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**SERMON LXXXIII.**

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**THE DANGER AND DUTY OF THE YOUNG.**

**PSALM 119:9.** *Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way?  
by taking heed thereto according to thy word.*

THE course of life which a man follows, is, in the language of Scripture, called his "way." To "cleanse" one's "way," is, plainly, to follow a virtuous course of life, all vice being pollution and impurity. The doctrine of the text is, therefore, this, that,

**THE BEST AND, INDEED, THE ONLY WAY TO A VIRTUOUS LIFE, IS  
CAREFULLY TO REGULATE ONE'S CONDUCT BY THE PRINCIPLES  
AND PRECEPTS OF THE WORD OF GOD.**

This is the subject before us. But before we proceed to the consideration of it, let us ask, and answer the question, why the young should be especially regarded in this matter? It is surely not insinuated, that the middle-aged and such as are still further advanced in life are left to pursue their own course, as if they needed no further instruction, or it were a matter of no consequence whether they acted right or wrong. Not so: but the suggestion plainly is, that the young are especially in danger of falling into vice; and that, in the critical period of life which they are passing through, it is peculiarly important that they should adopt virtuous principles. Now these are highly important considerations, and exceedingly appropriate to the present occasion. Let your minds attentively dwell on them. And, to this end, suffer me to repeat them distinctly, that you may lay them up in your memory for future consideration.

1. Then observe, that the text suggests that the young are especially in danger of falling into vice. Do you believe this? Are you sufficiently aware of its truth, in reference to yourselves? If not, you are in a situation of extreme peril, like a man going unarmed into battle, or putting out to sea in a vessel provided with neither helm nor compass. In youth, passion and appetite are strong; imagination

glows with intense fervor; and the controlling powers of reason and conscience are weakest. The truth of these remarks all experience testifies. Besides, it is often no easy matter, even for those who have some considerable experience in the affairs of human life, to discern, at first, to what any proposed course may tend in the issue. The differences of things are scarcely distinguishable in their beginning. The silk-worm, and the tree on whose leaf it feeds, strongly resemble each other in the germs which produce them. So do the serpent and the bird. The road may ultimately lead the traveler far astray, which, at the starting-place, diverges but a very little from the right direction. Streams that flow, in the first part of their course, in a direction nearly parallel, separate at length widely from each other, and, becoming mighty rivers, discharge their waters into different and far distant seas. So it is with virtue and vice. In their nature they are essentially distinct; and the issues in which they terminate are as different as light and darkness, happiness and misery, heaven and hell: yet, one often puts on the appearance of the other, especially in their commencement; and the only difference between them is in a point—a minute particular—a single circumstance—or the modification of a single circumstance.

Experience, it is true, will enable a man to detect this characteristic difference under the appearance of general similarity. But the young, they want this experience. What shall they do? The text answers.

In one important and remarkable particular, the Bible differs essentially from all other books: it magnifies to the view that one point in which, often consists, as I have just said, the sole difference between virtue and vice; or to speak more correctly, it throws upon it a full and strong light—not the taper-light of human philosophy—but daylight—sun-light—meridian sun-light; nay, more than this, allow me to call it light breaking out from its very source, emanating from its fountain—“dark with excessive bright”—above these dim spheres—from God himself, who is light, “and in him is no darkness at all.” To speak, if I can, without a figure, the Bible calls us to the contemplation of virtue and vice in their principles, as they exist in the heart; and it calls us to the contemplation, with our minds impressed with those high and awful thoughts—a spiritual law—an inspecting Deity—a coming judgment, and eternal retribution. Now, coming to view things under the influence of such impressions, we shall see many to be vices which otherwise we might have mistaken for virtues; and many to be crimes of the deepest malignity, which, otherwise, would have seemed mere peccadillos. By this means may the benefit of mature experience be anticipated in early life; and those who are young in years become old in wisdom.

