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S E R M O N

ON THE

"Irrepressible Conflict,"

PREACHED

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S E R M O N .

What communion hath light with darkness. [2nd Cor. 6:14.]

Opposites in the physical and moral worlds are pledged by their essential natures to a state of perpetual conflict! Light and darkness, stillness and motion, strength and weakness, truth and error, ignorance and knowledge, right and wrong—are only a few of the opposites, between which an irrepressible conflict exists, and must exist, so long as either two exist.

There are no greater opposites than Freedom and Slavery. There cannot be two principles more radically opposed to each other than these two. There are no two conditions in which a human being can be placed, wherein he will stand in such opposite relations toward himself, his God and his destiny, as in these two.

Whether we regard man individually, socially, or religiously, Freedom and Slavery stand in the relation of light and darkness, toward his well-being. I now speak of *the nature of* Freedom and Slavery. Much good may, in special cases and for special reasons, result from Slavery, and, in the same way, much evil may result from Freedom. But here is the essential difference: The evil which results from Slavery is its *natural fruit*, and the good is only incidental; while the *good* which results from Freedom is its natural fruit, and *evil* is only incidental.

I repeat, therefore, that the *principles* of Freedom and of Slavery are exactly opposed to each other. One is wholly wrong *in itself*, and the other is wholly right *in itself*. And, because righteousness and justice are absolute and eternal, and spring from the per-

fection of God ; while wrong and injustice are only partial and transient, and spring from the *imperfections* of man, there must be unceasing conflict between the two, until Slavery in all its forms, is destroyed, and Freedom left to reign without a rival over the family of man. The two principles can no more co-exist peacefully in a community or body-politic, than acids and alkalis can co-exist peaceably in the same substance, and each preserve its original character.

This essential and necessary antagonism has received a very good name from a very great man who is remarkable for calling things by their right names. It has been called the "Irrepressible Conflict"—a term destined to become the watch-word of Freemen, and the war-cry of a victorious crusade against the greatest evil that ever infested society. It will be mocked at, and ridiculed, and used as a term of reproach ; but we cannot find a better term to express just what every enemy of Slavery feels, and we should take it and remember that the term. "Christian" was once a term of reproach, from the lips of scoffers.

There are four enduring relations into which human beings enter, in obedience to certain instincts or impulses of their nature, viz : "The religious, domestic, social and governmental ; or the relation of Man to God, to his home, society and government. Hence, it may be inferred that these relations are best calculated to perfect human nature and carry it forward towards that for which it was created. Whatever, therefore, is in conflict with these normal relations, is opposed by the strongest instincts of humanity. And the opposition must continue until the obstacle is removed or nature defeated.

It is my purpose in this discourse, to show that Slavery is radically opposed to each and all of these relations ; and hence, that between it and all those powerful instincts, out of which spring the Home, the Church and the State, an "irrepressible conflict" must exist, until Slavery is cast out of society.

1st. Slavery is in conflict with the relation of Man to God, out of which grows all that appertains to religion. The condition most favorable to such a relation is that which enables an individual, so far as any *condition* can, to obey all the known laws of God, and to learn more and more of those laws. This is the condition which is pre-supposed in that command : " Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve." That is, ultimately serve.

Now, so far as Slavery affects this relation of man to the Deity at

all, it is in radical conflict with it. A slave may be compelled to violate all the known laws of God. "Thou shalt not kill;" "Thou shalt not steal;" "Thou shalt not bear false witness;" "Thou shalt not commit adultery;" every one of these commands, a slave may be compelled to violate, simply because he is in a condition of servitude to another master whose will has greater authority with him than the will of God. It is to no purpose that the objector says that : "masters are kind, and do not compel their slaves to violate the laws of God ;" it is not because they *cannot* do it. It is the kindness of the master, and not the nature of Slavery which prevents it.

Neither can the slave defy the will of his master when it crosses the will of God, and suffer the consequences. For if he does do it, then he becomes that instant a free man, and has but one right left him in this free country, the only inalienable right of the colored man—the right to die. But alas ! even this right can the master take away ! So fearful is his hold upon the very soul and mind of his slave ; so firmly does he grasp the very roots of his life, that he can, through the power of education, take away even this last refuge from his tyranny. He can take away the slave's desire to die for God, by making him believe that the law of his Maker is one and the same with the passion or caprice of his master.

