

PUBLIC

THANKSGIVING,

ITS OBJECTS AND RESULTS:

A DISCOURSE,

DELIVERED IN THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,

ON THANKSGIVING DAY, NOVEMBER 18th, 1858,

BY SAMUEL W. FISHER.

SYRACUSE:
PRINTED BY J. E. MASTERS,
STAR BUILDINGS.

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SERMON.

SYRACUSE, Nov. 22d, 1858.

REV. SAM'L W, FISHER, D. D., PRESIDENT HAMILTON COLLEGE—

Dear Sir:—Having listened with very great pleasure to the highly appropriate and instructive Sermon delivered by you in this city on Thanksgiving Day, (the 18th inst.,) and believing that the views then so happily presented merit a wide promulgation, we respectfully request a copy for publication.

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| S. B. CANFIELD, | E. W. LEAVENWORTH, |
| ISRAEL S. SPENCER, | T. B. FITCH, |
| R. HEBBARD, | ALLEN MUNROE, |
| SAMUEL MEAD, | H. A. DILLAYE, |
| H. RHOADES, | D. PRATT, |
| HENRY GIFFORD, | WM. H. ALEXANDER. |

PS. CXLVII : 7, 8, 12—14, 19, 20.—Sing unto the Lord with thanksgiving ; sing praise upon the harp unto our God ; who covereth the heaven with clouds ; who prepareth rain for the earth ; who maketh grass to grow upon the mountains. Praise the Lord, O, Jerusalem ; praise thy God, O, Zion ; for he hath strengthened the bars of thy gates ; he hath blessed thy children within thee. He maketh peace in thy borders, and filleth thee with the finest of the wheat. He sheweth his word unto Jacob ; his statutes and his judgments unto Israel. He hath not dealt so with any nation ; and as for his judgments, they have not known them. Praise ye the Lord.

Thanksgiving is one of the most delightful and reasonable of our duties. To show no sense of kindness received, to enjoy the gift and never recognize gratefully the giver, is to degrade ourselves below the brutes. "The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib ; but Israel doth not know—my people doth not consider," is the comprehensive description of a corrupt and sinful nation. The lark soars and sings his matin of praise ; but the warm gush of grateful love from an intelligent spirit is worth more, in God's estimate, than all the melody and instinctive praise with which brute songsters encircle the earth. He who hath in him no workings of gratitude towards his heavenly father, is "fit for treason, stratagems and spoils ;" but he is not fit for heaven.

True, say some—all true ; but what is the use of these *State occasions* for thanksgiving ? Cannot we give thanks at our firesides every day, and in our churches every week ? Why summon a whole people to drop their business and enter the house of God once a year merely to do what may just as well be done at home or on the Sabbath ? This is a fair question, and I mean to give it an explicit answer. The custom of an annual thanksgiving has grown up in most of the States of this confederacy. It has made its way and established itself, it spite of the opposi-

tion and the ridicule of infidelity; and surely there must be something in the thing itself—some grand fundamental idea underlying it, or some happy results and influences flowing from it, to have carried it thus far over the prejudices of multitudes, and commended it to the vast majority of the wisest and best minds in the nation. Now, it seems to me, we need not look far to discover the reasons which justify the custom, and which will continue to strengthen it precisely in proportion to the reign of just ideas and profound religious feeling in the minds and hearts of the people.

One of these reasons, and one, to my mind, of great force, is the fact that it is a recognition *by the State*, of the sovereignty of God over nations. One of the most serious charges ever brought against our government is that it is atheistic. The formal separation between the Church and the State in our country is so entire that, at first sight, it seems as if there was in fact no connection of the latter with *religion*, as the ultimate basis of all true prosperity. If this were indeed so, then woe to the State, and woe to all our constitutions of government. For no truth is more certain, than that a government like ours must derive its authority ultimately from God; and when it is not sustained by the firm basis of religious principle in the people, it will become so corrupt as either to fall by its own weight, or resort to the iron mace of despotism to prop itself up. All nations have sought to ally the Church to the State as a means of support. You cannot find a purely atheistic government, in ancient or modern days, that has stood for any length of time. Heathen or Christian, it is strong very much in proportion to the hold it has obtained through the recognition of some form of religion upon the consciences of men. Despots stand up as the Lord's anointed, and the multitude crown them as such. Let the masses of the people in any land, however thick may be their mental darkness, become thoroughly persuaded their King is the *devil's anointed*, and nothing but sheer brute force, nothing but cannon and bayonets, could keep him there an hour. But in our government we have no such alliances with religion; we have no State Church, no State religion, no religious tests of office, unless the

