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SERMON DCLV.

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THE UNKNOWN DEPTHS OF DEPRAVITY.

"And Hazael said: But what, is thy servant a dog, that he should do this great thing? And Elisha answered, The Lord hath showed me that thou shalt be king over Syria."—2 KINGS viii. 13.

"Know thyself!" was the concise maxim of ancient wisdom, but like many others, it is a maxim more easily uttered than obeyed. The true knowledge of ourself is, indeed, the most difficult of all human attainments; it is in fact, altogether beyond the reach of human attainments. A man may know something of himself, even as he may know something of external nature, and of his fellow-men. But in both cases, there is a limit beyond which he cannot go; there are hidden depths which he cannot penetrate. Especially in regard to his moral character, man is to himself an "unknowable individual." There are latent tendencies in his own heart, which may remain wholly unsuspected, until revealed, by an unlooked-for combination of circumstances, which shall call them into activity. It is on this account that men are so apt to misjudge themselves, and so prone to regard as harsh and unjust, the Scriptural account of human depravity. They will consent that the strong language of the Bible, may be true of some monsters of iniquity, but that it is true of fallen and unregenerated human nature, as such; that it has any just application to themselves, they wholly deny. They even wax indignant, when we take the words of Christ, and of his Apostles, as the exposition of their own depravity and guilt. And when we trace out the

lines of their spiritual paternity, and exhibit the extravagance of their amazing folly, in the rejection of Christ, and assure them, that in themselves they have no security against a descent into the lowest depths of degradation and crime, they exclaim with Hæzæel, "Is thy servant a dog, that he should do this great thing?" Now we would not needlessly disturb this self-complacency; we certainly would not do it, by any exaggerated representations of the inherent evil of the human heart. Nothing would be gained for the cause of truth and godliness, by painting the devil himself in darker colors than he wears, even if it were possible to do so. And yet it is the stale and standing charge against what is styled by ignorant witlings, a severe and sour Calvinism, that it delights to delineate human nature in the blackest lines, unrelieved by a single ray of love, or charity. But what could any system of doctrines possibly gain, except universal odium and detestation, by persisting in holding up such representations of human nature, if those representations were not true? It is not for the interest of any cause that would win the suffrages of men, to make them appear to themselves as worse than they really are. Satan sometimes plays a double game with sinners, and after having tempted them with flattering words, to great or long continued sin, he will turn and drive them to desperation, if he can, by persuading them that they are too bad to be forgiven. But by far his most frequent and successful effort is in the way of fostering the conviction, that they are too good to need forgiveness. The prevailing disposition of men is to think themselves better than they are. And as the faithful physician is often charged with unfeeling harshness, when urging the use of vigorous remedies, or even the amputating knife; he reveals the imminent danger of his patient; so, and with as little reason or justice, the faithful preacher of the word, is accused of delighting in denunciations, and exaggerating the moral malady of the soul, when he exhibits, from the word of God, its deep and damning depravity. If he had no remedy to propose, his representations, though truthful, might be regarded as needless, and his zeal, as wanton cruelty. But whilst, blessed be God! there is a remedy, yet such is man's inveterate aversion to it, that only the extremest sense of his need will bring him to consider and embrace that remedy. "They that are whole need not a physician, but they that are sick," and as to an application of the remedy, it is all the same, whether a man is really whole, or only imagines himself to be so.

It is therefore of the first importance, that every man should at least so far know himself, as to be sensible of his own guilt and danger. Without this it is in vain that we speak of the remedy, for without this, there will be no application to the great physician of souls. It is not, then, in unkindness, but in love, that we lift the covering from that abyss of sin, the human heart; it is not in cynical bitterness, but in sorrow, that we point to its

festering corruption; it is not with curious, but with weeping eyes, that we explore its secret chambers, and bring to light its hidden vileness. May the Spirit of all grace, guide our thoughts, and succeed our effort, as we endeavor this day to exhibit one phase of depravity, as illustrated in that fragment of sacred story which we have selected for our text.

