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A DISCOURSE

(On St. Paul's Epistle to Philemon, exhibiting the duty of citizens of the Northern States in regard to the Institution of Slavery.)
Delivered in Christ Church, Hartford, Connecticut, December 22, 1850.
BY N. S. WHEATON, D. D.

Among the books of the New Testament there is a short letter, written entirely on a private subject, and having no reference to the proof or elucidation of any doctrinal truth; which yet has held its place in the Sacred Canon unquestioned from any quarter, and been also understood as designed by the Holy Ghost for the general edification of the Church. From the nature of the subject of which it treats, it attracts little attention from the general reader. Yet, since it exhibits an example how a Christian Apostle behaved under certain peculiar circumstances, which circumstances have become our own in every essential particular, we naturally recur to it for instruction. There is this advantage in an example over a precept; the example, or instance, interprets the precept, and solves whatever there may be doubtful in it, if there be reasonable ground for doubt. When we see the rule actually applied in a particular case; when we see a man like St. Paul, acting under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, doing in his own person precisely that which is in accordance with his public teaching, we have a practical illustration of his meaning; and we know and feel that we are doing right when, under parallel circumstances, we act as he did. One might almost suppose that the Providence of God had anticipated the very crisis in which this country is now placed, and had caused this comparatively unheeded letter to be written as a guide to Christian consciences now.

Philemon was a citizen of Colosse, in Asia Minor, and evidently a man of wealth and consideration in his own city. But that of which it principally concerns us now to speak, is the esteem in which he was held by such a man as St. Paul. He had been converted by that Apostle to the Christian faith; he is commended for his "love and faith towards the Lord Jesus, and towards all saints;" St. Paul calls him "our dearly beloved and fellow laborer," whom he "always mentioned in his prayers," and in whose "love he had great joy and consolation," because, says he, "the bowels of the same are refreshed by thee, brother." We may look in vain through all the Epistles for a similar instance of tender friendship and personal esteem for a man in the private walks of life. Many such are indeed mentioned with distinguished honor; but no one of them has been handed down to us so richly embalmed—so consecrated by the dear affection of "the chiefest of the Apostles," as Philemon of Colosse.

Philemon was a slaveholder. One of his slaves, Onesimus, escaped from his bonds, and found his way to Rome, where St. Paul then was, an honorable prisoner within limits, but allowed to exercise the ministry. There, Onesimus hears the Apostle preach, and is converted to the faith of Christ. He seeks an interview with the Apostle, whom he had probably known at the house of his master in former days; confesses to him that he is a fugitive, and solicits his counsel.

A case is now presented, in which all the circumstances concur to bring to a decision, and before a competent tribunal, the rights and duties of all concerned. This decision we have in the following passage, in the letter of St. Paul to Philemon:

"I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds; which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me; whom I have sent again: Thou, therefore, receive him, that is mine own bowels: Whom I would have retained with me, that, in thy stead, he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the Gospel. But without thy mind would I do nothing."

The essential facts brought to our notice in this epistle, so far as they concern our present purpose, are these:

One of the best and most exemplary of Christian men, and the bosom friend of an Apostle, is a slaveholder:

The slave escaped from his master and finds his way to a far distant city, where he is safe from all pursuit:

He is there met by an Apostle, and by him converted to Christianity—shown the wrong he has done his master, and sent back to him, with a letter of commendation and friendly entreaty, which has ever been considered a masterpiece of its kind.

On the transactions thus briefly narrated we may remark, that nowhere in the epistle is there a word of censure, expressed or implied, of Philemon, for being the owner of slaves. There is no appeal to his conscience as a Christian; none whatever to any higher law than the law of the country which gave him a property in Onesimus. That right remained unimpaired, even after Onesimus

became a Christian; and the Apostle, so far from impugning it, recognizes it as all his own, and acts accordingly.

Another reflection, so obvious, indeed, as scarcely to demand a particular notice, is this: that had St. Paul perceived anything morally wrong in the relation of master and slave, he could not, and would not, have done what he did—remit to a state of domestic servitude one who, already escaped from it, had acquired a new title to freedom by his admission into the Christian family, if his former bonds were unjust.

Another circumstance to be remembered is, that Onesimus himself was satisfied with the whole procedure, since he acquiesced in it, and, by the direction of the Apostle, returned to his master. And what makes the case a still stronger one, the slave was of the same complexion, and probably of the same race, with his owner; and, what is still more, all the parties were Christians.

