

THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

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A DISCOURSE

DELIVERED IN THE

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UNITARIAN CHURCH

IN

PHILADELPHIA

JUNE 29 1862

By W. H. FURNESS

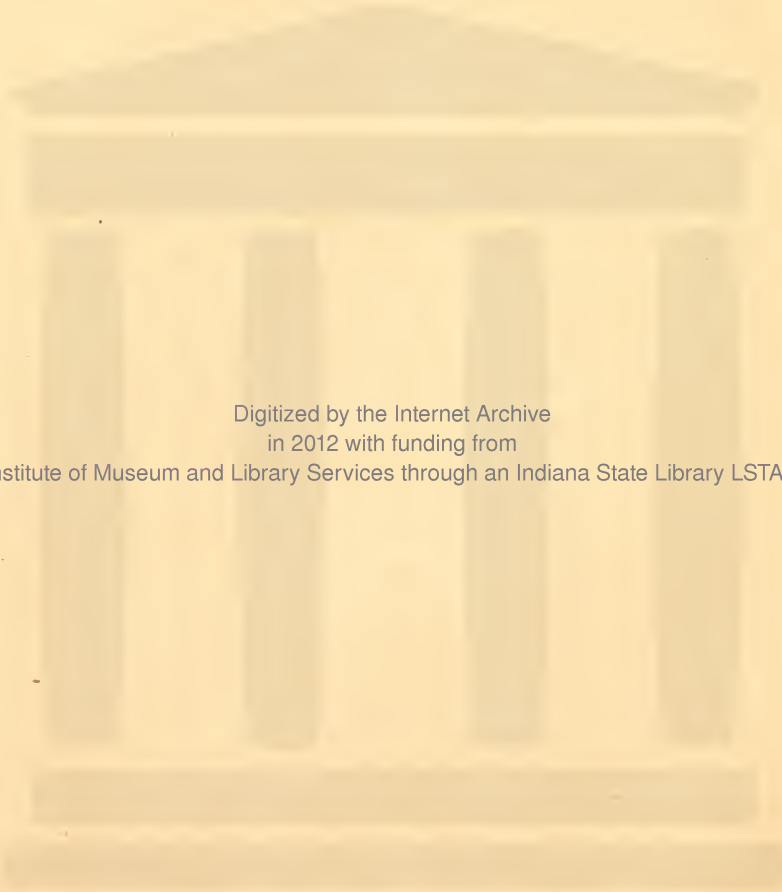
MINISTER

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# DISCOURSE

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ISAIAH XXXII. 17.

THE EFFECT OF RIGHTEOUSNESS, QUIETNESS AND ASSURANCE FOREVER.

ANOTHER anniversary, the eighty-sixth, of the Declaration of our National Independence is at hand. On how many vital accounts does it claim from us an earnest recognition! In whatever other ways it may be celebrated or be omitted to be celebrated, it cannot be allowed to pass without thoughtful notice at such a time as the present by any man who acknowledges a moral order in the affairs of men, the Providence of God.

In itself, apart from all that has flowed from it, the Declaration of Independence may well be invested with great sanctity to our minds, if there be anything in the world that is sacred. In founding the independence of this nation upon the equal, God-created rights of men, it is substantially a formal re-publication of the principles of Justice and Humanity, pre-eminently the truths upon which Religion, as Christianity defines religion, lays the greatest stress. In asserting the fundamental rights created by Nature and by God, it is a distinct declaration of Justice and Liberty, and Hope to all mankind. Necessarily is it a declaration of universal Liberty, because the faithful observance of the rights of all is the realization of the best idea of liberty.

That our great Declaration means this and nothing less than this,—that it recognizes the claim to freedom of every

human being, as endorsed by the Creator in the very nature of things, we can need no surer evidence than the fact that those among us who have ignored the natural rights of a certain class of our fellow-men and have been determined to persist in ignoring them, have denied the truth of the Declaration of Independence, unable otherwise to break its force than by pronouncing it a fallacy and a lie.

