

Sermons on Several Subjects

by
Rev. William Paley

Sermon XIII "Sins of the Fathers upon the Children"

"You shall have no other gods before Me. . . . you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD [Yahweh] your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me . . ."
Joshua 20:3-6 (NKJV)

These words form part of the second commandment. It need not be denied that there is an apparent harshness in this declaration with which the minds even of good and pious men have been sometimes sensibly affected. To visit the sins of the fathers upon the children even to the third and fourth generation is not, at first sight at least, so reconcilable to our apprehensions of justice and equity as that we should expect to find it in a solemn publication of the will of God.

I think, however, that a fair and candid interpretation of the words before us will remove a great deal of the difficulty and of the objection which lies against them. My exposition of the passage is contained in these four articles: First, that the denunciation and sentence relate to the sin of idolatry in particular, if not to that alone. Secondly, that it relates to temporal, or more properly speaking, to family prosperity and adversity. Thirdly, that it relates to the Jewish economy, in that particular administration of a visible providence under which they lived. Fourthly, that at no rate does it affect, or was ever meant to affect, the acceptance or salvation of individuals in a future life.

First, I say, [is] that the denunciation and sentence relate to the sin of idolatry in particular, if not to that alone.

The prohibition of the commandment is pointed against that particular offence and no other. The first and second commandment may be considered as one, inasmuch as they relate to one subject, or nearly so. For many ages and by many churches they were put together and considered as one commandment. The subject to which they both relate is false worship, or the worship of false gods. This is the single subject to which the prohibition of both commandments relates, the single class of sins which is guarded against.

Although, therefore, the expression be "the sins of the fathers," without specifying in that clause what sins, yet in fair construction, and indeed in common construction, we may well suppose it to be that kind and class of sins for the restraint of which the command was given and against which its force was directed. The punishment threatened by any law must naturally be applied to the offence particularly forbidden by that law and not to offences in general.

One reason why you may not probably perceive the full weight of what I am saying is that we do not at this day understand or think much concerning the sin of idolatry or the necessity or importance of God's delivering a specific, a solemn, a terrifying sentence against it. The sin itself has in a manner ceased from among us. Other sins, God knows, have come in its place, but this [sin of idolatry] in a great measure is withdrawn from our observation, whereas in the age of the world and among those people, when and to whom the ten commandments were promulgated [formally proclaimed], false worship, or the worship of false gods, was the sin which lay at the root and foundation of every other.

The worship of the one true God, in opposition to the vain and false and wicked religions which had then obtained among mankind, was the grand point to be inculcated. It was the contest then carried on, and the then world as well as future ages were deeply interested in it. History testifies, experience testifies, that there cannot be true morality, or true virtue, where there is false religion, false worship, false gods; for which reason you find that this great article (for such it then was) was not only made the subject of a command but placed at the head of all the rest.

Nay, [even] more, from the whole strain and tenor of the Old Testament there is good reason to believe that the maintaining in the world the knowledge and worship of the one true God--holy, just, and good--in contradiction to the idolatrous worship which prevailed, was the great and principal scheme and end of the Jewish polity and most singular constitution. As the Jewish nation, therefore, was to be the depository of and the means of preserving in the world the knowledge and worship of the one true God (when it was lost and darkened in other countries), it became of the last importance to the execution of this purpose that this nation should be warned and deterred by every moral means from sliding themselves into those practices, those errors, and that crime against which it was the very design of their institution that they should strive and contend.

The form of expression used in the second commandment, and in this very part of it, much favors the interpretation for which I argue, namely, that the sentence or threatening was aimed against the sin of idolatry alone. The words are, "For I, the LORD [Yahweh] your God am a *jealous* God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children." These two things, of being jealous and of visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children, are spoken of God in conjunction, and in such a manner as to show that they refer to one subject. Now jealousy implies a rival. God's being jealous means that he would not allow any other god to share with himself in the worship of his creatures. That is what is imported in the word jealous, and, therefore, that is the subject to which the threat of visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children is applied. According to this interpretation, the following expressions of the commandment, "them that hate me and them that love me," signify them that forsake and desert my worship and religion for the worship and religion of other gods, and them who adhere firmly and faithfully to my worship in opposition to every other worship.

My second proposition is that the threat relates to temporal or, more properly speaking, to family prosperity and adversity.

In the history of the Jews, most particularly of their kings (of whom, as was to be expected, we read and know the most), we meet with repeated instances of this, [of] some threat being both pronounced and executed against their family prosperity, and for this very same cause--their desertion of the true God and going over (after the example of the nations around them) to the worship of false gods.

