

1925

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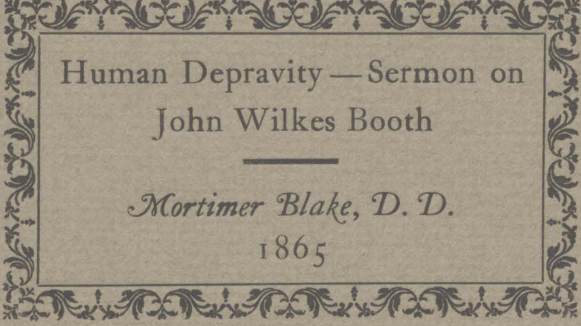
Mortimer Blake

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Human Depravity — Sermon on
John Wilkes Booth

Mortimer Blake, D. D.

1865

HUMAN DEPRAVITY

JOHN WILKES BOOTH

A SERMON

Occasioned by the *Assassination of President Lincoln*, and delivered in the *Winslow Congregational Church, Taunton, Massachusetts*, on Sunday Evening, April 23, 1865, by the *Pastor*

MORTIMER BLAKE, D. D.

CHAMPLAIN

Privately Printed at the *Moorsfield Press*

1925

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No. 23.

Foreword

PRESIDENT LINCOLN died early on the morning of Saturday, April 15th, 1865, and on the day following, Easter Sunday, but few pulpits throughout the land were silent upon the National Tragedy. Dr. Blake felt that it was a providential coincidence "that the first coming together of the people," after the assassination, "was upon the Sabbath, and that God's word spoke first to the Nation in His sanctuary."¹ At the time of the obsequies at Washington, held on Wednesday, the 19th, business was suspended and services held in all the churches, indeed this day has been called "the mid-week Sabbath." Then, as a further gathering of the people on account of the death of Lincoln, President Johnson had recommended that Thursday, June 1st,² be observed as a day of general humiliation and mourning

¹ *On Account of the Assassination of President Lincoln. A Sermon delivered in Taunton, Mass., April 23, 1865, by Mortimer Blake, D.D. Champlain: 1925. 8vo. pp 19.*

² May 25th was the date first set, but it was changed by a later proclamation of President Johnson, whose attention had been called to the fact that the day was "sacred to large numbers of Christians as one of rejoicing for the ascension of the Savior."

"in memory of the good man who has been removed, so that all shall be occupied at the same time in the contemplation of his virtues, and sorrow for his sudden and violent end."

The character of the sermons delivered on these three occasions, as well as of the many sermons preached on the death of Lincoln at the regular church services, varied greatly, from the hurriedly prepared outpouring of grief and perplexity, to the calm and studied discourse upon the character and services of the Martyr President. Hundreds of these sermons were printed, either singly or in collections, and are listed in the bibliographies, and portions of hundreds more appeared in the newspapers of the day. After a careful search, especially among the sermon-titles in Fish's Lincoln Bibliography (1906), it would appear that the present sermon is unusual, if not unique, in that it is based entirely upon the character and crime of John Wilkes Booth.

It will be noticed that Booth was at large when this sermon was delivered; he having been shot while being captured, on Wednesday, April 26th. The following, from an editorial on Booth's Death, appeared in the New York Tribune on the 28th; it seems to bind in well with Dr. Blake's sermon:

We do not fully share the feeling of regret, which seemed to be general yesterday, that it should have been necessary to shoot Booth instead of bringing him in alive to be tried and hanged. There was a possible chance of confessions and revelations—but only possible, for Booth was a determined villain, and very unlikely to tell anything that could damage his accomplices or help us. And for other reasons, it is just as well he died as he did. It was a dog's death—dog that he was,

and fitted him well. The arrest might have been clumsily managed, or the Sergeant who shot Booth might have been hasty, and no doubt it was expected of his captors that he should have been taken alive—but no matter. It is enough that justice has thus swiftly overtaken him, after a pursuit probably unparelled in its intensity and persistence. The murderer can have had no moment of rest, no instant of fancied security from the time he fired his shot down to his actual capture. If anybody wants to indulge his vindictive feeling, let him imagine what agonies of retribution and of apprehension the assassin has had to live through for ten days past.

On the first page of the manuscript of the present sermon Dr. Blake had written:

Sab. Hy. Bk.
188 Hm
494 c m
550 c m

N.S. 518. Taunton, Apl 23, 65
O

Human Depravity
(Booth)

Dr. Mortimer Blake was born at Pittston, Maine, June 10th, 1813; graduated from Amherst College in 1835, and died December 22nd, 1884 at Taunton, Massachusetts.

