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1852

Filial Piety a Blessing: Its Opposite a Curse.

A SERMON

DELIVERED IN

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, F STREET,

WASHINGTON CITY, MARCH 7, 1852.

BY THE REV. J. M. DICKEY, D. D.,

OF OXFORD, PA.

WASHINGTON:

PRINTED BY KIRKWOOD & MCGILL.

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Dickey, J. M. (John Miller),
1806-1878.

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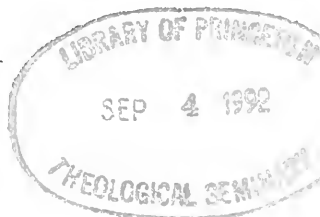
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WASHINGTON, *March 22, 1852.*

REVEREND AND DEAR SIR: A number of young men who had the pleasure of listening to your most excellent discourse on Sabbath morning, the 7th of this month, from Proverbs xx. 17, desire to obtain a copy for publication. This request is made from a firm conviction that its circulation will result in much good, by calling attention to and enforcing a lesson so deserving particular attention.

By complying with this request, you will greatly oblige

Yours, very respectfully,

W. H. F. GURLEY,

S. W. K. HANDY,

ROBT. M. PATTERSON,

AND OTHERS.

OXFORD, *March 27, 1852.*

GENTLEMEN: Your favor of the 22d inst. I have just received, and would say, in answer, that it gives me pleasure to comply with your request. The importance of the subject may compensate for the deficiencies of the sermon.

Very respectfully, yours, &c.,

JOHN M. DICKEY.

To MESSRS. W. H. F. GURLEY, S. M. K. HANDY, ROBT. M. PATTERSON, and others.

SERMON.

PROVERBS, XXX. 17.

“THE EYE THAT MOCKETH AT HIS FATHER, AND DESPISETH TO OBEY HIS MOTHER, THE RAVENS OF THE VALLEY SHALL PICK IT OUT, AND THE YOUNG EAGLES SHALL EAT IT.”

This passage of Scripture may be considered as set over against another which is found in Exodus xx. 12, as Mount Ebal was set over against Mount Gerizim—the one containing the curse, the other the blessing. It is here said that he who shall mock at and despise parental instruction and authority shall die the death of the outcast; he shall die while he is yet young, his eye full, and his limbs not shrunken, offering food for the eagle and vulture. It is implied, also, that he shall die alone, with no friends near to drive from him the birds of prey; and that he shall have no burial, but be exposed above the ground, unsightly and loathsome. In the dark and silent valley, where the raven flaps her wing over the carcass; under the shadow of the mountain, where the eagle seeks her food—there, the poor outcast from friends and home shall lie down to die; he shall have no mourner and no monument. A strong case is stated, and set forth in glowing Eastern language; but who will say that the case has not actually occurred, or that the description at all exceeds the reality?

But look at the other side of the picture; hear the voice from Mount Gerizim: “Honor thy father and thy mother, that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth

thee." A dutiful and obedient child shall live to a ripe old age. The land of Canaan, that "good land," shall be his portion. His eye, beaming with kindness, the raven shall not pick out. He shall have honor on earth, and a place in heaven. Our subject, then, is sufficiently clear—*the evil consequences of rejecting parental government and instruction*. A few things it is necessary to premise before these evil consequences are stated. The harshness expressed in the text is designed to guard against the consequences; and certainly those who are parents must feel a deep interest in the subject.

1st. There are three orders or kinds of government in the world—the Divine, the Civil, and the Parental—embracing three societies—the Church, the State, and the Family,—all ordained of God, all essential to the happiness of men, all established at the creation of our race, and the last as important as either of the others, preliminary to them in a measure, and designed for a particular class—for the young. Connected with this, we would remark, further, that there is a period on which the whole future life depends, a period over which civil law does not profess to assume much control—the period of minority; short, it is true, in itself, but almost equal to the average life of man—the average life being thirty, and the time of minority twenty-one—a period in which the law of God even is not fully known, when its power is not fully felt upon the heart, and during which that law must be taught. There are, in this period, no fixed principles or habits; there is an incapacity for self-government; there is no strength of purpose, no sternness of resolution. It is a period in which a visible eye is needed as a watcher, as well as the unseen eye of Jehovah. For this period, the instruction of the family is provided—the sanctuary of HOME. God has ordained the household for this period, not only sheltering our cradle and gathering us in youthful years to its fireside, but long after, with its tutors

