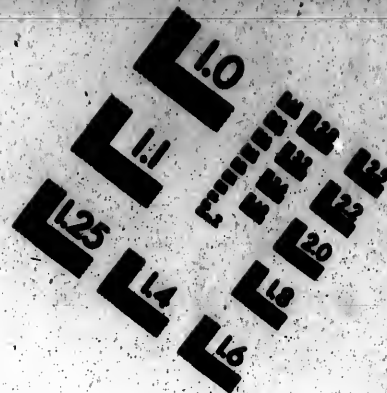




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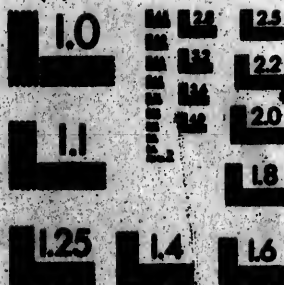
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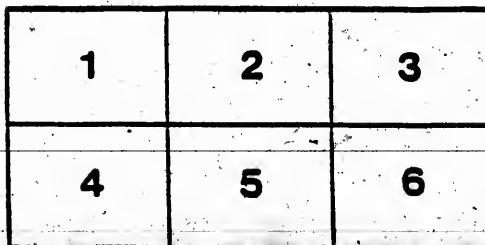
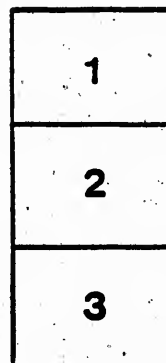
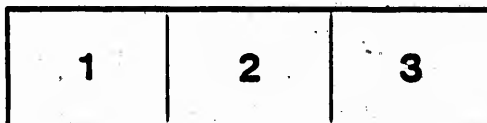
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25

A SERMON:

PREACHED

IN THE CHAPEL OF TRINITY COLLEGE,

TORONTO,

ON SUNDAY, JUNE 28, 1857.

BY

GEORGE WHITAKER, M.A.,

PROVOST OF TRINITY COLLEGE.

PUBLISHED BY THE STUDENTS OF TRINITY COLLEGE.

TORONTO:

THOMPSON & CO., PRINTERS, 26 KING STREET EAST.

1857.

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I SAMUEL, CHAPTER II, VERSE 1.

"Wherefore the sin of the young men was very great before the Lord; for men abhorred the offering of the Lord."

We have been reading this morning of the grievous offences of Hophni and Phinehas, the sons of Eli; offences by which they desecrated God's holy place and profaned the ordinances of His service. In the text the magnitude of their transgression is marked by the fearful results which followed from it, their 'sin' is said to have been 'very great before the Lord,' because 'men abhorred the offering of the Lord.' We must however be careful to observe that the consequences of their iniquity are, probably, thus made the measure of its guilt, only because those consequences were natural and all but inevitable—the legitimate fruit of their conduct—a harvest of evil which reason and conscience would have taught them most assuredly to anticipate from the corrupt seed which they had sown. We have indeed no reason whatever to suppose that the Almighty estimates the criminality of conduct by results of a more accidental nature. Some very grievous consequence may occasionally follow from an act of sin not only without the design, but to the bitter regret, of the offender; and although instances of this kind may serve the wholesome end of opening our eyes to the danger of doing anything whatever in violation of the holy law of God, yet it cannot be supposed for a moment that any such fortuitous result can stamp a sinful act with greater guilt than that which would have attached to it had no such result followed. We must therefore bear in mind that the sin of Hophni and Phinehas 'was very great before the Lord,' because the abhorrence of His offering on the part of the outraged worshippers was its natural consequence, a consequence which the profane priests could not but have anticipated, and which they had learned to contemplate with indifference. We must also remember that 'the state of life to which it had pleased God to call them' was in every way calculated to awaken their conscience—to quicken their moral perceptions—in respect of the point in question. They could not easily

be blind to the meaning of those services which it was their duty to administer; they could not easily see their fellow-countrymen coming up, in obedience to the Divine command, to 'the place which the Lord their God had chosen,' bringing thither 'their burnt offerings, their sacrifices, their tithes, and the heave-offerings of their hand, and all their choice vows which they vowed unto the Lord,' without being forcibly reminded of the sacred import of these acts of duty, of the spiritual worship which they were in all cases designed to exhibit, and in many instances did actually express. The joyous peace-offering, the penitential sin or trespass offering, the vow gladly paid by the thankful worshipper whose heart was yet softened by the fresh memory of pain or sorrow, would each have a voice of its own for an understanding and obedient priest; he would sympathize with the people between whom and their God he was commissioned to stand; and the earnest desire of his heart would be that nothing might be lacking on his part which might render the solemn service of the tabernacle more profitable to the worshipper, or more acceptable to Him who had condescended to dwell between the Cherubim.

