No. 59

On Habit
Jeremiah 33:23. "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil."

This is a most striking and impressive representation of the power of habit: a power, the wonderful effects of which are witnessed in all that we see of men and their actions. We give to our virtues almost all their moral durability; to our vices almost all the strength of their dreadful dominion. What we call the character of men is nothing else, than the mass, and sum total, of their habits. If you ask what constitutes a good man, the answer is: habit. If you ask what constitutes a bad man, the answer is: habit. All communicates strength, but it will communicate equal to power.
to improve perceptions; it gives permanence, efficiency, but it will give these qualities equally to what is base, what is noble, to what is degenerating, what is elevating. It is a powerful engine put into our hands, but its operation depends on ourselves; we may use it to make ourselves happy or miserable, to send through our hearts a polluting or a purifying influence, to render us heirs of glory or children of shame. It is like the flaming sword of the angel of Eden. It "turns every man (to keep the way of the tree of life); it may admit us to the delights of paradise, where flow the rivers of joy, or it may drive us far off amidst the deserts of the rough places of a wide-sweeping world. It is this subtle, ever-operating power of habit. When the prophet has so well described it, the truth of it is well illustrated by the Ethiopian shall change his skin, or the leopard here his spots? Then, yea, will the many we expect, that they shall be good, who have been accustomed to do evil; that they who have trodden the ways of vice till their progress has become rapid, yearly, shall recover their steps and return to the high road of innocence and virtue. These forcible expressions of the prophet, if understood strictly, would seem to represent it, as a thing literally impossible, to overcome bad habits, yea, to subdue theYeritties, which have been growing up with the fibre of the heart. But we must remember, that the bare mention avoids himself of the bold and distinguishing imagery of the last, to give a deeper, greater, and more lasting impression to the truth of what he would communicate; that his words are to be interpreted figuratively, as the language of hyperbole and strong feeling, not literally, as the cold, guarded statement of a proportion true in its whole extent of meaning. The passage, thus considered, is intended to express what no one will deny, that the conquest of bad habits is of all other conquests most difficult; this general truth is finely illustrated by saying, that we might almost as soon expect to see the tender skin of the Ethiopian change its color, or the spots disappear from the leopard's
there is no dislike so deep & strong, or no propensity so predominant & engraving, that it cannot be mastered, expelled by the force of habit. The rock on the sea shore is so hard as to resist to the hand of time; but wave after wave dashes against it, yet it wears away. So a continual repetition of the same effort of the same actions will gradually crush the most stubborn offering inclinations & the strongest feelings that stand up against it. If this cannot be effected, it is only another name for habit. We see, therefore, that there is reason enough, on the truth of the case, for the bold, strong, long-sought expressions of the prophet in our text:

1. Let us consider the process, by which habits are formed. This is a very easy, yet sometimes an unpardonable process. We are nowhere aware of our progress, while we are drifting along on a current, or becoming smoother, as we advance; & ere we find ourselves on the brink of a catastrophe, we have almost before we are fully conscious of having quitted the shore. We have certain propensities & tastes, we grant indulgence from time to time, till they
acquire the face of habit. If then they become dan-
gro, we shall no longer be denied indulgence. We have,
it may be, a favorite passion; but why is it a fa-
vorite one? because we have allowed it. Nowadays, it is
that it has become habitual. Perhaps it was so, we are
perhaps its bond slaves. We have become familiar with
a certain course of conduct. Why? because we have
suffered ourselves to pass thoughtless on former
action to another, till our feet will scarcely move
in any other path. This and yet they have already
trampled down. Habit has a soft and silken claim,
but it is strong enough to bind the mightiest:
it is wound imperceptibly around us; it is drawn
across our hearts in many directions, yea, she is
strongest if he makes an effort to break from it,
may find himself as completely shackled, as if
like him may feel it to be his doom to grind on
the prison house." The process by one habit to
a set of habits, is formed in most cases what
is often embedded. It is not usually accomplished
by any effort sufficient. Try any of them, to make
us both back see how much from me have already
measured. If we hastily we are going ever that remon-
sis to give us meaning that we are even now passing
from one stage to another in the progress. Habit
not formed by a few wild, it exists in particular
occasions of the uniform, miserable, unconverted,
ition of equals, actions of similar indulgences. In the
chain of moral acts, will have at last settled upon
any particular habit, you cannot begin to tell what
any particular one can hold more influence than any
other in bringing your to the results; you can envisage
that taken together they have spread their power
we are in the form of a fixed, regular habit.
and you observe the starting point. Remember set
out, & the conclusion at which you have arrived; but it
is not so easy to tell how you have been carried
by each particular step. Habits usually grow when
we are oblivious, at the shades of evening gathering
in, the twilight at first is clear; yea, full; by degrees
it waxes fainter & more dim, as object after another.
disappears in the distance, but we cannot tell when they disappear. Different scenes are encountered daily, until the sight of dying glories overpowers every object around us. Till at last the darkness becomes settled and definite. So it is with the power of habit; it takes us, as it were, in its chains. We can be captured all of the man, who has abandoned the high road of integrity and virtue, who is now familiar with the dark ways of guilt, he will tell you probably that his first devotions were only occasional, that he always prepared for himself to return to the good path, but he had forgotten; but by degrees he went astray so often and so easily, that at last he no longer wished to return. Ask of him, whose heart is now so hardened, that he rejects the laws of God; man with careless indifference, pathetically exultation, he will tell you that his first step in sin was so very small, so very small, that the old evidence to his feelings, while he violated the commandments of his Maker, brought the power of habit—
it overcame the fears of conscience, quieted new oils; these crimes remain present to him, at the very name of which he would once have started. With fear of him, who has now become the abandoned darling of guilty pleasure, he finds one delight that in the end of temporal gratifications. He will tell you, that he did not at once plunge into that abyss of misrule, vice, in which you now find him, but that the end of pleasure became by degrees greater to his taste, till at length he was overwhelmed by lost to the pure engagements of virtue. And so on the other hand it is with good habits. They likewise gradually took their influence over the soul. He submits it to their dominion, that influence is a salutary one, that dominion is the rule of virtue and peace. And why should it not be as easy to form a good habit, as a bad one? The process is the same, but oh, how different is the result. The strength and habit gives us in both cases the same, but in one case it is the strength of guilt and shame, in the other, it is the strength of conscience.
A man's heart is now devoted to doing good, who has, as a true disciple of Jesus, a blessing to society. He is brave in the sight of heaven. He will hold upon that at first seeming sacrifice of duty, to conscience, till habit comes with all its mighty power to make that easy, not before was difficult. If every thing unpleasant be resolved, if this course, as it demands energy, consents to heaven, is in great degree smooth, it will succeed. All ten of them, who are faithful in attending the services of the Lord, in the means of religion, who have the frequent visits of the house of worship, & makes it, if not the manifest office of our actions. In short the habit is the law of human life. Men can escape from its punishment.

