

1837-12-07

A discourse delivered on Thanksgiving
Day, Dec. 7, 1837 : in the Unitarian
Church, Keene, N.H.

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/78>

"Downloaded from OpenBU. Boston University's institutional repository."

A

DISCOURSE

DELIVERED

ON THANKSGIVING DAY,

DEC. 7, 1837.

IN THE

UNITARIAN CHURCH,

KEENE, N. H.

BY A. A. LIVERMORE

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST OF THE SOCIETY

KEENE

JOHN PRENTISS

1837

DISCOURSE

OUR BLESSINGS

PSALM C. 4.—“*Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise: be thankful unto him, and bless his name.*”

It is a common and correct remark, that we are not sufficiently sensible of, nor grateful for, the blessings of life. That although earth, and air, and sky, with perpetual ministration supply our perpetually recurring wants; that although our Holy Religion shines brightly and warmly into our hearts and homes, we are yet comparatively heedless of these glorious manifestations of God's love. The gifts, which when first received awakened a transport of gratitude, lose their freshness by repetition, and are soon numbered amongst that large class of benefits, significantly called the common mercies of life. We become indurated by habit, until the riches of the earth, and the glories of the sky, no longer thrill our palled senses. This magnificent temple of the Almighty Architect in which we dwell, with its varie-

gated pavement, richer than mosaic, with its pillared mountains, with its roof, "fretted with golden fire," studded with "the blazonry of God," has become worn and commonplace to our dulled spirits. The stately march of the seasons, the miracle of day and night, the pure air, the odor of flowers, the flavor of fruits, are all expected as a matter of course, and we forget how livingly they proclaim the unfailing love of our Father in heaven. As the poet has pointedly expressed the idea,—

"A languid, leaden iteration reigns.
 _____ With lab'ring step
 We tread our former footsteps—pace the round
 Eternal. We climb life's worn, heavy wheel
 Which draws up nothing new. We beat and beat
 The beaten track. We see what we have seen.
 We thank a misery for change, though sad."

It is apparent from our perversion of heaven's blessings, that the repetition and continuousness of them betray us into insensibility. Not tracing every benefit up to its source in God's love, failing to cherish a spirit of tender filial gratitude, we soon lose the sense of obligation: and the bad consequence then is, that we use the world as our own, and not as God's. The body, fearfully and wonderfully made to be the garment of the indwelling soul, we permit to be worn and rent with corroding appetites and frantic passions. The cup of Providence, filled to the brim, we indulge in to excess. The sweet ties between man and man, the golden links of the family, the neighborhood, the church, the nation, the race, intended by our Benevolent Father to hold us in an affectionate and helpful brotherhood, are

burst asunder, and become occasions of offence, points of irritation. We allow the soul to grovel among the poor interests of to-day and to-morrow, instead of aspiring after its native life and progress in truth and goodness. The disclosures of Revelation are slighted as things of trivial import. God is almost forgotten in the midst of his glorious works. The Eternal Hereafter is buried in the childish trifles of the present moment.

Such are the natural and the actual consequences of indifference to the Providence over us, and of ingratitude for its myriad blessings. Nor is this all. From perverting the gifts of our Benefactor, we go on to murmur that more are not given us. Unthankful, we soon learn the sad lessons of an impatient, refractory, and sullen temper. If we are poor, the cause of our disquiet is, that we are not rich. If we are rich, we pant to be powerful, or famous. If we are sick, we look back longingly to the vision of health, that has flitted away. If we are well, there is ever some care, or labor, or apprehension, that untunes the harp of life, and grates the morbid ear with coarse discords. Thus though we possessed health, riches, power, and distinction, though our cup overflowed with worldly blessings, there would still be something for a restless ingratitude to concern itself about, some eye-sore to happiness, some spot on the sun, some Mordecai, sitting at the gate and blasting enjoyment by his hateful presence.