HUGH McLELLAN.

Champlain, N. Y., August 6, 1925.

Human Depravity

John Wilkes Booth

2 KINGS, VIII: 11, 12 *And he settled his countenance steadfastly, until he was ashamed: and the man of God wept. And Hazael said, Why weepeth my Lord? And he answered, Because I know the evil that thou wilt do unto the children of Israel.*

ELISHA only foretold by divine inspiration what all Israel afterwards learned by painful facts; and God predicted Hazael's career of iniquity by His perfect foreknowledge of the circumstances of Hazael, and of the natural character of his heart and its actings under those circumstances. God saw in him the disposition to murder his king and become himself a wicked tyrant, and the circumstances which would develop that disposition, and therefore accurately predicted his career. Although Hazael repelled the imputation and retorted upon the prophet, "What, is thy servant a dog, that he should do this thing?" yet he showed himself a dog by actually doing as the prophet foretold him.

It is perfectly natural for us to repel the dark and guilty possibilities of the human heart, and to resent the biblical descriptions of its depravity, as utterly contra-

dicted by our own instincts. Yet, there sometimes comes such a revelation of human wickedness that we have to change our theories, and find refuge and relief in the facts of the natural depravity of man, and of the vindictive justice of God, as a logical and governmental necessity.

The community is startled into an assent to the darkest portraiture of the Scriptures. The crime of Booth has awakened a universal horror at its cold, premeditated guilt. But it ought to do more than this. It ought to cast light upon some of our ideas of Bible teaching, and recover our ever-sliding faith to some of its most unwelcome declarations. It deserves to be studied theologically as well as mourned over and hated humanly, for it teaches some lessons not to be forgotten, and as such only, and not for his consequence, do I propose to consider it. Booth, as an individual may point a moral, but as a completed sample of the educational forces of evil upon the unchanged human nature, and as a finished problem in the working of sin, his career teaches

The natural depravity of the human heart. He doubtless shared the early parental loves which encircle other children in their infant homes, and he gave no indications in his childhood of a precocious depravity. He was naturally endowed with the same attributes as belong to the whole human family. He had naturally born in him no true regard for God, and no disinterested love to his neighbor. The malignant passions which culminated in his crime had their origin in his moral nature; the

embryo of them was in him from the beginning of his life. We cannot trace their existence except into himself, as a part of his first moral nature, as we do a trailing vine to its root. As soon as he had any moral feelings at all they were sinful feelings. His first exercises could not have been holy—such affections never yet existed in him. He was naturally depraved. But he was not then radically different from the rest of the species. All are born destitute of holy affections, and do not have them naturally. They are under such a constitution of being, that as soon as they act, they will act selfishly. Notwithstanding all the pleasing fallacies about implanted germs of moral goodness in humanity, the stubborn fact will reveal itself, that whenever man develops himself naturally and fully, according to the unrestrained impulses within him, he always reveals a depravity of heart, and not a holiness of heart. He shows selfishness as soon as he shows anything, and continues to show it until he is changed by the Divine Spirit. The biblical doctrine that the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, and that men go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies, is not a popular one, because it is not pleasant to admit it; but sometimes the untamed heart so reveals its natural character that men have to admit, as a relief from worse inferences, that it is by nature corrupt, and from it proceed all evil thoughts, murders, adulteries and such like. It is painfully impressed upon us now by this ripened iniquity.

We see, to some extent, the ability of heart-development in sin. Hazael didn't believe that he could ever be

guilty of the crimes which the prophet predicted in his future, and he repelled the charge as an insult to his manhood; but he afterwards did them all. The President could not believe the many intimations he had of a conspiracy gathering against him, and he permitted rebels to go at large around him. Doubtless Booth would once have resented the imputation that it could be in his heart to do such a deed as has condemned him to everlasting infamy. But the actual result is the sad commentary upon all such self-estimations. He has done evil things as he could. In four years the depravity of his heart grew to the height of his monstrous iniquity. He is a repulsive example of the ability of heart-development in sin. He was able to plot and compass his crime, and publicly boast himself of its execution. But there was no more power of sinning put into him in the beginning than into others, and no one knows what sins he is really capable of. Cain did not once believe that he should kill his brother. Nor Joseph's brethren that they should relentlessly sell him as a slave, and then lie to their aged and disconsolate father. Nor Judas that he should betray his Saviour. But all these, and every other wicked man, have found in themselves a capacity for any crimes they had a mind to commit. The fact is that there are no impassible bounds to human depravity; the unregenerated human heart is able to all sins, upon sufficient provocation. It is stopped by no inability to go farther. The step from a little sin to the next larger is no shorter or easier than from the greatest sin to the next greater. The bottom stairs to perdition