The text suggests,

2. That it is peculiarly important, that virtuous principles be adopted in youth, because that, in this critical period, the characters of men are generally formed. The tendency of our nature to run into habits is strongest in youth; and by the time that youth passes into manhood,

these have generally become so thoroughly wrought and set in the character, that they can never afterwards be extracted. How important, then, that you set out in life on the right course, with your resolution firmly fixed, by the divine aid, to persevere in it, whatever sacrifice it may cost you! A single error, committed in the outset, may betray you into a thousand others, which, though you may bitterly regret, you will never be able to retrieve. How often do we not see this to be the case with persons advanced in years. Most sorely do they grieve the consequences of their former folly; the misimprovement of advantages once enjoyed; time misspent; good counsel, given by parents and others, slighted and disregarded. Now, therefore, is the time to prevent these regrets, by avoiding the course which leads to them.

The text not obscurely intimates that,

3. Care and pains are requisite in order to a good and virtuous life. He that would cleanse his way must take "heed to it:" an expression which denotes caution, foresight, and prudent consideration. Now these are precisely the qualities in which young people are generally deficient. They are not conscious to themselves of any thing very evil in their character; nor are they aware that there is so much wickedness in the world as really there is. They have, as yet, met with but little to try them, and put their virtue to the proof. They may have many weak points, therefore, of which they have not the slightest suspicion; and even many seeds of wickedness, that lie dormant in their hearts, which only wait for some adequate temptation to call them forth. Hence they are confident in themselves. They see no danger; and of course feel not the need of caution. Their virtue is yet but negative; it is rather innocent than positively right moral principle; for that has its root in consideration, a state of mind to them almost wholly unknown. They have, as yet, little sense of obligation; no deep and settled conviction of moral and religious truth; no just views of themselves, nor of human life; nor any steady regard to a future state. Gay and thoughtless, their feelings mostly take their rise from the objects and scenes around them, and seldom from reflection. Such is the character of the young, in general; and though it is a character of comparative innocence, a little reflection will show that its innocence rests on a very precarious foundation. For, as the symmetry of the fairest countenance may be entirely destroyed by the slightest addition to its most prominent features; so as to give to the whole a hideous and distorted appearance; so, it requires the peculiar properties and tendencies of the young to be augmented in but a small degree, to give to the whole moral character the aspect of the most shocking deformity. Take, for instance, a simple young man, whose character is no worse than that which I have ascribed to the young in general, and let his inconsiderateness, by a little augmentation, run into recklessness; his confidence, into arrogance and self-conceit; his gait, into frivolity; his courage, into obstinacy and audacity; his love of pleasure, into profligate sensuality: and all that will be wanting, is

the impact of some adequate occasion to push him off his balance and plunge him, at once, into crime and ruin. It is true, indeed, as a general rule, that—"nemo repente fit turpissimus"—no one arrives at the summit of wickedness but by degrees. Yet history furnishes instances more than a few, of persons rushing forth, from the ranks of the comparatively young and the seemingly innocent, with a violence and an impetuosity which seemed to hurry them over the whole trajectory of the moral sphere, as if by the impulse of one fearful movement, landing them at once in the very extremes of wickedness. Nor is this so strange as to be altogether unaccountable. For innocence is not virtue: neither is the absence of any actual volition to sin, innocence: and the "fountains of the great deep" in man's corrupt nature, may be covered over and concealed by a superficial incrustation of seeming goodness, composed and held together by the restraints of circumstances; and, when this is the case, the first shock of the tempest will break them up, and a scene of moral desolation will ensue.

These remarks, for the justness of which I may safely appeal to the voice of experience, show us the need of something to supply to the young that caution and reserve, that prudence and foresight, and, in short, that strength of moral principle, which they have not yet lived long enough to have derived from habit and experience. And this, as I shall attempt to show in another part of the subject, to which we shall instantly proceed, is no where to be found but in the careful study of the Holy Scriptures.

