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DISCOURSES TO MIXED CONGREGATIONS.

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DISCOURSE II.

NEGLECT OF DIVINE CALLS AND WARNINGS.

No one sins without making some excuse to himself for sinning. He is obliged to do so: man is not like the brute beasts; he has a divine gift within him which we call reason, and which constrains him to give an account to it for what he does. He cannot act at random; however he acts, he must act by some kind of rule, on some sort of principle, else he is vexed and dissatisfied with himself. Not that he is very particular whether he finds a good reason or a bad, when he is very much straitened for a reason, but a reason of some sort he must have. Hence you sometimes find that those who give up religious duty, attack the conduct of religious men, whether their acquaintance, or the ministers or professors of religion, as a sort of excuse—a very bad one—for their neglect. Others, and Catholics too, will make the excuse that they are so far from church, or so closely occupied at home, whether they will or not, that they cannot serve God as they ought. Others say it is no use trying, that they have again and again gone to confession, and tried to keep out of mortal sin and cannot; and so they give up the attempt as hopeless. Others, who are not Catholics, when they fall into sin, excuse themselves on the plea that they are but following nature; that the impulses of nature are so very strong, and that it cannot be wrong to follow the impulses of that nature which God has given us. Others are bolder still, and they cast off religion altogether; they deny its truth; they deny Church, Gospel, and Bible; they go so far perhaps as even to deny God's governance of His creatures. They boldly deny that there is any life after death: and, this being the case, of course they would be fools indeed not to take their pleasure here, and to make as much of this poor life as they can.

And there are others, and to these I am going to address myself, who try to speak peace to themselves by cherishing the thought, that something or other will happen after all to keep them from eternal ruin, tho' they now continue in their neglect of God; that it is a long time yet to death; that there are many chances in their favor; that they shall repent in process of time, when they get old, as a matter of course; that they mean to repent some day; that they mean, sooner or later, seriously to take their state into account, and to make their ground good; and, if they are Catholics, they add, that at least they will die with the last Sacrament, and that therefore they need not trouble themselves about the matter.

Now these persons, my brethren, tempt God; they try Him, how far His goodness will go; and, it may be, they will try Him too long, and will have experience, not of His gracious forgiveness, but of His severity and His justice. In this spirit it was that the Israelites in the desert conducted themselves towards Almighty God; instead of feeling awe of Him, they were free with Him, treated Him familiarly, made excuses, preferred complaints, upbraided Him; as if the Eternal God had been a weak man, as if He had been their minister and servant; in consequence, we are told by the inspired historian, "The Lord sent among the people fiery serpents." To this St. Paul refers, when he says, "Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them tempted, and were destroyed of serpents;" a warning to us now, that those who are forward and bold with their Almighty Saviour, will gain, not the pardon which they look for, but will find themselves within the folds of the old serpent, will drink in his poisonous breath, and at length will die under his fangs. He appeared in person to our blessed Lord in the days of His flesh, and tried to entangle Him, the Son of the Highest, in this sin. He placed Him on the pinnacle of the Temple, and said to Him, "If thou art the Son of God, cast Thyself down, for it is written, He has given his Angels charge of Thee, and in their hands they shall lift Thee, lest perchance Thou strike Thy foot against a stone;" but our Lord's answer was, "It is also written, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord Thy God." And so numbers are tempted now to cast themselves headlong down the precipice of sin, assuring themselves they will never reach the Hell which lies at the bottom, never dash upon its sharp rocks, or be plunged into its flames; for Angels and Saints are there, in their extremity, in their final need, or at least God's general mercies, or His particular promises, to interpose and bear them away safely. Such is the sin of these men, my brethren, of which I am going to speak; not the sin of unbelief, or of pride, or of despair, but of presumption.