and governors, our school, our refuge, until education is complete. All through the early period of life, when the world is new, and when inexperience, fickleness, and wild passions toss the adventurers to and fro upon a stormy ocean, threatening them every moment with wreck, where is the hand that should reach forth to rescue them, if not that of a parent? God has most graciously and beautifully grouped the inhabitants of the world together to attain this end: the gray locks of the old man shadowing the golden ringlets of the grandchild; the venerable mother teaching, from the Scriptures, sons and daughters never too old to learn from such lips; experience teaching inexperience in the beginning of life; the impetuous and rash restrained by the gentle and firm government of more mature years.

2d. The existence of certain obligations supposes the existence of certain rights. If this hold good in other respects, it holds good here. If parents have duties, and the young have advantages growing out of those duties, then the parents are invested with privileges corresponding to the duties. They are God's officers, and are clothed with authority. He sustains and protects them, both in their persons and in their offices. He has thrown a defence around them, in sacredness, second only to that around Deity itself; and the hand which is lifted to touch a parent, except in honor, almost touches God. We are commanded to rise up before the hoary head, and we are admonished by the punishment of the mockers of Elisha. There is due to them *honor and reverence*. Their superior knowledge, their more advanced age, their responsibility in regard to the young, demand it. They are the source of our being; and for this reason should be treated with respect. They also claim our *gratitude*. What have they not done for us in infancy, in sickness, and in distress? They have sheltered us by exposing themselves to suffering, and in many instances would have died to save us. Their affections

are garnered up in their children. It was not the Roman mother only who could say that they are her jewels and her pride. You cannot know, but by experience, their anxiety on your account. In her growing dependance and helplessness, what so beautiful as the strong arm of the son supporting the steps of the feeble mother! She may have wealth to purchase such attentions, but no stranger's hand is so grateful. While a son's hand smooths the pillow for the head, affection soothes the heart. If ever love might claim love, that of a mother should claim it from a son. There is also due to them *obedience*. They are commanded to rule their household. If this is expected of them—and God will call them to account for the performance of their duty—surely it is the duty of those who compose that household to obey. We will not discuss the question how long they are to obey, or to what extent, or by what means submission is to be enforced. We speak only to your reason and to your affections; and if you follow them in this, they will not lead you far astray.

Again, their *instructions* should be received, and their *wishes* complied with. We have a Divine example of filial reverence and love in our Lord Jesus Christ, all through his life on earth, and while on the cross, when He said to John, "Behold thy mother!" To Mary, the Son of God gave reverence and love. There may be those disposed to give to Mary idolatrous worship as the "Mother of God," who refuse, in their own case, after Christ's example, to give to a mother honor for her love and kindness.

3d. The young are in great danger of committing the sin which is spoken of in the text. The pulse of early life beats wildly, and the spirit is then impatient of control. I have known a mother say of a daughter advancing to womanhood, "Would she were again an infant in my cradle, or upon my bosom!" The young, then, have the most need of instruction and restraint, and

the least disposition to receive them. They are passing the rapids in their perilous voyage of life, and a steady hand is needed at the helm, for they feel not their danger. We have just passed, as we hope, through a period of danger to the Constitution of our country. A spirit of insubordination and of unwillingness to submit to law has tried the integrity of the Union, and, we thank God, our flag is safe. But yet this spirit, we may say, is the spirit of our age—we will not say of our country. We do believe, however, that the reverence for parental authority is weaker among our people than ever before, and weaker in our land than in any other land where it is at all felt. Indeed, it would seem as if that portion of the table of stone upon which God's finger inscribed the fifth commandment had been broken off, and fallen upon some other continent than this. Heathen as they are, they seem to know more of it in China than we do; and who can tell but that a large measure of their prosperity and perpetuity has been owing to their faithfulness in this duty?

