
THE BLESSINGS OF ABOLITION

A DISCOURSE

DELIVERED IN THE

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UNITARIAN CHURCH

SUNDAY JULY 1 1860

C. Sherman & Son,

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BY

**W.H. FURNESS
MINISTER.**

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DISCOURSE

ISAIAH LVIII. 7, 8.

In the fifty-eighth chapter of the book of Isaiah, the prophet assures his countrymen, if they will loose the bands of wickedness and undo the heavy burdens, and let the oppressed go free, and break every yoke, that then THEIR LIGHT SHALL BREAK FORTH AS THE MORNING.

Now, my friends, that our National Anniversary is at hand, and we are approaching the confines of the eighty-fifth year of our age as a nation, I pray you to give heed to the promise of the prophet.

I will not now enlarge upon the fact that the wicked bans are tightly drawn, and heavy burdens bound upon the oppressed, and the unrighteous and cruel yoke still dishonors the land which our fathers consecrated so many years ago with the greatest solemnity to Justice and Liberty. I do not now need to dwell upon the painful fact. It is pressed

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upon our notice in numberless way, in no way more publicly, at this present, than by the uproar of huge political organizations tumbling into ruins, solely through the influence of Slavery on our soil. I invite you to pleasanter thoughts, to considerations tending to illuminate the prospect and to cheer our hopes at this season of national commemoration, when the condition and destinies of our native land naturally command our attention. Let me try to make it manifest to you, with what morning brightness the sun of our national prosperity will break forth and shine, if we will only fulfil the conditions upon which the ancient promise was made. The universal fear is, if the wicked bands be loosed, and the heavy burdens undone, and the oppressed set free, and the yoke broken, that our light will instantly go out in midnight darkness; and, forsaken by God, we shall all be involved in Disunion and hopeless ruin. I have no such apprehensions. I rely upon the prophetic promise, not only because it is written and has stood written in this wondrous book for thousands of years, but because I read it written just as legibly by the finger of God in the nature of things, I know that darkness and disunion come, and can only come, not from righting the wronged, but from wronging the weak; not from obeying, but from disobeying the law of equal justice.

But before I mention some of the blessed conse-

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quences of letting the oppressed go free, let me briefly state by what means I consider that they ought to be set free. According to my plan of Abolition, and it is in agreement with the principles constantly asserted by the leading advocates of the Cause, all interference, whether by political force or by unauthorized political action, between the master and the slave, is utterly abjured and strongly condemned, and the sole reliance is upon truth, truth addressed freely and faithfully to the individual conscience and to the community at large. Let the truth, the whole truth be published concerning the essential iniquity of Slavery and its deadly influence, and, such is our faith in human nature, we believe that, sooner or later, men must be so convinced of the truth as to conform their conduct to their convictions; that not only will the individual conscience be stirred into effectual activity, but a public opinion will be formed, which will, as public opinion always does, so act upon the whole legislation of the country as peacefully to revolutionize all oppressive institutions. A great question which concerns the personal honor of every soul of us as well as the public peace and prosperity, is forced upon us of this age and country. And the great problem to be solved is substantially this: To convert some four millions of imbruted, objectless human beings into free and active laborers. This problem, the Intelligence and

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the Religion of the land are summoned to meet. It is not to my present purpose to say how they are to settle it. It suffices only to remark that no methods are required in its solution but such as Reason and Religion suggest and sanction.

My design now is to hint,—I can only hint,—at some of the results that would be realized, supposing the question were settled, that all the inhabitants of this country, without regard to complexion, were free, free to this extent: that not a man, woman, or child could be bought and sold; and that every one should be at liberty to work with the prospect of being paid for his labor; in a word, that Personal Liberty were everywhere, South as well as North, inviolable.