Accepted as a declaration of truth, it is a virtual condemnation of all injustice and inhumanity; and as it makes every man's rights the limit of his just wishes, it is identical with the Golden Rule which bids us do to others what we would that they should do to us, and which is the central precept of Christianity. Thus the Declaration of our National Independence is substantially a Christian act. It is a great formal testimony of a whole nation of men to the most important of Christian truths. It is a national confession of faith in the vital principle of Christianity, an echo of the very words of Jesus Christ, a tribute to the truth of the Religion in the faith of which we are here assembled, a triumph of its power. So far, in some eighteen centuries, have things come, that men have learned to see that the same truth, which Christ taught as the chief rule of personal conduct, is the primal condition of national existence, that, as with individuals so with communities, the observance of equal justice is the law of life. Neither man nor nation can prosper, can so much as continue to live, save in a distracted, decaying way, unless by acknowledging the rights of all. Human existence is not possible upon any other terms. This it was that our fathers, who sent forth the Declaration of Independence, announced and confessed. Thus is the divine wisdom of the Man of Nazareth re-asserted.

When we turn from what this great national Declaration was and is to what has resulted from it, from its char-

acter to its consequences, we find still more abundant occasion for thoughtfulness. What a vast fabric of social order has sprung from it like a flower from its seed, not so much by the constructive faculty of man as by force of nature, an edifice composed of upwards of thirty different States, without any limit apparently to the increase of the number but the confines of the globe, and, until within a few months, flourishing, as the world has hitherto gone, beyond all example! When before on this planet has such a spectacle been witnessed? Rapidly multiplying millions of human beings living in a state of unintermitting activity, putting vigorously forth their various powers, creating beauty and use, and all working in concert, with hardly a trace visible of any governmental restraint; all this wonderful energy resulting in countless arts, comforts, and luxuries, and caused evidently by the untrammelled operation of the silent laws of nature, by the animating life of a natural Providence.

It is not that the people of this country are better made than the inhabitants of other parts of the globe. It is the influence of the institutions based upon the truths of the Declaration of Independence, the absence of the oppressive legislation which elsewhere prevails, and which implies distinctions among men not existing in nature, and favoring a few at the cost of the many, cribs and confines the native powers of men, forbidding their unfolding,—it is the absence of partial laws to which our national happiness is due.

But this condition of social prosperity, which a little while ago was overawing the world with its splendor, has suddenly passed under a cloud, and seemed to be vanishing like the baseless fabric of a dream. And, naturally enough, the supporters of the old and unequal forms of social order pronounce our boasted Free Institutions a failure, and exult in the prospect of a reprieve from the revolutions,



peaceful and otherwise, which our national success, when once secured, is certain to render, sooner or later, inevitable. It is this shout of anticipated triumph, bursting forth especially from aristocratic England, the country, for obvious reasons, most imperilled by our influence, that aggravates our present great disaster, and impedes the restoration of our civil order by animating the hopes of those who are aiming to destroy it.

But it cannot long be hidden from any but the wilfully blind that the present condition of things, portentous as the aspect of it is, so far from giving evidence of the weakness of our Free Institutions, is affording the world a new demonstration of their strength. For we do not have to go far to find, that the disorder into which our national affairs have been suddenly thrown has been caused, not by the action of any free part of our national system, but by an institution which our fathers permitted to hold place in our social system in a private, domestic form, without any direct countenance of the national authority. Out of this domestic or State institution has come all our trouble ; for restricted as it was in its limits, and doomed, as it was confidently believed to be, to a speedy termination, Slaveholding is a pointed and sweeping denial of the natural rights which are the sacredly declared foundations of our national life.

It has followed naturally and inevitably in the nature of things that, in tolerating Domestic Bondage in this country, our fathers sowed seed from which bloody-minded rebellion and the foulest treason were sure to spring. It is very evident now, that wise and patriotic as they were, and they were rarely so, they did not know what they were doing. All they thought of, all the danger they feared, was the insurrection, bloody and disorganizing, of the victims of the violation of our deliberately avowed principles. And against that danger, it was fondly hoped,

an effectual guard was provided by the prospective dissolution of the dangerous institution itself, made certain, it was believed, to follow upon the prohibition of the Foreign Slave trade, then thought to be the only root whereby it lived. It never entered the generous hearts of our fathers to anticipate, that, without foreign supply, the perilous evil would continue to live and breed of itself. Accordingly, when they had provided for the cutting off of its supply from abroad, they trusted that the danger of insurrection would come to an end, as the oppression which alone could occasion it was struck at the root.