are of the same distance as the first ones, and time only is necessary to the deepest descent. "Only the next step" is the Devil's lure to conduct men down to his own depth; and when they once start on the road they will surely get there at last. No merely human force will arrest their progress.

We see the effect of evil influences upon the depraved human heart. Combined agencies operate on the human development; surrounding circumstances have great power to determine character, so great that some are disposed to throw all the blame of human iniquities upon the external provocations. But this is an incomplete solution. The external temptation must first find, and combine with, the inward disposition to prevail. Our Blessed Redeemer walked undisturbed through the earth, in spite of Satan's craftiest temptations, and was holy, harmless and undefiled unto the end; not because of His union with the Divine Nature, but because of the sinlessness of His human nature. And all men would live equally unswerved by outward circumstances if they had the same native purity. But they have depraved hearts instead, ready to be cultivated and led astray by evil influences. Hence I mentioned the natural depravity of man as a legitimate inference from the crime of the Presidential assassin. He was naturally disposed to sin, and the influences he put himself among, developed that disposition to the height of his rank crime. He consorted with rebels; he caught their spirit; he imbibed their bitterness. It provoked his predisposition to guilt and brought him to undertake the deed planned by other

criminals as great as he. Had he spent these years past with other associates; had he followed some honest vocation; had he imbibed other political ideas, he would have avoided this terrible guilt, and gone about an unchanged and unsuspected man. But even then, the disposition was naturally in his heart, like gunpowder in the cask, and it needed only the spark of occasion to explode it. A great deal of the goodness of men is *negative*. As the safety of a powder magazine is negative, the provoking circumstance is wanting to them, and they remain visibly upright, because they have no sufficient inducement to be otherwise. Hence wicked men start up unexpectedly, at certain times of trial, as strange plants will spring up in fresh-plowed land—seeds there lying quiet perhaps for centuries. Who would have believed that such unutterable wickedness could have been perpetrated in the South! That men wicked enough could have been found in the whole country for the shooting and starving and burning which the rebellion has caused. That men who sat in counsels together, in such meek and sleek modesty, should turn out like Polk and Breckenridge, etc.! Ah, none knows what is in himself, except He who trieth the reins and knoweth the hearts of men; and when God says evil is in their hearts, it does not become us to deny one of His descriptions. We have not yet been tried as gold is tried in the furnace; our natural tendencies have not been developed. We know not the power of temptations upon our hearts, nor how bad we may become in changed conditions. How many men of

staid lives and good promise, church members even, have gone from us to the West and to the South, and have there developed into unprincipled and abandoned infidels. The most virulent of the Southern rebels have been renegade New Englanders. Their naturally corrupt hearts grew rank in sin under that hot, forcing atmosphere, and their Northern vigor of mind shot them up into their abominable superiority of treason. There is no computing the pressure which an educated morality can bear before it will give way, and it is a perilous experiment to try it, without the power of God's inward upholding. Man's heart is like tow, and temptation like a spark, and when circumstances bring them together, there will be combustion.

We detect plainly the element of misery in the guilty. Booth was uneasy, confused and widely talkative sometime before his deed. He asked strange questions and gave strange answers. His soul was in insurrection. He and his conspirators drank together, and he drank frequently alone on the fatal evening, to drown the misery rising within him! He was, from the beginning of his plot, a wretched man. But the Devil had entered into him, and drove him to the deed from which his reason and his conscience shrank aghast. It may seem singular now that he was not on this account suspected. It always seems so whenever a great crime is committed that it is not sooner discovered, for the guilty actors always betray the same restless misery beforehand. But misery in the open sinner's bosom is too constant a guest to betoken anything unusual within. It is the

inseparable companion of guilt, and its presence and persistent staying is anything but a hopeful augury of the future. The soul has a presentiment of the angry face of God. It feels the blaze of his invisible eye, and knows that its crime is fully seen by Him.