oath may be regarded as such. Yet, it is undeniably true, that no government ever formed stands so much in need of the sanction and support of religion as this of ours. Take away genuine religious principle, and you snap the hoops that hold us together. To secure this, the church lives and works; but she lives and works unpatronized and unrecognized by the State. She is a mighty force within the State—the life that keeps the State from putrefaction, at the very time that the latter moves on, as if there were no such power essential to her existence; as if it could live and flourish without God and the great principles of his gospel. Now, having assumed this position, there is danger that multitudes, and especially our public men, will forget the absolute dependence of government upon the Divine benediction; that, as there is no State religion, so religion will come to be regarded as not necessary to the vitality and success of the State itself. And, therefore, while we would deprecate all alliances with the Church on the part of the State, we yet think that the latter should in some way express its sense of the importance of the former; that it should in some way occasionally demonstrate the fact, that while it discards all religious establishments, it does not thereby intend to discard religion as vital to the highest welfare of the nation. Thus it was in that memorable hour, when, in the convention that formed our national Constitution, there was distraction and darkness, and sectional prejudice, and the experiment of our Union seemed about to end ere it had fairly begun, Franklin rose and moved that they should seek Divine guidance. This, I say, was a practical recognition of the Providence of God in the great business of laying the foundations of government. It was the word that opened the windows of heaven and poured daylight upon the path along which the wisest Senators had stumbled in darkness. And so I value these annual thanksgivings, because they hold up the idea of God as supreme in the State as well as in the Church; because, while they commit the State to no form of sectarianism, they yet declare to all men that our civil institutions rest upon the conscience of the people and the Divine sanctions of our holy religion. When the masses of this country become so corrupt as to commit

themselves to the rule of atheists, of men who care nothing for the sanctions of religion, and recognize no Divine power capable of judging nations, then farewell liberty! farewell prosperity! farewell intelligence! farewell peace! And when the supreme magistrate of the State, or the nation, giving utterance to the sentiments of the Legislature, or the Congress, calls upon the people to meet in their sanctuaries and give thanks to Almighty God as the author of our civil and temporal blessings, as well as of those which spring directly from the hopes of religion in respect to another world, I adopt the recommendation with my whole heart, and recognize in it the fact that our government seeks to establish itself upon the only foundations on which it can stand—the authority of God and the vitalizing force of religious principle in the hearts of the people.

I find another reason for this annual festival *in its tendency to refine and ennoble our patriotism.* Patriotism has its first spring in material associations. Its first inspiration is the breath of our native air, the garniture of our native skies, the scenery of our early home. Amidst these associations as the superficial soil, the tender roots of our love of country nestle and grow. But these do not nurture the highest, noblest form of patriotism. As the mind grows, as the soul expands, it demands something higher, richer, nobler than these. Institutions, government, the religious, the literary, the social life of the nation—these form the elements of the highest patriotism. A man may love the scenery and the air of his youthful home, while yet he curses the influences and the men that have darkened the light of the fireside and spread moral desolation over the landscape identified in his imagination with the hopes and joys of early years. What was it made the cry, "I am a Roman citizen," thrill the soul of the humblest citizen of the great Republic? It was not so much Italy and her sunny skies, and Rome, with her seven hills, as it was Roman institutions: the life, the power, the freedom, the science that animated her government and flowed through every artery and vein of her civil, social and religious life. And when these perished, submerged in that sea of blood, crime and terror created primarily by the abandonment of her early religious faith, and