How causeless the fear of insurrection has been, we all now see. The revelation which we have now of the gentle and long-enduring nature of the oppressed class shows us how idle that apprehension was.

But whether it were causeless or not, it was the one dread that filled the minds of the generation that preceded us. They were not awake to that greater and surer peril to our Freedom springing from the influence which the unjust institution which they suffered to remain exercises upon the character of that class of our fellow-citizens who are tolerated in maintaining it. Our fathers did not see that if all the despots on the face of the earth had conspired with all their armies and all their gold to ruin our fair temple of Freedom, they could have hit upon no plan more effectual to that end than they themselves, the founders of the edifice, unwittingly devised, when they permitted the Institution of Domestic Bondage to form a part of it. It was a measure of all things most fitted to generate treason. And in this way.

As the Institution of Domestic Bondage is based upon the idea that one class of men is born to hold as property another class of men who are born to the condition of slaves and chattels, and as it must of necessity be in direct opposition to our free institutions, which are based upon the

idea that all men without distinction are born with equal rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, it follows that they who cherish Domestic Bondage must be averse to our free institutions: they cannot love them. For it is true, upon the highest authority, and to a proverb, that no one can serve two masters; for, loving the one, he will hate the other; holding to the one, he will despise the other, most especially when the two masters are opposite in their characters and in their aims. The love of the one involves the hatred of the other. Think now how much there has been to attach those who practise Domestic Bondage to the institution which they serve as their master. There is no slave so devoted to his lord as they have been to that. It feeds and clothes them without demanding wages. It ministers to their love of ease and of power. And so highly does the world in its ignorance think of the possession of power, this cherished institution gives its supporters rank in public estimation with the privileged classes of the earth, with kings and nobles. Born and brought up to look upon a certain class of human beings as their property, having no human rights that can claim any regard in comparison with their pleasure, how can they love the idea of human equality which we uphold as our master principle? How is it possible that they should be other than strangers to the sentiment of human respect, respect for human feelings and human life, which springs from the recognition of the natural equality of human beings? As that recognition, with the sentiments which it inspires, is directly at variance with the relations in which they hold themselves to others, it must of necessity be hateful to them. They cannot tolerate free institutions, which render the poor and the weak in certain vital respects their equals; or they can tolerate them only so long as they can render them subservient to their own aggran-



dizement; not one hour longer. This is truth written in the very constitution of human nature.

And who that perceives it can wonder how the present state of things has been brought about? Who can fail to see that it was inevitable? Is it not as plain as the light of day that from the very first this great nation has been tolerating—tolerating do I say?—it has been carefully cultivating a most prolific principle of disloyalty, of treason to its organic law? All the solicitude with which, by law and public opinion, this nation has labored to protect what are called Southern Rights, *i. e.*, alleged rights destructive of the declared rights upon which our national order is built, all our wars in behalf of the South, all our enactments in its favor, all our endeavors to suppress the dictates of justice and humanity, all our surrenders of Free Speech, all our shackles upon the Pulpit and the Press have had this one great effect, not at all to make the people of the South well disposed to Free Institutions; that was, and is, and will remain forever an absolute impossibility in the nature of things, so long as the Southern people hold slaves; but by confirming the lovers of Domestic Bondage in their attachment to their idolized institution, we have prepared them for the express work of open rebellion. They have been educated by their peculiar form of society for this very purpose. Its office has been to make them hate our Freedom, and bring them to the point of assaulting it, as they have done. And all our public action, by humoring them to the uttermost, has tended to render its influence in this direction most vital.

