

## THEODORE PARKER



THEODORE PARKER, American theologian and preacher, was born at Lexington, Mass., Aug. 24, 1810, and died at Florence, Italy, May 10, 1860. Educated at Harvard University and at the Cambridge Divinity School, he was in 1837 ordained pastor of the Second Unitarian Church at West Roxbury, Mass., but his extremely radical views excited opposition in his own denomination, and, separating himself from the conservative element, he soon became known as a radical religious leader. In 1844, a controversy arose among the Unitarians because some of his brother clergymen in Boston had exchanged pulpits with him; this resulted in his leaving West Roxbury and forming, in 1846, the Twenty-eighth Congregational Society, which for many years held its services in the Boston Music Hall. Parker was outspoken in his opposition to the Mexican War, to slavery and intemperance, as well as a staunch champion of the rights of labor. He was indicted in the United States court in 1854 for resistance to the fugitive slave law, but was never brought to trial. Parker was for years a factor in American thought, in matters both social and religious. In theological questions he not infrequently aroused opposition by his manner of statement rather than by the thing stated. He was a voluminous writer, but the ethical value of his work is superior to its literary worth. Among his works are "Discourse on Matters pertaining to Religion" (1842); "Sermons for the Times" (1842); "Critical and Miscellaneous Writings" (1843); "Theism, Atheism, and the Popular Theology" (1853); "Ten Sermons on Religion" (1853); "West Roxbury Sermons" (1892), etc. His complete works, in 12 volumes, have been edited by Miss Frances Power Cobbe. A volume, entitled "Great Americans," was published after his death.

### SERMON: THE STATE OF THE NATION

DELIVERED IN BOSTON, NOVEMBER 23, 1850

"Righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people."  
—Prov. xiv, 34.

WE come together to-day by the governor's proclamation, to give thanks to God for our welfare, not merely for our happiness as individuals or as families, but for our welfare as a people. How can we better  
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improve this opportunity than by looking a little into the condition of the people? and accordingly I invite your attention to a sermon on the state of this nation. I shall try to speak of the condition of the nation itself, then of the causes of that condition, and in the third place of the dangers that threaten or are alleged to threaten the nation.

First, of our condition. Look about you in Boston. Here are a hundred and forty thousand souls living in peace and in comparative prosperity. I think, without doing injustice to the other side of the water, there is no city in the Old World of this population with so much intelligence, activity, morality, order, comfort, and general welfare, and at the same time with so little of the opposite of all these. I know the faults of Boston and I think I would not disguise them; the poverty, unnatural poverty, which shivers in the cellar; the unnatural wealth which bloats in the parlor; the sin which is hid in the corners of the jail; and the more dangerous sin which sets up Christianity for a pretence; the sophistry which lightens in the newspapers and thunders in the pulpit:—I know all these things and do not pretend to disguise them; and still I think no city of the Old World of the same population has so much which good men prize and so little which good men deplore.

See the increase of material wealth, the buildings for trade and for homes, the shops and ships. This year Boston will add to her possessions some ten or twenty millions of dollars honestly and earnestly got. Observe the neatness of the streets, the industry of the inhabitants, their activity of mind, the orderliness of the people, the signs of comfort. Then consider the charities of Boston, those limited to our own border and those which extend farther, those beautiful charities which encompass the earth with their sweet influence.

Look at the schools, a monument of which the city may well be proud in spite of their defects.