Nor have we reason to suppose that, in the instance of the sons of Eli, such early teaching had been wanting as might have prepared them at maturer age to think and feel rightly respecting their holy duties. Eli was, probably, an over-indulgent parent, but the mention which is made of him in the eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews, as well as what is recorded of him in the Old Testament, would lead us to conclude that he was personally a faithful and devout servant of God, one from whose example and instruction his sons might have learned to be far other than they were. Yet these unhappy men were indeed 'sons of Belial, they knew not the Lord'; the sacred and honourable services to which they had been called inspired them with no pure or elevated sentiments, their least criminal thoughts were but of the flesh-hook and of the roast, and Israel was taught to loathe those hallowed rites which were defiled by the profanity and the impurity of the priests of the Most High.

It may appear at first sight that from so melancholy a story of

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irreligion and profligacy we, happily, have but little to learn; and this might gladly be conceded, if the sacred narrative were calculated to teach us nothing more than to abstain from following the example of Hophni and Phinehas in all its grossness. But the truth is that we have far more than this to learn from the lesson of to-day. The same voice which condemns the offences of the sons of Eli, commends to us also the highest rule of duty; the man of God, who came to the aged High Priest, did not merely denounce the grievous sin of which his family had been actually guilty, and which is characterized as 'kicking at' God's 'sacrifice and offering'; he also reminded Eli of what his household should have been, by speaking of the 'faithful priest' whom the Lord should 'raise up,' and who should do 'according to all that was in His heart and in His mind.' Moreover, living, as by God's grace we do, under the new covenant, we must liberally interpret the instructions of the old, according to the spirit rather than the letter, in the form of positive rather than of negative laws. This mode of interpretation is adopted both by our blessed Lord and by His Apostle in respect of the Decalogue. Our Lord Himself, in the sermon on the mount, proves the wide-extending range of the commandments, and although He still adheres mainly to the negative form, yet by proving that they exclude evil in every shape, whether of thought word or deed, He indicates with sufficient clearness that the law which prohibits all which is evil, does indeed enjoin the practice of all that is good. St. Paul also, in the fourth chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians, most instructively develops the prohibitory injunctions of the law of Mount Sinai into the hortatory precepts of the law of Mount Sion, showing that the eighth commandment invites not only to honest labour but to almsgiving, and the seventh to a pure and wholesome conversation.

Again, when the Apostle speaks, in the same chapter, of the Gentiles 'who, being past feeling, have given themselves over unto lasciviousness,' we shall lose the better part of the instruction which his words convey, if we suppose that the absence of feeling—the deadness of the moral sense—of which he speaks must necessarily discover itself by the same abandoned profligacy which was its

ordinary token in the ancient Gentile world. There may be among us a bluntness of the moral perceptions as entire as theirs was, which yet leads to no such results in our conduct; because God has, in His mercy, abated, by the moral teaching of His Gospel and by the example of His Church, the evil even of the world; and has thus taught even those, who do not acknowledge the authority of their Redeemer or their Sanctifier, to denounce and punish the gross vices which the pagan world not only practised but approved.

In order, therefore, fully to appropriate the lessons of the old covenant or the precepts of the Gospel, we must carefully remember the position which we occupy, we must thoughtfully consider what will be required of us as Christians by that God who visited with His heavy displeasure those who sinned against the feeble light whether of the Mosaic revelation or of the natural law written in the heart. And, besides, how are we to escape the danger of becoming even such persons as Hophni and Phinehas were, how are we to escape the danger of falling even into the vices of heathenism, except by striving to do the will of God from the heart? Men are not their own masters. There are two masters whom, as our Lord has told us, we may in vain attempt to serve simultaneously, but He does not speak of the possibility of being exempt from the service of both. And even if we could be thus exempt, thus free to work our own sole pleasure, what can be conceived to be a greater affront to the majesty of Almighty God than that a man should deliberately resolve, for his own sake, to abstain from evil in its grosser forms, to consult his present personal welfare and the good opinion of his fellow-men by maintaining a moderation and decency of conduct, and yet to withhold from the Maker and Saviour of his soul and body that sacrifice of both to His service which is indeed 'most meet and right.'

