

The Guilt of Indifference to Divine Threatenings.

by Edward Payson

The sermon emphasizes the sin of indifference to divine threatenings and the importance of being affected by God's word in order to be saved.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 32:29, Psalm 95:7, Proverbs 28:14, Isaiah 66:2, Jeremiah 22:24, Ezekiel 12:2, Matthew 13:15, Hebrews 3:15, Hebrews 4:7, James 1:22

Topics: "Divine Judgment", "Repentance"

Description

Edward Payson preaches about the importance of heeding God's warnings and messages, emphasizing the consequences of indifference towards His word. He draws parallels between historical accounts of nations who disregarded God's messages and the current state of the listeners, urging them to repent and seek forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Payson highlights the severity of the sin of hearing God's word without being moved, pointing out contempt, unbelief, and hardness of heart as underlying issues that need to be addressed.

Transcript

"Yet they were not afraid, nor rent their garments, neither the king, nor any of his servants, that heard all these words"

Jeremiah 22:24

the events recorded in this chapter took place, Jeremiah had been employed for more than twenty years in discharging the duties of his prophetic office. During that period he had brought a great number of messages from God to his countrymen, in which their sins were enumerated, and the most terrible judgments denounced, both upon them and upon the neighboring nations, unless they should repent. But most of these messages had long since been forgotten; and a repetition of them seemed to produce no salutary effect.

God therefore saw fit, instead of sending them new messages by the mouth of his prophet, to adopt another method of proceeding. A description of this method, and a statement of God's reasons for adopting it, are given in the first verses of the chapter before us: The word of the Lord came unto Jeremiah, saying, "Take thee a roll of a book, and write therein all the words which I have spoken to thee

against Israel, and against Judah, and against all the nations, from the day that I first spoke unto thee, even unto this day.

It may be that the house of Judah will hear all the evil which I purpose to do unto them, and return every man from his evil way, that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin." There did indeed seem reason to hope, that this method might produce the desired effect. Though the warnings, and threatenings, and revelations of God, when delivered separately, with perhaps long intervals intervening had made no impression upon the hearers; yet it might be hoped that, when all these warnings and threatenings were collected, and presented to their minds at once, they would prove more efficacious.

Accordingly, the experiment was tried, the record was made, and read, first to the people, and afterwards to the king and his princes; and we need only turn over the prophecy of Jeremiah to be convinced, that it was one of the most alarming, heart affecting messages which was ever sent by God to men. It was, in effect, a letter written with his own hand, subscribed with his own name, sealed with his own seal, and dropped from heaven at their feet. And its contents were at once terrible and melting beyond description.

It contained such denunciations of divine, Almighty vengeance, as, one would think, were sufficient to chill the blood and freeze the soul with horror; and, at the same time, such affectionate invitations to repentance, such tender and often repeated assurances of God's readiness to forgive the penitent offender, as must have melted any thing but a heart of adamant. Yet, says our text, yet they were not afraid, nor rent their garments, neither the king nor any of his princes when they heard these words.

The mode of expression here made use of; plainly and forcibly intimates that there was sufficient reason why they should have been thus affected; and that their insensibility was exceedingly criminal. They ought to have been afraid, they ought to have rent their garments; that is, they ought both to have been alarmed, and to have felt in view of their sins, those strong emotions of grief, indignation and abhorrence, which the Jews were accustomed to express by rending their clothes.

And now, my hearers, judge, I pray you, between God and these incorrigible sinners. What other means could he employ to bring them to repentance, and thus render it possible to pardon their sins? And when these means proved ineffectual, what remained but to fulfill his word, manifest his truth and holiness, and satisfy the demands of justice, by executing upon them the destruction from which they refused to fly? If you judge righteous judgment, you will take part with God in his controversy with these obdurate rebels, and say that he and his throne are guiltless, that they richly deserved their fate.

And yet, many of you cannot say this; many of you cannot, in the case before us, pronounce a righteous sentence, without at the same time condemning yourselves. God is pursuing, and for a long time has been pursuing, the same method with you, which he employed on this occasion with the Jews. He has caused all his awful denunciations against sin, all the terrible judgments which he has inflicted upon impenitent sinners, and all the far more terrible woes with which he will overwhelm them in the world to come, to be recorded in a book, in the volume of inspiration.