But Boston, though we proudly call it the Athens of America, is not the pleasantest thing in New England to look at; it is the part of Massachusetts which I like the least to look at, spite of its excellence. Look farther, at the whole of Massachusetts, and you see a fairer spectacle. There is less wealth at Provincetown in proportion to the numbers, but there is less want; there is more comfort; property is more evenly and equally distributed there than here, and the welfare of a country never so much depends upon the amount of its wealth as on the mode in which its wealth is distributed. In the State there are about 150,000 families—some 975,000 persons—living with a degree of comfort which I think is not anywhere enjoyed by such a population in the Old World. They are mainly industrious, sober, intelligent, and moral. Everything thrives; agriculture, manufactures, commerce. "The carpenter encourages the goldsmith; he that smites the anvil, him that smootheth with the hammer." Look at the farms where intelligent labor wins bread and beauty both out of the sterile soil and a climate not over-indulgent. Behold the shops all over the State; the small shops where the shoemaker holds his work in his lap and draws his thread by his own strong muscles, and the large shops where machines, animate with human intelligence, hold with iron grasp their costlier work in their lap and spin out the delicate staple of Sea Island cotton. Look at all this; it is a pleasant sight. Look at our hundreds of villages, by river, mountain, and sea; behold the comfortable homes, the people well fed, well clad, well instructed. Look at the school-houses, the colleges of the people; at the higher seminaries of learning; at the poor man's real college

farther back in the interior, where the mechanic's and farmer's son gets his education, often poor, still something to be proud of. Look at the churches where every Sunday the best words of Hebrew and of Christian saints are read out of this book, and all men are asked once in the week to remember they have a Father in heaven, a faith to swear by, and a heaven to live for, and a conscience to keep. I know the faults of these churches. I am not in the habit of excusing them, still I know their excellence and I will not be the last man to acknowledge that. Look at the roads of earth and iron which join villages together and make the State a whole. Follow the fisherman from his rocky harbor at Cape Ann; follow the mariner in his voyage round the world of waters; see the industry, the intelligence, and the comfort of the people. I think Massachusetts is a State to be thankful for. There are faults in her institutions and in her laws that need change very much. In her form of society, in her schools, in her colleges, there is much which clamors loudly for alteration,—very much in her churches to be Christianized. These changes are going quietly forward and will in time be brought about.

I love to look on this State, its material prosperity, its increase in riches, its intelligence and industry, and the beautiful results that are seen all about us to-day. I love to look on the face of the people in halls and churches, in markets and factories; to think of our great ideas; of the institutions which have come of them; of our schools and colleges and all the institutions for making men wiser and better; to think of the noble men we have in the midst of us in every walk of life who eat an honest bread, who love mankind and love God, who have consciences they mean to keep and souls which they intend to save.

The great business of society is not merely to have farms, and ships, and shops,—the greater shops and the less,—but to have men; men that are conscious of their manhood, self-respectful, earnest men, that have a faith in the living God. I do not think we have many men of genius. We have very few that I call great men—I wish there were more—but I think we have an intelligent, an industrious, and noble people here in Massachusetts, which we may be proud of.

Let us go a step farther. New England is like Massachusetts in the main, with local differences only. All the North is like New England in the main; this portion is better in one thing; that portion worse in another thing. Our ideas are their ideas; our institutions are the same. Some of the northern States have institutions better than we. They have added to our experience. In revising their constitutions and laws or in making new ones they go beyond us, they introduce new improvements, and those new improvements will give those States the same advantage over us which a new mill with new and superior machinery has over an old mill with old and inferior machinery. By and by we shall see the result and take counsel from it, I trust.

All over the North we find the same industry and thrift, and similar intelligence. Here attention is turned to agriculture, there to mining; but there is a similar progress and zeal for improvement. Attention is bestowed on schools and colleges, on academies and churches. There is the same abundance of material comfort. Population advances rapidly, prosperity in a greater ratio. Everywhere new swarms pour forth from the old hive and settle in some convenient nook far off in the West. So the frontier of civilization every year goes forward, further from the ocean. Fifty years ago it was on the Ohio, then on the Mississippi, then on the upper

Missouri; presently its barrier will be the Rocky Mountains, and soon it will pass over that bar and the tide of the Atlantic will sweep over to the Pacific—yea it is already there! The universal Yankee freights his schooner at Bangor, at New Bedford, and at Boston, with bricks, timber, frame houses, and other “notions” and by and by drops his anchor in the smooth Pacific in the bay of St. Francis. We shall see there ere long the sentiments of New England, the ideas of New England, the institutions of New England—the school-house, the meeting-house, the court-house, the town-house. There will be the same industry, thrift, intelligence, morality, and religion, and the idle ground that has hitherto borne nothing but gold will bear upon its breast a republic of men more precious than the gold of Ophir or the rubies of the East.