I will state more distinctly the kind of thoughts which go through their minds, and which quiet and satisfy them in the course of irreligion. They say to themselves, "I cannot give up sin now; I cannot give up this or that indulgence; I cannot break myself of this habit of intemperance; I cannot do without these unlawful gains; I cannot leave these employers or superiors, which keep me from following my conscience. It is impossible I should serve God now; and I do not feel the wish to repent; I have no heart for religion. But it will come easier by-and-bye; it will be as natural then to repent and be religious, as it is now natural to sin. I shall then have fewer temptations, fewer difficulties. Old people are sometimes indeed reprobates, but, generally speaking, they are religious; they are religious almost as a matter of course; they may curse and swear a little, and tell lies, and do such like little things; but still they are clear of mortal sin, and would be safe if they were suddenly taken off." And when some particular temptation comes on them, they think, "It is only one sin, and I never did the like before, and never will again, while I live;" or, "I have done as bad before now, and it is only one sin more, and I shall have to repent anyhow; and while I am about it, it will be as easy to repent of one sin more as of one less, for I shall have to repent of all sin;" or again, "If I perish, I shall not want company;—what will happen to this person or that? I am quite a Saint compared with such a one; and I have known men repent, who had done much worse things than I have done."

Now, my dear brethren, those who make such excuses themselves, know neither what sin is in itself, nor what their sins are; they understand neither the heinousness nor the multitude of their sins. It is necessary, then, to state distinctly one or two points of doctrine, which will serve to put this matter in a clearer view than men are accustomed to take of it. These are very simple and very obvious, but are quite forgotten by the persons of whom I have been speaking, or they would never be able to satisfy their reason and their conscience by such frivolous pleas and excuses, as those which I have been drawing out.

First then observe, that when a person says, "I have sinned as badly before now," or "this is only one sin more," for, "I must repent any how, and then will repent once for all," and the like, he forgets that all his former sins are in God's keeping and in the book of judgment, and that the sin he is now committing is not a mere single, isolated sin, but that it is one of a series of a long catalogue; and, that though it be but one, it is not sin one, or sin two, or sin three in the list, but it is the thousandth, the ten thousandth, or the hundred thousandth, it is the last in a long course of sinning. It is not the first of his sins, but the last, and perhaps the very last, the finishing sin. He himself forgets, manages to forget, or tries to forget, wishes to forget, all his antecedent sins, or remembers them merely as instances of his having sinned with impunity still. But every sin has a history: it is not an accident; it is the fruit of former sins in thought or in deed; it is the token of a habit deeply seated and far extending; it is the aggravation of a virulent disease; and, as the last straw is said to break the horse's back, so our last sin, whatever it is, is that which destroys our hope, and forfeits our place in heaven. Therefore, my brethren, it is but the craft of the devil, which makes you take your sins one by one, while God views them as a whole. "Signasti, quasi in sacco, delicta mea;" says holy Job, "Thou hast sealed up my sins as in a bag," and one day they will be all counted out. Separate sins are like the touches and strokes which the painter gives, first one and then another, to the picture on his canvass; and like the stones which the mason piles up and cements together for the house he is building. They are all connected together; they tend to a whole; they look towards an end, and they hasten to their fulfilment.

Go, commit this sin, my brethren, to which you are tempted, which you persist in viewing in itself alone, look on it as Eve looked on the forbidden fruit, dwell upon its lightness and insignificance; and perhaps you may find it just the coping stone of your high tower of iniquity, which comes into remembrance before God, and fills up the measure of your iniquities. "Fill ye up," says our Lord to the hypocritical Pharisees, "the measure of your fathers." The wrath, which came on Jerusalem, was not simply caused by the sins of that day, in which Christ came, though in that day was committed the most awful of all sins, viz., His rejection; yet that was but the drowning sin of a long course of rebellion. So again, in an earlier age, the age of Abraham, ere the chosen people had got possession of the land of promise, there was great and heinous sin among the heathen who inhabited it, yet they were not put out at once, and Abraham brought in;—why? because God's mercies were not yet exhausted towards them. He still bestowed His grace on the abandoned people, and waited for their repentance. But He foresaw that he should