God is wherever the sinner is. Thus, He looked into the first meeting of those conspirators and saw who assembled; and He was present at every subsequent gathering. He heard all the details and arrangements of the plot. His eye watched them as they separated to do their work, and He saw them when they did it. He followed them in their flight, and knows where they are hiding themselves today; and more than this, God is determined to bring their crimes to light. "The soul that sinneth shall die." He will so control events as to bring these murderers to justice when He sees best. They shall not escape Him, and their poor souls know this, too and hence their trembling and their misery. That spot of blood will not be out of their sight forever, and unless in some strange, and to us unexpected, moment of their bitter repentance the blood of Christ shall cover it, their misery is fixed eternally. How miserable they are today, in this blessed Sabbath sunlight. They know that they are hunted like venomous reptiles. Expert detectives are on their track, keen to scent the most trifling indication, and they are liable any moment to drop a word or show their faces where it shall bring the clutch of arrest upon them. There is no peace or place of secure hiding to them in this life. Justice will be on their track as long as they live, and then, if they escape

its earthly ministers, they fall into the hands of God, who needs no detectives to find, and no police to arrest, the violators of His law. A wretched career is before them in every sense; and there is no end to it, positively no end, here or hereafter, save by the interposition of the grace of God, such as we have no warrant to expect.

What an element of misery there is to the sinning, and it is not all in this dread of arrest and punishment. There is another in the future life, of the endless development in sinning. There is every reason to believe in the perpetual expansion of the soul after its fixed direction as determined in this life. We have no hint of any regenerating force to be applied after this life, to eradicate the sinfulness of man and reconstruct him into a pure being growing entirely towards God. Every intimation is to the contrary,—that “he that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still.” Eternity is but an endless and boundless development of the same character as it is started in this life—the soul is fixed hereafter, as a tree is planted in the garden where it is to remain; it shall grow as it was and as it grew in the nursery. If it is selfish here, it shall forever grow in selfishness, becoming more and more intensely selfish and grasping and insatiate forever and ever. This is the law of human character; its endless growth in the line of its final tendencies at death, and what a misery it shall be to the sinning, to be forever, more and more, as they already loathe themselves for being. The passions

which now provoke their misery and dread, endlessly intensifying and rioting, when there shall be no victims in whose blood they can cool their hate! Wretched as these rebels and murderers are, now skulking in our land, in constant dread of arrest, what is it to the dark eternity opening before them, when Divine Justice shall hold them to the clear contemplation of their guilt, forever and ever! Truly it is an awful thing to sin against God, and die impenitent and unreconciled to Him!

We see the need of immediate regeneration of heart. A timely repentance and return to God would have saved Booth and his accomplices from their great guilt, and their wretched future. It would have broken the power of the Devil over them, and given them a shield of resistance to all his suggestions. Possessing by nature, as we do, the initial depravity which so monstrously developed itself in them, we need for our present safety and future happiness a radical change of moral character—a new heart and a right spirit.

Granting that we have the utmost abhorrence to such crimes, yet we have naturally that moral disposition in us out of which they grew, and there is positive safety for us from sin only in the removal of that disposition. We are by nature shoots of the wild olive tree, and if we bear any fruit, it must be after his kind. We need to be grafted into the good olive tree, before we partake of its root and fatness. This fact is one of the plainest, though most unwelcome, of deductions. There is a deal of shallow philosophy wasted on this subject of human

tendencies, and a deal of culture expended upon the natural heart to make it look and act like a good heart of grace, without beginning at the basis of a regeneration; and what by the culture of the intellect and the restraints of society, we see very little of its natural out-workings. But the goodness of unrenewed men is from their conscience, and not from their hearts. But it is in the heart where God looks for holiness to select His holy company.

I know this stupendous crime is not a pleasant place to gather enforcements to the duty of a new heart; but I have felt that such an exhibition of the capabilities of human depravity ought not to pass without its solemn lessons to us all, imperfect and sinning ones. That miserable man has exhibited a sample of the passions of Hell for our astonished consideration. It were well for us, if we loathe, not him alone, but the sinful heart which capacitated him, to remember, then, that there is in us also, (unless God has taken it away), an evil heart of unbelief—a heart which, unless repented of, (though it shall never lead us to any visible crime), will bring us to be his companion hereafter; and may his sad picture of fallen humanity lead us to humble ourselves, and seek the gift of cleansing which Christ offers to every sincere penitent.