On a candid review of all these circumstances, I know not how an unprejudiced mind can evade the conclusion, that the holding of men to involuntary servitude is not, under all circumstances, inconsistent with Christianity; or, in other words, that slavery has not been prohibited by the word of God.

Let us now see whether the Apostle's teaching, in reference to the same subject, was in accordance with his practice in the case of Onesimus.

Allow me to make one preliminary remark, which must be borne in mind in order to comprehend the force of the passages I am about to adduce from the New Testament. Whenever the word *servant* is used by the Apostle in speaking of or to a particular class of persons, the persons indicated are slaves, in the common meaning of the term, and were as much the property of their masters as are the descendants of the African in any of the Southern States. This will not be questioned by any one conversant with ancient history; nor that the power of the Roman slaveholder over his bondsmen was far more absolute than any thing known in this land. Keeping this fact in view, then, that the *servants*, so often mentioned by the Apostles, were slaves, let us see what sort of precepts they delivered to this class of persons in their discourses on the relative duties of man and man.

Let us take, for example, the case of Onesimus, who is mentioned in the epistle to Philemon, in which the blame must be laid on those whom Christ sent forth into the world to instruct men in the duties which pertain to their several stations. They alone are responsible for such precepts as the following:

St. Paul to the Ephesians: "Servants be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as unto Christ."

St. Paul to the Colossians: "Servants obey in the Lord your masters according to the flesh; not with eye-service, as men-pleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God."

St. Paul to Titus, a Christian pastor and bishop: "Exhort servants to be obedient to their own masters, and to please them well in all things."

St. Peter, in his General Epistle: "Servants be subject to your masters with fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward."

St. Paul, again, in this Epistle to Timothy, another pastor and bishop: "Let as many servants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honor, that the name of God and his doctrine be not blasphemed. And they that have believing masters, let them not despise them because they are brethren, but rather do them service."

These things teach and exhort. If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to whole some words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but dotting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth. From such withdraw thyself."

I will not affirm that St. Paul had in his view a notorious class of persons in New England, in the middle of the nineteenth century, when he wrote this; but I may say that, had he lived to see and hear what we have been compelled to see and hear, his delineations of character could not have been more graphic and lifelike.

What, now, is the import of all these emphatic and reiterated injunctions, imposed on such as were in bonds and under the yoke? How do they comport with the zeal of our pseudo philanthropists to break, every hazard, the bond which unites the servant to his master? Is not the relation here recognised in its fullest extent, and made the groundwork of a particular class of duties? Is not obedience in the slave according to the apostolic standard, made a duty as sacred as any other duty, social and moral? And

are not they who teach otherwise—who would defraud the master by enticing away the bondsmen, or detaining him—characterized by condemnatory epithets which it would be thought scarcely courteous to utter now; epithets piled one on another with rhetorical profusion, as if the culpability of their conduct could not be made to stand out in too strong relief? Are they, indeed, to be identified with the *men-stealers*, of whom the Apostle speaks elsewhere?

We have now, I think, arrived at the true reasons on which a Christian man, who honestly desires to do his duty, is expected as a matter of conscience to acquiesce in the law which demands that the fugitive from service shall, on legal requisition, be returned. That he should be so returned, I need not say is the law of the land, and has been ever since the adoption of the Constitution under which we live. That it is not contrary to the law of God, is too evident to need further proof. If, then, these facts be incontrovertible, the most scrupulous conscience need not be disturbed by the demand of a cheerful acquiescence in the law which reclaims the fugitive slave; a law which demands no more than St. Paul thought it his duty to do in a parallel case. When I call the cases parallel, I must, however, make an exception in regard to a single point; but that exception places our duty, if possible, in a still clearer light. When he restored the fugitive Onesimus, he acted, so far as we are informed, under no constraint of civil law; the contrary is implied by the expression "whom I would have retained with me;" he was not obliged to do it, as is the case with us, by any positive enactment of the powers that were. He only obeyed what he understood to be the law of Christ, and the law of justice towards a Christian brother.

Let those who, in their erratic cruise on the ocean of humanity, think they have made new and important discoveries, impeach him if they please of a dereliction of high moral duties. The task shall not be mine. It is enough for me that, in obeying a particular law under which I live, I am not only subjecting myself to a "power ordained of God," but doing precisely what I have an example of in the action of the Apostle to the Gentiles, while under no such constraint as that imposed on me as a citizen of the United States by the laws of the country of which we are citizens. It is in regard to which it is desirable, at this particular time, that every one should be satisfied.