The past year furnishes an instance in point. We were running a race of unprecedented prosperity.—Discontented with what we had, we cast in our minds great schemes of producing and gaining more. The imagination was tasked to conceive, and the hand to execute, vast plans of aggrandizement. But from whatever cause, a change came over all. What seemed luxuriant and splendid as the forest branches, rimmed with icicles, and flashing in the morning sun, melted away ere noon, and left only barrenness and desolation behind. The rich man of yesterday became the beggar of to-day. Fortunes, which had sprung up, like the palace in Arabian story in a single night, lay prostrate and withered, like the prophet's gourd in the morning.

And what was the temper of our people in bearing these reverses in their worldly circumstances, whether caused by their own folly, or that of others? Was it a spirit of resignation to the overruling Government of God? Was it a spirit of faith, that the Almighty Being, who holds in his hands the destinies of the individual, the nation, and the universe, was conducting all to the best end by the stern discipline of affliction? Was it a spirit of gratitude, that whilst so much was taken away, so much was left? Was it a spirit of repentance for our unbounded devotion to wealth, and of resolution to consecrate the noble faculties of our nature, and this glorious arena of Nature and Providence to some better uses than heaping up that shining dust, which the rust cankers and the thief pilfers?

No: did we not, rather, complain as if the Moral Reign of the Unerring Disposer had gone wrong? Did we not forget apparently, that the blessings still continued, infinitely exceeded in number and value those withdrawn? Did we not blame our fellow-men for evils, to which we had contributed fully our own share? Is this discontented, anxious, querulous, accusing spirit right? Have we found that it sheds peace into our own bosoms, or helps to rectify the disorders we brood over? Rather, is it not an infringement of that beautiful precept of Jesus—"Take no thought (be not over anxious) saying, what shall we eat? or what shall we drink? or wherewithal shall we be clothed? For your Heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."

It is well that this day of public thanksgiving and praise, of religious retrospection, and of domestic enjoyment, comes to correct our wrong feelings, and invigorate our good ones. We need such an occasion. It meets a want of our condition—the constant proneness to forget the goodness of God, to lean on second causes, and to magnify, with a fault-finding ingratitude, the existing or the anticipated evils of our condition. It will help to revive in our breasts the faint sense of dependence on the Almighty, and to bring distinctly before our minds the obligation, thankfully to receive, and faithfully to use, the blessings of Nature, Providence, and Revelation.

The ordinary means are valuable towards promoting this end. Daily prayer will refresh our spirits with the thought of the Great and Good Giver. The reading of the Inspired Volume will remind us of the Creator, Proprietor, and Father of all. The holy day of rest, and the simple touching ordinances of the Gospel, and the hour of meditation and self-scrutiny, will fan the expiring embers of emotion into a pure and glowing flame of thankfulness. The casual events of life, the sad or the joyful allotments of Providence, coming home to our fire-sides and our hearts, and pouring honey or gall into the stream of our happiness, will also awaken our torpid gratitude, and open our eyes to the blessed reality of our Father's love. But a special time, a day taken out of the rest of the year, for the explicit purpose of recounting the mercies of our being, is happily fitted to make us feel more deeply and truly how munificent and ceaseless are the tokens of God's care and kindness. It is adapted by its infrequency to excite more than usual interest : by its occurrence near the close of the year, it recalls the blessings of the months gone by, and carries our minds still deeper into the past to that great crisis in the world's affairs, when in the inclement December, our pilgrim forefathers landed on these rugged shores : by its conformity to the sacred and beautiful example of their piety, it gives us partly a pledge that the puritan salt has not lost its savor amongst our people : by its appointment by the civil authority, it teaches the living union between our institutions of government and

the religion of Jesus, and bids us remember the inestimable rights and the solemn responsibilities of American citizens : and, lastly, as it is the occasion of social enjoyments and home pleasures, and of the meeting of distant and scattered relatives and friends, it impresses on our hearts the sentiments of respect and love for one another, and of gratitude to Him, who has so bountifully multiplied the inlets of our happiness, and made our duty, consistent with, and promotive of, our highest, and eternal good.

It cannot but be well pleasing in the sight of God, that we should devote a particular day to the commemoration of his benefits, that we should make his numberless marks of love pass in review before us, and quicken our hearts and tune our lips to his praise. To meditate seriously and feelingly on the Great Source of all our blessings, cannot but strengthen our convictions of duty, and our desires to do the will of God : cannot but teach us the important lesson that the divine love is equally manifest in what is denied, or taken away, as in what is granted, and continued.

