No. 197.

Visiting the iniquities of fathers upon children.
Exodus XX. 5, "Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them; for I the Lord am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me."

This passage suggests two topics of consideration: one is, the meaning of it, as it stands in the original connexion; the other is, the instruction which we may draw from it in a moral point of view for ourselves.

At first sight there appears in the passage, as I have read, something with which we can hardly reconcile with those great principles of justice and goodness, on which we know the divine government is founded. We feel at once disposed to say, that no impartial, merciful Being will punish the children for the iniquity of the fathers: It is our
acknowledge, that guilt is a wholly personal thing, cannot be transferred from one individual to another. He, who commits the sin, answers for it, as he alone. It would be quite as just to reward one man for another's virtue, as to punish one for another's vice. Both principles would be wrong, if they are principles never acted upon by human governments, that pretend to any justice in the government of God. How is it, then, that the Church declares to his people, that she will avenge at the sins of the fathers upon the children of the 3rd or 4th generation? Shall the curse of wickedness go down in long succession from the original sinner, to the innocent offspring, shall punishment flow with the blood from father to son?

Now in order to meet this difficulty, and indicate the passage from the charge of inculcating such principles, we must consider the connexion of the circumstances in which the declaration was made. We must not regard it as a naked or general statement, like the law in a statute book, but as qualified, limited to the purpose for which it was intended, the peculiarity...
nation of the Jewish people.

Here, then, we would remark, that the punishment of idolatry, denounced against the sin of idolatry, against that alone. It is a sanction annexed to the 23rd commandment, which forbids the worship of false gods. Then shall not bow down unto them nor serve them; yet when follows the threat of which we are considering. Now under the circumstances, with the Jews were placed, idolatry was a great dangerous crime, much more so than we at the present day can readily conceive. We live in an age, a part of the world, where the one true God is worshiped by all, one other God is known; at least, where men do not set up idols, where the idols with their own hands have formed. But far different was it with the ancient people of God. They were surrounded, every side by nations, who were given over to the grossest idolatry, damning whom scarcely a faint spark of true religion was kept alive. It is easy to conceive that the Jews were in no small danger of falling into the errors of folly of their neighbors.
for a gross of false worship seems naturally to be more acceptable to an unenlightened people, than a purer of more refined devotion: of history in fact testifies, that notwithstanding the strong guards, which were placed around this weak point, the children of Israel did at the end yield to the influence of their idolatrous neighbors, deserted the service of the true Jehovah... And we must remember that with them, idolatry was not only irreligion, it was rebellion: for living as they did under a theocracy, in which God was their only king, to abandon his worship was the same thing as it would be in citizens or subjects to renounce their allegiance to their government. So that whether we consider it as a civil or religious crime, it was one of such the consequences were must to be dreaded. It was an insult to the majesty of God; it was the undoing of the state. The idolater was to be considered as at once a sinner, a conspirator against his only lawful sovereign. And if we consider that in addition to the nature of the crime, it was one so easily committed, so frequent, we shall hardly wonder
the strong check which was placed against the disposition to abandon the way of heaven and go over to the service of senseless idols.

In the next place we are to remember that this threat of visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children has relation solely to temporal punishments, to punishments connected only with the things of this life, and not at all with the condition of a future life. It has relation to the adversity of ruin of families as such, yea, accordingly, we find it fulfilled in the subsequent history of the Jews in some individual cases. In fact, most, if not all, the sanctions of the Jewish law were of a temporal nature. It is thought by some, that in the Mosaic institutions no traces of the knowledge of a future life are to be found. However this may be, it is certain that the penalty annexed to the 21st commandment has no connection whatever with the final and eternal condition of men; so that the objection, that in the final judgment children will be punished for the sins of their fathers, is
entirely removed. It would indeed be monstrous to allow such a supposition for a moment. No rational being — no one who wishes to do honour to the government of God — can suppose that the sins of fathers are to influence the everlasting destinies of the offspring. — and when we find that temporary rewards & punishments are in accordance with the whole genius of Judaism, we are the more bound to admit them in the particular case before us. — If it be objected that even such punishments are unjust — that even the temporal rewards & punishments are unjust — that even the temporal rewards & punishments are unjust — that even the temporal rewards & punishments are unjust — that even the temporal rewards & punishments are unjust — that even the temporal rewards & punishments are unjust — that even the temporal rewards & punishments are unjust — that even the temporal rewards & punishments are unjust — that even the temporal rewards & punishments are unjust — that even the temporal rewards & punishments are unjust — that even the temporal rewards & punishments are unjust — that 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is no stranger in this particular case, than it is with regard to the common providence of our
Earth. We have no more reason to bring the com-
plaint of injustice against the one, than against
the other. In both it is equally unfounded. If
punishments are a part of the wise arrangements
of Providence for promoting the virtue & improvement
of mankind.

