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Relation of the North To Slavery. A Discourse Preached in the Federal Street Meetinghouse, in Boston, on Sunday, June 11, 1854

By Ezra S. Gannett

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RELATION OF THE NORTH TO SLAVERY.

A

DISCOURSE

PREACHED IN THE

FEDERAL STREET MEETINGHOUSE, IN BOSTON,

ON SUNDAY, JUNE 11, 1854.

BY

EZRA S. GANNETT,

MINISTER OF THE FEDERAL-STREET SOCIETY.

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DISCOURSE.

MATTHEW, VI. 23.

IF THE LIGHT THAT IS IN THEE BE DARKNESS, HOW GREAT IS THAT DARKNESS!

IF the good that is in us be made subservient to purposes of evil, how low must we have sunk! If the understanding be misled and the heart depraved, how deplorable our condition! This is one interpretation which we may give to the passage, and that which our Lord probably intended it should bear. It expresses a general truth, of which many illustrations arise as we look into ourselves or into society. Take these two, for example:—If we allow any just opinion or right feeling to lend its countenance to a wrong course of conduct, how sad is that perversion of what in itself and in its proper uses is good! Or, if that portion of a community who entertain enlightened views and command the widest influence, suffer their judgment or their influence to be drawn to the support of measures detrimental to the character or welfare of the people, how sorely should such a mistake be lamented!

The present time affords us an opportunity of making either and all of these applications of the truth so vividly expressed in the figurative language of the text. It is an anxious and unquiet time; when good men may be expected to differ, and when there is danger that, from the strong influences which will be brought to bear on different minds, (affecting them variously, according to situation and temperament,) the convictions, sympathies or habits which they laudably cherish, by inclining them to lean too much on the one side or the other, may betray them into serious error; the light that is in them in effect becoming darkness.

It is a familiar remark, that few persons act on large or impartial views; a remark, however, that conveys not so much a censure on any one's conduct, as a recognition of the immaturity of our present condition. Only a well-trained mind, and a mind of more than ordinary strength, can rise above personal attachments or private interests, local prejudices or temporary influences, and calmly survey the whole field of duty. Sometimes we say of others, that they carry their principles too far; a mischievous criticism, if it suggest the thought that principle may ever be sacrificed to other considerations. But if it mean that our life should, in all its purposes and details, proceed on such an adjustment of the several principles that have force in the moral universe as shall give

to each its proper weight, and not on an obedience to any one of them alone, it is both true and practically important. Again, it is often said, that one or another has acted unwisely, though from the best of feelings. Here, also, is a truth that should be remembered. The very best feelings may prompt us to do that which a sober judgment would disapprove. The clear head and the warm heart must control, or rather help one another.

In times of surprise or excitement, of peril or distress, we stand in special need of calm and resolute minds. Calm and resolute; not calm only, nor resolute only. We must consider what should be done, and be ready to do it. Such a time is the present. On, the last Sunday I alluded to a subject of which I feared that I could not then speak with a clear and temperate earnestness. What I may now say, my friends, I ask you to hear, if for no other reason, because when such issues as are involved in this subject are brought directly before us, and the best and the worst passions are aroused, it seems neither frank nor manly for the minister to affect an unconcern which he does not feel, or to study a silence that may be misconstrued. I have no fear that you will take offence at what I may say, even if it should not harmonize with your conclusions; because I shall endeavor to clothe my sincere convictions in language suitable to this place and hour.

On the circumstances which have raised the institution of Southern Slavery into such prominence among our thoughts I shall not dwell, because they seem to me to derive their importance from the subject which lies behind them, and not to give that subject an importance not strictly belonging to it. It is the relation which we shall in future hold to Slavery, that was brought before us by the occurrences which so painfully agitated this community for many days, and at last drew tears from the eyes of men, and harsh words from woman's lips; it is the relation in which we shall allow ourselves hereafter to stand towards Slavery, that demands serious and Christian thought. For this is not purely a political question; it has its moral side, and religion and Christianity are entitled to examine it as entering within their domain.

We shall arrive at a just decision more speedily, if we separate the question both from the individuals and from the incidents connected with any particular exhibition of its character. A mistake has been made, as I believe, in regard alike to the indignation and to the sympathy that have been awakened, by confining them within too narrow limits. It was inevitable that attention should be given to the immediate transactions, and to the persons concerned in them. Those transactions were the exciting cause of public feeling, and the actors of one class and

another would, of course, become conspicuous. The law, too, whether in its menace or its protection, must deal with individuals and not with ideas. But the intelligence, the conscience, and the heart of the people should expend their strength not on the occasion or the exponent, but on the institution which brings them into notice, and on our connection with it.