Here I wish I could stop. But this is not all. The North is not the whole nation; New England is not the only type of the people. There are other States differing widely from this. In the Southern States you find a soil more fertile under skies more genial. Through what beautiful rivers the Alleghanies pour their tribute to the sea! What streams beautify the land in Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi! There genial skies rain beauty on the soil. Nature is wanton of her gifts. There rice, cotton, and sugar grow; there the olive, the orange, the fig all find a home. The soil teems with luxuriance. But there is not the same wealth nor the same comfort. Only the ground is rich. You witness not a similar thrift. Strange is it, but in 1840 the single State of New York alone earned over \$4,000,000 more than the six States of North and South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi! The annual earnings of little Massachusetts, with her 7,500 square miles, are \$9,000,000

more than the earnings of all Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina! The little county of Essex, with 95,000 souls, in 1840 earned more than the large State of South Carolina with 595,000!

In those States we miss the activity, intelligence, and enterprise of the North. You do not find the little, humble school-house at every corner; the frequent meeting-house does not point its taper finger to the sky. Villages do not adorn the margin of the mountain stream and sea; shops do not ring with industry, roads of earth and iron are poorer and less common. Temperance, morality, comfort are not there as here. In the slave States in 1840 there were not quite 302,000 youths and maidens in all the schools, academies, and colleges of the South; but in 1840 in the free States of the North there were more than 2,212,000 in such institutions! Little Rhode Island has 5,000 more girls and boys at school than large South Carolina. The State of Ohio alone has more than 17,000 children at school beyond what the whole fifteen slave States can boast. The permanent literature of the nation all comes from the North; your historians are from that quarter—your Sparkses, your Bancrofts, your Hildreths, and Prescotts, and Ticknors; the poets are from the same quarter—your Whittiers, and Longfellows, and Lowells, and Bryants; the men of literature and religion—your Channings, and Irvings, and Emersons—are from the same quarter! Preaching—it is everywhere, and sermons are as thick almost as autumnal leaves; but who ever heard of a great or famous clergyman in a southern State? of a great and famous sermon that rang through the nation from that quarter? No man. Your Edwards of old time and your Beechers, old and young, your Channing and Buckminster, and the rest, which throng to every man's lips, all

are from the North. Nature has done enough for the South—God's cup of blessing runs over—and yet you see the result! But there has been no pestilence at the South more than at the North; no earthquake has torn the ground beneath their feet; no war has come to disturb them more than us. The government has never laid a withering hand on their commerce, their agriculture, their schools and colleges, their literature and their church. . . .

In the last Congress it is plain the democratic idea was beaten. Congress said to California, "You may come in, and you need not keep slaves unless you please." It said, "You shall not bring slaves to Washington for sale, you may do that at Norfolk, Alexandria, and Georgetown, it is just as well, and this 'will pacify the North.'" Utah and New Mexico were left open to slavery and 50,000 or 70,000 square miles and \$10,000,000 were given to Texas lest she should "dissolve the Union,"—without money or men! To crown all, the Fugitive Slave Bill became a law.

I think it is very plain that the democratic idea was defeated, and it is easy to see why. The three powers which are the allies of the despotic idea were ready and could act in concert—the Southern slaveholders, the leading politicians, the rich and educated men of the Northern cities, with their appendages and servile adherents. But since then the conduct of the people in the North and especially in this State show that the nation has not gone that way yet. I think the nation never will; that the idea of freedom will never be turned back in this blessed North. I feel sure it will at last overcome the idea of slavery.

I come to this conclusion, firstly, from the character of the tribe; this Anglo-Norman-Saxon tribe loves law, deliberation, order, method; it is the most methodical race that ever lived. But it loves liberty, and while it loves law, it

loves law chiefly because it keeps liberty; and without that it would trample law under foot.