There is no one, probably, that has lived to the years of maturity, in a Christian country, who has not heard and understood something of the doctrine of future retributions, as it is revealed in the Bible; and there is no one that has ever heard it who can avoid frequently thinking of it; and there is no one who frequently thinks of it, but will be, in some degree influenced by it. For as, on the one hand, it must be granted, that no one now in life knows, to an absolute certainty, the truth of the doctrine,—since thus to know it a man must actually prove it by dying and going to eternity,—and since, whatever evidence of it we may have here is only of the nature of faith, which, in its highest degrees, is still less than sight; yet, on the other hand, it is reasonable to suppose, even if experience were silent on the subject, that as, on the scale of moral evidence, there is a gradation from the lowest point on the scale, where the light of probability first faintly glimmers, till we reach the full assurance of faith, where the light of evidence shines with but a shade less bright than that of absolute certainty: since this is the case, I say, it is reasonable to suppose that a man may, by taking the proper course, have his mind brought up to such a state of habitual, constant, and settled satisfaction, in regard to the truth of the doctrine, as to feel no longer any serious doubts on the subject. Now, your philosophy has taught you—and your Bible will confirm the truth of it—that interest, or a regard to one's good upon the whole, is one of the two great principles on which the mind acts in coming to a decision in matters of practical morality; and fur-

ther, that hope and fear, which have been justly called the main springs of action, are moved by interest. It follows, that a belief in the doctrine of future retribution, must, in the very nature of things, exert an influence on these mainsprings, which will be transcendent; since that doctrine, as it is taught in the sacred Scriptures, carries our conceptions of the good we are to hope for, and the evil we are to dread, to the utmost boundary of thought itself. And, since the rewards expected and the evils dreaded, are to be bestowed and inflicted respectively on virtue and on vice, and on nothing else but virtue and vice—for so reason and Scripture jointly proclaim—it follows, that the influence of the doctrine must be as *salutary* as it is transcendent. Yet this influence, nobody will pretend, is too great even in those who most fully believe the doctrine. Do not the interests of public virtue imperatively demand that it should be much greater and more general than it is? And will there arise, think you, in the course of your future experience, no occasions which will demand all its strength? When you shall see, as you will see, should life be prolonged, others rising in the world around you to wealth and eminence by evil and dishonorable practices, will you be able to keep your minds free from vexation, mortification, and envy? Not by the mere force of a resolution to do so; not by a sense of propriety alone, unsupported by a belief of the doctrine in question. When you shall meet with unreasonable, selfish people—and you will meet with them—people, who will regard with an evil eye whatever credit and reputation you may honestly gain in the world, as if it were so much wrong and injustice inflicted directly on themselves, and who will lose no opportunity to oppose your interests and detract from your merits, actuated by the double purpose of gratifying their malice and raising themselves on the ruins of your reputation; will you be able to preserve your tranquillity? will you be able to avoid turning aside from the regular discharge of your duties to repel their attacks, and perhaps to hurl back upon them their own poisoned weapons; thus sacrificing the purity and peace of your mind on the altar of resentment? Not by the mere force of a resolution previously adopted; not by a sense of propriety alone, unsupported by a religious belief of the doctrine in question. When men, who have adopted for their motto the licentious maxim that, “the world is a cheat, and he is a fool who will not have a hand in it,” ask you to join their company, and demand of you either to unite in their measures or at least connive at them, and moreover, threaten you with their deadliest vengeance in case of refusal—and you will be fortunate if you do not meet with such cases—what shall prevent you from acceding to their infamous proposals? Not your resolutions to the contrary; not your sense of propriety merely, unsupported by a religious belief of the doctrine in question. When repeated instances shall occur—as occur they will, unless you take better care of yourselves than any good and virtuous person is ever likely to do—instances in which, after having labored to promote the interests of the public and of individuals to the very utmost of your abilities, with zeal, and dili-