Another mistake, and more than a mistake, a wrong has been committed, by many who are indignant at wrong-doing on one side and the other, in imputing unworthy motives to men of whose conduct they have disapproved. We should be very cautious how we allow any difference of opinion, or any resentment we may feel, to tempt us to ascribe the course another may pursue to moral cowardice, to a love of popularity, or to a mercenary spirit. A man may take a wrong view of his duty, and yet act from an imperative sense of duty. It may be his duty, under the circumstances in which he is placed, to do that which under other circumstances he would not only be free, but would rejoice, not to do. I should be ashamed to repeat such truisms, if they were not disregarded, as well by those who uphold order as by those who counsel disturbance. We can explain men's opposite behavior, without imputing to them bad hearts; and it is at once arrogant presumption and gross injustice to deny that others may have been governed by a sincere purpose of rectitude, because

they have done what our consciences would not let us do.

The judgment of many at the North on Slavery has been vitiated, and its effect upon the South been impaired, by similar errors. To make the fact of slaveholding conclusive proof against a man's character shows a disregard of one of the plainest lessons taught by human history. That which seems to you or me to be palpably wrong, may be accounted by another whose education has been different, to be justifiable on grounds alike of morality and humanity. I can believe that a Southerner may in good faith use arguments in defence of Slavery which, as I hold, have no foundation in fact or sound reason. He may assert the native inferiority and inevitable dependence of the black race, contradict statements and conclusions which appear to me incontrovertible, maintain that the transportation of the negro from his own continent to this Christian land has been to him and his descendants a blessing, and frame a vindication of ownership in human beings from texts gathered out of the Bible, and I will not only be slow to charge him with wilful sin, I dare not do it. The slave-dealer who traffics in his fellow-beings for the sake of gain, or who treats them with a cruelty which he would not exercise towards a brute, I am justified in pronouncing a bad man, for passion or avarice is his acknowledged motive. But there are thousands

of masters at the South who believe Slavery to be a logical deduction from sure premises, and a fair inference from Christian truths.

It is equally wrong to charge upon all masters harsh usage or cold neglect of their slaves. In many families they are treated with uniform kindness. We gain nothing in our address to the consciences or the sensibilities of Southern slaveholders by representing them as destitute of all proper feeling.

Not less impolitic is it, nor less unsound, to take our impression of Slavery from the extreme cases which arise, on the one hand or on the other. Such cases show to what abuse of authority it may tend, or, contrariwise, what mitigation it may carry in its own bosom; but they do not expose the real character of the institution: and it is against this that we must direct our efforts, and this therefore that we need to understand. The fault in that tale which had such an unprecedented reception from half the civilized world, but in its permanent influence will be seriously damaged by this defect, lies in the fact, that it is a narrative of exceptional cases; each of which may have had its counterpart in actual life, but still illustrates a comparatively rare result of the system. The beautiful piety of the slave and the sweet humanity of the child, the brutality of the trader and the barbarity of the planter, in that tale, are all of this class, exceptions, not the usual characteristics of the sys-

tem; and therefore, however artistically grouped, they cannot present a picture faithful to the reality which they are meant to describe. Neither a gallery of lovely faces nor a museum of deformed limbs, nor both of them together, would exhibit mankind as they appear in life. Besides, when we give our attention to the grosser examples of inhumanity and immorality which occur, we may overlook or slightly consider the inherent quality of the institution itself, while this it is which should excite our strongest aversion.

To this then we come at last, and till we come to this we fall short of a just consideration of the matter, — the intrinsic character, the inherent vice of slavery. What should we of the North think of it as an institution, and what should we do in regard to it, that the light which is in us may not be darkness?