then by her imperial usurpers, patriotism died. Rome stood there still; her hills bore up the grandest burden of palaces and temples the world had ever seen; the same skies, in all their former loveliness, looked down upon her. Italy was still a Paradise of beauty in nature and in art, the loveliest land the sun visited in his wide circuit. But the noblest form of patriotism had died; the name of "Roman citizen" brought a blush to the cheek of the pure and the thoughtful; the life that gave Rome her glory had gone out forever. And if you look around you here in our own land, you will see the same truth illustrated. The pilgrims carried their true country in their hearts and planted it on these shores. Their institutions made their country. They fled from hill-sides and valleys they loved so well, because the social air was tainted with civil and religious oppression; and that was their country where they could have freedom to worship God. Thousands and millions have followed them hither to identify themselves with institutions that gave a new life to patriotism, and made the name of American citizen a glory and a defence, on the land and the sea. Our patriotism clings not so much to soil, to place, to climate, as to our institutions. We regard, as an insufferable libel, the sentiment of an eccentric Senator, "my native State is my country." We pass from the hills to the plains; from the ocean to the lakes; from the cold, rock-bound north, to the mild and genial south; from the slopes that look down upon the Atlantic to those which hear the roar of the Pacific; and, wherever the stars and stripes float, and "Hail Columbia" is sung, and the great Declaration is acknowledged, there our patriotism finds its home.

Now, whatever will reach and ennoble these institutions, around which and through which patriotism sends its roots, tends to refine and deepen the true love of country. And these annual thanksgivings, allying the State to religion, present to us the form of civil justice arrayed in robes through which are interwoven the golden threads of religious faith, and bending lowly before the king of kings. Thus do I wish myself and my children—thus does every good man wish—to view the State; not as a cold, bloodless, atheistic machine, but as a life associated in its

deepest convictions and most effective workings with religion and with God. So will patriotism blend in one glowing picture the State, the family and the church — while religion sheds upon them a richer light, around them a purer atmosphere, than any other spot on earth enjoys.

“ There is a land, of every land the pride,
Beloved by heaven o’er all the world beside;
Where brighter suns dispense serener light
And milder moons emparadise the night.
There is a spot of earth supremely blest,
A dearer, sweeter spot, than all the rest,
Where man, creation’s tyrant, casts aside
His sword and sceptre, pageantry and pride;
While in his softened looks benignly blend
The sire, the son, the husband, brother, friend.
Where shall that *land*, that *spot of earth*, be found?
Art thou a man?—a patriot?—look around!
O thou shalt find, where’er thy footsteps roam,
That land thy country, and that spot thy home!”

I must not pass by in this enumeration of the public benefits of our thanksgiving days, *those happy family re-unions to which they give rise*. Domestic attachments assume the form and rank of virtues in our social life. The family is the earliest school, the embryo church and State. Here patriotism and religion begin their noblest work. These early affections that link heart to heart are as strong as they are beautiful. And as the family scatters, especially in such a land as ours, it is a useful and a blessed thing to keep bright the links of the golden chain that binds a man to his old home and friends. This chain holds many a young man back from destruction. It held George Washington fast to virtue and integrity amidst the corruptions of frontier life. And when, on these thanksgiving days, so many families gather again under the old roof, around the venerable forms that sheltered and nursed and guided their youth, the sun in its course looks down upon no brighter or happier scene. Hither one son comes from the city, and another from the far distant frontier, where he has toiled and prospered; and now, after years of absence, the day has arrived when sons and daughters and grand-children shall enter again the old homestead. Changes have passed upon the household since last they all met. The brightest and the loveliest, angel hands carried in its budding youth to the father’s house on high; and the memory of

such an one falls now upon the remainder like the holy hush of a better world. That mother, then erect and blooming, is now bent and feeble. That father, still strong, it may be, begins to wear the silver glory of age above his brow, and covets the old family bible, with its large, clear type. Here, too, is one who went forth a wayward boy, full of a restless ambition; now a manly form, chastened by stern experience, and thrilling with the glow of early memories. And so they all gather around the fireside; they kneel again at the same altar; they sit around the same table, and sing the same old hymns, and tell over the story of their youthful hours and their subsequent wanderings. The grand-children play over the same games their parents played; while that which consecrates this scene is the thought that all their early blessings, and all their after prosperity, have been due to the loving kindness of their heavenly Father, and that this is the day on which they rejoice to acknowledge and deepen in their hearts the sense of his great goodness. Will any man see in all this merely a scene of social festivity? or shall we not behold in these thanksgiving re-unions a higher, a religious element—an element powerful to educate and refine the heart, to re-chisel the loved names on the tablet of memory, and strengthen in the soul the pure influences of the fireside, and lend a deepening interest to the themes of religion, and so prepare these hearts for a better and holier life?

