

Continued

REV. MR. HILL'S

ELECTION SERMON.

Second Edition
1879

THE MORAL RESPONSIBILITY OF CIVIL RULERS:

A

SERMON,

ADDRESSED TO THE LEGISLATURE

OF THE

STATE OF CONNECTICUT,

AT THE

ANNUAL ELECTION

IN

HARTFORD,

MAY 6, 1829.

BY BENJAMIN M. HILL,

PASTOR OF THE BAPTIST CHURCH IN NEW-HAVEN.

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1829.

At a General Assembly of the State of Connecticut, holden at Hartford, in said State, on the first Wednesday of May, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and twenty-nine,

RESOLVED, That the Hon. JOHN D. REYNOLDS and DENNIS KIMBERLY, Esq. be a committee to wait on the Rev. Benjamin M. Hill, and present to him the thanks of the General Assembly, for the sermon delivered at the opening of the Session, and to request a copy of the same for publication.

A true copy of record.

Examined by

THOMAS DAY, *Secretary.*

SERMON.

ST. MATTHEW, XXVII, 24.

"I am innocent of the blood of this just person; see ye to it."

It is a characteristic of man to exonerate himself, if possible from the imputation of guilt, and to establish some principle of justification for all his actions. Few men can endure a sense of personal responsibility for evils which they have been instrumental in creating; but multitudes, under such circumstances, have been found willing to resort to any pretext by which they might evade censure, and have boldly acted upon that pretext, even though it involved others in the consequences of their guilt.

Such was the disposition of those Jews who crucified the Son of God. The civil restraints of the Roman government would have rendered them guilty, notwithstanding the decision of their national council, unless they had obtained the sanction of Pilate. This they sought in vain, until they resorted to a pretext well adapted to their purpose. They threatened to accuse him of conspiring with Jesus, who was styled the King of the Jews, against Cæsar; and being desirous of saving himself from the displeasure of the emperor, he yielded to their artful intrigue, and thus became involved in their guilt.

But even Pilate was unable to endure the guiltiness of his unjust act. Availing himself of one of their ceremonial signs, he endeavored to cast back the responsibility upon the Jews;—"he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this just person; see ye to it."

In neither case, however, were the parties absolved from guilt. Their efforts for justification were mere subterfuges of

sinful hearts, calculated rather to aggravate their crime than to avert the frowns of the Almighty, or atone for so gross an insult as they offered to the moral sense of mankind.

Such are some of the consequences of that fatal defection from God that originated with the father of our race, and is entailed upon his posterity to their latest generation. They extend to the humblest and most exalted ranks in life; and those, especially, who occupy stations of a public nature, are frequently exposed to them. While discharging the duties of those stations, and amenable to the world, many men, like Pontius Pilate, have resorted to means of personal justification for their conduct which have proved that God was not in all their thoughts, and are evidence of the moral responsibility and dangers peculiar to those stations.

1. Upon this subject permit me to remark, first, that men in civil stations are personally accountable to God for the influence they exert.

When men of integrity accept appointments to civil stations, it is their intention to discharge every duty arising from them. The diversified scenes of political action, instead of weakening their intentions, serve to stimulate them to perseverance, and fortify their minds against the reverses which often occur. To those, however, who have sustained active civil appointments, and have been subjected to the ordeal of public opinion, it is not a subject of much surprise, that, amidst the multitude of other cares, the moral responsibility of public stations has sometimes been forgotten. Yet no enlightened magistrate or legislator will hesitate to acknowledge that this is his paramount obligation, and should be his chief concern.

The doctrine of moral accountability is plainly taught in the holy scriptures. In that inspired volume we learn that, "God has appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness;" and that then, "every one of us shall give account of himself to God." To the truth of this doctrine the heart of man assents. Every plan of self-government; every maxim of civil jurisprudence; and every moral regulation in social intercourse, are evidently based upon the consciousness of its truth.

In exercising his prerogative the Almighty respects no rank nor condition of men. The monarch who sways the sceptre, and the subject of his authority; the statesman in the legislative hall, and the citizen pursuing his ordinary vocation, are all amenable to Him who is "Lord of lords, and King of kings."

The influence of men is increased in proportion to the elevation of their character and station. The most obscure peasant may affect the moral interests of his immediate associates, but the sovereign of an empire can exert a moral influence, throughout his dominions, and that may affect every nation with which he maintains intercourse. Tyre, with her king, yielded deference to the moral government of Solomon; and the queen of Sheba offered a voluntary tribute of admiration to his wisdom and virtue, of which she had heard in her own distant realms.