Though the past year has been one of great embarrassments in business, and distresses amongst both rich and poor, yet propitious skies have been over us, and the bounteous earth has in general yielded abundant food for man and beast. The sufferings man has had to endure, he must set down to his own foolishness or wickedness, rather than to the bankruptcy of Nature. We ought also with gratitude to observe, how singularly exempt our own neighbourhood has been from those

overwhelming calamities, that have elsewhere laid the stateliest fortunes in ruins, and desolated city and country, like a resistless avalanche. Yet these calamities are by no means to be viewed as the unlucky mischances of a blind Fate, but as the solemn and awful utterances of the superintending Ruler of all. The lessons, which they preach, trumpet-tongued, are old, but none the less valuable; and they never needed to be brought home powerfully to the heart of any age or country more than our own—That there are better things to live for than simply and solely to make money; that wealth is an uncertain good at best, and as unsatisfying as uncertain; that ingenious as may be his bolts and bars, his contracts and securities, man is but a weak contender with the winds and waves of society, and with that fiat of God, according to which “riches certainly make themselves wings, and fly away, as an eagle toward heaven.”

Our country in general has been blessed with health. Some sections however have been desolated with prevailing and fatal sickness. The arrows of death have glanced thickly around us, in the bosom of our own community. Many flowers, freshly and beautifully opening, have been struck down; and some ripe fruit has fallen in its due season. But how much cause we have of thanksgiving to God, that so many were sick not unto death; were spared to bless their friends and the community! How much cause of thankfulness too in respect to those who were taken from us, that we mourn not as those without hope, but enjoy

through the love of God and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious promises of immortality, the blessed prospects of reunion, in that world of eternal light and glory, to which we trust they have gone up! And, furthermore, could our eye have surveyed some of those scenes that passed in foreign parts, or in distant sections of our own land, during the last twelvemonth; could we have beheld the thousand falling at our side, and the ten thousand at our right hand, by “the pestilence that walketh in darkness, or the destruction that wasteth at noonday;” we should clasp our hands in a prayer of more fervent gratitude, than we can now feel, for the exemption we have enjoyed from those dreadful evils which have destroyed the hopes of multitudes of our equally or more deserving fellow-men. The earthquake, the conflagration, the explosion, the flood, and the shipwreck, have also destroyed the lives of thousands, and ushered them from the midst of life’s business and sins into the eternal world. But, blessed be God, the earth has been stable under our feet, and mild skies have smiled over us, and we have been comparatively free from severe accidents; although one in this immediate vicinity appalled us by its awful suddenness, and as with an articulate tone, bade us mark on what a brittle thread our life hangs.*

*The accident at Walpole is referred to; in which three ladies were drowned as they were crossing Cold River bridge in the stage.

As a nation we have continued to enjoy those unequalled privileges of freedom and social virtue and happiness, which distinguish our land. Violent and murderous conflicts between citizens and citizens, a destructive border warfare in one corner of our immense territory, and a furious party spirit, raging like the flames of Pandemonium, equally in Church and State, have mixed with our cup of quiet enjoyment that portion of bitterness, which in a greater or less degree is incident to the most favoured condition. Whilst other nations have been rent into belligerent factions, brother imbruing his hands in brother's blood, whilst the banner of revolution floats in our northern sky, we have been most mercifully spared the awful atrocities and immoralities of War. Whilst the fertile vineyards of Spain and Portugal have flowed scarlet, not with the vintage, but with the heart-blood of their choicest sons, we have been kindly permitted under the good Providence of God to pursue the walk of peaceful industry with none to molest or to make us afraid. Whilst the sword has remained unsheathed in the battling republics of South America, we have continued on terms of amity with all civilized nations. Whilst Florida has been drenched with the blood of savage and citizen, and Canada is convulsed with the first fearful shock with the arms of Great Britain, we can review in calm historical retrospect the period when the white man and the red man contested in many a bloody fray the possession of these now peaceful cultivated hills, or when the pillars of

our own republic reeled almost to their fall under the heavy blows of English power, and Washington stood as our Samson, not to overturn, but to uphold them. How signally are we blessed that we know only in imagination, or by remembrance, those dreadful sufferings, and those distressing apprehensions, incident to war, which our fellow-beings elsewhere are now experiencing in all their keenness!