2. But if habits are easily formed, it is not so easy to break them when once formed.

3. It is not a difficult thing to place yourself under their dominion, but it is a difficult, a very difficult thing to escape from their dominion. There are thousands of pleasures, smooth & pleasant roads leading you to the castle, but when you are once in the gates, are barred, if the avenues are closed, perhaps you remain a prisoner.
...ones for life. These properties & qualities, which have attached to us, either so closely, that to tear them away is like rending the very fibres of the heart. They have become so interwoven with all our thoughts & feelings, that the separation of them is not possible. He tells us to hope that it will not be attempted. And this is true of habit, if I may call it, it may be of very habit of very pernicious influence. It may give strength & aid to virtue, or it may make the dominion of vice more sure & dreadful. Who does not know how rare it is to see vicious habits reform'd, when they have once acquired a deep & settled root? "For the path that leads to destruction, there are but few points to be traced of returning feet." And no wonder, that the instance of one who has rescued himself from through good bad habits, is so uncommon. For it is the very influence of these habits to oppress every thing that would rise up in opposition to their power. Of...
of him who has long, long trod the mazes of a
is a hard road, & the roughness of the path 

It is painful to think that after the
in the dews of heaven be expected to sport 

It is great reason to fear that it will be but pa-

The restoration to moral soundness of him, 
who has suffered once to shake the pride of his mind, will be likely to resemble the langu-

But if the recovery from bad habits be a most difficult thing, &
require all the efforts of fortitude to overcome the 

But on the other hand good habit-

The heart of the di-

It is a great thing to secure all our evil.

Of what it is said, imagination grows cool 

The heart become calm; but what can we ex-

The perversity of man, whose vicious conduct is the result 

must be destroyed by principles gradually 

we may see the expression in cold blood? Ought it not to be the excitement of temptation? It is a hard thing to go back on a path in which we have not only a great distance before us on the return, but in what every step as we advanced, there be

It is a hard thing, oh! How hard, for the habitual drunkard to renounce his passion 

so long accustomed that they are incorporated with his very existence; it is hard for the inebriated man to put away his feeling of his propensity, & to go to the altar of God & humble his heart, so

that it is hard, very hard, for the habitual confirmed sinner to leave his sins. The heart
nations on the side of duty, for they are all not easily or often removed from duty. “God has balanced the evil of my condition with enough redemption of you.” If after a time vice is indulged, becomes fixed and permanent in the character, so also does virtue. “There is a period in the progress of those, who persevere wherein habits when they may be said to be established, is a good work. Very seldom when they are rooted, grown in the love of God, I mean, when nothing but those whirlwinds of tempests of temptation, while it is very often received, are able to tear them asfrom that ground to which they have thus grown. Less furious gusts may shake them, cause them to wave and bend; intermit the steadiness of almost the tranquility of their uprightness, but they will some more; they will still leave them standing. “There are storms which agitate the strongest tree, but cannot root it up.” So it is with good habits, when they are planted in the heart, grows and with all the principles of the mind. By the blessing of God, they will enable us to give new force to that, which cannot be too strong; they will form for us a charm, which may bind us to forever. The God of heaven.

