Ed. Note: **The "leprosy" mentioned in the Old Testament was actually a "leprosy-like" disease, tzaraath. According to the biblical description it was different than the actual disease of leprosy. However, some of the symptoms were similar to leprosy and, therefore, the translators chose that term as the closest equivalent in the English language. The Septuagint translators used the Greek word λεπρα and the English translators followed the lead put forth by those translators. For a detailed examination of the subject, students are required to read the Wikipedia article found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tzaraath**

PRESUMPTION IN THE WORSHIP OF GOD.

But when [Uzziah] was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction: for he transgressed against the Lord his God, and went into the temple of the Lord to burn incense upon the altar of incense. . . . And Azariah the priest went in after him, and with him fourscore priests of the Lord, that were valiant men: . . . And they withstood Uzziah the king, and said unto him, It appertaineth not to thee, Uzziah, to burn incense unto the Lord, but to the priests, the sons of Aaron, that are consecrated to burn incense. Go out of the sanctuary, for thou hast trespassed. . . . Then Uzziah was wroth, and had a censer in his hand to burn incense: and while he was wroth with the priests, the leprosy even rose up in his forehead before the priests in the house of the Lord, from beside the incense altar. . . . And Azariah the chief priest, and all the priests, looked upon him, and, behold, he was leprous in his forehead, and they thrust him out from thence; yea, himself hasted also to go out, because the Lord had smitten him. — 2 CHRON. xxvi. 16–20.

THE punishment of sin by bodily disease is commonly long in coming. It is one of the apparent after-thoughts of retribution in which God clearly expresses his accumulated anger against sin long ago committed, and perhaps forgotten.

The case of Uzziah is one of the few instances recorded in the Scriptures of instant and severe punishment of the sin of irreverence and presumption. God does not always punish sin in the same way. The sin is the same, age after age. It is

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Remember that it is not actually leprosy but tzaraath.

marvellous how human nature repeats itself, but God's treatment of the wrong is infinitely diversified. That irreverent worshippers are not all lepers, is no proof that they are more pleasing to God now than when the Judæan king was rebuked by that loathsome disease.

Let us note some of the ways in which the guilt of presumption in the worship of God is often incurred in modern times.

1. It ought not to provoke a smile when the first is named as that of *sleeping in God's house*. We must not be severe — for God is not so — in judging of the aged and the infirm and the diseased, whose worn-out powers yield to the soporific atmosphere, and perhaps the more soporific sermon, on a hot Sunday in July. One of the most touching illustrations of God's charitable judgment of physical infirmity is our Lord's plaintive inquiry of his sleepy disciples in the garden, in which there is only a low undertone of reproof: "Could ye not watch with me one hour?" Think of falling asleep in Gethsemane! Could you or I have done it? Yet Christ was very gentle in his thought of his weary disciples; and so he is of us, if age or disease renders sleep irresistible. Certain insomniac patients have been known, who for the most part could sleep only in the house of God. Not to such is the infirmity charged as sin.

But when no such excuse exists, when sleep is welcomed by the hale worshipper as a means of

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whiling away an irksome hour, few things of the silent sort can be more *impertinent* to the most high God. Should we sleep anywhere else where God should make his awful presence known? Should we have slept through the earthquake at Sinai? Shall we sleep in the day of judgment? Even in our death-hour do we not hope at least to have all our faculties about us and wide awake? The case is too plain for argument. That man coolly insults God, who needlessly composes himself to slumber, when professing to be a suppliant for mercy at his feet.

2. Similar is the presumption of *neglecting to participate in divine worship when present in God's house.* Negative sins are sometimes most intensely sinful. Heedless sins are sometimes most fearfully fatal.

If you were one of a delegation to the Court of St. James, for the presentation of a petition, and were admitted to audience with the Queen, should you think it becoming to the dignity of the royal presence to neglect the business in hand, and to wander about the apartment curiously, while your chairman was presenting the petition in your name? Yet that which would be only a breach of etiquette there, is a much graver offence in the house of God. A listless and wandering mind roving like fool's eyes, in the temple of worship, is a most insolent indignity to the King of kings.

Look at it in another light. When the Rev. Dr.

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Armstrong was wrecked with a large number of fellow-passengers on one of the Sound steamers, many years ago, his last act was to gather his doomed companions together in the shattered cabin, and, while the ship was thumping to pieces on the rocks, he committed their souls and his own to God in prayer. It was his last chance, and theirs, to pray this side of eternity. Men who had not prayed for years prayed then, with agony of desire. If you had been one of that group, would you have stood or sat in silent contempt of the solemnity? Yet you *may be* doing just that, — flinging insult in the face of God on the threshold of eternity, and tossing to the winds your last chance of prayer, — every time you listen to public worship in which you do not reverently join.

There is yet another aspect of it. Like all other presumptuous sins, the hearing of prayer without participating in the service has a peculiarly indurating effect on the conscience. The habit deadens all the moral sensibilities auxiliary to conscience. The sense of gratitude is dulled if thanksgiving to God falls on the ear without awakening response of heart. The susceptibility of penitence is blunted if confession of sin is offered in the hearing of an unanswering soul. The sense of honor is benumbed if one incurs the meanness of listening unmoved to an acknowledgment of God's claims upon one's love. A latent sense of moral propriety is deadened when reverent speech, look, attitudes,

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are expressed around one who gazes in stolid vacuity of thought and torpor of feeling. A delicate sense of moral beauty is drugged by the hearing of holy song to which the heart is apathetic. Men rarely appreciate how fearfully they debase and deform the most godlike faculties of their being, by the quickly growing habit of unresponsive listening to the services of God's house.

