

DANGER

In our readings this morning we have been informed that the Scriptures which are elsewhere declared to be for comfort and patience, are also profitable for reproof and instruction in righteousness. We have recently had occasion to look at the comfort in the glory of the prospect opened up before us in the Gospel. This is the bright side: today we glance at the dark side—that side, namely, that exhibits the position of saints in the present evil world—taking the word saints for present purposes, as including all upon whom the name of Christ is called without reference to whether they are faithful or otherwise. Here we shall find reproof and instruction in righteousness most salutary—most necessary. While in this position we are in danger. The greatness of the danger is evidenced in the constant recurrence of the apostolic exhortation to be on our guard.

“Beware, lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.”

“Let us therefore fear, lest any should seem to come short.”

“Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.”

“Be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

“Redeem the time because the days are evil.”

“Be ye holy in all manner of conversation.”

“Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world.”

“Pass the time of your sojourning here in fear.”

Such are the examples of the constantly recurring precepts of the Spirit to the saints in relation to their present position. They point to our danger, and danger calls for circumspection.

Let us look this morning at some of our dangers. The chapters read give us a clue. We read therein of some who were to be

“lovers of pleasure, more than lovers of God.”

The persons so described were not unbelievers: they were professors, for it is added that they had

“a form of godliness but denied the power thereof.”

This is a graphic description. It sets forth exactly who is meant. It does not mean that the persons to whom it applies would deny there was a form of godliness, or reject the form. The word “deny” has the same force here as in the exhortation to believers to “*deny ungodliness and worldly lusts,*” that is, put them away—have no part with them. Don’t consent to them—deny them. The persons in question believed the Gospel in theory, and submitted themselves in form to its institutions, but there is something in connection with these which they practically denied in not being influenced by it: “*the power thereof.*” What is this?

If seed is put into the earth, and does not germinate, it has no “power” in the soil. It is powerless, and at last succumbs to corruption. This is a simile employed by Jesus himself, in reference to the word: the word is seed: our minds are soil: if the seed does not bring forth the results intended, we have the form without the power. As a rule, the failure of seed to germinate is due to some defect in the seed: in other cases the seed is good, but some one or more of the conditions necessary to its fructification are wanting. There is a lack of moisture, or the ground is too hard, or it is not sufficiently covered with soil. In the case of the seed of the word, there is no defect in the seed: failure in fructification must be due altogether to the surrounding conditions. These conditions are most of them subject to control. The quality of the soil cannot be altered: a man cannot by an act of will change himself at the start from being what he is, as regards natural capacity and proclivity, but he can regulate the external conditions which at last even affect the constitution of the mental soil to some extent. A piece

of poor ground well cultivated will show a fair result, and even improve in quality, where good soil left untended will yield a crop of weeds, and deteriorate in its own constitution. The parallel in the case of mental tillage is perfect.

Certain conditions are essential to the fructification of the good seed sown in the heart, and other conditions are hurtful and will positively arrest growth at last and bring decay and death. The pursuit of pleasure is one of the latter conditions. It is mentioned in the chapter read: “*lovers of pleasure*” are the antithesis to “*lovers of God*.” It is mentioned in other places. Paul speaks of certain female professors, who living in pleasure were “*dead while they lived*.”

The opposite condition is expressed as—

“living soberly, righteously and godly in this present world, looking for that blessed hope.”

Incidentally, we have a practical illustration of the two states in one of the chapters read. In the 10th verse (2 Tim. 4:10) Paul says,

“Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world.”

Two years before, in writing to Philemon, Paul describes this Demas as his “*fellow labourer*,” and therefore a partaker of the sufferings that are incident in all ages in one form or other to those who identify themselves with the high calling of God which is in Christ Jesus. So that here is the case of a man, an actual companion of the apostles, turning aside from this cause, that he “*loved this present world*.” Now this is an influence to which we are all, at all times, exposed. There are pleasures in the world. There is recognition, entertainment, society, merry-making, and honour for those whom the world loves, and these things make the time speed pleasantly away. Even for those that the world does not love, there are many pleasures provided, if people like to go in the way of them. There is a gratification to the natural mind in going with the multitude in the ways of pleasure. There is always a fascination about the thing, especially if it is “*respectable*,” and engaged in as something about which the lovers of pleasure can say there is “*no harm*” in it.

The temptation to give in to this kind of seduction is liable to be felt in the loneliness, endurance and self-denial that belong to the present walk of fellowship with Christ. The temptation is especially felt by the young, who have not realized the hollow character of all the ways of man. They need especially to be warned, and if they are wise, they will listen. There are two strong reasons why they should listen—always pre-supposing that they have earnestly made Christ their portion, and not taken up with him merely because friends have done so. There are two things which make it impossible for those, whether old or young, who desire the approbation of Christ at his coming to indulge in the pleasures of the world, whether in the form of the ball-room, concert-hall, theatre, or any of the other devices which sinners have invented for the whiling away of their heavy hours.