Will my friends who are here bear with me while I advert to a few facts, more fully illustrating our subject? "The eye that mocketh." It is done with the *eye*. It is not presumed that there is gross violence; it is not even said that the language is improper; it never passes further than the eye; and we will not press the words of the text beyond their literal construction. It is done, again, with the heart: "despiseth to obey." It is rather the not doing what is desired than doing anything in opposition. The *opinions* of parents are not treated with proper respect; they are regarded as foolish or antiquated; they will do very well for persons advanced in life, but not for the young! These cannot see why they should receive them with more respect than the opinions of other persons. It matters not upon what subject the opinion may be expressed—whether on the subject of religion,

or the arrangement of business, or even on matters of the most trivial kind. Sometimes we are pained to see that persons, long members of the church, and high in public confidence, are everywhere regarded with respect but by those who sit round their own table. A teacher's opinions should be reverently received; and parents are seldom treated as they should be in this respect. The *society* of parents is often avoided. It is not to the taste of the young; hence their evenings are not spent at home. They seek amusement among those of their own age; they seek it in the club-room or at the theatre, and they lose in this way the advantage to be gained by intercourse with those who have experience, and so sin against the arrangement of God's providence. The young often *deceive their parents*, and impose upon their credulous partiality, as to their expenditures, associates, and employment of time. A young man told me, a short time ago, that he had incurred a debt, years before, when at college, and that he had been suffering ever since from constant fear of exposure, and from the compunctious of conscience, over an error which he was still unwilling to confess. We say, keep no secret from a mother, especially if she be a child of God.

The young are sometimes ashamed to honor their parents if they are ignorant or poor. This is certainly the "mocking eye." A refusal to comply with the wishes of parents in the matter of attendance upon religious duties is to mock at God; and to mock at religious worship in which a parent is interested, kills the heart. Many parents die from anxiety on account of children who go away from home. The children are careless about giving intelligence of their comfort and happiness, and thus cause those who love them most to pine away, under the apprehension that they are in distress. Lastly, there is sometimes a want of tenderness towards the infirmities and weaknesses of parents, denying that attention which is necessary for their support, making no requital for years of

tenderness spent in ministering to the wants of their children. I trust such instances are rare.

This brings us to the evil consequences flowing from such conduct. We have, in these three preliminary remarks, prominently set forth—1st. That there is a parental government as certainly ordained by God as the government of the Church or of the State; 2d. That parents are invested by God with certain offices, duties, and privileges; and 3d. That the young are in great danger of committing the sin spoken of in the text.

Now, we ask, as involving the consequences of this conduct, why so many of our young men die early, failing of the promise of either long life or prosperity, and even literally meeting the end of the outcast, with hopes blasted for this world, and a cloud, at least, thrown over the anticipations of the next? Do not regard me as saying that no young men who are truly pious and beloved of God die early. They are sometimes taken from the evil to come. The rule, like every other rule, has its exceptions; but still we must regard the fact as an appalling one, that multitudes of young men are brought to an untimely end. Noble efforts are made to reclaim them from intemperance, to give them instruction, to win them over to religion and virtue. Appeals are made to their honor and worldly hopes, and yet they die in multitudes while young. You may know the history of families in this city, as I know the history of families in other places. As the reaper makes broad lanes in the ripe grain fields; as the grape-shot from the cannon's mouth opens avenues through the ranks of a living army, so the silent reaper is cutting down multitudes of young men. We strive, by all means, to bring them to the Gospel of Jesus Christ; but, of the whole number, a remnant only is saved. Now, since God gives life and prosperity, and we can derive them from no other source—if we find one particular statute which has attached to it this promise, and a violation of the statute involves

the particular penalty of the text—and if we find that multitudes of young men do die prematurely,—may we not reasonably conclude that it is because this statute is not regarded? Would God be true if one of his laws revealed from Sinai be disregarded, and no punishment follow? May not war with all its desolating horrors, may not intoxication, with all its consequences, be but the instruments of judgment, sent by God to punish men for trampling upon this statute, and insulting his authority? Can a young person prosper, can he hope for long life, who tramples upon a parent's heart? Heaven, Earth, and Hell answer, No! Can a young person prosper who throws away all the influences of home, who refuses all the instruction and authority of experience, mocking at the counsel of parents, and following his own unrestrained will? If there be order in nature, if there be a plan in God's providence, if there be truth in the Almighty, death and wo will follow the breaking loose from these bonds.