I have this thought of the case with all habits are formed by the difficulty, with ease, they are altered. The subject is full of moment and importance to us all. For we should remember that our habits are not binding forever, in the grave, they will rise with us. You accompany us to the other world, if these, they will be our good or our shame, our happiness or our misery. To those who have long been accustomed to the ways of sin, I would say, think how dreadfully it is to fall into that moral lethargy, that sleep of the soul, from which it may be permitted you never, never to awake till you are to suffer its punishment. Oh, my Lord, it is dreadful to think, by habitual vice, into such stupidity, that even the wrath of God shall roll over your heads. Patiently trusting your repentance. Where can you look to heaven.
for assistance, and struggle, struggle on, till
you have for the space escaped those habits, and
held your soul in bondage. For those, who have for
habit already formed, I would say - forever, give
your moral power, for your cause is heavenward.
By God's good angels, let it go on with assurance.
So the young part will, if this subject is full
of importance, for they are at an age when habits
are easily formed. When the soul is flexible you'll
take any shock o' life may be given it, but break
by motives considered. But then consider that
the habits which are growing up in hearts of the child,
may determine the character of the future man.
And let me entreat you, my young friends, to with
stand every vicious inclination at first. For you
may be led astray, if you allow yourself to be
affected in that way. For me, that in the nature, seem, as a dreadful
wild beast, formed by a body of water, several miles
in circumference, in the midst of this strange
rock, against which the tide on its side is dashed
with an incalculable fury, where every thing is mad.
loved up that comes within the sphere of their
fate. No skill in the manner, nor strength of
saving can affect an escape. The sailor at first
finds the ship going on a current opposite to his
intentions; his vessel motion, though slow in the begin-
ning, becomes every moment more rapid; it goes
round in circles still, unresisted by force, until at
last it is dashed against the rock, violently dashed.
Thus it goes with the unfortunate sailor, who falls under the power of any vicious habit.
And now you understand in caution, struggles
against the stream of corrupt inclination. But
every relapse carries him farther down the course
of things, and he still comes to the fatal rock, at
the will of the mind itself, until at length the
spirit is subdued, the mind, without a struggle,
flounders beneath the prospect of conscience, of renunciation.
Religious principle of things is suited
by nature, for in character, she is desired of God, de-serve-
ed by man. From such a fate, must man finally be
reduced to the path of good habits, to known
glory, and immortality in the world above.
Other from whom cometh all our strength, all our hope, without whom we are poor and miserable. By blind and foolish grant us, we beseech thee, that in the assistance of thy good spirit, that we may be enabled to subdue our corrupt passions, to restrain our various propensities, to subdue our impure desires, to humble our hearts to the spirit of devout obedience to thee, our God. O save us from the power and dominion of our habits, from the hardness of heart, which is the consequence of long continuance in the ways of sin. May we be enabled to set all our habits in the right and virtuous religion, that thus the ways of sin may become to us ways of pleasantness, and all her paths peace. May we ever be on our guard against the dangerous deceivers and the various temptations that beset our path in life. From the eyes of sin may we discover that spiritual strength, that shall make us conquerors, more than conquerors, through him who hath
lived us. In the midst of our weakness to the world
we raise our eyes, sublime that we may be so guided
through things temporal, as finally to obtain the gaze
of things eternal. Amen.

At home, May 20th, 1820, forenoon.
At Mr. Grey’s Farm, (Nain) Sept. 24th, 1820, afternoon.
After whose name alone is holy, heart's friend, soul's refreshment, through all ages, heaven and earth shall come. We would humble ourselves before thee in the spirit of reverence, willing to thee our tribute of affection. We pray, O God, that at every time and in every place, a sense of reverence for the name of thy Holy Name be cherished in thy people. May we ever be mindful of a humbling disciples' prayer, 'Save us from all sin, guide our steps, especially from all profaneness. Teach us not to take the name of the Lord our God in vain, knowing that the Lord will not hold them guiltless who take his name in vain. Save us from all sin and from all rash words. From the guilt of blasphemy, teach us, O God, to cherish such a deep sense of the relation in which we stand to thee, our Creator, Governor, and Judge, that our hearts may be humbled at the thought of thine infinite majesty, that we may fear to speak carelessly with our lips. The suffer-
inspire thoughts to remain in our hearts, to give us grace so to fear thee here that we may be admitted to the glories of thy presence hereafter, through thy Son.

Albany, April 30, 1830 - afternoon -