And now this training has borne its fruits, and the present condition of the country is the natural and necessary result. We have no one to blame for it but ourselves. The peril that threatens the stability of the nation has not come, as one might have expected it would, from foreign hostility, from the open attacks or the secret machi-

nations of foreign despotism. It has been engendered on our own soil in the very heart of the nation and by the nation itself. It is to no purpose that we condemn and denounce the people of the South, and lay the calamity that has befallen us at their door. They are what we have all united to make them. As by nature they certainly are no better, neither naturally are they any worse than the other portions of these American millions. You may take the most intelligent and best educated of the people of this country, or of any country, and put them where the people of the South are, under the same influences, in the midst of the same peculiar institutions, and they would do just as the people of the South have done, and are doing. It is the whole nation itself that has brought on this dark and portentous hour, and it is now reaping the bitter harvest of its own sowing. Whatsoever a man or a nation sows, that must it also reap. A land in which injustice is planted and cultivated, will sooner or later be forced to gather a bloody crop. This is a truth now transmuted here on this soil and before the eyes of the whole world into a terrible fact. In characters of death, in fields of battle, in the roar of cannon and the rattle of musketry, mingled with the shrieks of mortal agony, in hospitals crowded with the sick, the wounded, and the dying, in the desolation of thousands of homes whence loved ones have vanished to return no more, is this simple truth written. Woe unto us if we read this solemn handwriting of God, and heed not the admonition!

And woe unto those, whether abroad or at home, who so grossly misinterpret the present state of things, as to read in it the failure of free institutions, for so to regard it is to put bitter for sweet, and evil for good! Not the freedom, not the equal justice, but the oppression, the unequal and inhuman institution which we have cherished,—that it is that has ushered in a day of darkness and of blood. And

we are suffering now not from too broad an application of the principles of human liberty, but from their limitation, nay, from the gross violation of them, from the despotism, despotism in its most crude and barbarous form, that the nation has harbored in its bosom, a despotism that would fain ignore every distinguishing attribute of humanity in the unhappy race who are the subjects of it, making merchandise of them, and asserting in the most formal manner and by the voice of the highest ministers of the law, that they have no rights, not even the right to live, that we are bound to respect.

And this horrid despotism we have cherished just where, —just in the form, in which its corrupting influence is most sure to tell, namely, as a domestic institution. We have suffered the deadly thing to grow close to the family altar. We have committed the supreme folly of supposing, because it was kept in the private homes of men, unrecognized as a public and national institution, it was out of the way of doing any public injury, and ceased, of course, to be a matter of public concern! Whereas it has occupied the very position in which it could do its fatal work of generating treason to our fundamental law most effectually, where it could infuse itself into the living blood of human hearts, and make it hot with the despotic element. Fixed in the domestic circle, it has had immediate access to character in its most tender state, in its forming process. Like some horrible vampire, it has fanned the very cradle of infancy, insensibly and unnoticed, drawing the very life-blood of humanity out of the heart, and stimulating the pride and the love of power of its victims to insanity, and so unqualifying them utterly for free institutions, incapacitating them to live under such a government, as ours claims to be, upon any other condition than the possession of absolute control of its administration. My friends, what I am now saying is a matter not of opinion,

but of stern fact, as we see to our great sorrow and cost. The country is torn and bleeding under the frenzied onslaught of a rebellion which Domestic Bondage has engendered. And this inevitable result of the despotism that we have nurtured points to that, and to that alone as its cause.

But in the fearful struggle in which we are involved, our Free Institutions are revealing a vitality which the paralyzing influence of the Slave system of the South, to which they have so long been subjected, has not been able to destroy. Although for years it seemed as if the spirit of Liberty, without which free institutions cannot exist, were dying out over all the North under the bribes and terrors of the Slave Power, yet when that power unsheathed the sword, the North, no longer crouching and trembling before it, leaped to its feet as one man with an enthusiasm of self-sacrificing valor, which showed that the Declaration of Independence was not a dead letter, that it was written in living characters in the hearts of the people, that free institutions were not a shadow and a failure, that not in vain had been our liberty of thought and speech, hampered though it had been, that not in vain had been our free schools and our churches, though so much had been done to suppress even in them the lessons of Freedom. Then it was made gloriously evident that, while Oppression had been using our civil Constitution to sanction its outrages, until that instrument, so full of wisdom and formed expressly to promote liberty, seemed as if it had no office but to guard the alleged right of property in human flesh, the Great God of Justice and Humanity had been all the while busily breathing his free spirit through our institutions in a thousand unnoticed ways into the very being of the North, and preparing our people, when in his Providence the signal should be given, to show themselves a united people, and to make the most



