

A

SERMON,

DELIVERED DEC. 12, 1822,

RECOMMENDED BY THE

GOVERNOR OF THE STATE,

TO BE OBSERVED AS A

DAY OF PUBLIC THANKSGIVING
AND PRAYER.

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SERMON.

PSALM LKV. 11.

THOU CROWNEST THE YEAR WITH THY GOODNESS.

THE goodness of God is one of the most conspicuous attributes of his nature,—and, when comprehensively viewed, may be considered as embracing the whole of his moral perfections. His very justice in punishing the finally obdurate, is but an expression of his goodness towards his kingdom at large, as every one can perceive, who admits that order among his creatures is essential to their happiness. Even his truth, his unchangeable truth, is only another form of that benevolence which he exercises towards his holy and everlasting kingdom : or, to say the least, his boundless goodness necessarily draws after it his infallible truth ; for if we could suppose it possible that he should prove unfaithful or untrue, the happiness of his friends would instantly be overthrown, and their brightest hopes swept away.

The living oracles teach that “ God is love,” and love of the most disinterested and diffusive character. They represent him as an infinite fountain of love, continually pouring out streams of kindness and beneficence to his creatures. What else but a benevolence thus communicative and boundless, could have induced him to give birth to the numerous orders of beings which peo-

ple the vast universe, and to make so liberal a provision for their wants? If the self-existent Creator had not delighted in their happiness, creation would never have begun; all would have been blank, from the tallest seraph that burns and adores before his throne, to the insect that flutters in the summer's sun and dies. That He should create beings to make them miserable, is impossible,—seeing he could have no motive to this, unless you suppose him *disinterestedly malevolent*,—an idea at once blasphemous of the Creator, and contradicted by all the operations of his hand. That He should create them with an indifference to their happiness or misery, is to suppose him to act without an end,—a sentiment equally incompatible with his wisdom and his goodness, and alike contrary to every man's experience and observation.

The truth is, that independent of the scriptures, God has not left himself without witness that he is good and does good continually.—Every where do we behold the proofs of his kind and wonder-working hand. In all the forms of sensitive existence which crowd the world we inhabit,—the earth,—the air,—the sea, what a train of causes do we notice, all subordinated to the great purpose of benevolence,—all leading to safety or enjoyment in the end.—Take up any single class of beings, and these classes are almost innumerable,—observe the circumstances in which they commence their existence, the provision which is made for their support, the numerous sources of their enjoyment, and the multiplied means of their defence, and you will be alike astonished at the depths of the Di-

vine wisdom, and of the Divine goodness. Take a still wider view—and contemplate the almost infinitely diversified orders of creatures in this lower world; mark how closely one order is linked to another, and by what various means they contribute to each other's welfare,—while the beneficent care of the Creator is extended to them all—a care as minute and as comprehensive, as if each were the only object of his attention,—and you can hardly fail to exclaim with the Psalmist—“O, Lord how manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all.” But if in wisdom,—then in goodness;—for nothing is wise in the Psalmist's sense of the expression, which is not also good; and therefore he adds, “The earth is full of thy riches, and so is the great and wide sea, wherein are things creeping and innumerable, both small and great beasts.” It was natural to his devout and contemplative mind to give this excursive range to his thoughts; and it was *useful* as it was *natural*; for the more he considered God's works, the more he saw of his greatness and goodness, and the more exalted were his thanksgiving and praise. While however God's goodness to his creatures at large, was often the subject of his attention—more frequently, and in tones of deeper feeling, do we find him dwelling upon the goodness of God towards man, his poor rebellious creature man. This was the subject which strung his sacred lyre, and tuned his voice to melody in the Psalm before us.

It was not simply the universal Creator and Preserver, that called forth his praise,—but the God of mercy,—the God that heareth prayer,—and purgeth away the transgression of his people

—"the God of our salvation" and "the confidence of all the ends of the earth, and of them that are afar off upon the sea." This glorious Being who "by his strength setteth fast the mountains"—"who stilleth the noise of the seas, the noise of their waves, and the tumult of the people"—this glorious Being exercising a government over men gracious and benignant, powerful and wise, is the immediate object of the Psalmist's devout and grateful adoration.—But he adores and praises God chiefly for his goodness,—goodness which returns to us with every morning and evening, and holds its joyful course through the various seasons to the close of the year.