Hazael was prime minister to Benhadad, King of Syria, and his eventual accession to the throne of that kingdom had been made known to Elisha, to whom God had revealed his purpose of punishing the sins of Israel by his instrumentality. When in after years Elisha came to Damascus, Hazael was sent by his master, who was then ill, to consult the prophet respecting his recovery. The answer was, that the king might certainly recover. "Howbeit," added the prophet, "the Lord hath showed me that he shall surely die?" Then fixing his eye steadily upon Hazael, as if he would read his secret thoughts, the guilty officer of the king became confused, and betrayed his embarrassment, whereupon the man of God *wept*; and when Hazael had inquired the cause of this outburst of tears, Elisha replied, by describing the vivid picture then present to his own mind, of all the evils which the man now before him would inflict upon Israel. At this portrait of himself, Hazael exclaimed, "But what! Is thy servant a dog that he should do this great thing?" The Prophet condescended to no further explanation than simply intimating, that, as king of Syria, he should do it. Hazael delivered to his master that part of the prophetic response which was intended for him; but the very next day, this man, cool and calculating in his ambition, took a thick cloth, and having dipped it in water, spread it over the face of the king, who in his feebleness, or in his sleep, was smothered by its weight, and died, what seemed to his people, a natural death. Having thus reached the throne, through the guilt of murder, Hazael made war upon Israel, and in a series of campaigns and victories, extending through forty years, he made good to the very letter, the appalling predictions of Elisha.

In considering the facts of this brief history, there are three points worthy of attention:—

I. Hazael knew that he was a wicked man, and that his tendencies were wicked. It is not improbable that his ambition had already suggested and entertained the purpose of the foul murder of Benhadad, which he afterwards committed. Perhaps this thought was in his mind when the Prophet told him that the king's malady was not mortal, but that he should nevertheless die. If so, it was the consciousness of his bloody purpose that made him quail under the searching glance of Elisha. He supposed himself in the presence of one who could read his thoughts, and with such thoughts in his heart, no wonder that he was confused. Those significant words, "*the Lord hath showed me that he shall*

surely die," and that steadfast gaze, penetrating to his inmost heart, would seem to him as the articulate utterance of his crime.

II. But though consciously guilty, Hazael did not know how wicked he was, and to what lengths of crime the evil tendencies would carry him. It was not a hypocritical affectation of horror when he replied to the prophet's prediction, "But what! Is thy servant a dog, that he should do this great thing?" We believe that Hazael was really shocked at the contemplation of the crimes which the Prophet described. He could not conceive himself as guilty of such enormities, and he actually felt a glow of indignation at the supposition that he could possibly be capable of them. Nor is it difficult to reconcile this with the supposition that he was already meditating the murder of the king. That crime had grown familiar to his conscience. He had looked it in the face, under the influence of a dominant passion. His strong desire for the end to be obtained by it, had led him to consider all imaginable extenuations of its guilt. Benhadad was growing old and infirm. The vigor of his reign was past, and the kingdom needed a more active and energetic government. Though he should recover from this sickness, yet he could last but a few years at best. But then, in those few years, events might occur, which would put Hazael out of the succession. He might lose the favor of the king, or the favor of the people, and thus the golden prize which tempted his ambition might be lost to him forever. Was it not better, by a bold stroke, which might be given without detection, to grasp the crown, and actually benefit his country, by employing his superior talents in its government? By such sophistries as these his mind might have been brought to look upon this awful crime without shuddering, and though he quailed under the eye of the Prophet, when he supposed his secret purpose was known to him, yet it was the fear of discovery that discomposed him, rather than the guilt of his meditated crime. No doubt he felt relieved when Elisha did not mention the murder of the king, as among the causes of his tears. And no doubt he recoiled with unaffected horror, when he did mention those other enormities which he would perpetrate. He had succeeded in stupefying his conscience in regard to the first, but he had never yet contemplated, or been in a situation to look without aversion, upon the cruel and needless butchery of helpless women, and innocent children. Those were crimes not yet grown familiar to his thoughts and from which his conscience, though blood-stained already, yet shrank with instinctive horror.