See the conduct of England. She spent \$100,000,000 in the attempt to wipe slavery from the West Indies. She keeps a fleet on the coast of Africa to keep down the slave-trade there—where we also have, I think, a sloop-of-war. She has just concluded a treaty with Brazil for the suppression of the slave-trade in that country, one of her greatest achievements in that work for many years.

See how the sons of the Puritans,—as soon as they came to a consciousness of what the despotic idea was,—took their charters and wiped slavery clean out, first from Massachusetts, and then from the other States one after another. See how every northern State in revising its constitution or in making a new one declares all men are created equal, that all have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Then the religion of the North demands the same thing. Professors may try to prove that the Old Testament establishes slavery; that the New Testament justifies the existence of slavery; that Paul's epistle to Philemon was nothing more than another fugitive slave law; that Paul himself sent back a runaway; but it does not touch the religion of the North. We know better. We say if the Old Testament does that, and the New Testament, so much the worse for them both. We say, let us look and see if Paul was so benighted, and we can judge for ourselves that the professor was mistaken more than the Apostle.

Again the spirit of the age which is the public opinion of the nations is against slavery. It was broken down in England, France, Italy, and Spain; it cannot stand long against civilization and good sense; against the political economy and

the religious economy of the civilized world. The genius of freedom stands there year out, year in, and hurls firebrands into the owl's nest of the prince of darkness continually,—and is all this with no effect?

Besides that it is against the law of God. That guides this universe, treating with even-handed justice the great geographical parties, Austrian, Roman, British, or American, with the same justice wherewith it dispenses its blessings to the little local factions that divide the village for a day, marshalling mankind forward in its mighty progress toward wisdom, freedom, goodness toward men, and piety toward God.

Of the final issue I have no doubt; but no man can tell what shall come to pass in the meantime. We see that political parties in the State are snapped asunder: whether the national party shall not be broken up no man can say. In 1750, on the 28th day of November, no man in Old England or New England could tell what 1780 would bring forth. No man, north or south, can tell to-day what 1880 will bring to pass. He must be a bold man who declares to the nation that no new political machinery shall be introduced in the next thirty years to our national mill. We know not what a day shall bring forth, but we know that God is on the side of right and justice, and that they will prevail so long as God is God.

Now, then, to let alone details and generalize into one all the causes of our condition, this is the result: We have found welfare just so far as we have followed the democratic idea, and enacted justice into law. We have lost welfare so far as we have followed the despotic idea and made iniquity into a statute. So far as we have reaffirmed the ordinance of nature and re-enacted the will of God, we have succeeded.

So far as we have refused to do that we have failed. Of old it was written, "Righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people."

III. And now a word of our dangers. There seems no danger from abroad; from any foreign State, unless we begin the quarrel; none from famine. The real danger in one word is this, that we shall try to enact injustice into a law, and with the force of the nation to make iniquity obeyed.

See some of the special forms of injustice which threaten us, or are already here. I shall put them into the form of ideas.

1. One common among politicians is that the State is for a portion of the people, not the whole. Thus it has been declared that the constitution of the United States did not recognize the three million slaves as citizens or extend to them any right which it guarantees to other men. It would be a sad thing for the State to declare there was a single child in the whole land to whom it owed no protection. What, then, if it attempts to take three millions from under its shield? In obedience to this false idea the counsel has been given that we must abstain from all "political agitation" of the most important matter before the people. We must leave that to our masters, for the State is for them, it is not for you and me. They must say whether we shall "agitate" and "discuss" these things or not. The politicians are our masters, and may lay their fingers on our lips when they will.

2. The next false idea is that government is chiefly for the protection of property. This has long been the idea on which some men legislated, but on the 19th day of this month the distinguished secretary of state, in a speech at New York, used these words: "The great object of government is the protection of property at home and respect and renown

abroad." You see what the policy must be where the government is for the protection of the hat, and only takes care of the head so far as it serves to wear a hat. Here the man is the accident and the dollar is the substance for which the man is to be protected. I think a notion very much like this prevails extensively in the great cities of America, north and south. I think the chief politicians of the two parties are agreed in this,—that government is for the protection of property, and everything else is subsidiary. With many persons politics are a part of their business; the state-house and the custom-house are only valued for their relation to trade. This idea is fatal to a good government.