gence, and vigilance, and care; watching as if your life were at stake for an opportunity to serve them, you will find yourself repaid with the blackest ingratitude, and when, on the back of that, as a justification of that same ingratitude, your beneficiaries become your accusers and lay to your charge the most atrocious villainies; what shall prevent you from becoming soured at such ill treatment—hating and loathing such miscreants; and hating and loathing your species because they belong to it; and wishing yourselves out of a world that contains such monsters? Or, at least, what shall prevent you from growing weary in well-doing, and ceasing to make further effort to benefit a race who know not how to distinguish a benefactor from an enemy? Not, I assure you, any resolutions you can make; not your mere sense of propriety, unsupported by a religious belief of the doctrine in question. Or, when scenes of worldly prosperity open around you, bright and glowing with whatever can regale the sense, or delight the fancy, or charm the affections—and possibly God may call you to this so severe a trial—what shall keep you from drinking in the fascinating influence, and becoming enervated, stupefied, delirious? Not any resolutions to the contrary; not the most stoical fortitude; not the strength of mere human virtue, if not supported by a religious belief in the grand doctrine of a future state of rewards and punishments: a doctrine which teaches us that to save life, in the sense of making the most of present circumstances, is to lose it for ever; that to live for pleasure here, is to incur the certainty of endless suffering hereafter.

But a severer trial than any of these is awaiting you. In what is called the Christian world, there is but too little of real Christianity. Some who call themselves Christians, are no better than infidels; some may be not even so good. And when you mingle among them and witness their course of life, differing in nothing from that of the mass of mankind, except, perhaps, that they are scrupulously nice and exact in their observance of certain modes and forms, and rigidly tenacious of certain peculiarities of their creed, while they hate and villify all who differ from them, you will perhaps be ready to say, So! here is Christianity; and I am bound to reject it with abhorrence. Not so; you must “cleanse your way” from the fatal errors into which a judgment so rash and unfounded would be likely to lead you, by “taking heed thereto according to the Scriptures.” There you will find, especially in the discourses of the Great Teacher himself, that Christianity is as different from the caricature of it presented in the lives of such men, as was the character of the ancient Pharisees from that of the divine Master himself.

Another doctrine of the sacred Scriptures, which furnishes a source of strong and peculiar motives to a virtuous life, is that of our redemption by the death of Christ. This is a theme, to contemplate which, we must rise far above the range of our ordinary conceptions; we must take our stand within the veil which separates the things of time from those of eternity; and, on an eminence, so to speak, near the throne of God; mighty angels, cherubim and seraphim around us; spirits of the

just made perfect chanting hallelujahs in our raptured ears; mercy and truth met together; righteousness and peace embracing; sin and death vanquished; and a new order of things arising to view out of the ruins of the apostacy. And all this is the achievement of almighty love: for God is love. "Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world! Behold the way of access into the holiest, laid open by the blood of Jesus.

What motives to love God and keep his commandments are here! We know, we feel, that mere authority can never command our love; but we feel, also, that the love of God, our heavenly Father, can gain it. This, or nothing can.

But the Scripture doctrine of redemption exhibits also another trait in the character of God. See there, that bloody spectacle! Hark! that cry of agony: "My God! my God! why hast thou forsaken me!" Hark again: "It is finished!" That was a note of triumph. He dies—the God-man!—dies under the curse, a victim to justice, in our stead. Let not men hereafter make a mock at sin: for punishment from the Almighty follows it! "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." True, he can, and will pardon the penitent; but "on the wicked God shall rain snares; fire, and brimstone, and an horrible tempest; this shall be the portion of their cup." All this is consonant with right reason, which teaches that the attributes of God are proportionate. It clearly comports with the same character of perfect rectitude to punish vice as to reward virtue: and both are illustrated with equal clearness in the doctrine of our redemption. Whoever, consequently, believes this doctrine, in a right manner, must receive the impression of both on his heart; the one to attract, the other to awe; the one to encourage his confidence in its object, the other to prevent that confidence from degenerating into presumption and indecent familiarity. Can there be any state of mind either more proper in itself, or more likely to exert a good moral influence upon the character, than the one which is thus produced?