To all this I may add, that it is a good thing thus to have a day set apart occasionally for thanksgiving, because of its *direct influence on the hearts of those who observe it*. Thanksgiving is a glad, ennobling exercise. It opens the heart, it expands the affections, it smooths the brow. Men are naturally grumblers. They take care upon them as a burden; they look oftener at the dark than at the bright side. They are ready enough in enumerating their trials, but dull enough at re-calling their blessings. It is well for them sometimes to forget the trials and look at the goodness of God. It is well for you, toilworn man, to lay off the ragged jacket of complaint, and come up here to-day clothed in the garments of praise. It is well for you, lawyers, who walk the streets as if you had the court house, as well as the sharp practice inside of it, upon you, to lay aside your

briefs and forget your clients; to re-call God's mercies, and lift up your hearts in thankfulness that his Divine justice has not cut you off, and that you have an advocate with the Father, even Christ the Righteous. It is well for you, merchants, trembling in your shoes at the news from Europe, in your hearts complaining that business revives so slowly, to cast up your accounts with *Him*; see what a wonderful debt he has forgiven you, and what unspeakable kindness he has shown you, and what a pearl of great price he has given you. It is well for you, mechanics, to forget the high price of provisions, and come see what glorious provision Jesus hath made in rearing a celestial mansion and spreading a celestial table for your souls. It is well for you, physicians, to come here and see what the great Physician hath done for you. It is well for you, mothers, careful and troubled about your domestic concerns, to come here and thank God there is something, a good part, which will never be taken from you. Praise will disburden you all of care. Thanksgiving will lighten your heart; you will look with a kindlier eye upon your neighbor; you will cease to envy the seemingly more fortunate; you will have a more genuine sympathy for the distressed and the destitute; you will realize on how high a position of blessing God hath placed you and yours. With these and such like considerations do we vindicate the policy of these annual thanksgivings.

And now, as this is a State thanksgiving, let us look for a few moments at some of the thoughts which our character and history as a State suggest, as adapted to inspire the spirit of thankfulness.

1st. Our position is commanding for progress and power. Position has much to do with national development. Look at the points of greatest interest in the world, and you will see that most of them are possessed of great natural advantages. Rome, Athens, Constantinople, Calcutta, London, hold positions that in themselves are full of power. This is the first State in the Union; first in numbers, first in wealth, first in foreign and internal commerce, first in mechanic arts and industrial products. This pre-eminence is due, in part, it is true, to the wisdom and foresight of our Statesmen, and the character of those who early settled here; but in part, also, to our position and material relations. On the west and northwest our shores are laved by

the waters of two inland seas—seas which form part of the most magnificent expansions of fresh water on the globe, which penetrate half a continent, and bear on their bosom a commerce already vast—a commerce destined soon to surpass all that Rome possessed in the height of her glory. On the north, the St. Lawrence lingers for a while, meandering amid her thousand isles, ere she bears the sparkling tribute of our lakes to the all-containing ocean. On the east flows the Hudson, rivalling the Rhine in its varied and picturesque scenery; most remarkable for the distance that the tide ebbs and flows between its banks, constituting it a grand highway of commerce; while at its mouth is an estuary, in beauty, equal to the bay of Naples, in capacity, ample for the navies of the world to ride in safety. In addition to these natural facilities for commerce, the genius of enterprise has created others not less important in this age of progress. The grand system of artificial navigation, now almost perfected, with the lines of iron that traverse the State in every direction, bring all parts of the State into neighborhood and connect the lakes with the ocean. With such a position, our relations to the Union are intimate and full of power. We give to, and receive from all. Stretching from Canada to the Atlantic, with her head and neck thrust down between the northeast and the middle and south, this State ever has exerted a most decisive influence on the policy and prosperity of the nation. With such a position, with a character for intelligence, enterprise and integrity corresponding therewith, her influence must continue great, and often decisive, in all questions of national importance.