III. But we notice, thirdly, that though honest in his recoil from the predicted atrocities, yet, as the event proved, he was capable of doing all, and more than all, that the prophet had said. The latent evil was in his heart, though as yet undeveloped in

this precise form and degree. It needed only the fitting circumstances of power, passion, and opportunity to make him, in fact, the "*dog*," the ravenous beast of prey, which he supposed Elisha's prediction to imply. The devil was in possession, and though he had not yet turned out every lingering remainder of conscience and sensibility, yet he had it all in subjection and could afford to take his time in bringing his deluded victim to the last degree of degradation and crime. The man had no power in himself to withstand the arts of that evil spirit who was leading him captive at his will. He was already the willing victim of the adversary, and it was a part of the infernal artifice of the destroyer to make him believe that, though up to a given point he had yielded, yet as to the rest he was free and need no further go. The deceitfulness of sin had so blinded his mind that he did not discover the truth, so constantly overlooked in the calculations of sinners, that in yielding one point all was yielded; that the heart owns no divided allegiance, but God or the devil must be enthroned in its supremacy. But let me not be misunderstood upon this point. I do not say that no evil passion or feeling will intrude into the heart where God reigns, nor yet that all amiable sensibility is destroyed and every generous impulse is excluded from the heart in which the devil is enthroned. The dominion of God in the regenerated soul, though at once supreme, yet is not at once complete. There may be lurking rebels in a conquered country, and though but one supreme authority is acknowledged, yet it may not be perfectly obeyed. In the renewal of the soul the dominion of sin is broken, but the extirpation of sinful habits requires sanctifying grace. And where the power of Satan is dominant in the soul it does not imply that a man is in all respects a devil, or that he is in every thought and feeling as bad as he might be. But this, at least, is true, and this is what we would affirm, that where the devil has possession he is supreme, and that when the heart is yielded to his dominion there is no assignable limit beyond which he may not carry the victim of his power in the career of sin and crime; and more than this, that the wilful, deliberate, and habitual rejection of God's authority, in any point, is itself a yielding up of the soul to the authority of the devil in every point. The rejection of God is subjection to the devil, and where the heart is under his dominion no sinner can know or fix the boundary of guilt beyond which he may not be carried.

Hazael found it so, and though he only intended to reach the throne by one act of murder, yet no sooner had he reached it than he dyed it crimson in the blood of the helpless. Restraints removed, opportunities offering, and passions inflamed, he became the "*dog*" he had indignantly designated the man who could do such things.

But it is not my purpose to detail the enormities perpetrated

by Hazael or to dwell upon his character further than as an illustration of those facts in human depravity which it reveals, and which were not peculiar to him, but which are common to all men in their natural condition. Hazael grasped a crown by the foulest murder, and mounted to the throne over the slain body of his master to wield the bloody sceptre of a vindictive and merciless tyrant. And, perhaps, you are ready to say, "What have we in common with such a man? How can his character illustrate our own?" As to his deeds you have nothing in common, and as to the prominent points of his character you have nothing. I am not preaching to blood-stained murderers, or exterminating tyrants. But there is an important point, because it is the radical point in which his character and yours unite, and do actually become one. You look upon the man and his deeds and you find in your hearts no sympathy with his crimes, but with instinctive aversion you brand him, in his own epithet, "a dog!" But I would have you look beyond his deeds to the source and spring of all his crimes, and then say, if you find no corresponding *fountain of iniquity* within your own breast. As yet it may have poured forth no such dark or crimson tides of guilt, perhaps it never will in this world. And, perhaps, those swelling floods are withheld *only* because you are *not* the eventual successor to Syria's throne, and because you are *not* Syria's king, in those days when Damascus was the pride of Syria and Syria the mightiest empire in the East. Say not in your indignation, "Is thy servant a dog that he should do these things!" lest in so saying you only help to complete the resemblance and point the moral which we seek to enforce.