Legislators and magistrates are ordained of God for the punishment of evil doers, and for the praise of them that do well; to whom all are required to be subject for the Lord's sake. When men, therefore, are elevated to these stations, they are constituted guardians of the public virtue and acquire an influence that will affect, in an increased degree, the moral as well as civil interests of the community, and consequently render themselves additionally responsible.

The faithful discharge of all the duties of civil stations is, undoubtedly, attended with difficulties which sometimes appear to be almost insuperable obstacles to the free exercise of individual judgment. It is not forgotten that it is insisted by some, that the legislator is only the passive representative of the opinions of his constituents; but however this principle may operate politically, it has nothing to do with his moral obligation. In this respect it deserves no other attention than that which it excites as an illustration of the embarrassments under which he attempts to sustain his own opinions.

But notwithstanding all the peculiar embarrassments of civil rulers, they must remember that for all their actions they are personally accountable to God. Their civil elevation is a distinctive feature of their probationary career. Their *yea*

and *nay* are registered in heaven. The moral character of their administration is treasured up in the remembrance of the Almighty; and having assumed the responsibility of such stations, they must expect to render to Him a solemn account of every official act, the tendency of which is to promote the moral interests of the community, or leave them unprotected and exposed to destruction. It is possible for men, with some degree of plausibility, to screen themselves from the censure of their fellow-men, by imputing their personal guilt to others; but with the All-seeing God this will not avail. The Roman governor endeavored to exculpate himself from guilt in the death of Christ, and to render the Jews exclusively his murderers; but he possessed the power of releasing him, and the exercise of that power would have accomplished his purpose: this he did not do: he gave his permission to crucify the Savior, and thereby rendered himself guilty of the dreadful deed, notwithstanding his ceremonial ablution and declaration of innocence. So, also, when others in authority consent to unrighteous civil measures, or deny those that are essential to the public virtue, merely to gratify the popular wish, they may, Pilate-like, attempt to cast the responsibility upon the multitude, and exclaim, "I am innocent;" but the foul stain will redden on their hands, and like the blood of Abel, cry to God for retribution.

The requisitions of Divine Revelation are directed to all men, individually, and each individual must respect them just as he would if no other being existed to be affected by them but himself. All men stand or fall to their own master. And to the civil ruler as well as to others, the word of God addresses itself in the momentous declaration; "If thou be wise, thou shalt be wise for thyself: but if thou scornest, thou alone shalt bear it."

2. The second remark arising from this subject is, that the influence of civil rulers is accompanied with great danger to themselves, and the morals of the public unless it is exercised with reference to their moral accountability.

When men forget God, they are easily betrayed into a course of conduct, that neither His law, nor the moral sense

of the world will approve. But no man can feel his accountability to God, without realizing much difficulty in doing wrong. This is one of the most prominent principles in civil jurisprudence. It originates the solemn oath of the juror and witness, and it deepens the coloring of atrocity in every criminal indictment, that the act alleged was committed without the fear of God before the eyes of the criminal. When men remember that they must appear before the seat of Christ, where the moral character of every action, of every secret thing, will be investigated; they remember, also, that "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God;" and whatever may have been their previous designs, they will then experience a salutary check. When men act with reference to their moral accountability, they are inclined to "do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God;" but when they allow themselves to act without that reference, they expose themselves to every temptation, and may be drawn into every sin. Acting without that reference, Adam subjected himself to the frowns of his Creator; and Cain imbued his hands in the blood of his brother.

But this is not the extent of the danger arising from forgetfulness of this solemn obligation. The vast arena of human action is occupied by minds which are susceptible of impressions from every movement; and the peculiar constitution of the human mind renders its susceptibility of impressions from moral actions, greater than from any other cause. A military pageant may fire the hearts of some men with love of glory, and a successful speculation may create golden hopes in the minds of a few adventurers; but the good examples of one righteous man, or the vicious course of one immoral being, may affect the morals of a whole community, and extend to those of unborn generations. Every individual in his intercourse with the human family exerts some influence. The meanest Jew that demanded of Pilate the crucifixion of the Savior, might have instigated another person to join in the general clamor. But the influence of men is increased as they are promoted in station. The tumultuous Jews who

sought the blood of Jesus, would have found in Pilate another Gallio, who would have driven them from the judgment seat, had they not been countenanced by the chief priests, whose office commanded his respect. When, therefore, men in public stations exert their influence without regard to moral obligation, it is impossible to limit the danger to which they expose the people.

