal and perennial freshness, when the present physical order of things shall have undergone an entire change.

It is not to be denied, that an impression is widely prevalent, with respect to the dissimilarity of God's moral and physical government. In the physical economy, his laws are admitted to be fixed and immutable; and no sane man expects to evade the penalty of outraged law. "The [562] thousand ills that flesh is heir to" are conceded to be the natural sequences of personal or ancestral transgression. Tell a man that health and longevity depend invariably on the observance of laws in which there is no chance--no arbitrary interference of some capricious power--and it will receive his unqualified assent. Tell him that every gratification of inordinate appetite--that intemperance and dissoluteness will bring with them a train of ills fearful and indescribable, in the eclipsing of the flaming brilliancy of the mind, and in paralyzing and prostrating the powers of the body, and he can give it no denial.

But, on the other hand, when you come to speak of the retributions which inexorably pursue the man who violates the laws of his moral being, you are met with distrust and chilling skepticism. In this department of God's universe, multitudes see nothing but chaos, disorder, and capricious chance. The hectic hue of health is upon the face of their pursuits and enjoyments, while the virus of death lurks in the vitals. In their vocabulary, there is no such phrase as the "evil of sin." They have perturbations and disquietudes of mind, it is true, but these are charged to physical, rather than to moral causes.

Because of this lurking and pervading distrust, a false and fatal indifference to the moral quality of actions is painfully evident in the pleasures and pursuits of life.

In our daily experience we have a proof of God's intolerance of sin, and an incontestible evidence that he will not allow it to go unpunished.

If his displeasure at sin was as transient as our concern; if his estimate of its guilt as small as our sense of danger, why does he visit us all with death, to us the most certain and inexorable of all events? This experience, unknown to sinless angels, and one from which the whole sentient [563] creation shrinks, is inflicted with pitiless constancy on every child of Adam.

If God regards the moral evil of the world with that complacency with which the world regards it, why such a hard dispensation to the children of men? For death, with remorseless certainty, as a keen scytheman, cuts down the fair and blooming in all the successive generations of men.

In the moanings of pain, in the tortures of remorseful despair, in the wild agonies of death, we have emphatic testimony that God hates moral evil, and will certainly punish it, if not abandoned with penitence. The sting of death is sin. It is, therefore, delusive to cherish the imagination, that retribution for infraction of God's moral law is not certain. It is the most certain of all, for most of all is he incensed at the violation of his moral laws. The great central truth of God's moral government is, that he governs actively toward moral, and not physical ends; and hence, every thing which conduces to this result will especially please him, and not go unrewarded.

As a Creator, God may be said to have physical plans and ends to reach; but as a Father, which is the highest relation revealed to us, or concernable by us, he has moral purposes to serve. And is it not reasonable to suppose that he will certainly smile with benignity upon such as act in harmony with his moral purposes, and frown with indignant displeasure upon such as seek to subvert his moral order and designs?

That the evil of sin, and the certainty of its punishment, may stand out more vividly before the mind, we pass from these general considerations to more minuteness of specification.

I. And first, with respect to the evil of sin. It is, [564] without doubt, true that the tone of general literature is in palliation of the turpitude of sin. Its sharp, harsh outlines of offense are softened down by the euphemisms of a skeptical imagination. Again, it is often looked upon as a theological subtlety of professional interest, and a subject for cloister meditation; while, by others, its existence may not be denied, it is regarded as something born with a man, a kind of moral taint, that no moral disinfectant can wholly remove--a transmitted virus that corrupts and poisons all with which it comes in contact.

In the Bible, the nature of sin, and the magnitude of its evil, receives no such complacent handling. It is represented as the sting of death--that it can kill the soul, and inflict unrespite torment forever. All voluntary wrong-doing is sin. It is to resist our sense of right, to neglect acknowledged duty, or to disregard the laws of justice, integrity, and benevolence toward men, or, in the highest sense, to fail in our duties to God.