1. In the first place it is evident that all the excitement which now disturbs the country, and to which an end has so often in vain been attempted to be put, would at once cease to exist. The animosities which have destroyed the vitality of our Civil Union, rendering it a Union only in name, would no longer find place. They would all die away. It is true, as naturally as sparks fly upward, occasions of misunderstandings and jealousies appear among men. So long as men are as they are, bad passions will be stirred, and controversies, more or less serious, will arise. But I am free to declare that I cannot see that any root of bitterness would remain to produce any lasting aliena-

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tion of one part of the country from another, if Slavery were abolished. On the contrary, there are evident and strong inducements to lead us to live in peace and to convert the Union into a living natural bond. We all speak the same language. We are interlaced, not only by many common interests of trade and by frequent intercourse, but by the sacred ties of kindred and intermarriage. And the differences of climate and natural productions tend directly to unite us. There is, moreover, this important thing to be considered: if Slavery be abolished, and, be it observed, it can be abolished only by the efforts of the whole people, North and South, East and West, united heart and hand in accomplishing the great object, then there could remain no cause of dissension, no conflict of interests that would not be completely overpowered and swept away by the strong sympathy, the unity of mind which would necessarily flow from fellowship in this great work. Here is a consideration which does not yet seem ever to have been fully appreciated. There is the utmost anxiety to preserve and strengthen our Union; and Presidents, and Parties, and Public Meetings resolve over and over again that it must be preserved. Why is it that we do not see what a sure and powerful means it is of uniting men in the closest fellowship, to set them laboring for one common and good end? As we are separated from one another and

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made bitterly hostile by having, or fancying that we have, opposing interests, so let us all be interested in one and the same object, and instantly and as certainly as by some chemical affinity, a cohesive force is developed: and we, who were repellant before, rush together and become warm friends. Do we not see this truth illustrated over and over again, even in Trade, which generates so much selfishness, and where the avowed object of all concerned is to look out each for himself and make as much money as he can? Let two or more persons in trade arrange their common transactions so that each is profitable to all the rest, what fast friends do they soon become, intimate as brothers, ready to serve one another in emergencies each with his whole fortune!

If in mere matters of Trade, having reference only to material interests, the effect of working together is to produce harmony and good fellowship, who shall undertake to estimate the beneficent result, when the common object shall be the very grandest that can excite the imagination and inspire the energies of man! They who labor together for such an object,—to right what is wrong, to establish Universal Justice and Freedom,—soon come to be united to one another by ties far transcending in strength and intimacy the ties of blood. They are nearer to another than the nearest blood-relatives. They are related spiritually,

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essentially. They are one; and no ordinary causes of division can make the slightest impression on them.

Now I say, that if Slavery be peacefully abolished,—and most earnestly do I pray that it may be so abolished, and only so,—for no other than a peaceful abolition of it, would I ever lift a finger or breathe a word, for no other could be really successful: if, I say, Slavery is peacefully abolished, it will only be through the united effort of the whole people of the land. And, being united in the accomplishment of so humane a work, the people will naturally, and almost unconsciously, have a bond of union formed between them all, so strong that no geographical divisions, no diversity of their lesser interests, will be able to break it. I do not believe it is in the power of the boldest imagination to conceive the effect which a united effort in this great work would have in making this people a united people in all respects, in binding this vast empire together as with steel and adamant. At present, the existence of Slavery is a fountain pouring forth, in ever fresh streams, bitterness and death. But let it be abolished, and the very act of abolition, calling into exercise all that is generous in human nature, as it necessarily would, must not only put an end to all hostility, but in the place of hatred and malignity, create a rich full flow of all kindly human feelings.

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Let it be that the work of abolition must be attended by many and trying difficulties,—no great improvement in human things can ever be brought about, under the most favorable circumstances, without trouble,—still, let the work be begun with an irrevocable resolution, and the difficulties that may arise will only call into action all the more vigorous, those sentiments and sympathies out of which will be woven an indestructible Union.