Again, we are to consider, that this visiting the
injustice of fathers upon children to the 39:4 gen-er-
ation was a part of the peculiarities of the Jewish
system & does not belong, in its direct sense, at all
to the present times. It is one of the sanctions
a law temporary in its nature & design. Admis-
sion like the Jewish must of course contain a good
deal that was entirely peculiar, motives, san-
tions, promises & threats must be attached to it, as
would likewise be peculiar, & be applicable to no
other time or age. Such doubts there is the declar-
in my text. It is a part of that particular
system of things, as was enjoined by Moses.
his people, but taken in its literal and direct meaning has no more concern with us, than the ceremonies of the Levitical law.

Now when we put together these considerations, which I have mentioned, when we reflect, that the thing in the text was directed against one sin, the sin of idolatry, and that only, that it was temporary in its nature and lasted no longer than the Mosaic dispensation lasted, that it had reference solely to the things of this life, not at all to the interests or condition of the future and eternal life, when we put together these considerations, I say, we shall I think find nothing in it, that in the least degree impeaches the justice of his government. Our doubts and difficulties will be removed, we shall be persuaded, that with him who is all good and all-merciful, it was a wise and merciful measure. Every remnant of doubt will be scattered, when we find the justice of the O.T. afterwards, when speaking in the broad ground of general principles, uttering such sentences as this, "the son shall not bear the sin of the father, neither shall the father
bear the iniquity of the sin: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, of the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him." Passages like these show what are the great, permanent, general principles of the Mosaic government, that they are like Jehoshaphat himself once, just impartial. Thus far I have considered the text with reference to its original meaning, in order to vindicate it from an unjust and groundless construction, which cast an aspersion on the Scriptures and do dishonour to the moral government of God. I am now to make it the occasion of valuable instruction to ourselves. Although we do not believe that God in a direct eternal way visits the sins of the fathers upon the children, yet from the passage which has been considered, we may take occasion to dwell upon a truth of the highest importance. That truth is, that the character and conduct of parents has in the natural course of things a close intimate connexion with the happiness or unhappiness of their posterity. In this way, it may in-
I do believe, that the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children to the 3rd or 4th generation. God has so constituted us that, as far as we are connected with each other, we in various degrees affect each other's characters and welfare. But in the relation between parents and children, forefather and posterity, this law of the moral world is more strikingly manifested, than in any other relation. Because the connexion is more direct, there are fewer obstacles to diminish or counteract the influence of the one upon the other. Offspring and progenitors are bound to each other by so many ties. They are constituted of some of the best feelings of our nature, that the influences of character and opinion are handed down almost from generation to generation. Thus God has formed us so we cannot escape from this mysterious chain of moral causes and effects. Let us consider a few of the instances which make it manifest that this connexion does exist...
of fathers are visited upon children, is to be traced in the character of a nation or community. It must be evident to every man of observation that the habits and condition of any particular generation are much considerable extent formed and influenced by the generations who have gone before them. You may trace the color with which a stream is tinged at its fountain through many a winding to a remote distance; so you may trace the character, stamped upon a community in its infancy, from generation to generation, developed under various circumstances with more or less strength.

You may see peculiar tastes, habits, ways of thinking, transmitted successively from father to children, forming a sort of common property of a community. If the progenitors are ignorant, bigoted, or ferocious, it will be long before ignorance, bigotry, or ferocity will be effaced from the descendants. If the fathers are enlightened, industrious, enterprising, inspired with a strong love of civil and religious liberty, the same general traits
will be found naturally to pervade the mass of the children. The institutions of one age deeply affect the character of succeeding ages, & even opinions sometimes go down the path of time, as a kind of entailed inheritance. When we consider how many of our feelings, habits there are, for which we can give no better account than that we have received them from our forefathers, we shall be convinced of the reality of the influence to which I refer. Now it is manifest, that in this way the sins of the fathers may be visited upon the children. Vice, wretchedness, barbarity may be thus preserved & perpetuated almost indefinitely, by the wickedness, narrowness of view, degradation of feeling may remain centuries after the original cause from which they flowed has ceased. But we must consider this subject in a more direct & practical point of view; as it regards the immediate relation of parents to their own children. Here the tie is more close, & the views more affecting. When we contemplate the influence & in a general domineering way the character & conduct of forefathers
may have upon the welfare of descendants, the
connexion is by no means so striking & monitory, as if
we were it operating in the bosom of one family, &
sunning along the chain that links the father to
his own son. Here, says in the course of G's government
the sins of the fathers are sometimes in an awful
sense visited in the children. i.e. the vices of par-
ents frequently affect deeply & deplorably the char-
acter & condition of their offspring. The curse descends
& blights what should have been preserved pure &
blissful.

