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SERMON XXI.

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JUST MEN MADE PERFECT.

HEB. xii. 23.—“But ye are come—to the spirits of just men made perfect.”

Between the dispensation of the Law, and that of the Gospel, there is an intimate connection, yet a manifest difference. The connection is like that which the beginning of a thing has with the end of it. The one was a preparation for the other, and bore the same relation to the other, as the breaking up of the field and the deposit of the winter grain in its furrows, bears to the golden harvest which is to be gathered under the heat of summer. We may ask, why the purposes of Jehovah toward his church should not have been accomplished without any such preparatory process: but this is like asking why the child was not born a man, or the seed a tree. Let it suffice to say that the law of Progress has been stamped upon the moral and natural worlds for reasons which can even now be vindicated as wise and good; and much more when the light of the heavenly future is made to fall upon the divine plans. But this, by the way. It is certain that the principles and designs of God's government of this world, have been progressively unfolded in its history, and that the full light of the evangelic dispensation had its beginning in the dim morning of the legal dispensation, in which were seen only the shadows of good things to come.

But if there be this intimate connection between the law and the gospel, there is also, as we have said, a manifest difference between them, amounting, in some things, even to contrast. Just so far as the first discoveries of a Redeemer went, so far the gospel was

preached before unto Abraham, and the blessings of the plan by which sinful men were justified through faith, were secured and enjoyed by ancient believers. But the brightness of the meridian day, is very different from the dimness of the morning twilight. The uncertain traveller fears the possible dangers of his road, and even harmless objects seem distorted and threatening. This is always more or less true of a state of imperfect knowledge: a timid imagination will often conjure up more dangers than really exist. But in respect to the imperfect knowledge of the first dispensation, there was room for more than the workings of a timid imagination. There was, in fact, a stern and awful severity in the revelations of the divine law and justice to ancient Israel, which made them oftentimes very appalling, especially to such as did not penetrate the purposes of mercy which lay hid in the prophecies and ceremonies of the Old Testament Church. The law more than the gospel—the just indignation of God against sin, more than the mercy of God toward the sinner, characterized that dispensation; and of consequence, the experience even, of the devout worshipper, partook more of ‘the spirit of bondage.’

In the well known passage of which the text forms a part, the apostle points out the contrast between the two dispensations in this respect. On the one hand, he reminds the Hebrew Christians that they are not brought by the gospel into the midst of the appalling wonders which accompanied the re-announcement of the broken but changeless law of Jehovah: flames of fire, and blackness, and darkness, and tempest, and blasts of a trumpet, and an awful voice, speaking awful words: all of them tokens of authority, power and justice which caused even the man of God to say, “I exceedingly fear and quake” Over-topping Sinai with its terrors, they were summoned to behold Mount Zion, “eternal sunshine resting on its head,” and, spreading on all sides of it, the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem, the beauty of holiness, whose glory all the symbols of earth fail to describe. Instead of terror-stricken Israelites, who entreated that the voice of words should not speak again its unendurable threatenings, they were bidden to behold an innumerable company of angels, their countenances radiant with joy, as they looked into the grand mystery of redemption: and mingling with them in holy brotherhood, the general assembly and church of the first-born, enrolled as citizens of heaven. Instead of God, the judge, executing justice against transgressors, they were called to behold God, the judge of all, surrounded by the ransomed and perfected spirits of just men: and finally—giving lustre to all, because the author of the reconciliation by which these once repellant

elements were harmonized—they are directed to look upon Jesus, the Mediator of this New Covenant, whose blood of sprinkling spake better things than the blood of Abel.

That the apostle means to present these things in contrast, there can be no doubt. Nor is the object he had in view at all doubtful. He aims to animate the soul with all the hopeful emotions, which such an attractive group of objects would naturally awaken. Courage, joy and peace in believing, must follow from steadily contemplating the array of blessings provided in the New Covenant; and in the hope of at last participating in the fulness, the believing Hebrew to whom he was writing, would find the best support under the persecutions to which his faith was then exposing him.

Out of this brilliant collection of evangelic glories, I have selected one—with the hope that a more particular consideration of it than we should be able to give, were we to notice each of the features of the picture, may animate our souls also, with similar anticipations. Our visit, to-day, shall be to heaven. And glad are we to get away, for a season, from the sights and sounds of the world we live in; for though a prison of hope, it is still a prison. We are not at home: we are not come to our heritage—and it is only wonderful that we should not, much oftener than we do, look forward with delight to the day of our discharge. It is for the purpose of quickening your desires, that we now call upon you, my brethren, to consider the holy group of just men made perfect, into communion with whom, faith brings us.