"Thou makest the outgoings of the morning and evening to rejoice,—thou visitest the earth and waterest it,—thou greatly enrichest it with the river of God which is full of water,—thou preparest them corn when thou hast so provided for it,—thou waterest the ridges thereof abundantly,—thou settlest the furrows thereof,—thou makest it soft with showers,—thou blessest the springing thereof,—THOU CROWNEST THE YEAR WITH THY GOODNESS, and thy paths drop fatness; they drop upon the pastures of the wilderness, and the little hills rejoice on every side. The pastures are clothed with flocks; the valleys also are covered over with corn; they shout for joy; they also sing." And shall not man sing, for whom all these mercies are wrought, and on whom this unwearied goodness is bestowed? Shall he not recount the loving kindness of the Lord, and praise him with joyful lips? This is a duty in which the Psalmist greatly de-

lighted, and in which *we* ought to delight.—The church in all ages has made it a conspicuous part of her public service; and the redeemed in heaven, united with the angelic choir, will never cease to be engaged in a solemn recognition of the Divine goodness, and in pouring forth correspondent songs of gratitude and praise.

Assembled in the house of God this morning at the call of the Chief Magistrate of this State, for the purpose of performing this most reasonable duty, let us advert in the first place to some of those indications of Divine goodness which justify the call.

We can none of us deny that we have been the subjects of great and special mercies, which involve us in a debt of gratitude to that almighty Being on whom we all depend. But how to bring these before the mind so as most deeply to affect us, is a point of the greatest difficulty.—Many of our blessings are so common, and have returned upon us with such uniformity from our early years, that they are in danger of losing much of their value in our estimation: Many of them, though of unspeakable importance, and especially those of a spiritual kind, are likely to be little regarded through the blindness of our hearts. Nay, the *very multitude* of our mercies, instead of awakening in us an increased sensibility, too often has the effect of blunting the sense of obligation, by leading us to consider what we receive as a matter of *right*, rather than as a matter of *favour*. Putting ourselves upon our guard therefore against the influence of these seductive causes, let us glance a moment, at the more prominent instances of the Divine goodness which this day call for gratitude and acknowledgment.

1. *To a great extent, God has given us health throughout our borders.* Rarely have the citizens of this State enjoyed a greater portion of this blessing than has been measured out to them the last year. Individuals indeed, and here and there a neighbourhood, have been visited with sickness—but Providence has been gracious to us, in limiting and restraining this calamity—and has no where permitted any sweeping epidemic or destroying pestilence to prevail. In some of our sister States, it has been otherwise,—and hundreds and thousands have been hurried into an untimely grave. While we sympathise with them under this painful visitation, it would be highly criminal on our part, not to notice the kindness of the Lord in spreading the wings of his protection over us.

Health is one of those favours on which all our other blessings in no small degree depend.—Without it, what is wealth? what is honour? and the richest supply of our temporal wants? In vain are our barns filled with plenty, and our presses made to burst out with new wine; in vain are our tables loaded with all the delicacies of domestic and foreign climes, if pale disease confine us to the walls of a sick room, and we are compelled to wear out wearisome days and nights in pain and languishment. Nothing satisfies,—nothing exhilarates. Every object in nature loses its charms, while our enfeebled spirits depress us, and our debilitated bodies, incapable, for all the useful occupations and tender offices of life. They alone who have felt the power of disease can fully estimate its privations and sufferings—or can duly appreciate the bless-

ing of health. I ask such of you as God has recently raised from a sick bed and restored again to your wonted vigour—to your places at your table and at your fire side—to your endearing intercourse with your families—and to your various and useful employments in society,—I ask you, if the blessing of health be not enhanced by its loss? and if you do not esteem it one of the precious gifts of life; a favour which should claim a tribute of humble and thankful acknowledgment? Ungrateful indeed shall we be, if this blessing, enjoyed by so great a portion of the community, do not awaken in our bosoms some suitable sense of the Divine goodness, and excite us to pour forth our hearts in thankfulness and praise.