Imagine too, if you can, what a reason we should then have for a noble pride in our native land, and how that pride would make us all feel as one man. At present, while every true lover of his country must weep and blush for it, our national pride, such as it is,—by what is it sustained! By our vast extent of territory, our mere material magnitude, by the variety of our arts and manufactures, by our visible wealth, by our military and naval power, and at the best by the memory of our fathers, from whose example we have degenerated, and whose precepts of wisdom and liberty we ignore. But how weak and superficial are these occasions of pride in comparison with the fact, when once it is accomplished, that ours is the soil on which the grandest deed in all history is realized, when the heavy chains and burdens, under which millions of our fellow-men have been crushed, are all undone, and a

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multitudinous host of the oppressed set free, lifted up from the dust of the immortal expectations of the children of God! Then patriotism will no more be a sentiment which a decent man is almost ashamed to avow, such a pretence has it been to cover the basest self-seeking. Then every bosom may glow with an honest pride, for every foot of a land consecrated by so God-like an act of justice, will be “hallowed down to earth’s profound and up to heaven.” The very dust of our native country will shine like gold, and with electric power send up noble thoughts into every mind; and such a thing as sectional prejudice will no more be named amongst us. If the one hundredth anniversary of our national birthday, which is now not far off, and which many of you may hope to see, be destined to celebrate the Abolition of Slavery,—has we only reason to expect so magnificent a day so near at hand, what an era of national greatness would then open upon the world! What tongue could tell the splendor of that time! “Vision of glory, spare my aching sight! Ye unborn ages, crowd not my soul!”

This, then, my friends, would be the first grand effect of the Abolition of Slavery. Not only would all the agitation, which creates so much alarm, come to an end, the very act of Abolition, calling forth the best sentiments of all classes, would unite us so closely that nothing would be able to separate us. Then,

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indeed, there would be neither North nor South. Out of the broken chains of the slave will be formed an indissoluble Union.

2. I turn to another quarter whence our light will break forth as the morning, when the oppressed are set free.

The Abolition of Slavery would speedily throw open a new and broad field to Trade, a crowded and busy market for our merchants and artisans and manufacturers. Strange is it, that our men of business do not see this. But the truth is, that, while there is nothing so adventurous and radical as Commerce, neither is there anything which is more timid and conservative. While it rushes forth to explore new seas and unknown regions, and is accounted the most daring of missionaries, compelling Governments to send great naval armaments to knock at the gates of the populous empires of the East, and force them to open to it, it trembles so at any change that threatens to disturb the course of traffic, that there is no abuse, no barbarism, that it will not cling to, as a child to its mother's bosom, to avert such exposure. But for this short-sighted conservatism, our men of business would see that Slavery is only another name for an enormous restriction upon Trade; that it is keeping in chains some four millions of their customers, disabling them from buying and selling. We have just been

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told by a slaveholder, in the National Senate, that the support of a slave costs ten dollars a year. Other similar authorities estimate the expense at double this amount, twenty dollars. Assuming this last rate, may it not be safely asserted that if a slave can be kept upon twenty dollars a year, a free man will require not less than five times that sum? A slave, debarred from holding property in anything, even in his wife and children and himself, is of course unmoved by all those inducements, and forbidden to indulge any of those wants which the idea of property creates. He has nothing to buy or to sell. A free man, having charge of himself and family, stimulated to exertion, instantly wants a great many things, and is ambitious to obtain them. And what is more strikingly characteristic of the African race than a fondness for dress and gay colors? Have we not been told of individuals of this race, who, after toiling all day under the lash, toiled nearly all night to procure the means of appearing in clothes as fine as their masters? When this trait of the African character is considered, we may well wonder that the brains of our business-men do not sink down into their pockets, and enable them to see what a host of eager consumers the Abolition of Slavery would send pouring into their market-places. Abundant as are our factories and shops, and our various means and materials of Trade,

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I believe it would require an activity such as our great marts, New York and Philadelphia, thronged and enterprising as they are, have hardly begun to dream of,—and the dreams of commercial speculation are very magnificent,—to keep up the supply to the demand which the Abolition of Slavery would create.