And now to apply these observations to the instance before us. Let us not imagine that thoughts should not arise in our hearts as we read the story of Hophni and Phinehas, even though we may look upon their conduct with abhorrence, and have good reason to trust that we may never be partakers in their specific offences. We may regard their conduct as reprov'd both by a negative and by a

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positive precept, and under the terms of each of these precepts we shall find that we have much to lay to heart. And, first, the negative precept which we may regard as being implied in the narrative before us, is this, 'Thou shalt not cause men to abhor the offering of the Lord.' Many of those who are present are destined for the sacred ministry, and to them I would in the first instance address myself. Let then those of us who are now in Holy Orders, or who purpose to receive them hereafter, bear in mind this negative precept, and remember that it may be violated by transgressions very different in degree, and even in kind, from those external acts of which the sons of Eli were guilty. Their sins were those of a rude age—of men of coarse minds, and we are too apt to consider that in this rudeness—in this coarseness—lies the gravamen of their offence. We are willing to resent the outrage which is offered to the decencies of society—to that decorum which man now exacts from his fellow, and consents in his own person to observe; but we are too prone to neglect the important enquiry whether the same renunciation of allegiance to Almighty God—the same 'contempt of His word and commandment,' may not be discovered in a more specious form—under a more plausible exterior. What were the sins of Hophni and Phinehas in the abstract, detached from the external acts by which they were discovered? What were they in their essence, abstracted from their separable accidents? They were the selfish love of gain, and the selfish love of pleasure. Thus stated we see at once that the sins of these unhappy men are not to be put aside as sins to which we are in no wise liable, with which we have no concern. They are sins to which fallen man is prone in every age and in every clime, however their outward manifestation may be modified in deference to the opinions of society, or in compliance with those moral instincts which may exist in a heart which is not possessed by the love and fear of God.

First then, the love of gain exhibited by Christian ministers may cause men to abhor the offering of the Lord. The religious may be offended, the doubtful and faint-hearted discouraged and repelled, the worldly-minded confirmed in their contempt for holy things, by finding that they who minister in those holy things are no less

sordid—no less selfish—than others who stand aloof and profess no regard for religion. The devout may be sick at heart, and sorrowfully avow that they can find little or no comfort in means of grace in which they would otherwise heartily delight; the doubting soul may be led to arrive at a most unhappy solution of its doubts; the heart to which God has spoken, and which has been reluctantly listening to His voice, may be aided in arriving at the false conclusion that it has been only beguiled by gloomy delusions—by unreal and groundless apprehensions; and the hardened worldling may be made yet more hardened, and be enabled effectually to deaden the consciences of others, inasmuch as a plausible pretext is afforded him for repeating his favorite maxims, that religion is but a name—that, fair as it may be in theory, there never yet was a human heart which was honestly subject to its influence. Let us remember that a worldly spirit in a clergyman—an undue desire of aggrandizement—a keen pursuit of temporal advancement—a preference of personal interests to higher claims and duties—any approximation indeed to the unscrupulous and disingenuous policy of the slave of mammon, flows from the same evil source, and leads to the same disastrous results, with the sordid covetousness of the sons of Eli.

But, again, there is a selfish love of pleasure which is most unworthy of the character of a Christian minister, and most fatal to his usefulness. The ministers of the church are set apart to holy functions—they have sacred and solemn duties to perform, and they must be content themselves to stand aloof from those follies which it is their office to reprove—from those vanities which they are bound to represent as ensnaring. Their parochial ministrations, if they are duly discharged, bring them constantly in contact with scenes of sorrow—with spectacles of sickness and mortality; those sad realities which the great mass of men may forget till personal experience forces them upon their attention, are habitually before the eyes of a minister of Christ; and he must indeed be most unworthy of his office if he does not find that the contemplation of so many of the bitter consequences of sin habitually sobers his mind, and disposes him to seek some other refreshment than that which is to be derived from the frivolous amusements or the heart-