In material wealth and population, New York is equally great. Two hundred years ago the State contained 6,000 inhabitants, exclusive of the Aborigines; to-day it numbers nearly four million. Of its twenty-seven million acres, fourteen million are under cultivation. Its chief city, the Metropolis of the Union, already taking rank among the largest in the world, like a queen surrounded by her maids of honor is ministered to and attended by a train of cities and towns beautiful, populous and intelligent. In manufactures, agriculture and mechanic arts, our progress has been immense since the Revolution; and yet, not greater than the advance in the elements of a higher civilization. The news-

papers and periodicals number over seven hundred. Our school houses and schools rise to twelve thousand. The church edifices are more than five thousand—in value worth thirty millions—with an actual membership of nearly eight hundred thousand.

In one respect, indeed, we have not kept pace with this otherwise rapid progress. In collegiate and professional education we are behind States far inferior to us in wealth and population. Out of some twenty-two hundred students in colleges and professional schools in 1855, only fifteen hundred were receiving their education in the institutions of this State; that is, the great State of New York, with all her enterprise and pecuniary resources, was dependant in that year upon foreign institutions for the higher kind of education of nearly one-third of all her students.

But with this marked exception, the progress of the State has been wonderful. In public and private resources, in position, in material civilization, in those things which constitute a refined and elevated society, in churches and school-houses, commerce and agriculture, science and art, New York is a nation by itself—greater, richer, stronger in all respects, than the whole confederation at the Revolution. Her blood is the mingled richness of various nations. Gov. Seymour informs me that no less than eight distinct nations were represented in the leading families of this State at the Revolution. Her history is brilliant with great names and great deeds. Distinguished in war, she is still more distinguished for the triumphs of peace. If religion supporting an intelligent freedom shall continue to purify her heart, who can predict the greatness and the glory of her future.

Meanwhile, this day we look out upon a people greatly prospered. It has been a year of abundance in the products of the earth. A good crop is fundamental to our prosperity. It carries its benediction to every habitation; it feeds alike the merchant and the artisan. Nothing can so well repair the breaches in individual fortunes, alleviate the distress occasioned by the commercial revulsion of last fall and winter, as the plenteous gifts that the earth pours into the lap of the husbandman. Even that ebbing of the tide of commerce has its blessings. Solid greatness and lofty integrity grow up slowly amidst the discipline of adversity, Trouble intervenes to prepare the heart for

the higher influences of religion. And so the mingling of the prosperous and the adverse gives solidity to our enterprise, curbs our presumption, chastens our vain glory, and prepares us to appreciate the superiority of that elevation of character, which no earthly power can take from us, to that material prosperity which at any moment may take wings and fly away.

Looking, then, at our position, history and prospects, at the abundance that has crowned the labors of the husbandman, and the pathway open to the success of the artisan; at our commerce and enterprise, at our churches and schools, and all the great elements of a secular and a christian civilization that are in our possession, and surely we have good reason as a State to give thanks to God for this fair heritage.

Nor can we forget, to-day, that we are a free people. We dwell under our own vine and fig-tree, with none to molest or make us afraid. We have entered into that great treasure of freedom for which our fathers fought. They were among the foremost in the great contest. What they had won for themselves, they gave to their bondmen. In 1799 they commenced that system of gradual emancipation which, in forty years, left but four slaves on our soil. Other States, with as noble elements and as true patriots as ours, have yet to work out the problem of their destiny amidst the embarrassments and the malign influence of a subject class. We, untrammelled as the eagle and free as the winds of heaven, behold the great principles of republicanism working their way in the fullest developement of individual manhood, and social and religious life. Liberty! the type in God's holy word of the higher state of his ransomed and sanctified sons; Liberty! which in every human heart hath a cord that thrills to the music of its name; Liberty! the jewel for which nations have panted, thrones have been toppled down, and fields have been fertilized with human blood;—Liberty hath here her full grown civil life. With her hands full of benedictions, she sits at our firesides; she toils in our factories; she plans in our counting rooms; she plants and sows in our fields and shouts the harvest home; she takes the hand of the stranger from other lands, and bids him go forth into this great domain and win a heritage for his sons and daughters; she pleads in our court