2. *God has blessed us also in the seasons of the year.* If the products of the earth have not been so universally abundant as in some former years, yet there has been no considerable failure.—Seed time and harvest have been continued according to the Divine promise, and the husbandman has been permitted to sow in hope, and reap in mercy,—and in some cases with joy.—By a propitious interchange of sunshine and rain, the successive fruits of the seasons have been brought to perfection—and both the former and latter harvest have been gathered without loss. If all have not gathered according to their expectations, still there is an abundance, and no want is feared either to man, or the creatures which God has given for the service of man. This is a felicity common indeed to our country—but ought not therefore to be passed over in ungrateful silence. It is owing to the good hand of God

upon us,—the smiles of his gracious providence, that our seasons have been so favourable, and particularly that the closing part of them has been so mild and benignant, and calculated to supply any deficiencies which might have been apprehended from those which preceded. Herein we remark the super-abounding goodness of our Creator and Preserver,—how constant and tender his care,—and how true it is that his mercy is above our thoughts, and better than our fears. Let us not refuse to give thanks unto him, and to bless his glorious name—saying with the Psalmist, “Thou crownest the year with thy goodness, and thy paths drop fatness.” Were it necessary on this subject to make a farther appeal, I might desire you to contrast your situation with suffering Ireland, and some parts of British India, in the course of the past year, where thousands of our fellow beings have been reduced to all the horrors of famine—and to the pestilence which usually follows in its train. Who is it that hath caused us to differ? and why has our cup been made to run over with goodness, while those more ignorant, and far less guilty than we, have been subjected to the keenest distresses? Great God! it is owing to thine eternal mercy, which is rich and discriminating as it is free. “Bless the Lord” then “O my soul, and all that is within me bless his holy name. Bless the Lord O my soul, and forget not all his benefits:” He “redeemeth thy life from destruction, and crowneth thee with loving kindness and tender mercies.” He “satisfieth thy mouth with good things, so that thy youth is renewed like the eagles.”

3. But there is another blessing which distinguishes us from the great mass of the human

family, and which calls for our devout and grateful acknowledgment—I mean, *the blessing of a free and enlightened government.*

Civil government is an ordinance of God, and there are various forms of it, which, when wisely administered, may become instrumental both of much security and happiness. But of all the forms which it has assumed, there is none which is so honourable to our nature, so grateful to our feelings, and as I apprehend, so compatible with our rights, as that which has been generally denominated a republican form of government,—a government which knows no privileged orders,—but which offers to every man equal security, and according to his talents and means, an equal prospect of honour and success. Such a government we have—a government of our own choice—where the rulers and the ruled sustain a relation to each other, calculated to produce a high sense of responsibility in the one—and a peaceful submission to law and good rule in the other.

I know that the stability of this government has often been questioned, and that the advocates of royalty have predicted its early dissolution. Grounding their reasonings upon the state of society in ancient and modern Europe, and upon the turbulence known to exist under certain popular governments, they have imagined that no nation on earth possessed knowledge and virtue sufficient to govern itself, independent of imperial and hereditary power. But happily for us, the experiment has shewn that their conclusions were false. Our government, after a trial of thirty years, is found to be unspeakably more firm than at the beginning. It has a far deeper

hold of the hearts of the people, and is sustained, both in its principles and administration, by the manly voice of millions of freemen, heard from one extremity of the land to the other. Belov'd at home and respected abroad, it stands forth with proud and enviable distinction, among the first political institutions of the world.

It is not to my present purpose to delineate the peculiar features of our government, or to shew its happy adaptation to the wants of the people; but when I reflect upon the broad and equitable principles on which it is based—the many wise and salutary provisions it embraces—and more than all, when I remember the severe trials through which it has passed, acquiring confidence as it has proceeded, I can have no doubt for myself, either of its strength or its permanency. But suppose it were to dissolve to-morrow, where is the man who can say it has not been a great and inestimable blessing while it lasted? Under its fostering hand, how rapid has been our improvement in science and in the arts; how steadily has every great national interest been pursued and promoted, while every man has been securely protected in his own rights, and the most important facilities afforded of gradually increasing in the means of personal and social enjoyment.