Here is a result of that blessed event, which it is important should be brought fully into view. One of the chief obstacles of Emancipation is the apprehension that it must ruin trade irretrievably. That it would not temporarily derange our commercial affairs, I do not by any means affirm. No great changes, as I have already observed, are ever made without some temporary inconveniences. But that such evils as are predicted from letting the oppressed go free, would be suffered, I have not the shadow of an apprehension.

For example: it is said that Slavery could not be done away without frightful scenes of rapine and massacre. Violence and murder are to be dreaded from the continuance of Slavery, not from its ceasing to exist. They are its natural fruit, and plentiful is the bloody crop which it produces. But let Slavery cease, and all alarm on this score would cease with it. Let the oppressed be set free by the voluntary, conscientious act of the Slaveholders themselves, convinced of the folly and guilt of oppression,—the only desirable, only effectual way in which Emancipation can take

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Place,—and the very night of that bright day, the Slaveholders and their families will know, for the first time perhaps for many a long year, the comfort of sound sleep. In the British island of Antigua, where the blacks far outnumbered the whites, on the day when the act of Emancipation took effect, did the freed slaves rush to arms? They flocked unarmed to the churches and thanked God.

And here I cannot deny myself the pleasure of quoting to you a passage from an Address, delivered by the Rev. Mr. Bleby, on the anniversary of British emancipation, in Massachusetts, two years ago. “I was in Jamaica,” said he, “when Slavery was abolished. This day twenty-four years ago, I stood up late at night in one of the churches under my charge. It was a very large church, and the aisles, the gallery stairs, the communion place, the pulpit stairs, were all crowded, and there were thousands of people round the building, at every open door and window looking in. It was ten o’clock at night on the thirty-first of July. We thought it right and proper that our Christian people should receive their freedom as a boon from God, in the house of prayer, and we gathered them together in the church for a midnight service. Our mouths had been closed about Slavery up to that time. We could not quote a passage that had reference to *spiritual* emancipation without endangering our lives.

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The planters has a law of 'constructive treason,' that doomed any man to death, who made use of language tending to excite a desire for liberty among the slaves; and they found treason in the Bible, and sedition in the hymns of Watts and Wesley, and we had to be very careful how we used them. You may imagine with what feelings I saw myself emancipated from this thralldom, and free to proclaim 'liberty to the captive, and the opening of doors to them that were bound.' I took for my text, 'Proclaim liberty throughout all the land, unto all the inhabitants thereof! It shall be a jubilee unto you.' A few minutes before midnight, I requested all the people to kneel down in silent prayer to God, as befitting the solemnity of the hour. I looked down upon them as the knelt. The silence was broken only by sobs of emotion, which it was impossible to repress. The clock began to strike. It was the knell of Slavery in all the British possessions. It proclaimed liberty to 800,000 human beings! When I told them they might rise, what an outburst of joy there was among that mass of people. The clock had ceased to strike, and they were slaves no longer! Mothers were hugging their babes to their bosoms, old white-headed men embracing their children, and husbands clasping their wives in their arms. By-and-by, all was still again, and I gave out a hymn. You may imagine the feelings with which these people, just emerging into freedom, shouted,—for they literally *shouted*

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‘Send the glad tidings o’er the sea!
His chains are broke, the slave is free.’

Since such was the peaceful effect there, where Slavery was abolished, not by the people of the island themselves, but by a Government at a distance, and in a manner foreign to them, how much more certain would be a like effect here, where it must be the Slaveholders and the Slave States themselves, that with their own willing hands are to undo the heavy burdens and break the yoke! The Slaveholders claim that their slaves are attached to them. Will their attachment be less, when they shall have received from their masters the free gift of liberty? Will it not be a great deal stronger? Will they not venerate the whites, when the whites, by a voluntary act of justice, give them the highest possible reason for veneration?