It is further to be observed here, that the position in which the doctrines of the Bible place every serious inquirer, in relation to the great question of his acceptance with God, is precisely such as is most favorable to virtue; because it gives scope for the fullest operation, at once, of both hope and fear. A state of perfect certainty would exclude one or the other. If we were sure of final happiness, fear, and if, of final misery, hope, would expire; and, in either case, we should have no stimulus to exertion arising from considerations of the future. A man may, indeed, pretend that gratitude for so great a boon as the certainty of his eternal salvation, supersedes the necessity of fear, by the introduction, in its place, of a more generous motive. To this I would reply, that, supposing it to be true, as some hold, that an inadmissible title to eternal life may be made out for a man in this world and that it is his privilege to know the fact; yet it might be well for him still further to inquire how he knows it. Is his knowledge of it complete? If he says it is, we may at once set him down for a con-

ceited Pharisee, who knows nothing as he ought to know, and especially on a subject which of all things most nearly concerns him, viz. himself. For the Scriptures assure us, that they and they only who persevere unto the end shall be saved—and to say nothing here in the way and manner of polemics in theology, who plainly show that they have but too little of religion, by their angry disputes about it, or rather about dogmas of their own, with which religion has really nothing to do—I say, therefore, that since no man's evidence of the goodness of his state can possibly be any higher in degree than that which he has of the purity and integrity of his character; and since that can never be complete while any parts of trial remain for him to undergo—for though he has stood the test of all that are past, there may remain yet one, more severe than the rest, which he will not endure—it follows, that he can never, so long as he lives, feel so perfectly assured of his final salvation, as to preclude all further occasion for fear. You will find the statements, exhortations, and approved examples of the sacred Scriptures all support this view of the subject; and you will, probably, also find in your progress through life—at least all shrewd observers of human character before you have found—that those men who are under no anxious apprehensions respecting their own personal prospects for another world—whether this proceeds from the hardihood of scepticism or the still more impenetrable hardihood of Phariseism—are not the men whom you may safely trust. The truth is, that whoever allows himself in any delinquency, either obscures the evidence of his acceptance with God, or violates the terms of it; and, in either view of the case, endangers his salvation: and, it is also true, that whoever considers himself out of danger in respect of his salvation, whether it be because he considers it already sufficiently secure, or because he thinks and cares nothing at all about the matter, will be regardless of moral obligation.

I would observe, in the next place, that the sacred Scriptures insist much and strongly on the necessity of honest industry in some useful calling. They allow no one to be idle; not only because idleness is destructive to our temporal interests, but also, and especially because it is the inlet to many and ruinous vices. No man lives for himself alone, but for the common good; and such as are raised above the necessity of laboring for sustenance ought to employ their time and means for the public benefit, or in administering relief to such as are in want. There is not the smallest difficulty, in our own country especially, for men of education to find situations in which their talents and acquirements may be put to some useful purpose. The civil offices of the government are open to them. The business of education presents a vast field of usefulness to such as possess the requisite qualifications. In no other field is there a fairer opportunity for disseminating the benevolent and pure principles of the Bible than in this. He who instills these principles into the youthful mind, labors in a vocation, which is, in itself, and ought to be esteemed, the most honorable and the most important; for its results, like the mind itself, are imperishable. There



is, indeed, but one other vocation in life so intimately connected with the cause of religion and humanity as this is. I refer to that of the pulpit. In some minds I am aware that the mention of this may awaken feelings of contempt. But though it has none of those circumstances which strike a worldly imagination to recommend it, and though it has become degraded in public estimation by causes which need not here be mentioned, it can never become dishonorable in itself; since, in the judgment of sober reason, it surpasses in importance all employments that are merely secular, as much as the concerns of the moral world are superior to those of the physical; eternity to time; or the immortal soul to the perishing body. The state of the world at large, and of our own country in particular, imperiously demands the addition of many more laborers in this holy vocation. It is, I believe, admitted on all hands, that public morals have greatly deteriorated among us in the course of the last fifty years. Should not the spirit of genuine Christianity move the hearts of our young men of talents and education to come forward in the strength of the divine Master to inculcate the same great principles which He inculcated, regardless of the shibboleths of sect and party, I know not what is to be done to check the progress of iniquity. Of no one truth, in relation to our beloved country, is my conviction more thorough, than of this, that its interests are identified with those of genuine Christianity—a religion as remote from superstition on the one hand, as it is from libertinism on the other. The freedom of our institutions looks for its support to the purity of public morals; and the purity of the public morals cannot be sustained but by the prevalence of that clear and vivid perception of right and wrong, and that deep sense of obligation and responsibility which the Christian system is so well calculated to inspire.