Because this condition does not permit a human being to develop his powers, save in obedience to his master's will ; because it does not allow him to know what God's will is, save as it suits his master's purpose ; he can be educated to love his slavery, and glory in his shame ; as a squirrel or bird can be made to exchange the free air and wood land haunt for the iron cage, and learn to be contented with its bondage. It is clearly for the best interest of the master to do this.—

This contentment of the slave in his degradation is the *most revolting feature of Slavery*. For it is not the contentment which results from a cheerful submission of the better nature to a condition in harmony with its highest good ; but it is the sleep of moral death—the stupor of a merely animal life, in which aspiration is useless, and improvement impossible. And he who justifies slavery because it makes the slave contented, really condemns it by every proof which he adduces. For it is impossible to imagine a condition more radically in conflict with the true relation of a human being to God, than one which takes away the means of knowing and the power of doing God's will, and then makes that being contented with the life of an ox or a horse. Freedom, indeed, is not the *cause* of a man's obedience to the will of God, nor of the full development of his powers ; but it is the

necessary condition thereof. Many things beside Freedom are necessary to perfect the relation between man and his God, but *without that*, those other things are useless. Many things beside health, are necessary to make a good soldier ; but without health, those other things are useless for that purpose. There is nothing outside of himself to compel a free man to violate the known laws of God, or to neglect the duties of his religion. He has a voice in the laws of his country, and he makes them such, that, in obeying them he serves God. If they are wicked, he has means of changing them. If he cannot change them, and oppression becomes unbearable, he has the right of revolution. And if all else fails, he has the right to die, and his religion will teach him to do so rather than obey a wicked law.

He can control his development. What seems right to him, to-day, may seem wrong to-morrow; then he can change his life accordingly—the slave cannot. If he is surrounded by those who degrade him, those who tempt him to be untrue to his sense of honor and right, or to be untrue to his wife and family, he can change his condition; which the slave cannot. From the fruits of his toil he can enlarge his liberties and increase his opportunities of knowing and obeying God. Is he serving a hard master ? one who requires him to lie, cheat and steal ? He can forsake him for another. Has he a peculiar gift ? he can use it as he sees fit, and receive its benefits. I do not say that every man who possesses freedom *will* do all these things, for, as I have said, many *other things* beside freedom are necessary to that. But it is the prime condition, out of which all good *may* spring to the soul, while slavery—its opposite—is the prime condition out of which evil may spring.

The time has been, within the memory of most of us, when these thoughts were called mere truisms, as indeed they are; when North and South, East and West, agreed that Slavery is in *radical conflict* with the normal relation of man to God ; that it takes possession of his *soul*, as well as his body ; that his very conscience, having no higher law than the will of his master, in reality belongs to the master.

In 1818 even the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S., that old Silurian deposit of fogyism, drew up a declaration, in which, among many other good things, was this : " We consider the voluntary enslaving of one part of the human race by another, as a gross violation of the most precious and sacred rights of human nature ; as utterly inconsistent with the law of God, which requires us to love our neighbor as ourselves ; and as totally irrecon-

cileable with the spirit and principles of the Gospel of Christ which enjoin that "all things whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so to them." Slavery creates a paradox in the moral system ; it exhibits rational, accountable and immortal beings in such circumstances as scarcely to leave them the power of moral action. It exhibits them as dependent on the will of others ; whether they shall receive religious instruction ; whether they shall know and worship the true God ; whether they shall perform the duties and cherish the endearments of husbands and wives, parents and children, neighbors and friends ; whether they shall preserve their chastity and purity or regard the dictates of justice and humanity."*

Then, Slavery was apologized for and excused as a political necessity, but seldom or never defended as right in itself. And so long as this was admitted, the conflict between Slavery and the religious duties of every human being came less within the sphere of the religious teacher. But now it is forced upon him. Now, when he claims equality before God for all men *according to the talents given them*, his mouth is shut by a law of the land, which excludes men of colored skins from this equality without regard to their talents. When he claims that the Gospel shall be preached "to every creature" he must except 3,000,000 of the United States' creatures as not included in this royal decree. Does he enforce the universal observance of the Sabbath day ? It is upon the supposition that the master is willing.

Yea, this is not all, nor the worst. Slavery is now called a " Divine Institution !" It is now thought to be good and beautiful *in itself*. "Now," says the Richmond Enquirer, "all thinking men in the South are persuaded that Slavery is the *normal condition* of the *Negro*; that it is justified by the sanction of God's revealed, as well as natural law ; that it is an instrument of Providence in working out the material and moral developement of Civilization ; and that it is a wise, salutary and beneficial institution of Christian (?) society."