It was under such circumstances that the fearful tide of moral desolation rolled its sweeping billows over one of the most enlightened and powerful states of Europe. Those leaders of revolution who dragged their monarch from his throne, and drained out upon the guillotine some of the most virtuous blood of the land; they who, with heaven-daring hardihood, could profane the institutions of religion, and attempt to hide from the eyes of their fellow-men the awful truth of a day of retribution; were men who disregarded their moral obligation. They had no "fear of God before their eyes." Those appalling scenes may never be repeated, but consequences as deeply alarming may be apprehended by any people when their rulers forget God. Their influence being exerted upon the side of vice, or what is the same thing, not in the cause of virtue, will occasion the flood-gates of moral evil to be opened to their widest reach, and a deluge of misery and woe to spread abroad its desolating tide, with wildest agitation. Intemperance, profaneness, sabbath-breaking and licentiousness in every form, will then lift their brazen fronts, and stalk abroad in dreadful triumph.

It is admitted that the moral virtue of the people will, under ordinary circumstances, prove a safeguard against such evils; but when legislators and magistrates are embarrassed with political difficulties, legislative errors may be committed, and intrigues resorted to, which may have a powerful tendency to produce them. Like Pilate, who could discover no evil in the Savior, but yet surrendered him a victim to a frenzied populace, rather than be thought the enemy of Cæsar; some civil rulers, actuated by political motives, have acquiesced in the wicked plans of those whose favor was their fortune, and

thereby produced, directly or indirectly, great mischief to the morals of the public. The moral responsibility of the act, they have endeavored to cast upon those who instigated it; and their imaginary success has lulled them into repose, until their conscience, as with a giant's hand, has assailed the citadel of their fancied integrity, and aroused them to a sense of the danger in which they have involved their country and themselves.

What patriot can, without alarm, reflect upon the destructive influence that prevailing moral evils exert upon men? And who, having the power of preventing, or at least of checking those evils, can imagine himself arraigned at the bar of God, with men who had been drawn into the whirling tide of moral ruin, without shuddering at the thought of their tremendous responsibility!

3. I remark, thirdly, that our country presents strong claims upon the moral energies of her civil rulers.

Although "there is no power but of God," and "the powers that be are ordained by God;" yet in this respect, as well as in every other, He has connected with his purpose, the means of its accomplishment. The right of suffrage, and other forms of delegating power to individuals by the people, stand conspicuous among those means. Hence civil rulers receive their authority, in a subordinate sense, from the people, and are morally responsible to them, also, for the influence they exert in their respective stations.

Those valuable acquisitions which constitute our country's glory, are justly regarded with those lively feelings which are the legitimate offspring of genuine patriotism. Our agriculture and commerce; our civil and judicial institutions; our arms and diplomatic representations; together with the flourishing condition of religion, literature and the useful arts, combine with magical efficiency, to forward the work of national aggrandizement. These are to us, what the Roman matron's children were to her—our jewels. They distinguish and elevate our character among the nations, and conduce, in no small degree, to convert the world, which, in these re-

spects, was long "a waste, howling wilderness," into a fair and beauteous Eden. But among the fresh laurels with which moral patriotism has encircled our nation's brow, vice has already entwined her dark ivy, and deadly cypress. The genius of immorality already treads the sanctuary of our nation's virtue, and pollutes it with her daily offerings.

The free institutions of our country are, in a great degree, the cause of the national good we enjoy, but they have also been productive of some evils. To these must be attributed, in some measure, the introduction of habits characteristic of foreign nations with which we hold commercial intercourse, and from which we receive a prodigious accession of that class of citizens whose moral influence is prejudicial to the community. From these, and other sources more domestic, nurseries have originated, and are continually multiplying among us, where vice and immorality are fostered and matured; and from whence they are diffused abroad to infect society, as "the pestilence that walketh in darkness," and "the destruction that wasteth at noon day."

We have witnessed enough of the ravages of vice among our fellow-men to excite our deepest regret, and our firmest resolution, to arrest their ruinous career. The arm of philanthropy has, indeed, been made bare to rescue the wretched victims from destruction, and the potency of moral feeling has been severely tested in its struggle with the enemies of man; but while ministering angels have borne the story of its triumphs on high, they have often had occasion to pause and weep, because the wounds of millions were inflicted with arrows dipped in a hydra's gall:—because moral and eternal death had already fastened on their souls.

Frequent investigations of the causes and extent of prevailing moral evils are found prolific in evidences of our country's danger. The cruel traffic in human blood; the shocking prevalence of duelling; the extensive spirit of lottery adventure; the innumerable incentives to intemperance and sabbath-breaking; and the increasing facilities of every kind, for depraving the public morals, many of which enjoy the

protection of the law, present us a picture of moral desolation too gloomy to contemplate. Their history contains a catalogue of crimes so black, that when it is unfolded in the day of retribution, were it not for the ineffable glory of the righteous Judge, it might shroud the very heavens with its darkness.