If we are not contented and happy as a people, it is not the fault of government; for though I ascribe neither unerring wisdom, nor sinless fidelity to our rulers, I have no hesitation in saying, that both the principles of our government, and the general character of its administration, are entitled to the grateful notice of a rising and pros-

perous people. In what portion of the habitable world, can there be found at this moment a nation, in all respects, as free and happy as ours? Many are still groaning under the wrongs and oppressions of ages, with little more of liberty, than the cattle in their fields: many are pressed down with public burdens, and doomed to yield their earnings to the support of men in their civil and ecclesiastical establishments, whom they neither love nor venerate, and whom no agency of theirs can exert the smallest influence in displacing or correcting: many are struggling for liberty, under accumulating difficulties, with scarcely enough of political science or physical strength, to attain the object of their wishes;—while some in our southern hemisphere, are just emerging from a sea of blood, shed in the defence of their natural rights—with good hope indeed of better times, and a brighter day—but who have not yet reached that perfect organization, which will ensure them a quiet and peaceful order of things. O! while we pray for the prosperity of all nations, let us not forget those who are struggling for civil and religious liberty, in whatever part of the globe they may be found; and above all, let us not forget our Christian brethren the Greeks, who are making a mighty effort to throw off the yoke of the followers of Mahomed,—a yoke of the most cruel despotism, worn for ages by these hapless sufferers. If ever a nation deserved the sympathy of the world, they are that nation: and that Christian nations should look on and do nothing, except it be to impede their exertions, is a matter of just surprise, at least to those who are unacquainted with the

selfish policy of European cabinets. But why do I advert to the condition of other nations? It is to make us grateful for the blessings which distinguish our own. We are a free and independent people, enjoying all the benefits of good and wholesome laws—unmolested without, and blessed be God, undisturbed within. And to whom are we indebted for all this? Ultimately, to Him who holds the destinies of all nations in his hand, who lifts them up and casts them down,—who enlargeth, and straiteneth them again at his pleasure. “O let us then give thanks unto the Lord, for his goodness;” let us say in the language of David, “Great is the Lord, and of great power—his understanding is infinite. Sing unto the Lord with thanksgiving; sing praise upon the harp unto our God, for he hath strengthened the bars of thy gates; he hath blessed thy children within thee; he maketh peace in thy borders, and filleth thee with the finest of the wheat—He hath not dealt so with any nation: Praise ye the Lord.”

4. But we have other cause to praise him,—and cause of much higher import. *To him we are indebted for our spiritual privileges and hopes.* We have been born and educated under the light of the gospel,—a light of the most cheering and purifying character. God sent his Son from heaven to expiate our sins, and open the way for our salvation. He sent him as a prophet, as well as a priest, to disperse our moral darkness, and teach us the way of God truly. The gospel discloses his character, his doctrines, and his works,—and taken in connection with Moses, the Psalms, and the Prophets, presents a copious

and all-sufficient revelation of the Divine will. This revelation constitutes the BIBLE,—a book which we have all had in our hands from our very infancy,—and whose infinitely important truths have been expounded to us, by one means or another, from our childhood to the present hour. This blessed Book gives form to our religion,—is the chief foundation of our morality,—and may be assigned as the principal cause, that our morality is both more pure and extensive than the morality of Greece or Rome, or any of the nations composing the heathen world. To this in like manner are we indebted, in no small degree, for the wisdom and equity of our laws, and for the mild and benignant character of all our civil institutions.

Looking no farther then than the present life, we are bound to give thanks unto God for the pure and sacred light of the gospel. It has shed a propitious influence upon all our earthly interests. It has taught us the value of our social relations—marked out with precision their appropriate duties,—and furnished the most powerful motives to a faithful discharge of them. We are better fathers and sons,—better mothers and daughters,—better husbands and wives,—better and happier in all our relations, than if the light of the blessed gospel had never dawned upon our shores. But this is the least part of the blessing. The gospel contemplates us in the light of immortal beings, and makes provision for, while it discloses our immortality. It points out the true and only path to heaven. It tells us that God will forgive sin, and the conditions on which he will forgive it. It calls us all to repentance,

and bids us believe on the name of the only begotten Son of God ; and to the performance of these duties, it annexes the gracious promise of pardon and life everlasting. It pours a full and consoling light upon the character of God, and the paths of his providence ; it teaches us plainly what we are by nature, and what we must be by grace : In a word, it furnishes abundant matter of instruction on all that pertains to our spiritual and immortal concerns, and may properly be designated " The Word of life."