But it is time that I should think of drawing this discourse toward a close; and I shall do so, by calling to your attention the solemn reflection that your destiny for future life, and for that eternity which is to follow, is suspended on the course you are about to take, and will be greatly affected, perhaps decisively determined, by the very first steps of that course—perhaps by the resolutions you are this moment forming! Reflect, I beseech you, reflect seriously on what you have just heard. In you, we, in common with the rest of your friends, have much at stake. In you your country has much at stake. But this is nothing compared with what you yourselves have at stake. Take heed, once more, I solemnly warn you, how you treat the counsel given you in my text. By an authority the most august and venerable, the most sacred and tremendous, a volume of directions has been given to be your chart and compass on the voyage of life. Take heed to them. Unless you take heed to them there is no more probability of your going safely, than there would be, for a man benighted, traveling without a light and without a guide, by a way where at every step, frightful chasms yawned beneath his feet, and precipices approaching close on either side opened an abrupt descent to the abyss below. No more probability did I say? Not so much. For such a traveler might, by a sort of

miracle, feel his way on in the darkness, till he had passed the danger; and this may well represent the case of a poor heathen, to whom the light of divine revelation has been denied, and who, though surrounded by the gloomy superstitions of pagan night, may nevertheless grope his way through the perils that surround him to the light and joy of a better world. But yours is not this case. To you a light has been given; and you must either use or reject it. You cannot take a neutral position. God, in the dispensations of his wise and holy providence, has precluded that. He has apprised you of your danger; and offers you the means of escaping it. Here it is—the Bible. I throw it in your way; I put it in your hands—I recall the expression. It is not I, it is HE—He that made you, and who has ordered the circumstances of your birth, education, and lot in the world; it is He that has placed you in this dilemma. His hand has put into your way—into your hand—into your very souls—I mean, into your understanding, your memory, your conscience, his DIRECTORY of the WAY. This benefit has been—shall I say—forced upon you? It has been, at any rate, conferred upon you, without even the merit of seeking it on your part. God calls it his grace. And so, indeed, it is; a most free and precious gift. But, as I said before, it places you in a dilemma. You must accept it, or reject it; use it, or refuse it. And, if the latter be the alternative of your choice; if you reject this directory, this light of heaven—not the darkness of ignorance, but darkness of another kind, more deep, more dense, more rayless, more impenetrable, and bewildering will enclose you round—the darkness of obstinate and cherished hatred against the truth you have rejected. For, you must find reasons to justify you to your friends, to the world, to yourselves, for what you have done in rejecting the Directory of your God: and you will find them; or rather, you will find what, to you at least, will seem reasons satisfactory. And this is what will bring upon you that preternatural darkness, involved in which you will have to make your way amidst the snares and perils of a world dangerous to virtue, doubly so to such as have rejected the light of truth; for, to their eyes false lights will show themselves; songs of syren melody from enchanted halls will charm their ears; and a strange infatuation will possess their souls; and, as is usual in such cases, their confidence and presumption will increase as their perils multiply, and their way becomes more dark and slippery, till from above, at length, the tempest—raised by their own folly and the wrath of insulted Heaven—breaks in ruin on their heads. Such, sooner or later, must be the fate of all, whether young or old, who do not take heed to their ways according to God's word. Young gentlemen! receive it as my last counsel, my most earnest and solemn warning: Beware that this fate be not yours.