The subject before us, invites our attention—

I. To the REALITY;

II. To the FOUNDATION; and

III. To the NATURE of the condition enjoyed by 'the spirits of just men made perfect.'

I. The reality of their condition calls for a brief notice.

The first thing the mind needs to be assured of, is the fact of an immortal and spiritual future. All speculation as to its nature must be comparatively useless and inoperative, until we have attained to the conviction that it is a great truth—a certainty, not a mere possibility—a reality, not a dream of a hopeful imagination. And to reach such a conviction, so that it may act upon us with a force as great as the assurance we all feel that the sun will rise to-morrow, ought to be a principal aim of the soul. The more positive and definite our faith is in the glorious fact, that "there remaineth a rest for the people of God," the more will all our movements harmonize with the requirements of the gospel which reveals

it. The evidence upon which this truth is established, addresses itself to the whole man, to the heart as well as to the understanding. If I am to debate the question with any one, upon the ground of mere reason, I should feel that much of the success of the argument must depend upon the degree in which the higher instincts of human nature are in active operation within him. If he has trained his understanding altogether in the school of material science, and much more, if he has educated himself in the school of sensuality, I should feel that the doctrine of a future spiritual holy life would have but a feeble hold upon his belief, because in either of the supposed cases, the moral instincts of the soul are deadened by neglect or abuse, and the doctrine is deprived of the powerful testimony which these instincts give. While on the other hand, if, as you will all admit, the highest specimens of our human nature are precisely those in whom the mental and moral powers have been most harmoniously developed, it is no small presumptive proof of immortality, that it is with such minds that the argument for the perpetuity of our nature is most powerful. The impulse of Hope which prompts us to look for something good, and of Fear, which apprehends something evil, both point to the future. The warm affections which bind us together in the relations that compose this life, and which make the thought of a final and irreparable breaking of the bonds, appalling; and the inveterate clinging to existence, coupled with longings after a higher state of knowledge, purity and happiness, what are these, but so many witnesses to the truth, that "though a man die, yet shall he live again?" In all these, (as in other respects that we might name,) it is true, that "nothing THIS life unriddles, but the next."

It is to this class of evidences that the word of God does most powerfully appeal. Our faith in the reality of the future life of the people of God—here called "just men made perfect"—does not rest exclusively upon a divine declaration of the fact, in the shape of a logical proposition: That we have, and if we had no other evidence of the fact, that would be enough. But in giving that assurance, the word of God does not limit itself to a bare affirmation of it,—but, taking it for granted rather, it weaves it into every discovery it makes of the character and will of God, and the relations of man. All is made to bear upon the grand fact that he is immortal. This lies at the basis of accountability. It is no less presupposed in the Law than in the Gospel. For when it is said that Jesus Christ brought life and immortality to light, it is not meant that he was the first to reveal this truth to the world, but only that he most fully exposed to view the nature of immortal life, and especially the condi-

tions upon which it might be secured. We must turn then to the process by which the gospel brings out into active existence the noblest and purest traits of our nature, if we would know what is the most powerful means of impressing the soul with the certain reality of "the life which is to come." By delivering man from the defilements of sin, the gospel ennoble him, and this most effectually puts upon him the stamp of immortality: so that the bare suspicion that one thus ennobled by communion with God, and filled with divine aspirations, is to perish at death, is too revolting to be endured for a moment. It puts the doctrines of God's benevolence and justice, yea, of his very being, into the same vessel with the doctrine of a future retribution, so that if the latter be wrecked upon the shoals of unbelief, the former must be also. It calls upon the parent, the child, the friend, to believe and feel this truth, by appealing to the horror which chills the soul at the bare suggestion that the loved ones who are departed are utterly perished, and that nothing remains of them but the dust of their graves. It asks the the Christian believer, struggling with evil and longing for higher reaches in holiness, whether he can credit for a moment the belief that prayer and hope are chimeras. It summons us to the bed of death, where gleams of holy confidence in the future are seen shining through the chinks of the frail tabernacle; it takes us to the funeral pile of the martyr, and to the deep dungeons, and the dens, and caves of the earth, to behold the victims of injustice and cruelty which no HUMAN law could restrain nor punish; and surrounded by these witnesses, it leaves us to feel that the condition of perfectness now enjoyed by the "just," is not a less substantial reality, than this present condition of imperfection, in which they once "groaned, being burdened."