To the former of these questions I answer, we should think of it as ineradicably wrong and bad. The institution which dooms a human being to involuntary servitude as long as his master chooses to keep him in that state, and makes him a piece of property, to be transferred from one owner to another, like any other article of merchandise, should be regarded by us with abhorrence. The fact of irresponsible ownership constitutes the central offence in the case. Until we deny the right of man to

buy and sell his fellow-man, as if he were a beast of burden or a part of the household stuff, we do not put ourselves on the only position from which we cannot be dislodged. So long as we build our complaints or reproaches upon the evils which the system generates, rather than on the evil of the system itself, we give the slaveholder a double advantage; as he can reply that these results, however common, are incidental, not unavoidable; and further, that institutions which we foster are debased by similar results. Pointing to our homes, he may cite from the records of our courts instances of parental cruelty or conjugal unhappiness, and maintain that the principle of judgment which we apply to his social state condemns our domestic life. Southern Slavery, in its mildest form, involves a great wrong; a wrong to every one of those held in bondage, a wrong to the race of which they are a part, a wrong to human nature. This truth, I am willing to confess, I never felt in its full power till I came into close observation of the system. A year ago I had, for the first time, an opportunity of ascertaining its real import. I saw this peculiarity of Southern life under the most favorable circumstances, for a lenient or approving judgment. I beheld its very best aspects. I saw the well-dressed and lightly tasked slaves of the city, and the kindly treated and tenderly watched slaves of the plantation. And I returned home with

a persuasion which I think will never be changed, that Slavery is a grievous wrong. I heard its propriety and its necessity maintained, and I came home with the conviction that it is utterly indefensible and unjustifiable.

It does not follow that immediate emancipation, in the sense of absolute freedom for the millions now held in bondage, is the duty of the South, or would be its duty, if the whole South entertained the conviction which I have expressed; since their past life has disqualified the greater portion of the slaves for taking care of themselves. But an immediate adoption of measures for the final liberation of every man, woman and child, now regarded as transferable property, is what a correct view of duty would obtain from the Southern masters. And we of the North have the same right to speak of their duty, (in terms of brotherly kindness, not of angry invective,) that we have to speak of English legislation about India, or the Czar's government of his empire. Free criticism is a privilege which the people of this century claim in virtue of their place in the history of civilization. At least, whether the North address the South in language of fraternal counsel or not, public sentiment here should be sound on the subject. Slavery should be held in universal and immitigable condemnation.

It may be more difficult to determine what should

be done than what should be thought, since action may induce unpleasant relations or commit us to illegal proceedings, while thought is beyond the reach of any but a Divine penalty. Some may think we can do nothing, hampered as we are by restrictions of both a political and moral nature. But these restrictions do not impose the duty of acquiescence in whatever may arise to prove our fidelity either to constitutional obligations or to moral convictions. We may more easily distinguish what is within the scope of our practical purposes, if we first decide what we may not do. And here it will be sufficient for us to notice two directions which our activity must avoid.

We are, in the first place, precluded, by the terms of citizenship under which we enjoy the privileges of the Union, from intermeddling with Slavery in the States which adopt it as a part of their social institutions. So long as we remain under the Constitution of the United States, each State must be left undisturbed in the settlement of its own internal policy. No other State may attempt to control that policy, while it is kept within the boundaries of the State in which it originates, and does not invade the constitutional rights of any citizen of another State. The General Government is placed under similar restraint by the terms on which it exists. No Northern man may assail the institutions of the South by any

direct or covert action on the soil to which they belong, or by any measures at home inconsistent with a strict interpretation of the compact under which the Republic was organized. Plain speech and fair discussion are allowable, if one can find hearers, but the instrument which makes us a nation guarantees to the South an unmolested enjoyment of its own ways, so far as they affect only itself; and we can honorably violate neither the letter nor the spirit of that instrument, while we avail ourselves of the advantages it yields us, or recognize its authority as the supreme law of the land.

The law of the land. We are subjects of a government which we, or our fathers on our behalf, have created, as well as freemen who have inherited liberties that we will never alienate. Order is the first condition of a safe or prosperous community. We are prohibited, therefore, from resorting to violence as an expression of our dislike of Slavery. This is the second restraint which we must religiously observe. Religiously, I say, because religion teaches us "if it be possible, as far as in us lies, to live peaceably with all men," and to set before one another an example of respect for law. Until that solemn crisis arrives, which in the providence of God is the ultimate fact of political history, when a people are driven upon the right of revolution, and society returning to its first principles is dissolved into its

original elements,—a crisis which no thoughtful man will contemplate but with dismay,—we must avoid all conflict with the laws or the legal authorities of the land. We may present a passive resistance to an enactment or a mandate which it would violate our consciences to obey. Else our obedience to human law may supplant our respect for what we believe to be the requisition of God, which would be fatal to integrity and purity of character. But in this collision between the claims of an earthly and a Divine government, each of which we recognize as legitimate, we must accept the penalty of disobedience to the former,—suffering, not fighting for conscience' sake. Violence in the support of truths dear to us, or disorderly resistance to offensive legislation, is as unwise as it is improper, and as unchristian as it is injurious. Painful as may be the struggle, we must not disturb the public peace for the sake of redressing a private wrong. If the barriers of order may be swept away by popular commotion, freedom is imperilled, and right is left to the arbitration of numerical force.