wait in vain, and that the time of vengeance would come; and this He implied when He said, that He did not give the chosen seed the land at once, "for as yet the iniquities of the Amorites were not at the full." But they did come to the full some hundred years afterwards, and then the Israelites were brought in, with the command to destroy them utterly with the sword. And again, you know the history of the impious Baltassar. In his proud feast, when he was now filled with wine, he sent for the gold and silver vessels which belonged to the Temple at Jerusalem, and had been brought to Babylon on the taking of the holy city,—he sent for these sacred vessels, that out of them he might drink more wine, he, his nobles, his wives, and his concubines. In that hour, the fingers as of a man's hand were seen upon the wall of the banquetting-room, writing the doom of the king and of his kingdom. The words were these: "God hath numbered thy kingdom, and completed it; thou art weighed in the balance, and art found wanting." That wretched prince had kept no account of his sins; as a spendthrift keeps no account of his debts, so he went on day after day, and year after year, revelling in pride, cruelty, and sensual indulgence, and insulting his Master, till at length he exhausted his Divine Mercy, and filled up the chalice of wrath. His hour came; one more sin he did, and the cup overflowed; vengeance overtook him on the instant, and he was cut off from the earth.

And that last sin need not be a great sin, need not be greater than those which have gone before it; perhaps it may be less. There was a rich man, mentioned by our Lord, who, when his crops were plentiful, said within himself, "What shall I do, for I have not where to bestow my fruits? I will destroy my barns, and build greater; and I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for very many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and revel;" he was carried off that very night. This was not a very striking sin, and surely it was not his first sin; it was the last instance of a long course of acts of self-sufficiency and forgetfulness of God, not greater in intensity than any before it, but completing their number. And so again, when the father of that impious king, whom I just now spoke of, when Nabuchodonosor had for a whole year neglected the warning of the prophet Daniel, calling him to turn from his pride and to repent, as he walked one day in the palace of Babylon, he said, "Is not, this great Babylon, which I have built for the home of the kingdom, in the might of my power and in the glory of my excellency?" and forthwith, while the word was yet in his mouth, judgment came upon him, and he was smitten with a new and strange disease, so that he was driven from men, and ate hay like the ox, and grew wild in his appearance, and lived in the open field. His consummating act of pride was not greater, perhaps, than any one of those which through the twelvemonth had preceded it.

No; you cannot decide, my brethren, whether you are outrunning God's mercy, merely because the sin you now commit seems to be a small one; it is not always the greatest sin that is the last. Moreover you cannot calculate, which is the last sin, by the particular number of those which have gone before it, for this varies in different persons. This is another very serious circumstance. You find that you are ruined beyond redemption, though others who have done more are not. Why we know not, but God, who shows mercy and gives grace to all, shows greater mercy and gives more abundant grace to one man than another. To all He gives sufficient for their salvation; to all He gives far more than they have any right to expect; and they can claim none; but to some He gives far more than to others. He tells us Himself, that, if the inhabitants of Tyre and Sidon had seen the miracles done in Chorazin, they would have done penance and turned to Him. Till we set this before ourselves, we have not a right view either of sin in itself, or of our own prospects if we live in it. As God determines to each the measure of his stature, and the complexion of his mind, and the number of his days, yet not the same to all; as one child of Adam is pre-ordained to live one day, and another eighty years, so is it fixed that one should be reserved for his eightieth sin, another cut off after his first. Why this is we know not: but it is parallel to what is done in human matters without exciting any surprise. Of two convicted offenders one is pardoned, one is left to his sentence; and this might be done, where there was nothing to choose between the guilt of the one and of the other, and where the reasons which determine the difference of dealing towards the one and the other, whatever they are, are external to the individuals themselves. In like manner you have heard, I dare say, of decimating rebels, when they had been captured, that is, of executing every tenth and letting off the rest. So it is also with God's judgments, though we cannot sound the reasons of them. He is not obliged to let off any;