In all this, we say nothing of the use which we make of it, or of the consequences which may follow upon its abuse. Like all our other mercies, it may be the means of raising us to honour and felicity,—or sinking us to greater depths of woe. It is sufficient for our present purpose, to consider it as an appropriate and indispensable mean of salvation, which should call forth the loudest notes of thanksgiving and praise.

I add to this, that it is not only the means of grace so abundantly enjoyed that ought to awaken our gratitude, but the blessing of God upon these means. Several of our towns and villages, to the number of fifteen or twenty, have been visited by the special out-pouring of the Spirit the last year, and large accessions have been made to the number of the faithful. Seldom has this State witnessed a more gracious visitation. And though, as to this town and vicinity, it has been a year of spiritual drought and barrenness, a circumstance which calls for humiliation, it need not—and it ought not to repress our joy and thanksgiving for the mercies vouchsafed to

others. Let us exalt and praise the King of Zion for what he hath done ; and the wider our circle of vision extends, the greater be our rapture, and the more exalted our song. Every fresh conversion among sinners, gives new inspiration to the joy of angels. Why should it not move the hearts of God's people on earth ?

But how shall we testify our thankfulness to God, for this and all his other mercies ? I have said, that we should praise him,—and praise him with joyful lips ; and I add, that this should be done both publicly and privately,—in our religious assemblies and around our family altars,—in our prayers, and songs of melody. But in exercising and expressing our gratitude to God, various things are requisite. It is necessary to preserve in our minds, a particular and affectionate recollection of his mercies. Without this, we shall neither be thankful, nor show forth our thankfulness in a manner acceptable to our great Benefactor. It is necessary to maintain upon our hearts, a deep and powerful sense of the *obligations*, under which his mercies have laid us. They bind us to a grateful remembrance of Him,—to high and adoring thoughts of his goodness,—and to a ready and cheerful consecration of all our powers and means to his service. This is what we owe indeed from our creation,—from our natural and necessary dependence upon him as the physical and moral Governor of the world ; but the obligation is deepened by his unceasing care over us, and his merciful attention to our wants. Our *sense* of obligation ought therefore to keep pace with his goodness,—and this goodness should

strike us the more, because bestowed on creatures the most ill-deserving. This is the very essence of gratitude; and I know of no better way of expressing it, than by yielding a cheerful obedience to God's commands,—praising him in the manner before mentioned,—and *carefully imitating his goodness*. This last, the Apostle has assured us, is among the sacrifices with which God is well pleased, and it is a sacrifice in the highest degree reasonable. Do we subsist upon his bounty? and should we speedily fall into suffering and want, were he to withhold the kindness of his hand? How just and suitable is it, that we should look with compassion upon others, and extend to them our charitable regards? Have we the poor among us? They are God's receivers; nor can we neglect them without insulting his authority, and despising the riches of his goodness. "Who hath made thee to differ? and what hast thou, that thou hast not received?" and wherefore hast thou received it? Is it not that, as a faithful steward of God's bounty, thou mayest kindly and promptly administer to those that stand in need? Hear then the cry of the widow and the orphan,—and turn not away from the poor that are within thy gates. To-day the Father of mercies invites us to *imitate* his goodness,—to cast an eye round upon the habitations of poverty,—and by our charities, to make glad the hearts of the children of want and of sorrow. The season of the year, as well as the solemn service of the day, renders this duty peculiarly appropriate. "Freely we have received—freely let us give." And may HE who loves and rewards the cheerful

giver, remember us in mercy, in the day when the rich and the poor shall meet together, before his spotless and eternal throne.—AMEN.