II. Let us now proceed to consider the FOUNDATION of the heavenly perfectness of the spirits of just men into whose communion we are brought by the gospel.

This is sufficiently indicated by the word here employed to characterize them. They are called "JUST" men, a title which, when used in Scripture, has a much larger sense than when used in common speech. In the latter case, it indicates simply an adherence to the laws of equity between man and man, and he is called a "just" man who does not defraud nor injure in any way his fellow-man. But the scriptural sense of this important word is, conformity to all the laws of God, and therefore it covers as well our duties to God, as those we owe to man. Moreover, in the duties we owe to man, it embraces as well the obligations of benevolence as those of strict equity. In this primary sense of the word "just,"

and its equivalent "righteous," those only can claim the appellation, whose works of piety toward God, and of benevolence and justice toward man, are perfectly conformed to the two tables of the Law.

You will ask me, are there, have there ever been, any such upon earth? And the answer must be now, what it was in all former days (we give it in the language of the word of God), "there is not a just man upon earth, who doeth good and sinneth not; there is none just, (righteous) no, not one;" and our observation confirms the truth of the awful declaration. So that if a perfect personal conformity to the righteous Law of God be a necessary condition of the entrance of men into the company of heaven, we may again ask, who can hope for admission?

This view of the condition of all men, in the eye of God's Law, makes it indispensable to bring in that other sense of the word "just," which is known only in the word of God, and according to which it is synonymous with the word "JUSTIFIED." A believer can be called just only in this scriptural sense. He is a JUSTIFIED man, just by faith; declared "just" in the eye of the Law, not because he is so inherently, but by the gracious imputation to him of a justness (righteousness) not his own but another's, even Christ Jesus, the end of the Law for justness (righteousness) to every one that believeth. By the Divine grace the merit of the works and sufferings of the surety is counted to him for justness (righteousness) and on that account he is called and treated as "just" in the view of the Law.

You see then that the peculiar provisions of the Redemption plan, where justice and compassion join in their divinest forms, constitute the foundation of the heavenly perfection now enjoyed by the spirits of "just" men. For the truth of this view, (were we to undertake the duty of arguing it at length,) we should be obliged to refer you to the whole economy of God; to the gospel representations of the fall and ruin of man, and the distinct declaration that he is saved by grace, through the Redemption which is in Christ Jesus. We might (were it needful) show how this truth is involved in the glory of the cross: how God set forth the Mediator to be a propitiatory sacrifice, for the express purpose of declaring his own "justness" in the very act of remitting past sins, so that he might be "just in the act of justifying the ungodly who believe in Jesus. (Rom. iii. 20—31.) We will not, however, vindicate this truth from the sophisms of self-righteousness, for it is self-righteousness after all which underlies all the violent opposition which this "offence of the cross," has met with from moralism, and ritualism under various forms. If there be any here who still doubt that it is of such

"just" souls that the general assembly and church of the first-born is composed, we shall content ourselves with summoning themselves to testify. Hear their own lips renounce all reliance upon "their own righteousness:" bowing before the Throne, this is their doxology: "Unto him that loved us and hath washed us from our sins in his own blood, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever." Nor is this the doxology of a part only, but of all. Not one self-delivered soul, not one who does not count himself a monument of grace, can be found among all the children of the fall, who now are or ever will be part of that blessed company. Each one of them bears the name of "God and of the Lamb" upon his forehead, (Rev. xxii. 4 :) and will throughout eternity delight to ascribe every thrill of joy, every honor, every holy affection which enters into his perfectness, to "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world."

III. The NATURE of this perfectness next demands our notice.

1. Need I say that it is a HOLY perfection? In the economy of God's moral government, holiness is as necessary to a perfect condition, as heat is necessary to animal or vegetable life. The enjoyments which are found disjoined from this moral purity, are factitious and perishable. Holiness is the crowning glory of God. This gives lustre to his power and knowledge. This makes Heaven. I know that men are not ready to take this view. In their eyes, Genius, Intelligence, Power, are the primary objects of attraction; but in the eyes of angels, Holiness transcends them all. Not insensible to the other glories of the Godhead, but more overwhelmed with the bright atmosphere of holy purity through which they view them, they are represented as crying continually, not "mighty AND wise art Thou," but "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty."

And when we, my hearers, see all things through this medium, as the saints made perfect do, we too will sing thus Oh! for such "a faculty divine!" Let us pray for it, and strive to reach it. Why should we allow ourselves to be so governed by what is seen and felt by the outward sense—as if we belonged to the sensuous who could see nothing even in an angel, but the bloom upon his wings? The highest forms of material glory are less than the spiritual. What is a jewelled crown to the soul which shines through the eyes of him who wears it? What is an universe of material grandeur to one single spiritual essence in whom the intelligence and purity of God are reflected?