The very roll, which Jeremiah wrote by God's command, in which he expresses so clearly his indignation against sin, and which it was so criminal in the king of Judah and his princes to disregard, forms a part of this volume. Nor is this all. The same God, who spoke to them by his prophet, has, in these latter ages, spoken to you by his Son. By him he has revealed himself to us in the most interesting attitudes; he has addressed us in the most impressive language; he has addressed us as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; in the attitude of taking from his bosom his only begotten and well-beloved Son, that he

might give him up for us all, to bear our sins on the cross.

In the instructions, in the gospel of that Son, he has set before us denunciations of vengeance far more tremendous; invitations and offers of mercy far more tender; proofs of his goodness far more affecting; and motives to love and obedience far more powerful, than were ever exhibited to his ancient people. He has brought life and immortality more clearly to light; he has rent asunder the veil which concealed the eternal world from the view of mortals; he has made the glories of heaven to blaze down upon our eyes; he has caused the unquenchable flames of hell to flash up before our faces; he has caused the groans of the latter, the songs of the former, the blast of the last trumpet, and the sentence which the final judge will pronounce upon the righteous and upon the wicked, to resound in our ears.

In fine, all that he has done, all that he designs to do, he has recorded in the Scriptures. He has dictated them by his own Spirit; he has subscribed them with his own name; he has stamped upon them the broad seal of heaven; he has authenticated them by fulfilling many of the prophecies which they contain, and, addressing them to us as it were by name, has caused them to drop from heaven into our hands. And he has told us why all this is done. It is done with the same view with which the record of Jeremiah was made.

It was done that we, and other sinners, to whom its contents relate, might read and hear them; and thus be induced to return unto our forsaken God, and receive, through the atonement and intercession of Jesus Christ, the forgiveness of all our iniquities. In part this design has been accomplished. The record has reached us. Its contents have been made known to us. You have all read them and heard them read. And some of you, we trust, have not heard them in vain. You have complied with the gracious design for which they were sent.

You have been alarmed by their threatenings. You have felt grief and shame and self-abhorrence, in view of your sins; you have renounced them, and returned to your forsaken God, and he has freely forgiven you all your trespasses. But many of you, my hearers, though you have heard and read the same truths, have not been thus affected by them. You have rather imitated the king of Judah and his princes. You have not been alarmed; you are not now alarmed, when you hear the threatenings of God's word; and some, who once were so, have ceased to feel alarm.

Nor have you felt those emotions which the Jews were accustomed to express by rending their garments. You have not been grieved; you have not been ashamed; you have not felt self-abhorrence on account of your sins; nor have your hearts relented in view of God's mercies. No, as certainly as the charge in our text stands recorded against the king of Judah and his princes, so certainly does it stand recorded against you in the book of God's remembrance, that though you have heard all his words, yet you were not suitably alarmed, or affected by them; but listened to them, for the most part, with indifference and unconcern.

This charge then we must as it were, extract from the records of heaven, and press it upon your attention. It is by far the heaviest charge which we have to bring against you, or indeed which can be brought against sinners. That you are moral, in the common acceptance of the term, we do not undertake to deny. That you are punctual in attending on the public worship of God, and treat the institutions of religion with apparent respect, I readily allow. That I am under great, very great obligations to your kindness and generosity, I acknowledge with gratitude.

But still I must press upon you the charge of hearing the word of God with an almost total indifference, with a most criminal unconcern. I call you to witness against each other, that this charge is true. I call upon your

own consciences to bear testimony to its truth. I call with reverence on the insulted majesty of heaven, to witness the manner in which his declarations are received in this house, and the little effect which they produce. What sinner is now led by them to fly from the wrath to come?

What individual is now excited by them to ask, What shall I do to be saved? Where is the individual who is one half so much affected by all that God has said and recorded, as he would be by intelligence that some temporal calamity is impending? The charge is then fully substantiated. Heaven and earth, God and men, your own observation and your own consciousness, bear testimony to its truth. And while it is thus proved in all its length and breadth to be true of impenitent sinners, it is also true, though we hope to a less extent, of many who have professed repentance.

Yes, many who once trembled at the word of the Lord, have almost, if not entirely ceased to tremble at it. Many of the professed servants of God hear his declarations, his threatenings, his warnings, even those which are addressed to his church, with feelings very little removed from indifference. Nay they can see one of his most awful threatenings now executing, one of his most terrible judgments now inflicting upon us, without laying it seriously to heart. We allude to the almost total withdrawal of his gracious presence and of divine influences, a judgment, compared with which, pestilence, famine, and conflagration would be mercies.