The existence of all these evils furnishes the nation with claims upon the moral energies of its rulers, and distinctly points out the course of those, especially who direct the affairs of the State.

The grand confederation of our sectional governments creates a mutual interest in each other's prosperity, and exposure to each other's calamities. As a member of this confederation, our own beloved State has identified herself with the others in every national interest, and has not been exempted from the moral dangers of which they have all complained. But her legislators and magistrates have been distinguished for moral energy; and to this, with the divine blessing, we must attribute, in a great degree, our preservation amidst those dangers. To this must we continue to look for the perpetuation of our safety.

*This remark is not intended as an apology for any union of church and State. From this curse of nations the Lord has graciously delivered us. "Let not" that day "be joined unto the days of the year; let it not come into the number of the months," that may produce so unhallowed a combination. Nor is it intended to represent legislative measures as more efficacious than a correct public morality in arresting the progress of vice. It is obvious to the most superficial observer, that when the public morals are vitiated, the sanctions of the law cannot accomplish this object. But in order to promote extensive moral improvement, there should be a mutual co-operation between the moral feeling of the community, and legislative authority. Good laws can originate only from such a feeling, and that feeling requires the protection and support of such laws. Sooner may we expect the heaven to become inert in the lump without a neutralizing power, than, that

overt acts of immorality will not be excited by hearts which are "desperately wicked," when unrestrained by laws that can operate immediately. The retributions of Divine Justice often seem to the wicked so remote, that they regard them unawed; and because the sentence of God against their evil work is not executed speedily, therefore their hearts are fully set in them to do evil. This is the reason why human laws are at all necessary. And it is no less just than desirable, that when men, in these respects, disregard the authority of God, they should be rendered amenable to Cæsar.

Thus far the transactions of the legislature of this State, intended for the moral benefit of the people, have been generally conducted with an independence that has placed it above the influence of designing men, and are regarded as noble pledges of the care which that subject will continue to receive. The moral energies of the last legislature, particularly, added a page to our civil records, the brilliancy of which will delight the eyes of many generations. But although much good has been done, it is clearly the case that much remains to be effected. Victories already gained must be improved, and new ones must be attempted. The people have a right to expect that the legislators will watch, with vigilance, any attempt to restore suppressed nurseries of vice, or strengthen such as yet exist; that they will regard with deep interest the advance of the public mind upon the subject of moral evils, especially the debasing and ruinous evil of intemperance; and that it will become their aim to attach, if possible, sanctions to the law which, aided by their own good examples, and the moral feeling of the community, will prove like a thick hedge of piercing thorns around every haunt of the drunkard.

While these important objects engage the attention of our legislators, many pious and enlightened men indulge the hope that they will bestow increasing care upon the means of intellectual improvement.

Vice and immorality are the offspring of depraved affections, but they are nurtured and strengthened by ignorance.

Hence the cultivation and wide diffusion of knowledge, are no less important in securing the virtue of a nation, than in the promotion of its intellectual greatness. The prosperity of republics is identified with that of their literary institutions. When these are suffered to languish, especially those of a primary character, a moral and mental enervation follows, which, with the first succeeding generation, is diffused through all the national system, as a subtle poison is diffused by means of arteries throughout the animal body. Although ignorance does not uniformly prevent the enjoyment of happiness, it is a fruitful source of degradation to the human character. With a strong hand it has laid hold of millions in other nations, and its iron grasp has been more firmly fastened on them by those who control their civil and religious actions. The demoralizing customs and amusements of many European nations, which the fathers of New-England, and many of their sons have regarded with abhorrence, are sustained by a people whose minds are trained within an extremely circumscribed sphere of operation. Never, until pure religion and science present to their minds new, and now far distant objects, will they be able to emancipate themselves from the bondage imposed upon them by mitred and sceptred domination.

Our puritanic ancestors understood this subject well. Having escaped the thralldom that had been, for ages, the lot of their fathers, and inhaled the pure, invigorating air of freedom, their next care was to protect themselves and their posterity from the recurrence of their degradation. To effect this object, among other wise measures; they made a provision, unexampled in the history of the world, for the education of youth. New England exhibits many fine demonstrations of their solicitude and wisdom in this respect. The venerable collegiate institution of this State, whose rapid advances in literature and science render it already a rival of those that have become hoary in Europe, stands conspicuous among them. Subsequent events prove that the solicitude of the Pilgrims was not wasted on their sons. Among ourselves, a noble monument