Some communities too have been trampled into the dust by the iron foot of the despot, the ties of domestic life broken, and the fairest of their youth severed from their homes. But our roofs have been sacred, our rights have been respected, and the honest fruits of our industry have been secured to us. The law has held over us its impenetrable ægis, and we have laboured by day, and reposed by night in safety and peace.

The lights of science and learning have continued to shine with increasing lustre upon our beloved country. New discoveries in nature, new researches into the past, new plans of ingenuity, and new developments in literature, have revealed or diffused new and important truths in every department of human knowledge, and through all classes and conditions of men. Preparations have been made on a scale, commensurate with the dignity of the undertaking, to explore more accurately than has yet been done, the dimly known regions of the Southern Ocean. The mineral and metallic treasures of our own land have recently been, in many of the States, subjected to the

scrutiny of science ; and the result has afforded us fresh topics of gratitude to Him, whose is the earth and all that therein is, and who has with so much wisdom and love balanced the wants of man and the resources of nature.

The cause of philanthropy, moreover, has not been forgotten amidst the thronging pursuits of gain, pleasure, fame, and knowledge. Though its movements in behalf of the enslaved have taken a fierce and injudicious mien, alien from the meek, and calm, and prudent, though determined, spirit of Jesus, the greatest of philanthropists ; yet there have been toiling hands, and throbbing hearts, and treasures poured freely forth as water, to bless the needy, to diffuse religion, to extinguish war, to arrest intemperance, to circulate the scriptures, to educate the young, to rescue the criminal from wickedness, to elevate the class of seamen, to relieve the sick, to bless the orphan, to mitigate, or dispel the horrors of insanity, to give what shall be better than eyes to the blind, or ears to the deaf, or speech to the dumb. We have unspeakable cause of gratitude, my brethren, that we live in a philanthropic age. That although man, forgetting the example of Christ, has not yet distinctly learned how to do good, he nevertheless shows the dispositions of philanthropy, could he only be properly enlightened respecting his duty. It is a glorious thing that mankind in civilized and Christian countries, after the long and guilty sleep of ages, are at last awaking to

the obligations of benevolence, and learning that as—

“ Man’s inhumanity to man
Makes countless thousands mourn—”

so might human sympathy and beneficence cause those countless thousands, now wretched or wicked, to rejoice. It is an inestimable privilege to live at a period when the heat as well as the light, of the sun of righteousness, begins to be felt on man’s chilled heart. And let it communicate a quicker pulsation of grateful feeling to our hearts this day, if our means or our inclinations have been such, that we have been able to succour the weak, to relieve the poor, to give religious instruction to the young, to minister to the sick, to cheer the desponding, to comfort the bereaved, to afford sympathy and assistance to feeble societies of our brethren in a common faith, or those of other denominations. Thus to become fellow-workers with God in his benevolent purposes, to ally ourselves by righteous and philanthropic efforts to his holy and beneficent Providence, is the noblest distinction of a human being, and should enkindle our whole souls with a lively spirit of thankfulness. This is to become like, in some humble measure, that blessed One, who “ came not to be ministered unto, but to minister :” the compendium of whose religion is, that “ love is the fulfilling of the law,” and who taught by precept and example, that to do good to man was the best homage to God.

In all these things, and others too numerous even to mention, how much cause we have of devout gratitude to that Great and Good Being, who made all, and blesseth all! How vain would have been all our efforts without his blessing! How impotent would our tillage have been, unless he had caused the bosom of the earth to be fruitful, and had commissioned from the heavens his fertilizing suns and rains and dews! How fruitless would have been the skill of the artisan, unless He had preserved the laws of nature in their inviolable integrity! To what purpose would have been the art and hardihood of the mariner, except He had filled his sails with auspicious breezes, and borne him as in the hollow of His hand across the bottomless deep! And what childish folly would have been in all the seminaries of education, the studios of the artist, the retreats of science and literature, the councils of State, the temples of Justice, and the churches of religion, if His Spirit had not kindled the hearts of young and old with its own eternal fires of truth and wisdom!