He has the power to condemn all: I only bring this to show how our views of justice here below do not preclude a difference of dealing with individuals. The Creator gives one man time for repentance, He carries off another by sudden death. He allows one man to die with the last Sacraments; another dies without a Priest to receive his imperfect contrition, and to absolve him: the one is pardoned, and will go to heaven; the other goes to the place of eternal punishment. No one can say how it will happen in his own case; no one can promise himself that he shall have time to repentance; or, if he have time, that he shall have any supernatural movement of the heart towards God; or, even then, that a Priest will be at hand to give him absolution. We may have sinned less than our next door neighbor, yet that neighbor may be reserved for repentance, and may reign with Christ, while we may be punished with the evil spirit.

Nay, some have been cut off and sent to hell for their first sin. This was the case, as divines teach, as regards the rebel Angels. For their first sin, and that a sin of thought, a single perfected act of pride, they lost their first estate, and became devils. And Saints and holy people record instances of men, and even children, who in like manner have uttered a first blasphemy or other deliberate sin, and were cut off without remedy. And a number of similar instances occur in Scripture; I mean of the awful punishment of a single sin, without respect to the virtue and general excellence of the sinner. Adam, for a single sin, small in appearance, the eating the forbidden fruit, lost Paradise, and implicated all his posterity in his own ruin. The Bethsamites looked at the ark of the Lord, and more than fifty thousand of them in consequence were smitten. Oza touched it with his hand, as if to save it from falling, and he was struck dead on the spot for his rashness. The man of God from Judah ate bread and drank water at Bethel, against the command of God, and he was forthwith killed by a lion on his return. Ananias and Sapphira told one lie, and fell down dead almost as the words left their mouth. Who are we; that God should wait for our repentance any longer, when He has not waited at all, before He cut off those who have sinned less than we?

O my dear brethren, these presumptuous thoughts of ours arise from a defective notion of the malignity of sin viewed in itself. We are criminals, and we are no judges in our own case. We are fond of ourselves, and we take our own part, and we are familiar with sin, and, from pride, we do not like to confess ourselves lost. For all these reasons, we have no real idea what sin is, what its punishment is, and what grace is. We do not know what sin is, because we do not know what God is; we have no standard, with which to compare it till we know what God is. Only God's glories, His perfections, His holiness, His majesty, His beauty, can teach us by the contrast how to think of sin; and since we do not see God here, till we see Him, we cannot form a just judgment what sin is; till we enter heaven, we must take what God tells us of sin, on faith. Nay, even then, we shall be able to condemn sin, only so far as we are able to see and praise and glorify God; He alone can duly judge of sin who can comprehend God; He only judged of sin according to the fulness of its evil, who, knowing the Father from eternity with a perfect knowledge, showed what He thought of sin by resolving to become man; He only, who was willing, though he was God, to suffer inconceivable pains of soul and body in order to make a satisfaction for it. Take His word, or rather, His deed, for the truth of this awful doctrine,—a single mortal sin is enough to cut you off from God forever. Go down to the grave with a single unrepented, unforgiven sin upon you, and you have enough to sink you down to hell; you have that which to a certainty will be your ruin. It may be the hundredth sin, or it may be the first sin, no matter: one is enough to sink you; though, the more you have, the deeper you will sink. You need not have your fill of sin to perish eternally; there are those who lose both this world and the next: they choose rebellion and receive, not its gains, but death.

Or grant, that God's anger delays its course, and you have time to add sin to sin, this is only to increase the punishment when it comes. God is terrible, when He speaks to the sinner; He is most terrible, when He refrains: He is more terrible, when he is silent, and accumulates wrath. Alas! there are those who are allowed to spend a long life, and a happy life, in neglect of Him, and have nothing to remind them of what is coming till their irreversible sentence bursts upon them. As the stream flows smoothly before the cataract, so with those persons, does life pass along swiftly and silently, serenely and joyously. "They are not in the trouble of men, nor with man are they scourged." "They are filled with hidden things; they are full of children, and leave their remains to their little ones." "Their houses are secure and at