The Scriptures are full and explicit in affirming that all pains, afflictions, and losses are light matters compared with the guilt of voluntary wrong-doing; that to lose a right eye or right hand would be preferable far to a stain upon the soul, which may tarnish its beauty forever. This uniform testimony of Scripture is in perfect accord with human reason and experience. Take a man who has never occupied himself with the study of questions of morality and religion, and set before him the case of a man who has become rich by extortion and fraud; and the example of another, who has carefully abstained from these, and, in the discharge of acknowledged duty, has borne great suffering. Will he not decide that the latter has made a wise choice? The admiration of our souls for what is disinterested and heroic in human conduct, is proof of the [565] excellence of virtue and the unnaturalness of sin. In our personal experience, those things which sting with the keenest pang are the occurrences in which, so to speak, we gained the world, but lost our soul; in which temptation triumphed over our moral principles, or in which selfishness or passion degraded us below our proper level.

There is no sting so sharp as remorse; no loss like the loss of innocence; no crimson so deep as that of shame, in view of remembered follies and vices. This is the voice, not of a single man, nor of a single age, but it is the universal sentiment of humanity. The Furies, brandishing in one hand the torch of vengeance, and in the other a scourge of writhing, wriggling vipers, and bearing aloft a Gorgon's head, that could turn

every beholder into stone, are terrific representations of the heinous nature of moral evil, as revealed in the universal consciousness of men. But the culmination of this evil will not be realized in the present life; but, like the envenomed robe of Nessus, will cling with burning and consuming potency to the blackened and charred soul forever.

There is a kind of parchment, on which the characters, faded by time, are so perfectly restored by chemical reagents as to reveal, after the lapse of centuries, the secrets and forgotten lore committed to it. Such a parchment is the human soul, on which will be restored, in lines of ineffaceable light, the desires and the deeds of the unremembered past. The continuity of our being will not be interrupted by death. "Dust to dust" was not spoken of the soul. As our lives to-day are the resultant of past affections, aspirations, and pursuits, so our character beyond the stream of death will be the product of the influences that control us from day to day. Though we may be blind now to the turpitude of moral evil, through the [566] fascinations of pleasure, or the anxious cares of active life, in that day, if given up to a sinful life, we shall feel with Milton's Satan, that "whichever way I turn is hell--myself am hell."

II. In the next place, we consider the certainty of God's retributive justice. The nature of moral evil lays the foundation for such justice. God's nature is the foundation of its certainty. This certainty is affirmed with the positiveness of dogmatism in our text. "Whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap." It is not hypothetical or uncertain. He shall reap: not as a mere prediction, but as of positive appointment. To many, no doubt, this inflexible certainty of sequence seems a hard and stern decree. Like the man who had received but one talent, they complain of God as an austere Master, who reaps where he has not sown. It is obvious that our complaining does not and can not alter God's plans; but it will be our highest wisdom to learn his plans, and to conform to them.

Even if one should be unable to explain them, or construe them satisfactorily to his mind, this will absolve him in no measure from the penalty incurred by violating known law. Approve or disapprove as we may, of the sanctions which God has annexed to his laws, this will, in no respect, bias or change the Divine course. Go and work, and whatever is right I will give you, is the universal law underlying all his economies. From this his immutability can not allow him to swerve.

In illustrating and enforcing the truth of the certain connection. between our acts and their pre-ordained consequences, we shall appeal to matters that intimately concern the young, as youth is, in the order of nature, the period in which the seed is sown which will ripen with pestiferous fruit, or into a glorious harvest. [567]

1. In the first place, we invite attention to one of the lowest and least reprehensible forms of transgression--the mistakes of the young.

If there were any cases in which we might reasonably expect that the rigor of law would be relaxed, surely we might expect some mitigation of penalty in the case of simple mistakes. But do we find such to be the case? Does even involuntary error lead to no pernicious result? Does ignorance snap the ligament that binds effect to cause? The answer is found in our own experience.

How often do we find men in situations that they have a special unfitness for. In such conditions they labor on for years, without suspecting for a moment their inaptitude for their calling. They blame their mischances, the infelicity of their conditions, while they are simply the victims of their mistakes. They, perchance, mistake their turbulent pride, and enormous self-consciousness, for the measure of their practical force; and hence are arrogant in all their demands on society. Inordinately desiring a life of ease

and elegance, and believing themselves, by birth or culture, fitted to shine in the highest positions, with singular pertinacity they claim for themselves the special consideration of the world. This great mistake with regard to what the world owes or will accord, paves the way to their ultimate ruin. The common callings of life, in which downright, earnest work is demanded, are shunned, and without aptitude or ability for those positions which they seek, they fall peevishly into a driveling mediocrity.