generous self-sacrifices. They have rushed to the national defence with a unanimity unexcelled in the history of the world. They have waited with unbroken patience upon the guidance of their chosen leaders. They have borne the burdens and anxieties of this critical period with unequalled cheerfulness. In fine, under the social forms here established a brave national heart is found all at once beating in accord with our great Declaration and in prompt response to a devoted patriotism, and the people of the North are now known to be one people, bound by a generous and intelligent affection to this land of their birth or of their adoption. Our Free Institutions a failure! Where is there another Government on the face of the earth that would not have been shivered into atoms at once by a rebellion as wide-spread and powerfully equipped as this with which we have suddenly been forced to grapple? Put now to the severest test, our free form of civil order is developing itself victoriously in the love of an intelligent and self-sacrificing people. And in commemorating the Declaration of Independence now in the second year of the Rebellion, we have the proud satisfaction of knowing that that Declaration is a living spirit, living in the heart of this nation, and making it a nation worth suffering with and suffering for to the uttermost; a nation which, as the world has now seen, when occasion calls, springs to arms in its own defence of its own free good-will, and is showing itself in this essential respect first in war, as it has shown itself first in peace.

I have now spoken of two reasons for a thoughtful commemoration of the Declaration of our National Independence. The first is the intrinsic, religious, Christian character of that great charter, asserting, as it does, the equal justice upon which our common Christianity lays most emphatic stress. And the second is the result of that first great act of our fathers; its influence as witnessed in the

magnificent Empire which has risen from it, and as attested in the extraordinary circumstances of the present hour.

There is yet another thing that gives a peculiar interest, a special solemnity to the anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights with which this people claimed recognition among the nations. There is another thing that makes it incumbent upon us to regard the celebration of our National Birthday as a formal re-assertion of the Rights of Humanity with a new and profounder, a world-wide, significance.

The civil strife in which we are engaged threatens, as the progress of events is making more and more evident, to implicate us in a contest with one or more of the Old World governments. We are called, more and more pointedly, to maintain our free form of society not only as against the Slaveholding Revolt which has endangered it, but as against the aristocracies and monarchies of Europe. The present crisis in our national history has revealed the fact that the Old World,—that England especially, bears us no love; that our republican institutions are odious in her eyes, and not the less so because our increase in national power has been too great hitherto to allow the jealousy we have undesignedly awakened to be freely expressed. But now, when all at once our National Power seems to totter on the brink of ruin, all restraint vanishes, the mask is thrown off, and the bitter secret is out. The haste with which our utter overthrow is predicted, and every act of ours is misconstrued, joined with the stony insensibility shown by leading Englishmen to the atrocious character of this Rebellion, shows that all our previous unexampled prosperity, instead of securing for us any cordial goodwill abroad, has only tended to deepen the aversion with which we are looked upon.

Instead of giving childish expression to the irritation which this unexpected revelation of foreign hostility very

naturally causes, it becomes us to confess our folly in having so easily fallen into the delusion that our English kindred regarded us with favor. Undoubtedly all Englishmen, who upon principle respect a republican form of government, are to be cordially acknowledged as our hearty friends and well-wishers. But every nation, which as a nation is maintaining an aristocracy, must, by the necessity of its position, by the force of the vital principle upon which it seeks to sustain itself, be just as really, if not as strongly, opposed to our free Institutions as the South itself. Our national prosperity has been from the very first a living argument, growing every year in force, against all unjust social forms. Of course the prospect of its being overthrown could not fail to create a satisfaction abroad too intense to be repressed. We ought not to have been disappointed at the attitude of Foreign Governments. Nothing else was to be expected from them than that they should betray their joy at the prospect of our dissolution, and should refuse to entertain the unwelcome thought of the possibility of Northern success. It is manifest now that, bitterly as they have taunted us with our toleration of Slavery, it is this despotic part of our social system which has reconciled them to our existence. Strongly as they have professed to disapprove of us on this account, they show now that they will hate us a great deal more heartily when we shall get rid of the dark cloud which has veiled our light. For then there will be nothing to neutralize the mighty moral effect of our Free and beneficent institutions. Then their influence will be absolutely irresistible. Nothing will be able to withstand it.