of moral patriotism has been erected by them, in the establishment of the immense fund for primary education. This must be regarded as an invaluable boon of Divine Providence, that has been productive of vast intellectual and moral blessings. But in contemplating this subject, an important inquiry presents itself to our mind, concerning the present efficiency of the schools supported by that fund. It is not a question whether those schools were once productive of blessings commensurate with the benevolent views of the good men with whom they originated; but whether we now enjoy all the benefits from them of which they may be made capable, and which the advanced and advancing literary and moral character of the State demands. If our district schools may be ranked among the moral bulwarks of our country, it is a serious inquiry whether they may not be rendered more efficient, or at least, whether their fundamental constitution may not be protected from the ruthless subversions which are often attempted by ignorance and avarice. That they may be rendered potent auxiliaries of virtue admits of no doubt, and our experience qualifies us in some measure, to anticipate correctly the fearful consequences of their being neglected. In proportion to the neglect those schools experience, will ignorance acquire strength in the public mind, and this, combined with previous immoral dispositions, will become like a "strong man armed," who with fatal and unrelenting aim, will hurl around "arrows, firebrands, and death."

It is consoling to remember that a redeeming spirit is abroad in the land. That spirit has sought the aid of men in civil stations, and blessed be God, many have come up to her help "against the mighty." But still she seeks the helping hand of others; and every relation they sustain to the human family, and above all their personal accountability to God, urges their attention to her calls. Let those who hesitate to comply, sit down and count the cost of refusal: let them calculate the value of the blood that streams at the shrines of vice and immorality, and beware lest through their inattention, it stain their hands in the great day of the Lord.

4. The last remark suggested by this subject is, that the personal happiness of civil rulers furnishes them a motive for the exertion of an energetic moral influence in the discharge of official duties.

This is not offered as the only motive. Honor, consistency, sound policy and humanity, each present powerful motives for that exertion. But this is the prominent motive presented by the subject.

As civil rulers are ordained of God, and become by the appointment of the people, guardians of their moral, as well as political interests, it is plainly, a duty they owe to God and their constituents to promote both of those objects by every reasonable effort. Inattention to the moral interests of nations has involved thousands of civil rulers in trouble and wretchedness. They have temporized with the licentious as long as their personal interest rendered it necessary; but that course has subjected them, in the end, to keen and bitter reflections. As they have beheld the sad effects of their neglect, and remembered the remonstrances of the friends of virtue, the pangs of woe have sharpened in their breast; and they have then assented to the charge of their restless conscience, that has proved as convincing of guilt, as that which extorted from the self-condemned brethren of Joseph the humiliating confession; "We are verily guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the anguish of his soul, when he besought us, and we would not hear; therefore is this distress come upon us." The miserable fate of the kings of Babylon, and other nations, in ancient and modern times may be traced to this cause.

But the work of moral improvement is a source of happiness; and peculiarly so to men of extensive influence. They labor to redeem their fellow men from the bondage of vice, and restore them to the bliss that is the rightful privilege of man. They oppose the rulers of the darkness of this world; but the weapons of their warfare are mighty through God, to the pulling down of the strong holds of wickedness. Their success is certain. It is predicated on the word of Him who cannot lie; and in the successful operation of moral principles, they enjoy the

blissful evidence that they do not "labor in vain," nor "spend their strength for nought."

The civil ruler who is determined to distinguish his career by a serious reference to his moral accountability, will experience great present satisfaction in sustaining those interests of which he is the constituted guardian. If the promotion of the best interests of men, and the diffusion of virtuous principles throughout a community, are sources of happiness, then he will be happy. The measure of his days will be filled up with usefulness and honor. The ways of such a man are "ways of pleasantness," and his "paths are peace." And when the hour arrives in which, having "fought a good fight," and finished his course, he stands upon the threshold of eternity, the consolations of his moral integrity will not forsake him. His recollections at that hour will cast a cheering radiance upon the gloomy darkness accompanying his dissolution; and though, while bestowing upon the world his last look of benevolence, he may be compelled, notwithstanding all his efforts, to see it every where lying in moral ruin, a tear of pity may moisten his dying eyes, yet he may say with truth, appealing to the great Omniscient, "I am innocent of this blood."

It would not comport with the personal responsibility of a minister of the gospel, to forget, on such an occasion as this, the guilt in which all men, without distinction, are involved by the crucifixion of Christ. However innocent we are in other respects, in this we are guilty before God, that by our sins we have rejected and slain the Lord of glory. And now, though with unwearied efforts we seek the good of others, and even succeed in washing away every other stain from our hands; while this remains, let no one be at peace. Let no man think himself "innocent of the blood of this just person," until by penitential sorrow, and the application of the Savior's merits, he becomes justified, and holy before his Maker.

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