These *great discoveries* it declares are the fruits of abolition agitation ! How grateful Virginia ought to feel to the abolitionists ! What a convenient blessing to find out that she has been piously serving

* New Englander for November, 1854.

This was from those very men who are now mousing in the archives of the American Tract Society, trying to gnaw out the few grains of free thought to be found in their piles of rubbish. But it should be acknowledged in justice to the General Assembly that cotton was cheaper then than it is now.

God all this time, in holding slaves, whereas she had only made up her mind to hold slaves "whether or no." Perhaps it is in gratitude to the abolitionist, for these favors received, that she has set apart the 2d day of December next, for the purpose of solemnly enrolling among hero martyrs the name of John Brown!*

This great change in the defence of Slavery has imposed new duties upon its votaries. Slavery is now one of the Sacraments of American Christianity. It is not only to be tolerated, but it must be loved, as the normal condition of the descendants of Ham, and as being in full harmony with their relation to the Father of us all!—For if it is such a blessing, then it must be a Christian duty to extend it to all the posterity of Ham. We must open the slave trade, and take up contributions in our churches on communion-days, not to send out missionaries, but to fit out slave-ships, and bid them catch, buy or steal as many of the sons of Ham as can be crowded into the "middle passage." And not only so, but the poor, benighted colored men and women who have escaped from their normal condition, or never found it—all these should be sent back into their Providential position of Slavery.

Yea, we must, as far as it is possible, become slave-holders ourselves, upon the same principle that we should become members of Churches, Bible Societies and benevolent fraternities, so as to discharge all our Christian duties. This is sober logic. If we admit the "divineness" of Slavery, we thereby enforce the duty of doing all in our power to extend it. The South is right here.

But why is Slavery called divine? I have already shown that it is not because it makes man divine; not because it ennobles man and aids him in becoming more like the Deity, for its tendency is

* Since the above was written John Brown has been hung. He must have known from the first that, in case his plan failed, the gallows was his certain doom. He had violated the laws of Virginia and he must pay the penalty. He has paid it, and few will complain of that. It is the unenviable privilege of the men of to-day to pick out defects in John Brown's *plan*, and call it insane, and allow these defects to obscure every other feature. But posterity will soon forget all that, as it has done a thousand times before. His unselfish devotion to *abstract right*; his readiness to die for a great principle—*this* is what poets will sing of and history remember.

If Virginia is willing to accept her own treatment of John Brown as being *essential* to the permanence and security of her institutions, it should be freely admitted by every enemy of Slavery. I think it was all *essential*, and therein is Virginia self-condemned, and Slavery with her; for not only this last farce, but all the monstrous claims which Slavery has made since it first began to pass its original limits, are essential to its life and health. And if the extension and perpetuity of Slavery, and not *Freedom*, is the end and aim of our government, it has acted consistently in the past.

the very opposite; to make him more and more like a brute. By what reasoning, then, is this blasphemy justified? It is called divine: 1st. By that convenient philosophy which says that whatever *is*, is divine; Slavery is therefore Slavery is divine. Stripped of all its false coverings, this style of argument is narrowed into that syllogism. But that spoils itself in this case, by proving a great deal too much. Whatever *is*: is Divine. Murder *is*: therefore, murder is divine! War, drunkenness, licentiousness, adultery, theft, are: therefore they are divine. Or, worse yet: Whatever *is*, is divine: Abolitionism *is*; therefore Abolitionism is divine.

This argument is good for nothing, therefore, towards proving the divinity of Slavery, for it serves equally well to prove the divinity of the devil—which is about the same thing. It is to no purpose, that the objector repeats this old plea: Slavery always has been permitted; it is one of the oldest of institutions, it always will be permitted, and is therefore Divine, and there is no use in trying to remove it. I hold him to this fact; that Slavery is not older than Satan, nor has it figured more extensively in history, yet neither age nor service has made him divine, nor secured him from a final doom.

A second argument is: That great good has resulted from Slavery; therefore it is divine. This is constantly paraded in one form or another, before the public mind, and when clothed in rhetoric, makes a plausible appearance. But if we throw all the rhetoric aside, and stick to the logic involved in this reasoning, we shall see how specious it is. "Much good has resulted from Slavery, therefore it is divine." This proposition is destroyed by its correlative, viz: Much *evil* has resulted from Slavery, therefore it is Devilish; both of which are fallacious and inconclusive, since much good may result from a bad thing, and much evil may result from a good thing.