Yes, though we would fain not tell the disgraceful fact in Gath, nor publish it in the streets of Askelon, yet it must be told, that the words God, and Christ, and heaven, and hell, and judgment, and eternity, have almost become in this house idle words, without force or significance; that the glorious glad tidings of the blessed God here excite no joy, and meet with no reception; that the things which many prophets and kings desired to see, and into which even angels desire to look, can scarcely command an hour's languid attention; and if God's threatenings are to excite fear, or his glad tidings to inspire joy, they must be proclaimed elsewhere; they must be addressed to hearts which have not acquired a more than adamant hardness under the means of grace.

And is it indeed come to this? Is it indeed become a fact, that in this house, where God has so often displayed his power and grace, where the lighting down of his glorious arm has so often been seen, and where so many hearts once seemed to bow with reverence before his commands, and drink in with delight his promises, he is now become a cipher, and his word an idle tale? Is it true that he has, in this favored place, seen himself treated with such indignity, that even his patience and forbearance could no longer endure it, and he was constrained to depart?

Yes, my hearers, it is indeed come to this. The glory is departed. The gracious presence of God, which once filled this house, and almost made itself visible, is withdrawn, and its departure will be final, it will never return, unless we become more suitably affected by the contents of his word, and by a recollection of the sins which have constrained him to forsake us; for his language respecting them who treat Him as we have done, is, I will go and return to my place, until they acknowledge their offence and seek my face.

But we shall never acknowledge our offence, till we are convinced of it; we shall never be convinced of it, till it is set clearly before us, in all its blackness and enormity, and with all its aggravations. This therefore I have of late frequently attempted to do; attempted it so often, that you are perhaps weary of the repetition and ready to wish that your attention might rather be called to some other subject. But, my hearers, what would it avail, in the present state of things, to call your attention to any other subject?

What subject soever is chosen for a theme of discourse, it must be drawn from the word of God; and what can it avail to present subjects to you from his word, unless you pay some regard to its authority; unless you are, at least in some degree, affected by its contents, when they are pressed upon you? On this often repeated subject I must therefore still insist. It must still be my first, my principal aim and endeavor, to make you sensible of the enormous, the heaven-provoking, heaven daring wickedness of hearing without emotion the declarations of Jehovah.

It is a sin which, however lightly any may regard it, involves in itself all the worst and most provoking sins of which men can be guilty. It involves, for instance, and expresses the utmost contempt of God. The man who hears God's threatenings without being afraid, and his kind invitations and promises without being melted, does in effect say to his face, I consider nothing which thou canst utter as of sufficient importance to excite the smallest emotion; neither thy favor nor thy displeasure is of the least consequence to me; I dread not thy threatenings, I regard not thy promises; after thou hast said all that thou canst say, I remain perfectly unmoved, and prepared to execute, not thy pleasure, but my own.

And if this does not express the utmost contempt of God, what can express it? It is a well known fact, that our feelings toward any being may be estimated, with great exactness, by the regard which we pay to his words, and by the degree in which they affect us. If we feel any respect, or esteem, or affection for a person, we listen to his words with proportional interest and attention; and if they relate to important subjects in which we are concerned, they will produce some effect upon our minds.

On the contrary, if we thoroughly despise any one, all that he can say will be heard with indifference, and produce no effect upon us. This is so well known, that we cannot insult a man more grossly, we cannot wound his feelings more deeply, than by showing him that we pay no regard to any thing which he can say; that all his offers of friendship, all his threatened displeasure, all his arguments and entreaties, are heard by us with indifference and unconcern. No words which language affords could express contempt of him so effectually.

Yet this insult, this greatest of insults, has been offered to the awful majesty of heaven and earth a thousand and ten thousand times, in this very house. And it is offered to him afresh as often as any individual hears his word read or spoken without being affected by it. This sin also involves and indicates the highest degree of unbelief, of that unbelief which makes God a liar. When a man brings us intelligence of most important events, of events in which, if true, we are deeply interested, we cannot tell him more plainly that we disbelieve every thing which he has said, than by remaining perfectly unaffected.

If we thus remain, he sees at once that we have no confidence at all in his veracity, or in other words, that we believe him to be a liar. Now the intelligence which God communicates to us in his word is, if true of the very highest, nay of infinite importance. Every man who believes it, feels that it is so, and is affected by it in exact proportion to the degree of his belief. He then who is but in a small degree affected by God's word, has but little faith in it, and he who is not at all affected by it, has no faith in it at all.