I have heard the venerable Dr. Mason, of New York, an old preceptor—and there are none who can give testimony to the worth of the authority better than the two pastors of this congregation*—remark, that a Highlander was seen on the threshold of his cabin, dragging an aged father by his locks. He was reproved for his brutality, but the dying man rebuked the reproof, saying, “Just so far as to this threshold I dragged my aged father, and so far has God, in his retribution, permitted my son to drag me.”

The Apostle, when he speaks of murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, may mean others than those who commit the acts by instruments of steel. God's judgment is retributive judgment. The very means provided and neglected, and the training for such a life, prove to us that there can be no other consequences than those which the text speaks of as the sure reward.

* Drs. Laurie and Junkin.

A second consequence: Why are so few young persons, especially young men, converted? The great thing at which all who come into this world ought to aim, is to be born again. To live and be prosperous here—this we have spoken of; the more important is to live and be blessed above. For either of these, all who are born again have a bias and a disposition before they pass out of their minority; and, if they are eventually lost, they are confirmed in habits of sin, and utterly ruined, before they pass this period. This fact need not be proved; it would be an insult to your good sense and observation to stop to establish it. Upon the training during that period, for which the family instruction and influence are provided, the whole destiny in many cases depends. May we not even say, that “the eye that mocketh at his father” shall not see God? He who hateth his brother, much more his parents, whom he hath seen, how can he love God, whom he hath not seen? Submission to parental authority, and teachers, and family government in early life is the surest precursor of submission to God. A disobedient son will not be likely to be converted. What is the reason why there is such a stable government in Scotland, and so general a regard to the authority of Heaven, and the reverse of this in France? Personal inspection would lead those who make the investigation concerning this matter to the conclusion that it is because Scotland has homes, household, parental government, and instruction, and France has none. We must first say, “I will arise and go to my father,” ere we will take our journey back to God. Give us the son who has been dutiful to his parents at home, or to his family bound by those golden chains which encircle it, and in his ear we may hope successfully to speak of his Father in Heaven, and of his Son whom He sent to save the world; to such a one we may, with confidence and hope, repeat the story of the cross.

Lastly, the training of the family is necessary to form, in all

respects, the character and virtues in all the relations of life. Look at the composition of the family: the stern yet tender father; the self-denying and gentle mother; the kind and affectionate brother; and the loving sister, so mild and dependant. It is almost heaven on earth. What is there to form character that is not here? Mock not at these things; if you do, you mock at God's institution!

He whose youth is spent at a boarding-house, where there is no interest beyond that which is mercenary, and his evenings at a club-room, may have a merry life, but it will be a short one. He who is trained in the counting-room may become a rich man, but he will be a selfish one. He who is trained altogether in a college study may be learned, but he will not be useful. God's government, in every institution, meets our wants.

In conclusion, I would say to the young of both sexes, Have you a home? Be not in haste to leave it. You may have but one, and may sigh over the deserted hearthstone long after its inmates have been scattered, never to meet again on earth. You go into temptation when you leave it, and you need its influence in this cold, unfriendly world. Have you parents?—cherish them; never give them, by your conduct, an unnecessary pang. They are your best friends. Yield kindly to their authority and instruction, even after your childhood is over. God will not pass it by. Obey for His sake who has interests for you beyond this life. They are His representatives here. Do your parents act unworthily? Oh! mock them not! Remember Ham, and see the far-reaching, indelible character of his curse. Is a father or mother dead? Remember their instructions; cherish the thoughts of their kindness. When you see the wrinkled brow and wasting form of a living parent, remember that they are passing away. Are you going to a strange place? Go not without a letter of introduction, and seek a kind adviser where your lot is cast.

There are pastors of churches, and good men, in every city and in every country place of our broad land, under whose shelter and protection the young may be placed.

You may say this is all well; but that the great object we have in view is to bring about the conversion of the heart. I have little faith in those conversions which are not founded on a true basis; I have little faith that any will be good citizens, under our civil government, who have not been well trained in their family relations; and I have but little faith that any will be brought to God who have despised, rejected, and cast from them the authority, instruction, and influences of home.

May God, in His infinite mercy, and for Christ's sake, grant His blessing, so that our households may be types of the great household above! Amen!



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