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less dissipation of the world. Nor should a minister consult only the dictates of his own heart, he should remember also the effect which may be produced on others. Men will not always judge him fairly, they will sometimes feel a strong temptation to do otherwise, it will often be a great relief to them to infer from his appearance amid the gaieties of the world, and from his demeanor in general society, that he is but a dissimulator when he preaches to them 'of righteousness, soberness, and judgment to come.' There may be some who will complain of undue reserve, but reserve will generally command respect; while it will be hard indeed to maintain that respect unimpaired, if we consent to mix habitually in societies whither our ministerial office does not call us, and where it will be difficult in any way to assert it, or to avail ourselves of its protection. Laymen not unfrequently complain that familiar intercourse with the clergy destroys or seriously impairs the satisfaction which they had derived from the discharge of their official duties, and this disappointment may well be supposed to result, in most instances at least, not so much from their discovering in the clergy any very serious faults of character, as from their seeing them at great disadvantage, and in a false position. When we are in deep sorrow—in grievous sickness—on the bed of death, to whom would we rather have recourse as our spiritual guide, to him who lived a simple and secluded life—patiently treading his prescribed path of duty, or to the gay companion of our leisure hours, with whom we had often trifled and laughed, and who had often, perhaps, awakened within us a pleased surprise that a minister of the church could so thoroughly accommodate himself to the tone and spirit of the world? There is a love of pleasure—a conformity to secular fashions and principles, which must necessarily lower a clergyman's apprehension of the duties of his office, must degrade, beyond all estimate, the opinion which those, with whom he associates, entertain of Christian belief and duty; and must therefore merit, in its degree, the self-same reproof which Eli addressed to his sons: "It is no good report which I hear; ye make the Lord's people to transgress."

But it is time to proceed to the positive precept involved in the text. It not only says to every minister of God, 'Thou shalt not

cause men to abhor the offering of the Lord ;' it says also, 'Thou shalt instruct and invite men to love and honour the offering of the Lord.' And if we will but give ear to this positive precept, we shall not be under the law of the negative precept; if we will but do what we ought to do, there will be little fear of our doing what we ought not. Real devotion to the duties of our sacred calling will lift us far above the sphere of those temptations by yielding to which that sacred calling is disgraced. But how are we thus to instruct and invite men to love and honour the offering of the Lord? First, by a due discharge of our public duties. Much is, indeed, left to the individual here. God's service is, to a great extent, what we make it, in the esteem at least of the majority of those to whom we minister. We must then strive to bring prepared hearts to that service. It is not by a conventional solemnity of tone—by a superficial decency of behaviour—that we are to assist the devotion and to awaken the attention of those whom we are appointed to serve. It is by a simple, unaffected, heartfelt reverence, which no skill can possibly counterfeit, and which can result only from a settled persuasion of the truth of the great doctrines of our faith, and a devout recognition of the awful relation in which we stand to the Almighty—of the duty and service which we owe him. Let us then ask of God that our hearts may ever be thus fixed when we utter the words of confession, of prayer, or of thanksgiving, or when we read the Holy Scriptures in the audience of his people. And let us remember, too, that the sermon is a part of Divine service; that, as we are bound to read God's Holy Word with peculiar reverence, inasmuch as we rehearse, in His own presence, the words or works of the Great King, so too we speak in His name and in His presence, when we preach in the congregation. This remembrance will prevent alike our over-estimating or undervaluing the sermon. It will exclude vain thoughts of it, as our word to the people; it will cherish reverent and solemn thoughts of it, as a word of exhortation or instruction, which is spoken by Divine appointment, and for which both we and our hearers will have to give account to God. Could we bear this ever in mind, the tone of our sermons would be insensibly elevated—we should shrink from introducing

into them terms and expressions borrowed from the secular language of the day—our consciousness of the unseen presence would impart a chastened dignity to our style, and whatever our intellectual acquirements might be, we should not fail to leave on the minds of our hearers the salutary conviction that we had given them the fruit of patient study—of a reverential and humble spirit—and of an earnest desire to glorify God and to edify His church, by the declaration of Christian truth and the inculcation of Christian practice.