The first is, these things are hurtful to the new man formed within them by the word: they check the fructification of the seed of the word. They hang a heavy weight on the spiritual racer: they help the sin which doth already too easily beset us: they tend to hold the mind in a carnal sympathy, and to keep at a distance the things of God. They make us feel one with the world, which is God’s enemy. They are therefore a hindrance. They do not help us to Christ, but they rather widen the distance between us and him. Who has not at one time or other experienced the mental blank—the spiritual desolation—caused by the peculiar mental excitement called “*pleasure*”? Therefore on the score of spiritual expedience, spiritual men and women (and none others are the children of God) should never be found in the paths of pleasure-seeking. They should be found taking care of the seed of the word that has been sown in their hearts. To follow pleasure is as if a man should water his garden with vinegar or lime water. Let him water it rather with the pure water of the word, and manure it with those self-restraints and sobrieties which will make it healthful and strong and vigorous.

But there is a stronger reason why we should “*stand not in the way of sinners, nor sit in the seat of the scornful.*” It is one of the plainest teachings of Christ concerning himself and his brethren that they are “*not of the world.*” By the world he does not mean the earth, or air, or sky; he means the people that inhabit the earth; the people who compose the present order of society. Not being of the world is a sufficient reason of itself why we should not be found consorting with the world in its particular pleasures and festivals. But we are expressly commanded to “*love not the world.*” We are informed that if in spite of this exhortation we do love the world and have its friendship, it will be at the price of God’s friendship, for “*the friendship of the world is enmity with God.*” There is substantial reason for the invitation to “*come out from among them and be separate,*” that God may receive us, and that we may be His sons and daughters. That reason is the one given by John: --

“All that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father”;

that is, these sentiments are not such as the Father approves as the motives of action in those whom He has formed in His own image. Now these feelings mentioned by John are the conspicuous features of every worldly gathering of pleasure-seekers, and of worldly people when they do not gather. When we attain to any growth in Christ, we see this clearly, and more clearly every year. At first, to youth and inexperience (and always to the carnal mind, whether old or young) it seems not so bad. Things seem fair and harmless, and the apostolic portraiture overdrawn, and the scruples of such as are guided by the apostles over strong. But at last, with maturer judgement of all things and enlarged appreciation of things that are truly “good,” the world looks all that it is, and if we are wise, we stand aside as God’s friends have always stood aside from the enemy of God. We get to see that the world in all its ways is wrong at the root. What root is that? God. The world sprang from God; and in a right state of the world, God would be its highest honour, its highest concern, its highest pleasure. But in the actual state of the world, God is not there at all. He is unknown, unregarded where professedly recognized, sneered at where not actually denied in words—blasphemed everywhere in the actions of men. His Word neglected where admitted, despised where not avowedly cast out, spurned and denounced where the carnal mind openly unfurls the flag of its rebellion. While casting God behind their backs, the world scruples not to use, as if it were its own, the goodness God has distributed with open hand on every side. It lays its hand on everything as if it were creator and lord of all. It puts itself in the place of God. The word tells us that for the pleasure of God creation exists. The world ignores this, and acts on the theory that all things are for the pleasure of man. Thus God is dethroned in His own house. God purposes a great change in this respect. He intends to humble the haughtiness of man, that the Lord alone may be exalted in that day. He intends to exhibit His glory to the eyes of all flesh, when, because of His judgements, all nations shall come and worship before Him. He will say,

“Be still, and know that I am God, I will be exalted in the earth.”

The day is coming when one shall not say to his neighbour,

“Know the Lord, for all shall know him, from the least even to the greatest.”

Every knee shall bow to Him, and every tongue confess.

Meanwhile He is making preparation for that day in the selection from men, by the preaching of the Gospel, of a family who shall shadow forth his glory, and execute His authority in the age to come. They are called to the fellowship of His Son, who is the first-born of the family, and their elder brother. This fellowship consists in walking as he walked (1 John 2:6), and being in the world as he was in the world (1 John 4:17), doing the will of the Father, and glorifying His name, even to the point of enduring the contradiction of sinners against themselves. Now shall these—the appointed executioners of divine vengeance on the world, the appointed reflectors of divine wisdom in the age to come, the appointed

instruments of enlightenment and blessing to all mankind in the day of holiness to Jehovah—shall these be found consorting in the pleasure-seeking of a world that knows not God, and obeys not the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ? Can the sons of God give countenance to assemblies and occasions in which God is dethroned, and pleasure placed on the seat of honour and power?

It is scarcely possible for a heart in true sympathy with God to falter in the answer to this question. David is a true instance of such a heart, and he says,

“I have hated the congregation of evil-doers; I will not sit with the wicked.”

“I have not sat with vain persons, neither will I go in with dissemblers.”

Such will be the account that every faithful son and daughter of the Lord God Almighty will give of themselves. And what if such a course may bring present weariness (though a righteous man is less weary in solitude than in the crowd of those who set not God before them)? What if it shut you off from much that looks agreeable and entertaining and advantageous in the present time? The day that hastens is a day of great recompense for those who take up the cross and follow Christ. It is a day when the present evil world will be no more, when it will have passed like a dream, when the children of vanity shall lament in vain with weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth, mourners shall be comforted, and the despised shall be exalted. There is no human joy, and no earthly pleasure comparable to the joy and gladness that will electrify the ranks of those who shall come to Zion with singing, crowned with everlasting and unspeakable joy in the day when, for them, sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

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