He is as completely an infidel as any one who ever gloried in the name. Again; those who hear or read the word of God without being affected, display extreme hardness of heart. They show that their hearts are absolutely unimpressible by any motives or considerations which infinite wisdom itself can suggest; that they are of so much more than flinty hardness, as to resist that word which God himself declares to be like a fire, and a hammer, that breaketh the rock in pieces. Such are some of the sins of which they are guilty, who hear without emotion the declarations of Jehovah.

And we assert, with the utmost confidence and solemnity, that three worse sins never polluted the heart of fallen man, or fallen spirit. Three worse sins cannot be found in those regions of final abandonment and despair, where sin, in all its dreadful forms, rages uncontrolled. If any suppose that we exaggerate, that we portray the sinfulness of hearing God's word without regarding it in colors too dark, let them look into the Scriptures; and if any thing which is there recorded can produce conviction in their minds, they will find enough to convince them that we have not been, that on this subject we cannot be guilty of exaggerating.

They will find multiplied proofs that, in God's estimation, no sin is so abominable as this; that no sin fills up so soon the sinner's measure of iniquity, or draws down such sure, and swift, and awful destruction upon his head. Look, for example, at the old world. It was corrupt, it was filled with violence, every imagination of the thoughts of man's heart was evil only, and that continually. Yet God still bore with it; for its inhabitants had not yet heard his messages with indifference.

A day of grace, a space for repentance, was therefore afforded them. Noah, a preacher of righteousness, was sent to reprove them for their sins and to warn them of the destruction which was impending, and which would fall unless they repented. But they would not repent; they were not alarmed, they heard the warnings of Noah with indifference and unconcern; and this God could not bear; this sealed their doom, and the flood came and destroyed them all. Look next at God's ancient people in the days of Jeremiah and his contemporary prophets.

They had for ages been guilty of every other sin which tended to provoke God to jealousy. They had forsaken him to worship idols; they had polluted his temple with their idolatrous abominations; they had offered their children in the fire to Moloch; and what their character and conduct were in other respects, we may learn from God's own description of it: Your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies, and your tongue muttered perverseness.

None calleth for judgment, nor pleadeth for truth; they trust in vanity and speak lies, they conceive mischief and bring forth iniquity; their feet run to evil, and are swift to shed innocent blood; and judgment is turned away backward, and justice standeth afar off, for truth is fallen in the street and equity cannot enter. Now could any nation be in a worse moral and religious state than this? Yet all this God bore with, for years he bore with it. He sent them more highly gifted prophets, more faithful reprovers; and if they would have listened to these reprovers and turned from their iniquities, he would have forgiven all.

But Jeremiah and other prophets had warned them in vain; when God had caused all his threatenings to be written in a book and read in their ears, and saw that they were not afraid, neither rent their clothes he could bear with them no longer, but gave them up to speedy and terrible destruction. Read the writings of Jeremiah and the other prophets of that age, and you will find that the unconcern with which they regarded God's reproofs and threatenings, are mentioned far more frequently than any of their other sins, as the immediate cause of their ruin.

Once more, look at the Jews in our Savior's time. From the testimony of their own historian, Josephus, as well as from the writings of the Evangelists, it is evident, that irreligion and every kind of immorality, every species of crime, prevailed among them in an almost unexampled degree. And yet our Savior says, if I had not come and spoken to them, they had not had sin. As if he had said, the sin of hearing, with unconcern and unbelief, the messages which I have brought them from heaven, so far transcends all other sins, that in comparison with it, they are as nothing, and not worthy even to come into the account.

My hearers, this is decisive, this is sufficient. Nothing more need be said to prove that, in the judgment of God, there is no sin like that of making light of his declarations; that there is no sin which so certainly draws down the most terrible expressions of his indignation. My hearers, if any of you wonder at this, let me remind you that, in similar cases, we judge in a similar manner. Suppose a son to become idle, vicious, profligate; to be guilty of frequently and grossly disobeying his parents; to run into every kind of excess; yet they do not give him up as hopeless, do not disinherit or banish him on account of all this, so long as their expostulations, their entreaties, their tears appear to produce any effect upon his feelings.