There is a law of adaptation in the affairs of life which we may not violate with impunity. While something in our failures may be charged to circumstances, and to the infelicities of our lot, still this great organic law, [568] Adaptation, is the main operative principle that controls our fortune; and no plea of mistake will undo the mischief which inevitably follows the infraction of this law.

2. In the next place, indolence and disregard of the opportunities of life are visited with certain punishment. For a time these things may sit easily, and life may glide along jauntily; but in the end their results will sting like adders, realizing to the transgressor that whatsoever he sows, that, and nothing else, shall he reap. There are a great many in this world, of whom more might have been made; but all their vain regrets over what might have been will be unavailing to bring back the neglected past, or squandered opportunities. If a young person makes a mistake here, no degree of industry in after life will fully retrieve the losses of the past; and painful losses they will remain forever.

Am I asked what are the special inflictions visited upon this easy and seductive vice? They are poverty, beggary, loss of self-respect and public esteem. Should I place before you two classes of circumstances, one of ease, affluence, and indolence, the other of hardship and the reward of persistent evil, most, I presume, would choose the former.

One comes into life the expectant heir of countless advantages. He has no want unsupplied or unanticipated. He walks the easy path of indolence--the petted, the indulged, and, generally, the spoiled child of mistaken parental love. This bleached, etiolated scion of doting parents, harboring all the selfishnesses and meannesses of an unoccupied life, is fitted, by the lessons of indolence, for all covert or public transgression of law.

The other is born, perhaps, under the dispensation of rags. From early life he falls into the eddies of society, [569] and is thrown from one side to another--sunk at one time, then coming to the surface; and, with fearlessness and fortitude, at last begins to get hold on life, and, in the words of Emerson, he "teams it, farms it, peddles, keeps school, edits a newspaper, goes to Congress, buys a township," and so forth. This discipline develops something better than wealth or position. It develops manhood, and, by its attritions, polishes the jewels of character until they shine with splendid luster.

Given these circumstances and careers from which to choose, would not many young persons choose the life of indolence and magnificent worthlessness? We need not now stop to trace indolence through all its labyrinths of dishonesty--to which it most surely leads--its swindlings, its forgeries, thievings, and the sensual indulgences which fill up the interstices between these crimes.

3. In the third place, there is certain retribution consequent upon the dissipation of life. One of the most alarming exhibitions of unbridled desires, is that pursuit of pleasure called, with great significance, dissipation. This is a species of self-gratification that assumes Protean forms--the idol of modern society, and the constant pursuit of restless and unoccupied minds. Such persons, in constant pursuit of some new titillations of pleasure, seek to drown their time, thoughts, and restiveness in the whirl of endless dissipation. They stand along the high road of life as sad examples of self-anarchy and internal misrule.

These "wild oats" of dissipation may be sown--thousands do sow them--but the reaping will be according to the sowing. Not more certainly will the husbandman reap tares when tares are sown, than will he reap shame and disappointment who makes pleasure his pursuit in life. All the steps taken on this road must be retraced with [570] painfulness and cross-bearing, if ever safety or happiness in this life be found.

Were I to specify with particularity those forms of dissipation most hurtful to the moral welfare of the young, I should mention the saloon, the theater, the gambling hell, and the haunts of sensuality to which modesty denies a name. Of some of these, it may be said, that their grossness is so great, that none but the most hardened in depravity are reckoned among their votaries; while the theater may be a source of rational and innocent satisfaction. It is often asked, with an air of conscious triumph, what specific law of morals is violated by attending the theater? It may be true that it has been refined from the excesses of intemperance, from the execrations of profanity, and the jeers of infidelity, and yet be practically pernicious to moral culture. Then comes the groveling question: What mysterious harm in frequenting such a place as this? It is a fallacy to suppose that no substantial objections may exist against a practice which infracts no specific command.

A man might be unwell, and the physician be unable to give a specific name to his complaint. So with the scenic representations of the stage. The ailing is general; and even if unable to impeach them for specific guilt, they are to be condemned for their complicities and general results. In the words of an apostle, "An idol may be nothing, and the meats offered to it may be nothing," and still it may be unlawful in morals to visit its temple, or to sit at its table.

It is, no doubt, well that the Christian religion gives no dogmatic utterances on points like this; but that it aims to supersede the luxury, the license, and the giggling folly of such entertainments by new tastes, new affections, [571] and a nobler manhood. The new wine of tastes and principles must be put into new bottles, if both are to be preserved.