What then remains for us to do? More than some persons may at first suppose. Four ways are open by which we may signify our repugnance to Slavery, without the breach of any obligation that rests on us as Christians or citizens.

First, we may maintain an inflexible determina-

tion to be drawn into no farther support or countenance of this institution, direct or indirect, than we are already obliged to render. Not a hair's breadth beyond the necessities of the case should we allow ourselves to go, under whatever inducement. Neither by intimidation nor by flattery should we be diverted from the strictest construction of our constitutional and legal interest in this subject. While we adhere to the terms which our fathers made a part of the framework of government for their posterity, we must enter into no new compromises, arrangements or concessions, by which the peculiar institutions of the South shall be made more impregnable than they now are. Our sister States can claim of us nothing more than a fulfilment of the compact which we found pressing upon the land when we became capable of discharging political duties; and if they openly or artfully attempt to lead us into any further concurrence with them in upholding their favorite interest, we must be as firm as justice itself, refusing to harbor a suggestion to that effect. New England is involved enough already in the sad perplexity of sustaining what she disapproves, and nothing more may she yield.

Secondly, we may take all constitutional and lawful methods for securing an abrogation of those enactments, and of those provisions of the fundamental law, which offend our moral convictions. By peti-

tions to Congress, and especially by placing in our national legislature, and so far as we may be able, in still higher posts, men who will represent our views and feelings, we may seek, and eventually secure a repeal or modification of obnoxious statutes. I confess that I do not attach to such a measure the importance it holds in the judgment of many others, because, as I have said, I think our moral sentiment should go behind any particular form which the evil may assume, to the radical vice of the system; and I should be grieved to see the North sinking into apathy in regard to the condition of the Southern slaves, because the most objectionable features of a specific law were changed. Still, whatever we can do to lessen the enormity of the evil, or to mitigate its severity, should be done.

Thirdly, we may oppose every attempt of the South to extend the institution beyond its present limits. Such opposition we are bound to make by every principle of loyalty to our country, or to the cause of human freedom. Slavery is intrinsically bad, and therefore we have no right to consent that regions in which it does not now exist, and over whose future history we have any control, should be afflicted by its presence. Politicians or moralists at the South may take a different view of its character; and they have a perfect right to press that view on our consideration. But while we persist in pro-

nouncing it wholly false, we are not justified in permitting involuntary bondage without crime to trespass on a single inch of territory beyond that which it now impoverishes. It is our duty, to resist and defeat the purpose of the slaveholder to subject a soil not yet marked by this stain, to the disgrace and damage it would incur by legalizing property in human beings. Let Southern statesmen argue in defence of what they consider the rights of the South; but let our statesmen stand firm on what we believe to be both the right and the duty of the North. If the consequence should be that our politics become sectional, and the country be divided according to local judgments, we shall not be accountable for this result. It will have been forced upon us, and they who shall compel us to accept such an issue must answer to posterity for placing us in a position from which we cannot honorably retire.

Fourthly, we may proceed to rescue our own soil from being trampled by those whose attempts to reclaim their fugitive servants are conducted in a manner to wound our sensibilities and provoke our passions. I repeat, that while a law stands in force, we must either consent to its execution or bear the penalty of disobedience. But when the execution of that law not only inflicts a pang on our moral nature, but is made doubly painful by the frequency and zeal

with which it is carried into effect, we cannot, or if we can, we ought not to fold our arms and close our lips in patient acquiescence. The principle of the present Fugitive Slave Law was embodied in the similar act of Congress passed more than half a century ago, but for more than fifty years the South was content that the act should remain comparatively inoperative; let it take the same course now, and the North would acquiesce in the legal validity of a claim seldom enforced. But if the South evince a determination to put Northern feeling to a trial on this question whenever it shall have an opportunity, Northern men will not consent to witness often such scenes as we were made to endure a few days since. The question will not be simply, whether a law shall be executed or be resisted; a deeper question will arise, when the Southern master shall use the free States as the ground on which to assert the immaculate character of Slavery. The alternative will then present itself, whether we will become ready participants in upholding a system which we abhor, or will seek a dissolution of the bond which holds us and the South together. This is sad language, and fearful. I know what it means, and what it suggests. But the facts which wring such language from us are sad and fearful. I have loved the Union as dearly perhaps as any one. I have clung to it as the guide and hope of the oppressed nations of the world. I