There is an insidious disease which slowly and secretly turns vital organs of the body to bone. It begins by ossifying little fragments of tissue here and there. No medical skill can arrest its progress. Nature is perverted from her healthy processes of assimilation and nutrition, to the creation in the system of nothing but bone. What should be life to muscle and nerve and sinew and arteries, turns to solid and lifeless bone. At length the heart is reached, and vital parts of it become bone, and its beautiful work of pulsation, by which life is sent in red streams to the very tips of the fingers, ceases, and death ensues. Such is the moral induration which the sensibilities of a soul suffer, when long appealed to by the services of religion, to which it will not give back a throb of responsive feeling. Ossification of *heart* may have a double meaning.

3. Presumption in worship may take the form of *frequenting the house of God as a place of entertainment merely.* "Thou art to them as a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice, and

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can play well on an instrument; for they hear thy words, and do them not." Thus the Lord said to the prophet Ezekiel; and it is a truthful record of the reception which multitudes give to faithful and eloquent preaching. Often the auditorium of God's house is turned end for end. It is not the pulpit, but the organ and the operatic quartette, which entertain the wondering listeners.

In a certain church the most costly music that money can buy is furnished to the worshippers. The same "stars" appear there on Sunday that stood the evening before on the stage of the opera or the theatre. An entrance-fee is charged at the door. People flock thither as to a place of religious entertainment. Many of them profess no other motive. The sermon, the prayer, the scriptural lesson, are but appendages to the performances of the operatic troupe. Is that worship? Can God be pleased with it? "My house shall be called a house of prayer, but ye have made it a den of thieves." Is it any more a sin to sell a dove in the temple than to sell a song? The only instance in which our Lord gave way to violence in his holy indignation was at the sight of the desecration of the sanctuary. Would he not find use for the whip of small cords if he should wander into certain churches in our day?

4. We are guilty of presumptuous sin in worship, if we endeavor *to conceal from ourselves hidden sin under cover of scrupulous devotion.* In

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the time of the judges of Israel there lived a man, Micah by name, who stole eleven hundred shekels of silver. He built him an idol with a part of it, thus "consecrating it to the Lord" as he thought. He was an idolater and a thief. His conscience pricked him. So, to make every thing sure, he hired a young Levite to be his household chaplain. "Now," said he, "the Lord will do me good, seeing that I have a Levite to my priest." That was a semi-barbarous age. The trick of the thieving rascal seems transparent. We marvel that even an old half-civilized Jew could juggle himself with it. But are there no such self-cheated worshippers in our times? By more ingenious devices perhaps, and in more recondite twists of conscience, yet not a whit less impiously towards God, we may make our very fidelity to God's house, and the zeal of our worship, a cover to hidden sin which we are not willing to abandon, and therefore not willing to see.

A recent celebrated forger in New York was one of the most faithful attendants upon the worship of a Christian sanctuary. For years, while he was setting his hand to the deeds for which he now lies in the penitentiary, he was repeating every sabbath the prayers of an ancient church; singing the songs which the voices of martyrs had hallowed; giving freely of his stolen goods to the benevolences of God's people; and, as he seems to have believed, loving rather to do deeds of charity

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than to hoard gold. It would be just like man, if that poor man really persuaded himself that his religious devotions would somehow offset his crimes. Yes: that is man as he is by nature. Such are we all, but by the grace of God. Our very consciences become tortuous and serpentine under the wiles of sin, till we verily think we can mock God with impunity. Oh, how idiotic we become when we make Satan our ally!

5. We are guilty of presumptuous worship *when we offer to God services in which any essential truth of God's being is denied or ignored.* A celebrated preacher of "another gospel," recently deceased, has published as a part of the "truth as it is in Jesus," as he understood it, the following fragments: "I take not the Bible for my master, nor even Jesus of Nazareth. . . . He is my best historic ideal of *human* greatness; not without errors, and I presume of course not without sins. For men without sins exist in the dreams of girls. You and I never saw such a one, and we never shall." Let us think kindly of the erring one who has gone to a world where the "Lamb that was slain" sits as judge of the living and the dead. He has discovered before this time who and what the Lord Jesus Christ is. He has learned what that means, "Who is the brightness of his glory and the express image of his person." But can God ever have been pleased with worship which denied his triune being; with prayer which as-

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sumed that the Lord of glory was a sinner; with songs of praise in which the claims of Him who "was with God, and was God," were ignored?

How God will deal in eternity with honest infidelity, if there be such a thing in the strictest and final analysis of the human heart, we may safely leave to him. I do not know, and do not wish to know. But it becomes us who believe with all our souls that Jesus Christ is indeed the Lord of glory, "very God of very God," and that in him we have an infinite and eternal and sinless Saviour, to beware how we offer, or seem to offer, worship which denies him his place on the throne of the universe. The place of worship where he is thus denied is no place for us. Prayer offered otherwise than in his name is not prayer to us. Whatever it may be to those who honestly offer it, to us it cannot be worship of the true God. We kindle unhallowed fire on a strange altar if we thus seek communion with the Most High. Our fellowship is with the Father *and his Son Jesus Christ.*

Even in our own usages of prayer, and in our own sanctuaries, we need to be most watchful of our moods, lest we pray as a regenerate heathen might pray, who had never heard of Christ; as Socrates and Plato, for aught we know, may have prayed; with no hearty recognition of the merits of Christ as our only ground of approach to the throne of grace. A redeemed sinner, who believes that he is redeemed, who knows that he

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has been bought with the precious blood of Christ, commits an act of fearful presumption if he ever lapses into what may, for distinction's sake, be called *unchristian* prayer. In what other form more insolent to the most high God can he take God's name in vain?

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