When upon earth those now perfect spirits longed for this chiefly; and could we now hear the holy Psalmist, we should find his song

praising the grace which had rewarded those aspirations which, while he was here below, proved him to be a child of God, as when he cried, "I shall be satisfied when I awake in thy likeness." And the disciple whom Jesus loved, could we single out his voice from that choral harmony, we should find it one of thanksgiving for the fulfilment of the confidence he thus beautifully expressed, "Beloved, now are we the sons of God: but it doth not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he shall appear, we shall be like him."

2. The perfection we are called to contemplate is a perfection of intelligent activity. The most that has been disclosed concerning the heavenly state, is its holiness. But into the conception of holiness there necessarily enters the idea of enlarged knowledge and active service. Holiness is not simply a negative condition, it is indeed the negative of sin, but it is more; it is the spring of the soul, its balance-wheel, its inspiration, its vital atmosphere, and especially will it prove to be a fountain-head of inexhaustible energies, where it is complete, as it is in the saints made perfect. If, even now, its faintest dawnings in the form of godly sorrow for sin, and trembling faith in Christ rouses the sleeper from the apathy of sin, to the labors and self-denial of the narrow road of duty to God, how much more will he mount as upon eagles' wings, run and not be weary, walk and not faint, when there shall be no more sin to enfeeble his faculties!

They take a very feeble, not to say false, view of the state of perfection, who make repose the predominant thought in their conception of the heavenly world. Such a heaven is akin to that of the false prophet, a condition no higher in dignity than the harem which forms the Mussulman's earthly happiness. It is true that we know but little of the forms of activity which a beatified soul shall assume; but this we know, that knowledge is to be acquired, and that implies mental activity; moreover, if angelic beings are employed in active service, there is no reason, at least in the nature of things, why the spirits of just men made perfect may not be. Can any one conceive of Paul, or David, or Isaiah, as fallen into a passive state of self-enjoyment, which can scarcely escape the charge of sloth? No; there are no spiritual voluptuaries in Heaven. They live! with a vastly increased energy, every moment furnishing new fields for their inquiries, and new calls upon their love and service. Mysteries of nature and grace are to be studied, past history unrolled and pondered, works of love mingling with direct offices of worship. All are busy in knowing, doing and adoring. All are tending forward and upward toward the Infinite in an inter-

minable but unwearied approximation. Without jar, confusion, or hurry, the motion of the soul is the REPOSING motion of the eagle.

"Ye cannot see
The stirring of his wings, and yet he soars."

If now, the emphatic word, "rest," so often applied in Scripture to describe the heavenly state, seem to any inconsistent with these views of a constant activity, let us

3. Consider HAPPINESS as part of the perfection of the spirits of just men. We feel as if it were better to be silent here; for who can describe that exceeding and eternal weight of glory? CONTRAST, is our only means of reaching any suitable conception of the greatness and pureness of the joy that animates every soul which forms one in that throng of the justified and perfected. Contrast, I say: what this present world is, that heaven is not. Take the history of the present life: is it not the history of a discipline, which involves fighting within and fears without? Exclude then from your present Christian experience all painful misgivings and doubts, all anxious watchings, all struggles with sin in its numerous forms of temptation, all battling with ourselves, the evil one, and a false-hearted world: all efforts to drag along the reluctant soul in the way of duty: take away all carking care about the future, all alternations of hope and disappointment: remove the idea of separation from beloved friends, who, when torn up from our side, like trees torn from the soil, leave a yearning void which cannot be refilled: imagine all the pain and shame of persecution for Christ's sake, all sights and sounds of anguish which assail us from the crowded haunts of life, taken away from the experience of the Christian life, and nothing left but a holy residuum of elevating and unchecked communion with God and holy beings—and you can easily see how the promise of "rest" shall be made good to the people of God. It is rest from sin first, and then from sin-begotten sorrow, and trials which sin has made necessary, and toils which sin has made irksome. You can also easily perceive, how such rest, which thus enters necessarily into the happiness of the blessed, is by no means incompatible with the fact of a continued and happy activity. The hour which admitted the spirits of just men into it, was, to them, as the sunset of painful, and the sunrising of joyful labor. Their happiness consists in the divine harmony in which all objects and persons shall move in relation to each other, and around the central sun, like the bright orbs which fill the heavens, ceaselessly revolve in their appointed courses, yet in such harmonious order, that they seem to be in beautiful repose upon the bosom of immensity.