have lost friends and been traduced,—that is no matter, except as it shows how I have spoken,—because I maintained that the Union must be preserved at almost any cost. I say so now. But it may cost us too much. If every manly, and honest and Christian sentiment must be subjected to continual indignity, then will sober men, who have loved the Union and clung to it, ask whether a peaceable separation, with all its prospective issues, would not be preferable. We do not want what has been justly styled “the characteristic of Southern civilization” made familiar to our eyes, and we shall not be able, I think, to bear it. Not as threatening or braving the South, do we so speak. We believe the Southern part of our country would suffer more than we from disunion. But the relative prosperity of the two sections cannot be permitted to decide a question of such moral import as this. In sorrowful, not in passionate emphasis we say, that if the South insist on making the North the scene of its activity in maintaining an institution from which the conscience and the heart of the North revolt, it will compel us to ask in serious and solemn deliberation, is the Union worth preserving on that condition?

Many of our best feelings will shrink from a contemplation of this alternative, and will incline us to turn away from a subject of such painful and difficult decision. But what is this, if it be not letting

the light that is in us become darkness? May I, in a few words bestowed on each, indicate four among the influences that are likely to have this effect?

First, some persons will recur to the love of peace, which is with them a conscientious as well as a Christian feeling. But I advise no measures of violence. In the worst resort, a peaceable division of our territory is all that I would dare to counsel; and if Southern statesmen be sincere in the language they have used, many of them would welcome the proposal. If they would not, then the instruction they would receive in regard to the strength of Northern feeling might produce a change in their policy. What we say is, that our national administration and our free soil must not be used to promote the interests of Slavery; and if, in maintaining this position, a result which five years ago, or a year ago, we should have regarded as among the most extravagant suggestions of a gloomy foresight should become inevitable, and even be followed by disasters which we tremble when we think possible, we may deplore the situation into which we shall be brought; but how can we, with self-respect or in consistency with our holiest persuasions, avoid it? We must do our duty, and leave the issue with Him who ruleth over the affairs of men.

Others will be led by their attachment to the Union, to deprecate a disruption of the ties which bind these

States into one great Republic. I have already said it would be dreadful; and I do not think it need come, for I believe that nothing but firmness and harmony at the North is needed, to deter the South from driving us upon ulterior measures. But if it must come, then I can only repeat, that precious as our national history and national hope are, righteousness and liberty are still dearer possessions.

Many of us would grieve at the interruption of domestic sympathies. Thank God, these sympathies are felt at the South as well as here, and they may arrest the evil which we dread, by mitigating the evil which we deplore. But the kindly relations of households need not be broken because our political union is dissolved. Such relations disregard the lines of national sovereignty, and weave the families of the earth together by closer bonds than those which spring from the support of a common government.

Yet other persons may be influenced by the effect upon the financial and mercantile interests of the land, which depend so much on mutual confidence and the most ready interchange of commodities. Doubtless, all parts of the country would suffer from a disturbance of our political connections; but there is enterprise and energy and wisdom enough in the Northern States for them to retrieve their affairs, though for a time prostrated. And if duty call us

to proceed, in whatever direction, I will not suppose that a love of gain would make us deaf to the command.

I gladly quit this strain of remark. I have been speaking of a possible alternative for which we may need to be prepared. The surest way to prevent its actually coming before us is, for all to take a calm and firm attitude on the subject which has given rise to this discourse. We must not ignore the fact of Slavery;— we cannot ignore it. Then must we not be indifferent to it. We must indulge and express Christian feeling on the subject. We must not let the light that is in us be darkness; but, following our convictions, must act wisely, seeking of God more light and more strength.

I have spoken to you, my friends, feebly, but honestly. I have meant to speak frankly, but neither dogmatically nor vehemently. I have been impelled by a feeling that I could not put aside, to express my own opinions. Allow them the weight which they may seem to you to deserve.

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The world is a vast and beautiful place, full of
wonders and marvels. It is a place of
infinite possibilities and endless opportunities.
We are born into this world with a blank slate,
and it is up to us to write our own story.
We have the power to change the world,
to make a difference, to leave a legacy.
We have the power to love, to hope, to dream.
We have the power to be brave, to be kind,
to be true. We have the power to be
the best that we can be. We have the power
to make the world a better place. We have
the power to change the world.

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