With the same blindness to human nature that anticipates bloodshed from the voluntary emancipation of the slaves, men of business talk as if it were a fixed fact, beyond all question; that if Slavery were to cease, not another pound of the great Southern staple would ever be produced, and all the extensive traffic which that staple creates, would come to a full and disastrous stop. Can there be an idea more preposterous? Rely upon it, so long as the cultivation of the cotton plant contributes to human wants, and to that prime want of

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all men black and white, the want of money, there will be people enough of all complexions to cultivate it, and with unprecedented activity and success, when every laborer shall have a personal interest in its cultivation.

3. A third great consequence of the Abolition of Slavery would be the inflowing of a full tide of immigration over all the sunny lands of the South, enriching the soil, increasing its value like an inundation of the Nile. At present the great stream of population that sets so steadily from the Old World to the New, flows past the South as if it were a plague-stricken region, or an unbroken waste of sand, instead of being as it is the luxuriant garden of the land. And for the plain reason that manual labor is dishonored there, by being identified with the most abject servitude. Let the brand of shame be erased, let the yoke be removed which degrades the laborer to a beast of burden, and instantly the whole South will be overflowed with honorable and improving labor. I verily believe that in a few years, we should depopulate Europe, and could afford to dismantle our fortifications and ships of war. The Old World despotisms would have no materials for armies left, no men willing even if able to fight against us. At all events, the immigration that would ensue upon the Abolition of Slavery, and that nothing could check but the most thorough changes in the

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social organization of the Old World, would enhance the value of land at the South, as, in a few years at the farthest, to compensate the Slaveholders abundantly for the pecuniary loss which the emancipation of the slaves might involve.

4. Another sure and imposing consequence of letting the oppressed go free, which I can only hint at,—it is beyond my power to portray it,—would be the moral effect of such an event throughout the whole world. Who shall weigh the influence of the glorious spectacle of thirty millions of human beings, living in the full enjoyment of personal liberty: every individual in possession of his God-given rights! All unjust forms of government would melt away like snow, before such a luminous argument for the capacity and dignity of human nature. What a new faith in man it would inspire! What a commanding sentiment of human respect would take the place of the contempt which is now the soul of all oppression! Then the fierce Eagle that now distinguishes our national ensign, only too well representing our national character, might give place to the Dove, emblem of peace, symbol of the Spirit of God, bearing the olive branch, the pledge of hope to all mankind.

5. The last result of the disappearance of Slavery from our land, which I shall mention, but by no means the least, is the Revival of Religion which it would

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imply, the triumph of our common Christianity which it would be. At present, Slavery, instituted and legalized, with savage prejudices and passions drawn up in powerful array all around it, and with all the force and patronage of the Government to protect it, has silenced the Religion of the land, which hardly dares to mutter a word of pity for the oppressed. The religious sentiment of the people is forced to occupy itself with phrases and outside observances, and let Justice and the Love of God go; and so Religion has become to a melancholy extent a mere compound of bigotry and cant; and thousands of thoughtful men are heartily disgusted with it. Over one-half the land not a whisper against the reigning iniquity is permitted, and the Bible is appealed to for its defence, and everywhere Truth is in chains. Were Slavery abolished, not only would the Reign of Terror cease, but the Religion of the land, so long suppressed, or wasting away on husks, would receive a new life. Indeed, the bare act of Abolition would be only another name for a new and rich experience of Vital Religion, the experience of a whole great people; and we should all see the difference and be able to distinguish as never before between the living genial reality which reaches and purifies the hear, kindling generous thoughts, and the dead creaking machinery of a sanctimonious formalism. The economical, the social, the political benefits that would

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accrue would be great. But they are insignificant in comparison with the religious power of so beneficent a change.