Into the presence of these perfected saints are you come this day. From this view of their character and condition, learn—

FIRST, That the glory of the world that now is, is not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed. Duty and interest therefore both adjure us to prize more highly our heavenly citizenship, and to declare plainly by our lives that 'we seek a country.' The degree of satisfaction with which we look upwards to those who, having passed over Jordan, are now safe in the land of promise, will always be in proportion as we love the road they travelled. The pageant of the world—every day declares it—passeth away. 'What then have we any more to do with its idols?' What communion hath our light with its darkness, our Christ with its Belial, Moloch or Mammon? Oh my brethren! take care not to live as if you thought it a fine thing to be on equally good terms with both worlds, but 'be ye followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises.'

SECONDLY, Our subject teaches us to rejoice that the soul is not tied to an immortal body like that which now holds it prisoner. Oh! what if we were! Blessed be God, this rough husk shall not forever hold the gem. We would not encourage the morbid disgusts with which some persons brood over the evils of the present condition, and the morbid attraction which draws them only to the darker mysteries of life. This world is the theatre upon which the mighty work of Redemption is acted, and by that work life is glorified. We dare not complain at the hidden secrets of providence, knowing that sin explains the problem of sorrow, for with such an interpretation of its mysteries, coupled with an assurance of a future reckoning and restoration, we may well bear our lot with patient humility. While we have duties to perform, and while earthly mercies mingle with earthly ills, far from us be the proud and rebellious disgusts of those who abuse their Maker, by abusing the life in which he has been pleased to place us for a season.

Yet, with all these qualifications—reduce the evils endured till they are only half in number, and quadruple the blessings of the happiest earthly lot—a submissive but decided preference for the nobler and better life of heaven will predominate in a mind thoroughly Christian. Make the best of it, our present dwelling is but a tent, rent in many places, through which the wind, rain and cold will find their way. We have given the reason. This is a sinful life. Hence its troubles:

"Hence all thy groans and travail pains,
Hence, till thy God return,
In wisdom's ear thy blythest strains,
Oh nature, seem to mourn!"

To shake off the last fetter of sin—to become instead of a child, a man—to see and know, as he is seen and known—our only wonder is that the believer's desires are not more thoroughly fired with the 'far better' prospect of being 'with Christ,' and that his language is not oftener, 'I would not live away.' Thanks be to God, that the immortality promised to us, is not a perpetuation of the present condition.

THIRDLY, I exhort you to take large views of the communion of saints. It is good not only to look around us to our fellow-believers, but upwards to those who, having 'fought the good fight,' are now triumphing in the presence of Christ. They too are one with us, for they belong to the Head. Yea—(I love the charming words)

" All the children of our Lord
 In heaven and earth are one.
 One family, we dwell in him,
 One church, above, beneath,
 Tho' now divided by the stream,
 The narrow stream of death.
 One army of the living God
 At his command we bow,
 Part of the host has crossed the flood,
 And part is crossing now."

Oh blessed host! which no man can number.

FINALLY, I turn to you my world-loving, impenitent hearers, and bid you learn the conditions upon which alone you can join that general assembly of enrolled citizens of heaven. You must be "just" men, in the gospel sense of that pregnant word. You must be believers, subjects and followers of Christ. You must find that one road which led them safe to heaven; and every step of which is sprinkled with the blood of expiation.

There is a religion which you must begin by renouncing. It is the religion which alone can be called, the Catholic or Universal, for it alone has all the signs which have been falsely claimed for Popery. It alone has been at all times, in all places, and embraced by all! It has been found under a Pagan, a Mohammedan, and Christian dress. We have all of us known it from experience, and I fear that some of you, even now, know no other. Do you ask what I mean? I mean the religion of self-righteousness, self-wisdom and self-strength. Whether it hold up its head in the scornful indifference of rationalism, or creep upon the ground in superstitious fear, counting its prayers and scourging its flesh, it has equally in view self-salvation. Under all its disguises, with all the elastic principles by which it can so easily fit itself to all the forms of human corruption, it must be abandoned, for it is the enemy of God, and the rejecter of 'the grace that is in Christ Jesus.' The gates of the heavenly city are barred against it, just men made perfect abhor it, and you, my hearer, must find your way to the foot of the cross, and with penitent shame renounce it.

Which may God grant—and to the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost shall be all the glory. Amen.