The consideration which met us in the outset, was the universal requirement of Christ's law to submit ourselves, without reserve, to the law under which we live, "for wrath's sake, for conscience sake, for the Lord's sake."

The next consideration was that, in thus submitting ourselves in this particular instance of restoring a fugitive, not in baffling the officers of the law and aiding in the escape of the slave, but in honestly sending him back to his legal owner, we were just do what no less a man than St. Paul, a chosen messenger of the Lord, and the interpreter of the mind of Christ, did in a similar case; only that he was not constrained, as we are, by any positive law of man.

Then, referring to the teaching of this Apostle and his coadjutors, we find them recognising, without reserve, qualification, or censure, the relation of master and slave, and giving a variety of instructions to the latter in regard to the duties of his peculiar situation.

On all these accounts, and bearing in mind the conduct of St. Paul in the case of Onesimus, so perfectly in conformity with his precepts, and those of his fellow Apostles, we are obliged to conclude that, when, under similar circumstances, we act as he did, and allow ourselves to be governed by the same law of duty which he acted right. In this conclusion I am content to rest, till I have the light of a new revelation to show me what I ought to do.

If any objection be urged on the score of humanity, and the supposed hardship of a return to a state of bondage; if our sympathies are engaged in behalf of any who, having escaped from their bonds, have been long dwelling amongst us, how very simple and obvious is the remedy! We have, in that case, only to purchase the liberty of the slave, and leave him in the quiet enjoyment of his home. A few thousand dollars would redeem all who are likely ever to be reclaimed in New England, and probably not a master at the South would hesitate to accept the arrangement. But let the law first have its course, without hindrance or obstruction from any quarter; and when the fugitive shall have been found and identified, he will soon learn whether the real friends of his race are not to be found among the strenuous supporters of law. To this course I do not see what possible objection can be urged by the most scrupulous mind, however unsatisfactory it may be to the factious and turbulent.

In what I have said thus far, I have simply endeavored to present to you the

law of Christianity in regard to slavery, as it appears to my own mind. I have spoken to you as Christians, solicitous to know your duty, or what may be your duty, at a very delicate and important crisis; and trust that every ground of reasonable doubt has been removed.

But there are other considerations, besides the mere obligations of law, which I wish to submit before I leave the subject, and to these I now ask your attention.

If any amongst us have been taught to think hardly of our brethren of the South for retaining the institution of slavery, it is proper to remind such that it was not of their procuring in the first instance. I cannot but remember that it was forced upon them, in their then condition of colonies, by the mother country, in the days of her moral darkness, when neither she nor any one else supposed there was any thing wrong or even questionable in the slave trade. It does not become us to forget that the capital and the navigation of New England—the ships of Chittim—the navigation people—were largely, if not principally, engaged in transporting slaves from the barracks of Western Africa to the shores of Virginia and the Carolinas; against the earnest protest, too, of both colonies. And when I remember all this, and consider how, in consequence, this domestic servitude has become so incorporated with the whole texture of southern institutions and society; how they have so grown up together, and are so intermingled, that by no possibility can slavery be suddenly torn out without the most deplorable consequences, both to the master and the servant; I think I see reason enough for a very kindly forbearance on our part; I recognise even a stern demand of justice, irrespective of all written laws, that we religiously abstain from every thing like contumely and reproach, as well as from an officious intermeddling with what is now altogether their concern, and none of ours. And I go still further, and say, in view of the part taken by the North in former times, in stocking the sugar and cotton fields of the South with their sable cultivators, that, whoever are entitled to cast the first stone, we are not that people. It seems indeed incredible that any amongst us should feel themselves at liberty to indulge in the language of vituperation, so long as we insist on raising our antipathetical feelings against the sepulchres of the righteous, through whose active agency the slave trade was carried on, and all the consequences incurred of which many are now disposed to complain.

Slavery having thus been imposed on our brethren at the South; and unwillingly, we are at liberty to suppose, so far as a portion of them were concerned, and become an integral part of their social existence, they cannot suddenly abolish it if they would. But whether they shall or shall not abolish it at all, is no business of ours. It was rightly said on a late occasion by one of our most eloquent orators, while commenting on a remark of the foremost of our statesmen, that we had less to do with the slavery of the southern States than with that of Cuba. The latter we may discuss as we please, and publish what we please in regard to it; while the former is guarded against our approach by the very spirit and intent of our political compact. We cannot assail it without giving just ground of offence. Many seem to forget this, and talk as if we were under a moral obligation—some undiscovered, unintelligible higher law—to wipe out this foul blot, as they are pleased to call it, from our national character. Why, since the day when our navigators discharged their living cargoes at the wharves of the southern States, it has never for one instant been under our control, in any manner or shape whatever. And whether it be a good or a bad institution, a blessing or a curse to the land where it prevails, is not our concern. It can no more become a practical question with the people of New England, than the question of *ordism* in Russia of Poland. It is less so, for the reason I have just alluded to, and a good and sufficient reason it is why we should let it alone.