I deny the assertion, that the good which has resulted from Slavery bears the smallest proportion to the evil. But, admitting that it does, I still deny the inference that we are *therefore*, to defend, cherish and extend it, as an institution well pleasing to God. What untold good has resulted to the human race from the murder of Jesus Christ and the treachery of Judas; but are murder and betrayal *therefore* well pleasing to God? Shall we not still do all in our power to get rid of them? Great good has resulted from War, but shall we not still try to abolish it? Great good has

resulted from tyranny and oppression, and shall we not still try to get rid of them ?

Is there not still an irrepressible conflict existing between the enlightened conscience, mind and will of mankind, and these very things, out of which so much good has resulted ? The "Richmond Enquirer" says that much good has resulted to the South from the fanaticism of Garrison, Greeley and Seward. Will it therefore say that they are sent by God, and will it not threaten to hang these men ? Oh, no ! they reply. The good which they have done, was not *intended*, but only accidental ! It is not the natural, but the incidental result of their agitations. This we apply to Slavery, and it becomes sound. Not everything that results in good, is therefore right or divine. The difference between the condition of the Slave in this country and the free Negro in Africa, results, not from his slavery, but from his indirect contact with Freedom. Slavery being wrong in itself and hostile to the highest good of man, we must do all in our power to remove it, as we must to remove war and murder.

But the third argument is the modern "Bible argument !" In my reply to this, I shall differ somewhat with many persons who do reply to it successfully in another way. For it does not seem to me that the argument is valid, even if it were sound. I cannot see why it should be right to hold slaves *now*, because the Jews once held them, any more than it is right to have several wives now, because the Jews had them ; or to keep Saturday holy, because the Jews did. I cannot see how a thing which is wrong in itself, can become right, simply because it existed, or was allowed 3,000 years ago.

But it is said that it was not only *allowed*, but enforced by positive *command*. The great proof texts are the 44-46 verses of xxv Leviticus. "Thy bondmen and thy bondmaids which thou shalt have, shall be of the heathen round about you ; of them shalt ye buy bondmen and bondmaids.

Now, if we grant that the terms "bondmen" and "bondmaids" here refer to slaves held as American slaves are held, *in perpetual bondage as property*—which is denied—these verses may just as well be understood as referring to a *modification* of Slavery as to the *institution* of it. In that case the *command* would not refer to the *buying* but to the *place of buying*. The injunction would be *regulative* and not enabling. As if it were "If you buy slaves, you shall not buy your own brethren, but you shall buy of the heathen round

about you." If Moses was trying to change the custom just as fast as possible, he would naturally begin by forbidding the Jews to buy and sell their brethren. And it seems to me that one passage in the Gospels fully confirms this interpretation. The Pharisees said to him, "Why did Moses then command them to give a writing of divorce-ment, and to put her away?" Jesus replied, "It was because of the hardness of their hearts that Moses suffered"—not commanded—"suffered them to put away their wives, but from the beginning it was not so." Here the word *suffered* is substituted for *commanded*, as if by way of correction. And so it seems to me in regard to Slavery among the Jews ; it was suffered, on account of, or rather it grew out of "the hardness of their hearts."

But I am free to say that this argument has little weight to my mind. If the Jews held slaves, it was the worse for the Jews, and not the better for Slavery. These very passages are found in the same book and invested with the same authority with the following : "Breach for breach, eye for eye, tooth for tooth." (Lev. xxiv, 20.) "And he that blasphemeth the name of the Lord, he shall surely be put to death ; and all the congregation shall stone him." (Lev. xxiv, 16.) And a great many other commands which no one *thinks of regarding* as obligatory. Why, then, must these few referring to Slavery be selected as having a *peculiar* sanction ?

Men who have, apparently, little regard to any other command of the Bible, claim *Divine authority* for these, which looks strongly as if they have little confidence in it themselves, but use it only for the sake of the argument.

However, let us admit the *validity* of this testimony to the divinity of Slavery, and examine it on its merits. We forget what a serious claim this is ; when we discuss it where we see no immediate results from our conclusions, whatever they may be. But when we reflect that we are trying to prove the right of white men to own black men ; the right of one branch of the human family to hold another branch in perpetual bondage ; that not only the present, but all future generations are doomed to the worst form of servility ; and that all this is the revealed will of God concerning that branch of his children, we ought, at least, to require the most positive proof, before we can assert any such position.

How then, does the case stand ? The genuineness and authenticity of the Book of Genesis are denied by some of the ablest writers of the present age. The most that is known of its authorship is, that it, in common with the first four Books of the Bible, are ascribed by