But, again, our private ministrations must also teach men to love and honour the offering of the Lord. There are, unhappily, those who will not learn this lesson in public, till they are sought elsewhere. We must admonish in private those who do not frequent the house of God, those who do not receive the necessary means of grace provided under the new covenant; we must be fellow-workers with God by the bed of sickness, and be diligent to sow the good seed in the fallow-ground which He has mercifully broken up by the ploughshare of trial or affliction. And, again, if we use due diligence with the young, we may anticipate the growth of much evil, and teach them, even for our own sakes, to love and honour the offering of God, before any bad advice or depraved example has taught them to abhor it.

Once more, our personal conduct must teach men this love—this honour—for God's holy things. Our responsibility here is great indeed. Many men will judge of God and of His truth by the standard of our conduct; many will charge our offences upon the doctrine which we teach—upon the church which we serve, and turn away from the truth, by the knowledge of which God would have them to be saved, only because we are unworthy heralds of that truth. Let us think seriously of this responsibility, and let us pray God to give us grace 'to show forth his praise, not only with our lips but in our lives.' Faults and imperfections there must be in us all—daily sins and errors to be confessed and forsaken; but the grace of God, if we seek it, will assuredly enable us to leave this general conviction on the minds of men, that we are honest and true-hearted ser-

vants of God—that we believe the holy creed which we profess—that we strive to practise the holy precepts which we inculcate. The grace of God, if we diligently seek it, will at least enable us so to live that, when we are withdrawn from the scene of our labours, those to whom we have ministered may have a good hope that we are gone to our rest, and may heartily thank God that His providence ordained that our lot should be cast among them."

Let us, moreover, reflect what a blessed and glorious thing it is to have fulfilled this duty—to have accomplished this task—in any portion of Christ's church, however remote, however rude, in which we have been called to labour. To have taught our fellow-men to love the house of God—to hallow His Sabbaths—to frequent His ordinances; to have led them to recognise their high privileges as members of the church of Christ, and faithfully and obediently to avail themselves of those privileges; to have warned them in danger—to have counselled them in difficulty—to have comforted them in sickness—to have smoothed the bed of death—to have refreshed the parting spirit with the words of holy prayer, with the blessed promises and life-sustaining gifts of Christ; is not this indeed angels' work, and has it not promised to it an angel's recompense, in the day when 'they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness, as the stars for ever and ever.'

And, if we 'trust that we are inwardly moved by the Holy Ghost to take upon us this office and ministration,' shall we hesitate to do so because the labour is great, and the temporal recompense miserably small? Let us not doubt that God will provide for those who undertake so solemn and self-denying a duty—who come forward to dispense, in the name of Christ, the means of grace to those who must otherwise be destitute of them. If we have calmly counted the cost, and if our heart be indeed in the work, we need not fear that God will ever forsake those who have left all to follow Him.

I have been hitherto addressing myself exclusively to those who are at present serving in the sacred ministry of the church, or are in-

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tending so to do. Let us not, however, forget that the text has a lesson which is common to us all. Hophni and Phinehas were distinguished from the great mass of their fellow-countrymen as being priests of the family of Aaron, yet God had instructed Moses to say to all the children of Israel without exception, 'Ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation.' And even so, while there are in the Christian Church, by Divine appointment, ministers of different orders, Bishops, Priests and Deacons, the whole body of the church is, in St. Peter's language, 'an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.' Thus we may, all of us, as private members of the Church of Christ, be guilty of an offence analagous to that of Hophni and Phinehas, we may by impiety and sin teach men to hate and despise, for our sakes, the truth which we profess. On the other hand, the lay members of the church, no less than the clergy, may, by a devout and consistent life, recommend religious truth to the love and reverence of others, and aid most effectually in extending a belief in the doctrines, and obedience to the precepts, of our most holy faith.

Let us all alike remember that God has called us to the discharge of this duty, and more especially let every one, who has been admitted into this College, bear in mind that his position as a member of the Anglican branch of the Church Catholic, and the special benefits which he enjoys as a member of this Society, lay him under a solemn obligation to bring no discredit either upon the faith which he professes, or upon the institution which Christian piety has founded for the maintenance and furtherance of the faith among us; but, on the contrary, to make his daily life a sacrifice of thanksgiving to God for the unspeakable blessings of reception into the baptismal covenant, and of an education based upon a recognition of the privileges and of the duties which reception into that covenant involves.