rooms ; she worships in our churches ; she teaches in our schools ; she inspires our orators ; she breathes into the great heart of this people the idea and the spirit that has made our land the refuge of the oppressed, the home of the free, and the grandest nation in its position and prospects time has ever known. And as to-day we render thanks to Almighty God for this our State heritage, we should be forgetful of one of the richest elements of our prosperity, and untrue to the memory of the heroic dead, if we did not thank him for the priceless inheritance of civil and religious freedom which he hath given us.

Let us, then, give thanks to God this day for a wise and a free civil government ; for a land so rich in all the material elements of prosperity, and a climate propitious to the highest efforts of man ; for all the arts and comforts of civilized society ; for the opportunity afforded to every child of our State to acquire sufficient knowledge for all the ordinary purposes of life ; for the open pathway of advancement along which the son of poverty may rise till he reaches the highest and most useful positions ; for the peace that spreads its quiet influence around us ; for the abundance of food for man and beast, and the absence of any great financial distress ; for the health that reigns, and the absence of the pestilence that walketh in darkness ; for Sabbath schools and churches opening their doors over all our territory ; for the Sabbath as yet preserved to us, and all those blessings of time which attend and follow a people who keep the Sabbath holy. These are some of our temporal and spiritual blessings. But that which crowns all the rest—that which consecrates all the rest—is the precious gospel of Jesus, the Son of God. Those are but the fringe, while this is the royal robe that clothes our nakedness. Men of this world, with their miserable philosophy, invert God's order, and make the gospel but the means ; and temporal prosperity, freedom, intelligence, the end. But in God's sight the earthly benedictions are the least of all his mercies. This glorious gospel, which Greece and Rome knew not in their days of empire, introduces us into the temple of the living God—to the fellowship of angels, and the companionship of the spirits of the just made perfect—to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood that speaketh better things than

that of Abel. This unfolds to us a life and an immortality which the heathen, in their highest flights of fancy and their sublimest reasonings, never satisfactorily attained. This gives peace to the conscience burdened with sin ; this gives strength to the soul to rise above the accidents of time and sense, and live as seeing him who is invisible ; this enters the hearts of men and subdues their evil passions, and teaches them the beauty of true holiness ; this makes our homes the centres and the fountains of high and holy influences ; this produces temperance and charity for those who are in distress ; this comforts us in the time of sorrow, and gives us songs in the house of our pilgrimage ; this inspires us to seek the highest good of our fellow-men for time and eternity ; this reconciles us to God, and, in the hour when heart and flesh fail us, this opens to us the vision of glory and compasses us round with angelic attendants, and scattering the darkness of the grave, makes its once gloomy portals the open passage to the life of heaven.

It is a fact of peculiar significance—a consideration adapted to quicken the spirit of thanksgiving—that within the past year this gospel has to an unusual extent become the wisdom of God and the power of God unto salvation. Never before—not even in the time of Whitfield and Edwards—has this land enjoyed so wide-spread and remarkable an outpouring of the spirit of God. Unheralded by the parade of preparation, anticipating the desires and efforts of the church, it came down like the dew in its gentleness—it announced its coming by its manifest effects on the hearts of men. Breaking down the artificial walls which the spirit of sect had built up between the various divisions of the tribes of Israel, it vindicated its divine mission by revealing the substantial unity of the followers of Jesus. For the first time in their history, multitudes of christians have penetrated the meaning of their masters prayer—“*that they all may be one* ;” while hundreds of thousands of souls brought out of darkness into the marvellous light of the gospel, to-day bless God for a redemption wrought out in Christ Jesus, and for a redemption appropriated by faith to their own possession. Let us, then, with one voice and one spirit, sing unto the Lord with thanksgiving, for that he hath not only given us this gospel, but attended its proclamation so mightily with the power of the Holy Ghost.