In their indignation at the heartlessness of the English Press, and of English statesmen, some of our people profess to be waiting impatiently for the hour, when, our present troubles ended, we shall be ready for a war with our mother-country. But I trust in God, that, in the great

work of maintaining the Right, in which we are now honored to suffer, we shall learn a magnanimity that will render us incapable of that. And besides, there will be no need of war. We are bound to conquer England, and to elevate her by the conquest, high as she already stands, without drawing the sword against her. Let us once settle our present domestic difficulty, and we can settle it only in one way, and that is, by conforming to our central law,—by the utter extinction of Domestic Bondage on our soil,—let that darkness which now hides the light of our glorious Liberty be dissipated, and every government in Europe will be revolutionized. Most especially will England be stirred to the very inmost by the beneficence and power and beauty of the order of things which will then be witnessed in this Western Hemisphere.

I am persuaded that it is a sense of the certain doom of all unequal forms of society involved in our success that instinctively prompts all this foreign opposition to the Cause of the North. The nations feel in their inmost being that it is something more than a domestic trouble that has arisen on this soil, that the principles upon which all existing forms of society are based have here and now come into conflict, that this struggle has world-wide dimensions, that it is a struggle of the rights of Universal Humanity with all the powers of oppression.

It is even so, and such is its essential character. And the consciousness that it is in such a strife that we have become engaged, gives a special solemnity to our National Birthday, the birthday, it is now manifest, not of one nation only, but of a new era for all mankind. The Declaration of Independence now takes a larger meaning. The “glittering generality” as it was not long ago sneeringly called, is now growing into a consuming fire a fire which, while it glares upon all existing forms of oppression and reveals their hideousness, will purify the heart of this



nation, burn up all our littlenesses and all our selfishness, and bring out those divine, indestructible elements of human nature which, once becoming active, change common men into saints and heroes. Most earnestly is it to be hoped that the people of the free North will be so elevated by the greatness of their cause, that the taunts and threats of foreign nations will pass them by as the idle wind. Standing on the mountain-top of Liberty, we can afford to let the murmurs of foreign discontent roll away unnoticed at our feet.

I cannot think that England and France, with the terrible experience they have had within the memory of some still living, will venture actively to interfere in our affairs. It is but little more than a half century ago that the monarchies of Europe, forming a coalition, undertook to interfere with France, then in a state of revolution, in which, following British example, she had brought her king to the scaffold. And though France then seemed to be utterly disorganized, exhausted by domestic convulsions, streaming with blood from self-inflicted wounds, that coalition of princes so exasperated her that instantly, as by magic, she developed a giant power, that in a few years brought Europe chained in blood at her feet. Let England and France ponder the lesson which was then taught, and take heed how, by a similar insolent interference, they madden the people of this land, who now, though sorely tried and tasked, are suffering no social disorganization like revolutionary France, but stand united as never a people were before, in the full consciousness of untold resources of intelligence and power. We of the North are, as we ever have been, strongly disposed to keep ourselves to ourselves, intermeddling with none. The only propagandism that has been generated on this soil, is the propagandism not of Liberty but of Bondage. And Northern success, if we are let alone, will be the destruction of

that. But if foreign nations, by their interference, exasperate this people beyond endurance, it is not merely the emancipation of our own slaves that we shall be forced to proclaim and contend for, but the liberation of all men from the oppressive weight of unjust legislation, and then the war, instead of being confined within our borders, will extend over the world, and directly implicate the human race in the work of blood. God send wisdom to the rulers of England and of France!

Most earnestly do we implore His blessing upon ourselves, both rulers and people. The hearts of all flesh are in His hands, and God alone knows what bright forms of good or what dark shapes of evil may issue therefrom. It is not in man to direct his steps. Here at home, on our own soil, may we cling with a boundless confidence to equal Liberty, to that Righteousness which, as it is the one great thing that exalts a nation, so is it the only thing that can save a nation in an hour like this. Daily and hourly may the faith of every soul of us increase in the Declaration of our National Independence, our National Creed, in the right of every human being, whatever the color of his skin, to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That Declaration is the word of the Lord that comes to this generation with most solemn emphasis. Not until that word is faithfully obeyed, will the day of deliverance from our present calamities dawn. I implore the mighty Spirit of truth to write that word upon every heart!

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