Think of this, that "The great object of government is the protection of property." Tell that to Samuel Adams, and John Hancock, and Washington, and the older Winthrops, and the Bradfords, and Carvers! Why! it seems as if the buried majesty of Massachusetts would start out of the ground, and with its Bible in its hand say, This is false!

3. The third false idea is this: that you are morally bound to obey the law, let it be never so plainly wrong and opposed to your conscience. This is the most dangerous of all the false ideas yet named. Ambitious men, in an act of passion, make iniquity into a law, and then demand that you and I in our act of prayer shall submit to it and make it our daily life; that we shall not try to repeal and discuss and agitate it! This false idea lies at the basis of every despot's throne, the idea that men can make right wrong, and wrong right. It has come to be taught in New England, to be taught in our churches—though seldom there, to their honor be it spoken, except in the churches of commerce in the large towns—that if wrong is law, you and I must do what it demands, though conscience declares it is treason against man and treason

against God. The worst doctrines of Hobbes and Filmer are thus revived.

I have sometimes been amazed at the talk of men who call on us to keep the Fugitive Slave Law, one of the most odious laws in a world of odious laws—a law not fit to be made or kept. I have been amazed that they should dare to tell us the law of God; writ on the heavens and our hearts, never demanded we should disobey the laws of men! Well, suppose it were so. Then it was old Daniel's duty at Darius' command to give up his prayer; but he prayed three times a day with his windows up. Then it was John's and Peter's duty to forbear to preach of Christianity; but they said, "Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye." Then it was the duty of Amram and Jochebed to take up their new-born Moses and cast him into the Nile, for the law of King Pharaoh commanding it was "constitutional," and "political agitation" was discountenanced as much in Goshen as in Boston. But Daniel did not obey; John and Peter did not fail to preach Christianity; and Amram and Jochebed refused "passive obedience" to the king's decree! I think it will take a strong man all this winter to reverse the judgment which the world has passed on these three cases. But it is "innocent" to try. However, there is another ancient case mentioned in the Bible in which the laws commanded one thing and conscience just the opposite. Here is the record of the law: "Now both the chief priests and the Pharisees had given a commandment, that if any one knew where he [Jesus] were he should show it that they might take him." Of course it became the official and legal business of each disciple who knew where Christ was to make it known to the authorities. No doubt James and John could leave all and

follow him with others of the people who knew not the law of Moses and were accursed; nay the women, Martha and Mary, could minister unto him of their substance, could wash his feet with tears and wipe them with the hairs of their head. They did it gladly, of their own free will, and took pleasure therein, I make no doubt. There was no merit in that—"Any man can perform an agreeable duty." But there was found one disciple who could "perform a disagreeable duty." He went, perhaps "with alacrity," and betrayed his Saviour to the marshal of the district of Jerusalem, who was called a centurion. Had he no affection for Jesus? No doubt, but he could conquer his prejudices, while Mary and John could not.

Judas Iscariot has rather a bad name in the Christian world; he is called "the son of perdition" in the New Testament and his conduct is reckoned a "transgression;" nay, it is said the devil "entered into him" to cause this hideous sin. But all this it seems was a mistake; certainly, if we are to believe our "Republican" lawyers and statesmen, Iscariot only fulfilled his "constitutional obligations." It was only "on that point" of betraying his Saviour that the constitutional law required him to have anything to do with Jesus. He took his "thirty pieces of silver"—about fifteen dollars—a Yankee is to do it for ten, having fewer prejudices to conquer—it was his legal fee for value received. True, the Christians thought it was "the wages of iniquity," and even the Pharisees—who commonly made the commandment of God of none effect by their traditions—dared not defile the temple with this "price of blood;" but it was honest money; it was as honest a fee as any American commissioner or deputy will ever get for a similar service. How mistaken we are! Judas Iscariot is not a traitor; he was a great patriot;