Among various other instances, one is very memorable and very direct to our present argument, and that is the instance of Ahab, who of all the idolatrous kings of Israel was the worst. The punishment threatened and denounced against his crime was this: "Behold, I will bring evil upon you, and will take away your posterity, and will make your house like the house of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, and like the house of Baasha the son of Ahijah, because of the provocation with which you have provoked Me to anger, and made Israel to sin" (1 Kings 21:21,22).

The provocation, you will observe, was the introduction of false gods into his kingdom. And the Prophet [Elijah] here not only threatens Ahab with the ruin and destruction of his family as the punishment of his sin, but points out to him two instances of great families having been destroyed for the very same reason. You afterwards read the full accomplishment of this sentence by the hand of Jehu.

Now I consider these instances as, in fact, the execution of the second commandment, and as showing what sense that commandment bore. But if it were so, [that is], if the force of the threat was that (in the distribution and assignment of temporal prosperity and adversity to families and to a man's race) respect would be had [shown] to his fidelity to God or his rebellion against him in this article of false and idolatrous worship, then is the punishment (as to the nature and justice of it) agreeable to what we see in the constant and ordinary course of God's providence.

The wealth and grandeur of families are commonly owing not to the present generation but to the industry, wisdom, or good conduct of a former ancestor. The poverty and depression of a family are not imputable to the present representatives of the family but to the fault, the extravagance, or mismanagement of those who went before them, of which, nevertheless, they feel the effects. All this we see every day, and we see it without surprise or complaint.

What, therefore, accords with the state of things under the ordinary dispensations of Providence, as to temporal prosperity and adversity, was by a special Providence and by a particular sentence ordained to be the mode--and probably a most efficacious mode--of restraining and correcting an offence from which it was of the utmost importance to deter the Jewish nation.

My third proposition is that this commandment related particularly to the Jewish economy.

In the 28th chapter of Deuteronomy you find Moses, with prodigious solemnity, pronouncing the blessings and cursings which awaited the children of Israel under the dispensation to which they were called; and you will observe that these blessings consisted altogether of worldly benefits, and these curses of worldly punishments.

Moses in effect declared that with respect to this peculiar people, when they came into their own land, there should be among them such a signal and extraordinary and visible interposition of Providence as to shower down blessings and happiness and prosperity upon those who adhered faithfully to the God of their fathers, and to punish with exemplary misfortunes those who disobeyed and deserted him. Such, Moses told them, would be the order of God's government over them. This dispensation dealt in temporal rewards and punishments. And the second commandment, which made the temporal prosperity and adversity of families depend (in many instances) upon the religious behavior of the ancestor of such families, was a branch and consistent part of that dispensation.

But lastly and principally, my fourth proposition is that at no rate does it affect, or was ever meant to affect, the acceptance or salvation of individuals in a future life.

My proof of this proposition I draw from the 18th chapter of Ezekiel. It should seem from this chapter that some of the Jews at that time had put too large an interpretation upon the second commandment, for the Prophet puts this question into the mouth of his countrymen, he supposes them to be thus, as it were, expostulating with God: "Ye say, 'Why? Does not the son bear the iniquity of the father?'" (That is the question he makes them ask.) Now take notice of the answer. The answer which the prophet delivers in the name of God is this: "When the son has done that which is lawful and right, and has kept all my statutes and has done them, he shall surely live. The soul that sins, *it* shall die. The son shall *not* bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon *him*" (verses 19,20).

In the preceding part of the chapter the Prophet has dilated [expounded] a good deal, and very expressly indeed, upon the same subject, all to confirm the great truth which he lays down: "Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father so also the soul of the son is mine; the soul that sins, *it* shall die" [verse 4]. Now apply this to the second commandment and the only way of reconciling them together is by supposing that the second commandment related solely to temporal, or rather family, adversity and prosperity, and Ezekiel's chapter to the rewards and punishments of a future state.

When to this is added what has been observed, [1] that the threat in the second commandment belongs to the crime forbidden in that commandment, namely, the going over to false gods and deserting the one true God; and [2] that it also formed a part or branch of the Mosaic system, which dealt throughout in temporal rewards and punishments; [and [3] which were] at that time dispensed by a particular providence; [then] when these considerations are laid together much of the difficulty and much of the objection, which our own minds may have raised against this commandment, will, I hope, be removed.

Sermon XIII, "Sins of the Fathers upon the Children," in Rev. William Paley, *Sermons on Several Subjects* (Philadelphia: Hopkins and Earle, 1808). **Note:** The text has not been modified, except that punctuation and KJV-era pronouns and verb forms have been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.