Doubt of this, ask where are the instances
of these sad effects of vice? Take then the instance
of a parent, who is a drunkard & debauched. Think
how he sins without contaminating his children?
No, he transmits to them disease, squalidness, &
perhaps guilt. They receive, it may be, bodies en-
feebled & emaciated by a parent's vices; & certainly
their minds, which were designed to be pure of the
breeze of a summer's dawn, are polluted god-
bed of their sweetness, before they themselves know
what pollution or innocence is. & even before their
moral feelings are exercised, they are blunted
made powerless; actions, left to the in-
structive judgment of an undefiled heart, they
would have abhorred & shuddered at; they soon
learn to regard with complacency & delight. From
the first opening of the sportful heart, they re-
ceive an inheritance of corrupt moral feelings, are
surrounded by the pestilence of a profligate exam-
ple. And what is the consequence? As they grow
up to manhood, they in all probability grow up
to the same vice as has been continually before their
eyes, of the very children, who under a purewatch-
ful discipline might have blessed society & gone
to their graves heaven only lamented, are given over
perhaps to disease, wretchedness & infamy. Omp,
may we not say, that in such a case, the sins of
the fathers are visited upon the children? that
the dreadful effects of vice descend like a poison
from parents to offspring? & thus by a sort of moral
necessity, the almost insurmountable necessity arising
from a bad example, is the daily influence of vice.
children are made to feel the iniquity of their fathers perhaps to the 3d or 4th generation.

Again, think of the irreligious parent—the Sabbath breaker—the profane man: will he not be likely to transmit a curse to his children? I will not if his reckless impiety throw a deadly shade over the principles, feelings, which might have been maturing something good in their hearts? Imagine yourselves a home, in which echoes with profaneness, scoffing at religion—a family, in the midst of which nothing better is heard or known, than the most profane contempt of all good and serious things—what do you, must become of children at such a home in such a family? When God is blasphemed, is the Sabbath deified by the parents, will not the effects of this daring iniquity reach to the offspring? Yes, you need not rest your imagination to conceive of this: facts will supply you with a more dismaying picture than I can draw. The children of such families are
in truth to be pitied; for at an age when they have no moral precepts over themselves, the seeds of vice begins a future guilt are born in their hearts; when they arrive at manhood, they are let loose in the world prepared for crime, utterly destitute of every principle of piety to God or morality to man. And this too perhaps without any fault of their own, solely because the ruinous and fatal consequences of the father's iniquity have come down to them.

Once more, there are parents, who bring their children up in ignorance, or that too even among us, where school instruction is brought to the door of every cottage. Now the iniquity of such parents is dreadfully visited on their children; for the young, who come to maturity without the common elements of the simplest knowledge, will scarcely ever be able to rise to respectability or usefulness in life, for let them take what course they will, this state of ignorance will be wanted or must be had, if they would be of
any service to themselves or others. The parent, who brings his child up in ignorance, should remember that it is his own ingratitude which is visited upon his offspring.

These remarks may serve to throw upon us in a practical sense the impiety of the fathers may be said to be visited on the children. And then solemn, how awful, truly, is the admonition with these reflections suggest— an admonition however with too many neglect, of themselves lend a helping hand to corrupt the youthful mind.

Let me entreat you not to leave to your children an inheritance of shame of sin, of ignorance, impiety, profaneness, & guilt, an inheritance which at some future day they will look upon only to curse those from whom they derived it. It is an agonizing to a great degree to have them think of you only to bless you, as the source of their misery & happiness. — be of this number, if they must be wicked, let it be their own ingratitude, not yours — let them
not turn round long, all this wretched
iritation of your sins upon us. If

At home, June 22, 1823—afternoon.