Let us look at the facts :

1. Hazael knew, when he uttered these words, that he was a wicked man, and that his tendencies were wicked. So do you, and so does every unrenewed man know the same. You may have no meditated murder upon your conscience or any other deed of darkness to make you quail under the eye of a fellow man. But you have the guilt of long continued and daring sin upon your conscience, and *there is* an eye before which you shrink abashed, and *there is* an accuser, sometimes sterner than the Hebrew prophet, whom you cannot confront. By familiarity with sin, it may have grown comparatively easy, and a stupefied conscience may give you little trouble, except an occasional twinge. But you know that you cannot stand before God in judgment and answer for one in a thousand of your sins, and the thought of that dread tribunal will, now and then, stimulate conscience to an unwonted activity and alarm your guilty fears. Your refuge, then, is in escaping reflection, or in soothing your apprehensions by extenuating your sins and magnifying your merits. You plead the infirmities of the flesh and the little harm you have

done; you are not as bad as others; you have maintained your integrity as a man, at least, you are *no hypocrite*, and exemption from that crime you hold as a high merit, if not as an actual indemnity for all your sins. But with it all you cannot escape the conviction that you are wicked, and your tendencies are wicked; you have not rendered unto God the things which are God's; you have trampled upon his authority; you have broken his laws, and though sometimes troubled, you are not penitent for your sins, but persist in their practice. Sinner, is it not so? Well, then, the first point is made out, and as we are not inquiring for the measure and degree of actual transgression but for the source and nature of sin, you must confess that you have this much in common with Hazael, namely, a wicked and depraved heart. But this is a main point, for if your conduct flows forth from the same polluted fountain, it implies a correspondence of character, though the streams of iniquity may not in both cases have proceeded to the same extent of evil.

2. But again, Hazael was a much worse man than he supposed himself to be, and capable of committing crimes at the prospect of which he shuddered. And so are you, and so are all unregenerated men far more wicked than they suppose, and capable of an excess of sin from which, under other circumstances, they would shrink with horror. The truth upon this subject is, no man knows himself until he is tried, every man finds himself more susceptible to the power of temptation than he had supposed, and any man, unrestrained by the power of divine grace, has no security that he shall not be carried away to the last extreme of vice and crime. "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, who can know it?" "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." There are mournful and startling examples upon record, of grievous sins into which good men have fallen, and which stand as beacon-lights along the pathway of life, to warn away from temptation even the Christian who is unduly confident in himself. The penitential strains of Israel's bard have been fitly sung by many a saint recovered from his sin, and by it taught, as David was, to know his own weakness. But in the heart, unrenewed by divine grace, there are tendencies to evil which no man can limit or confine, by any boundaries which he himself shall erect. The barriers of education or the restraints of society may suffice, under favorable circumstances, but they will be swept away when temptation, opportunity, and passion combine to open the flood-gates of iniquity and pour out the gathered, but hidden wickedness of the heart. There was a time when even a Nero could exhibit some marks of sensibility, but the man who once wept at the execution of a felon, coolly plotted and executed the murder of his own mother, and reveled in fiendish delight in the destruction of his own capital, and the unprovoked slaughter of hun-

reds and thousands of its citizens. The point I desire to impress is simply this, there is no assignable limit to the wickedness to which any man may be carried in whose heart the devil has possession. He may yet coolly perpetrate crimes at the suggestion of which he would now be indignant, and cry out with Hazael, "Is thy servant a dog?" But let him become king of Syria, in other words, let his present circumstances be changed, and power and opportunity concur, and he has no security that the indwelling devil will not be displayed in all the diabolical excesses of an incarnate fiend.

3. And in intimate connection with this is that other fact, that every heart in which God does not reign is under the dominion of the devil. He may not, as yet, have exterminated all its sensibilities. The sinner may never, in this world, become altogether a devil, but the latent evil is there, and it only waits its development to make him all that his inexorable master would have him to be.

SERMON DCLVI.

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"The discretion of a man deferreth his anger, and it is his glory to pass over a transgression."—PROVERBS xix. 11.

VERY diverse are the ideas which different men have conceived of honor; and various, accordingly, are the standards which have been adopted for the measurement of honorable conduct. The time has been when he who was most successful in pommeling the body of his fellow, or in inflicting the speediest and deadliest revenge for real or supposed injuries, was the applauded of surrounding thousands and the honored of a nation. The time is even yet when the conquering chieftain who has steeped the battle-field in the blood of his enemies, and who has rolled the widest and deepest wave of ruin over states and nations, returns to receive from enthusiastic millions his crown of glory.

Amid the various and, for the most part, degrading conceptions of the glory of man which have generally prevailed, the exalted morality of the text is most advantageously seen. Unregenerate men in their best estate have too often regarded revenge as