When the people of the southern colonies, as they then were or lately had been, were about to unite with those at the North in a mutual confederation for commercial and for other purposes, they were as independent of us as we were of them. They had their local laws and institutions as we had; and they had a right to require, as they did, that one of the conditions of the compact should be, that they should continue to manage their domestic affairs in their own way, without any interference from us, just as we were to manage ours without any interference from them. It was one of the mutual stipulations, that persons held to service in one State, escaping into another, should, on requisition, be given up. That was a part of the compact, and a very important one to those States which were enumerated with a numerous population of this character; and they had a right to say that unless that condition were made a part of the compact, the negotiation should not go on. They did not ask the North to

sanction slavery, nor to pronounce any opinion in regard to it; no such thing. All that they demanded was, that slavery should be recognised as a fact, an existence, a thing that was, subject to no control but their own; and, moreover, that fugitives from labor should be restored—a thing of no sort of consequence to us, but of the greatest possible consequence to them. To these conditions we assented, and very properly; the federation could not have been consummated on any other terms. And now, if we deliberately violate those conditions, or, through a culpable negligence, permit them to be violated; if we allow a noisy faction, whatever their motives may be, so far to prevail as to set the laws at defiance, and in any way to render the recovery of a fugitive impossible, whether by connivance, or sham legal proceedings, or by open resistance, or by exhortations to resistance, then what follows? Why, the compact is broken by us; we refuse to fulfil its stipulations, and the aggrieved States may, if they choose, at any moment declare the confederacy dissolved. When their rights in this matter, as agreed upon and confirmed in the Constitution, the great instrument of union, shall be denied them, or cannot any longer be enforced, the bond is broken, and they are cast loose from all obligation to observe it. The act of separation in that case is ours, not theirs; the crime of disunion lies at our door, and not with them. All this seems plain enough.

Let me present the case in another point of view. Wherever the two races subsist together in the same community, in any thing like equal numbers, experience has shown it to be best that the relation of master and bondsmen should prevail. Whatever may be the evils, moral and social, growing out of such a relation—and I shall neither deny nor extenuate them—it is certain that much more aggravated ones, though of a different description, would follow the sundering of the tie; evils which would fall more heavily on the emancipated slave than on his former master. I speak now of the actual relative position of the two races in the southern States, and on the supposition that they are to continue to inhabit the same land. But it would be foreign to my purpose to pursue this idea farther.

For my own part, after the maturest consideration of every aspect of the case, I am unable to separate the idea of Colonization from emancipation on an extended scale. Dwell together as equals, the two races never can; at least in this country. Wherever the sons of Ham and the sons of Japheth have been brought into juxtaposition, the original law of servitude in some of its forms has universally prevailed: "a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren." I do not so much understand this in the light of a command that it should be so, as of a prophecy that it would be so. So it ever has been; so it is at the present moment, even in the place where I now stand; for you know there is and can be no equality here. All attempts, hitherto, to force the two races into an equal social position have only served to exhibit the unsightly folly of their authors. The repugnance remains unconquered and unconquerable; and the inferior race must, by a law which we cannot control, remain under some kind of subordination to the higher intellect of the Anglo Saxon, till it shall please God to lift up the curse pronounced four thousand and five hundred years ago. How this will be brought to pass is not yet altogether manifest; but the dawnings of God's providence in regard to the African are not perhaps undistinguishable at the present moment. They may, I think, be discerned in the opening of a door for the return and regathering of this long servile race in the land where their brethren are now clustered. As Joseph's brethren, when they sold him into Egypt, meant it for evil and God meant it for good, so may blessings incalculable yet spring from an act evil in itself—the carrying away of the African to sojourn for a time in a state of bondage. That time has not been lost to him. Compare the moral condition of the southern slave with that of his almost brute brother in the forests of Western Africa—worshipping the Devil, and propitiating his wrath with human sacrifices and rites obscene; administering the poison water; warring eternally, and wallowing without shame or restraint in the grossest sensuality—and say if his bondage, hard as bondage may seem to us, has not been to him a blessing! Beyond all doubt, he has been unspeakably elevated in the scale of being, humble as his position may still be. He has gained the knowledge which would never have dawned on his dark mind in his native land. He has been made to know the God who made him, and the Saviour who bought him, and all those precious truths of the Gospel which, more than any others, tend to improve and ennoble man's nature; his bondage, then, has been to him not altogether a curse. Very far from it. And, now that he has been in some degree prepared for usefulness in the hands of another master, shall we not say to him, and to all his brethren dwelling in the land