Do we sufficiently realize, that the vital air we inhale, the sun looking down with his glance of light and heat from on high, the established earth on which we have erected our homes of affection, the fire which preserves our lives through the inclement winter, the nutritious food, the organized body, the delicate senses, the richly endowed soul—have we thought how all, the whole and each part, the far and the near, the high and the low, the grand and the little, is but one varied,

sublime, and boundless expression of the goodness of God, one tongue, which in every variety of tone, and accent, and emphasis chants the unceasing *Te Deum*.
With Milton we exclaim,

“These are thy glorious works, Parent of good,
Almighty, thine this universal frame,
Thus wondrous fair; thyself how wondrous then!
Unspeakable, who sitt’st above these heavens,
To us invisible, or dimly seen
In these thy lowest works; yet these declare
Thy goodness beyond thought, and power divine.”

But if the works of Nature, the endowments of man, the ways of Providence, the institutions of society, proclaim the love of God, if he “hath not left himself without witness, in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness;” what mind can adequately conceive, and what tongue can fitly express, the greatness of that love, which shines in the Gospel of Jesus Christ! How shall we speak of that long-suffering, which the wilful obstinacy of erring man could not in aught impair, of that mercy which was not wearied in pardoning until seventy times seven, and of that all undeserved goodness, which has supplied all our spiritual wants, poured balm into the wounded breast, couched the blind eye to see the light of truth, and opened before us the sublime prospect of an eternal existence! These things also—so full of all that can captivate the affections, enlighten the understanding, fire the hopes, and entrance the imagination—how have we permitted them to sink into the rank of commonplace matters, and to lose their divine beauty!

With what a feeble gratitude have we reflected on the favors of God to us, compared with the benighted condition of the poor Pagan, who has bowed down to stocks and stones, or prostrated his body to be crushed by the slowly moving wheels of the idol car, or plunged himself into fires or waters to appease his angry gods, or thrown his children to the wild beasts, or exposed his aged parents to die by hunger, or to be devoured! And who but the Supreme has made our lot to differ from his? To what do we owe it but to our Father's unmeasured kindness, that we participate in the blessed and saving truths of the Gospel, the mission of his well-beloved Son, the assurances of mercy to the penitent, the consolations in trial, the armor against temptation, the promises to the good of a blissful and eternal life? We should be more insensate than the beasts of the field, or the stones of the valley, if emotions of gratitude did not swell our bosoms, while we contemplate blessings so unmerited, so magnificent, so incorruptible.

Let us on this day "enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise; let us be thankful unto him and bless his name." Let us be grateful unto him for the fruits of the earth, for the arts of mechanism, and for the favors of commerce. Let us thank him for the exercise of our powers and faculties, for the means of improvement, and the comforts of our homes. Let us praise his holy name for those wise and admirable institutions, which were founded by the skill, and defended by the arms of our

revered ancestors, for the mild sway of just and equal laws, for the schools and colleges of the young, for the societies of philanthropy, and the altars of Christianity. Let us chiefly celebrate his love that we are enlightened and saved by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, if we embrace his affectionate invitations, and that when this world, with all its pleasures, honors, riches, friendships, and memories, shall be wrapped in the black pall of death, he has opened to the eye of faith "new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness," where "there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away."

It becomes us on this day, my brethren, to reflect on the unspeakable goodness of God in all our private and public blessings. We should partake temperately and thankfully of the manifold bounties of Divine Providence. We should remember the poor and the friendless, in the midst of our joy, and impart unto them abundantly of our sympathies and our substance. Let us remember the sick, seemingly drawing nigh to the gate of death, in our intercessions before our Father. Let us not selfishly forget those absent friends, who are near and dear to us. And, finally, let us least of all overlook that Mighty Friend, who has unsealed these thousand fountains of happiness, and invited all his children to come and drink of the crystal waters of life without money and without price.