But when this ceases to be the case, when all which they can say is heard by him, and all their distress and their tears are seen by him, with perfect indifference, then they despair; then they say, he no longer regards us as his parents, we have lost all influence over his mind; there is no reason to hope that our endeavors to effect his reformation will avail any thing; let him go from us; let him follow his own course, since all attempts to restrain him are vain. Just so our Father in heaven bears and forbears, notwithstanding many gross provocations, so long as his word produces any effect upon us; so long as there seems to be the least reason to hope that we shall ever yield to its warnings and admonitions.

But when he sees that they are all regarded with indifference; that we are neither alarmed by his threatenings, nor melted by his invitations, then he treats us as he treated Israel of old. Israel, says he, would not hearken to my voice, and my people would none of me; so I turned and gave them up to their own lusts, and they walked in their own counsels. Now, my careless hearers, this sin, this greatest of sins, this sin which has destroyed so many millions of immortal beings, we charge upon you; the truth of the charge has been sufficiently proved, and you yourselves cannot deny it.

Even now many of you are, probably, exhibiting additional proofs of its truth. You have this day heard some of God's most terrible threatenings repeated; you have heard from his own word that he will execute them with infallible certainty, if you remain in your present state; and you have now heard how great, how provoking, how destructive a sin it is, not to be alarmed by these threatenings. Yet it is probable, it is, I fear, but too certain, that many of you are not alarmed; that many of you hear all this with as much unconcern, as the king of Judah and his princes heard the words of Jeremiah's roll.

And if this is the case, what will it avail that your dispositions are amiable, that your morals are unimpeached, and that you treat the institutions of religion with some apparent respect? O, what can all these things avail, so long as your hearts are polluted, and your characters blackened in the sight of God, by the worst and most provoking of all sins? Were there any reason to hope that arguments or entreaties would induce you no longer to be guilty of it, gladly would I employ them.

I would beseech you no more to tell Jehovah to his face that he cannot make you tremble, that he cannot make you weep, lest he should be provoked to make you tremble with evil spirits, and to cast you into outer darkness, where is weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. I would beseech you to comply with the purpose for which he has caused his declarations to be recorded and placed in your hands, by repenting of your sins, embracing the Savior, and receiving through him a full and gracious pardon.

But in vain should I urge these and other considerations drawn from the word of God, so long as that word is regarded by you with indifference. I may go round and round, and assail you on every side, and seek every where for some avenue through which the truth may enter; but all will be vain, until you learn to revere and tremble at the words of Jehovah. But shall our endeavors, my professing hearers, prove equally unsuccessful with you? If they do so, they will certainly continue to prove unsuccessful with

impenitent sinners; for as Moses said to God; Lord the children of Israel have not hearkened to me; how then should Pharaoh hear me?

So we may say, If God's own professed servants do not tremble at his word, how can we hope that sinners will tremble? If it does not lead you to repentance, how shall it lead them to repent? My brethren, it is painfully affecting, it is in the highest degree alarming, to see how little apparent effect is now produced upon this church by appeals which would once have affected it like an electric shock. And it is still more affecting and alarming to see how little we are affected by the spiritual judgments under which we are perishing.

Were a pestilence raging in this town, we should feel. Were half its habitations involved in one conflagration, we should feel, nay, should trade and commerce suffer a stagnation, we should feel. But since we are suffering nothing more than the loss of God's gracious presence and its irreparable consequences, the decline of religion, the prevalence of a moral pestilence, which ends in the second death; and the spreading of a conflagration in which immortal souls are consumed, we seem to forget that we have any cause for sorrow and alarm.

My brethren, these things ought not so to be; and let me add, so they must no longer be. If you ever did feel any thing, if you ever expect to feel any thing, now, now is the time to feel, and not to feel only, but to act. In Christ's name I say to you, Whosoever hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches. In his name I say to you, Either cease to call me Master and Lord, or treat me as such by hearing and obeying my words. I charge every declining professor before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, and as he will answer it at the judgment day, to remember from whence he has fallen, and repent, and do his first works; and to recollect in a practical manner and with self-application, the declaration of Jehovah, To this man will I look, even to him that is poor, and of a contrite spirit, and that trembleth at my word.

And to all of every description I say, Hear ye, give ear; be not proud, for the Lord hath spoken; and what he hath spoken, he will assuredly perform. Hearken then to the voice of the Lord your God, before he cause darkness, and before your feet stumble upon the dark mountains, and while ye look for light, he turn it into the shadow of death, and make it gross darkness. But if ye will not hear it, my soul shall weep in secret places for your pride; and mine eye shall weep sore, and run down with tears, because of the destruction which is coming upon my people.

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