"Rejoice, then, young man, in the days of thy youth! But know, that for all these things God will bring you into judgment."

4. There is also certain retribution for the dishonesties of life. There is, in our time, not only a tolerance, but there are even encomiums upon some of the dishonesties of men. The moral significance of deeds is charged, and what was formerly, and in truth, esteemed a vice, is now canonized as a virtue. This is the involuntary homage that men are compelled to pay to virtue. If rascality is called tact or business sagacity, it is because men wish to give a creditable account of themselves; if mendacity, in all its forms, is called a prudent defense against the impertinence or overreaching of others, it is because they wish to gloss over the repulsiveness of lying. The danger of dishonesty comes not in some hideous, colossal form, but often attenuated and gay, rallying the fears or piquing the pride, until, admitted to the hospitality of human hearts, it suddenly swells into gigantic proportions, and with its Gorgon head of horror, affrights every impotent struggle to exorcise the demon. Then honor, integrity, and purity perish; and, with these, all is gone but the stinging disappointment, the useless remorse. Instead of the anticipated harvest of respect, and honor, and life eternal, there is the fruit of tyrannous and insatiable desires, which will constitute forever a man his own tormentor.

Among our own countrymen, I know no more melancholy example of warning to aspiring young men, that they beware of the dishonesties of life, than that of Aaron Burr. Sprung from a noble ancestry, and bearing an honored [572] name; endowed with a mental tact and brilliancy that eclipsed all competitors; of speech

as fluent and fascinating as that which angels use; of ambition towering as Lucifer's; of an iron will that bent all, even bodily infirmity, to its own imperiousness, he was fitted, by nature and liberal education, to become a blessing to his race. But, losing his hold of moral and religious principles, which had shed their hallowed and sweetening influences on his early life, he fell from bad to worse, until, in his infinite progression toward evil, he conspired to dismember his country, was exposed in his wicked career, and is now gibbeted by the execrations of his countrymen.

Thus it ever will be, that it may be known how God watches the flow of our daily life, its honesties and dishonesties, asserting his approbation of the one, and his condemnation of the other.

5. In the last place, consider the application which the apostle himself makes of this doctrine of retribution. "He that sows to the flesh, shall of the flesh reap corruption; he that sows to the spirit, shall of the spirit reap life everlasting."

No labor is expended to prove that it is wrong to sow to the flesh, or that it is right to sow to the spirit. He affirms a universal truth, with its certainty and momentous import, and leaves it for us to apply. That it is always criminal to sow to the flesh is clear; but in this connection the apostle endeavors to enforce the evanescent and perishable nature of its objects.

The whole round of pursuits, tastes, and affections of mankind are generalized by the two words, flesh and spirit. The former are temporal and evanescent; the latter are commensurate with the life of God--they are eternal.

What, then, is the boundary-line that separates the spirit [573] from the flesh? Is it that by which the dissipations or dishonesties of life are separated from its decencies and uprightness? Is it that by which the man labeled all over with uncanceled wickedness is separated from the genteel and affable?

There is no need for one to possess Satanic eminence in moral turpitude in order to define his spiritual status. The jurisprudence of heaven requires no such glaring contrasts to fix the character or destiny of men. It is possible to belong to the category of the flesh without any of the forms of gross delinquency. We might conceive of a man possessing a lively relish for the amenities of social life; of public spirit and activity; of keen relish for the sensuous beauties which have been spread with lavish prodigality on the face of nature, and yet, with all these, he may be on the side of the flesh. In his tendencies, habits, and practical concerns, he may be altogether carnal. God may not be in any of his thoughts. Like Mammon, "whose looks were always downward bent," the earth may claim all his affections, and be the theater of all his aspirations and all his hopes. Far better would it be to be destitute of worldly schemes and ambitions than to be destitute of religious affections and a sensibility for spiritual things. The flesh and corruption; the spirit and life eternal. The choice is ours. The ample apartments of the soul may become dismal and dreary from sheer emptiness of this spiritual furnishing, or they may become bright and refulgent by the garnishing of spiritual inclinations and holy affections. May no treacherous delusions or errant philosophy beguile us from the simplicity of this truth, that "Whatever a man sows, that shall he reap;" and may God graciously grant, that we may sow to the Spirit, and bring us at last to partake the felicities of everlasting life. [574]

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