of their captivity—"as fast as the way is prepared and the door is opened, return to your yet brightened brethren in the country of your forefathers, and impart to them the blessings you have received; bear to them the tidings of the everlasting Gospel; acquaint them with the everlasting civilization you have learned; open the wilderness to cultivation; let churches arise, and let schools be established; let the native African see with his own eyes, and bear witness to the superiority of Christian and civilized over brute savage life. Be the founders there of a new empire; build cities on every harbor and inlet along the coast; and know that, when you are achieving these things, you are doing what none else can do for the millions there. You are reducing them to a state of civilized humanity; and you will also be doing what I fear can never be done by treaties, and protocols, and squadrons of armed cruisers—you will be putting an end forever to the African slave trade."

Such, I trust, will yet be the mission of the descendant of the African in this country. It has been begun already. The colony at Liberia, the nucleus of a future African empire, was prospering under the fostering care of the best of our great men, both at the North and the South, when it encountered a deadly and relentless foe in those who now claim to be exclusively the friends of the African. Their friendship has been fatal in every way, and will be, till the objects of their benevolence are torn from their embrace. But though their perverse labors have impeded for a time, they have not been able to arrest an enterprise, which I have ever regarded as comprising more of enlightened, and comprehensive, and far-reaching benevolence, than any other which this age has brought forth. When the present agitation, so aimless and fruitless of every thing but evil, shall have died away, we may suppose that the desire of the African exile will be more distinctly and finally turned towards a home already prepared to receive him, and where he can stand erect as a man, conscious of no superior by his side. When the present advantages, and fair promise and hope of the colony at Liberia, shall have been spread before him, and the dream of an equality here with the white man, shall be seen to be a chimerical vision, he will turn to his own land, which is properly his country and his home, and to share in the toil and glory of adding another to the civilized nations of the earth. Then will commence a spontaneous emigration of the race to the coast of Africa, such as is poured in upon us now from the shores of Europe. Every ship which parts from our shores, laden with our manufactures for the use of the colonists, to be exchanged for the rich products of the eastern tropics, will be made vocal—not with the groans of miserable captives manacled in the filthy hold, but with the songs and gratulations of captives made free at last, and going to bestow upon their brethren the liberty wherewith Christ has made them free. Nor will the funds of the nation be withheld from the enterprise. Then will there be, what there has never yet been, an open door, and effectual, to the emancipation of the southern slave. The great hindrance, in the estimation of those who ought to know best, will be removed; the dread, namely, of a constantly accumulating population among them unfit for freedom, as they always must be while they continue there.

I cannot regret the discussion which is now going on in these northern States. It has been forced upon us by the recent outbreaks against law; and it is time that we should all understand our duties as Christians, as citizens, as members of this great Confederacy. I am glad that a crisis has been reached, when we must determine whether we will any longer invite or tolerate an agitation so utterly senseless and pernicious as that which for years past has disturbed the peace of the Union, and now threatens its very existence. If we are henceforth to live in harmony with our brethren at the South, we must forego our absurd abstraction, and learn to deal justly, and follow after the things which make for peace. And never again should any factious man amongst us be allowed with impunity to reproach them, in a style so popular with the vulgar, for perpetuating an institution for which, at present, there is no remedy; or sting and irritate them with sarcasms as mean and ungenerous as they are unjust. And let us learn, also, to put more faith in time and progress, to bring about results which appear to us desirable.

In regard to slavery and its concomitants, one truth, at least, must by this time have become apparent to every dispassionate mind. No desirable change can be wrought by violence, by denunciation, by withholding from any citizen the rights secured to him by law, by any resistance, secret or open, to the execution of law. What must be the effect of such resistance or evasion? It is bad in every way, and to all concerned in it; and who amongst us is not concerned in upholding the supremacy of law? It is peculiarly

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