Thus have I endeavored, my friends, to show how our light would break forth as the morning, the morning of a day of unprecedented brightness, were the Yoke taken away. If I had the gifts of an angel I could not tell you half the good that would ensue. I cannot believe that the happy results of Abolition are to remain forever hidden from the eyes of those at the South whom it most nearly concerns to engage in the great movement. I confess I shall not be surprised at any moment to hear that our Northern advocates of Slavery are suddenly left in the lurch by some one or more leading Southern men catching a glimpse of the bright dawn that will break upon the land when the oppressed are set free, and obeying the heavenly vision. It is true, at this present time, with a fanaticism amounting to insanity, they claim it as a sacred right to extend Slavery far and wide; and insist that the traffic in human flesh is a divinely authorized institution. But there is reason to believe that they are driven to take this ground, not from deliberate conviction, but by the blinding terror in which they live day and night. They would fain lighten the terrible burden by extending it. As the light of truth is more and

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more concentrated on the whole subject, they must come sooner or later to see it as it is. And the instant the South confesses a willingness to get rid of oppression, I believe the North will be ready, heart and hand, with all its power to aid in the blessed work, so little sectional feeling is there here. In the meanwhile, as we love our country, as we value Righteousness and Mercy, as the Religion of Jesus is dear to us, it is our duty to maintain the Holy Cause of the Oppressed. All claims to religion, nay, to civilization, to common humanity, are suspended, so long as we are indifferent to the rights and wrongs of our brothers.

And here, as a fitting conclusion to what has now been suggested, I cannot do better than read to you a few words from a recent tract by Mrs. Child, entitled "THE RIGHT WAY THE SAFE WAY." "The trouble," says this distinguished woman, "in forming a correct estimate on this subject (of Emancipation), arises mainly from our proneness to forget that negroes are men; and, consequently, governed by the same laws of human nature which govern all men. Compulsion always excites resistance; reward always stimulates exertion. Kindness has upon the human soul an influence as renovating as sunshine upon the earth, and no race is so much and so easily influence by it as the negroes." . . . "Free labor has so obviously the advantage in all respects over slave labor, that poste-

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rity will marvel to find, in the history of the nineteenth century, any record of a system so barbarous, so clumsy, and so wasteful. Let us make a very brief comparison. The slave is bought, sometimes at a very high price; in free labor there is no such investment of capital. The slave does not care how slowly or carelessly he works; it is the freeman's interest to do his work well and quickly. The slave is indifferent how many tools he spoils; the freeman has a motive to be careful. The slave's clothing is indeed very cheap, but it is provided by his master, and it is of no consequence to him how fast it is destroyed; the hired laborer pays more for his garments, but he has a motive for making them last six times as long. The slave contrives to spend as much time as he can in the hospital; the free laborer has not time to spare to be sick. Hopeless poverty and a sense of being unjustly dealt by, impel the slave to steal from his master; and he has no social standing to lose by indulging the impulse; with the freeman, pride of character is a powerful inducement to be honest. A salary must be paid to an overseer to compel the slave to work; the freeman is impelled by a desire to increase his property and add to the comforts of himself and family. We should question the sanity of a man who took the mainspring out of his watch and hired a boy to turn the hands round. Yet he who takes from laborers the

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natural and healthy stimulus of wages, and attempts to supply its place by the driver's whip, pursues a course quite as irrational.

“When immediate Emancipation is proposed, those who think loosely are apt to say, ‘But would you turn the slaves loose upon society?’ There is no sense in such a question. Emancipated slaves are restrained from crime by the same laws that restrain other men; and experience proves that a consciousness of being *protected* by legislation inspires them with *respect* for laws.

“But of all common questions, it seems to me, the most absurd one is, ‘What would you *do* with the slaves, if they were emancipated?’ There would be no occasion for doing *anything* with them. Their labor is needed where they are; and if white people can get along with them under all the disadvantages and dangers of Slavery, what would hinder their getting along under a system that would make them work better and faster, while it took from them all motive to rebellion?

“It is often asked, ‘What is your plan?’ It is a very simple one; but it would prove as curative as the prophet's direction, ‘Go wash and be clean.’ It is merely to stimulate laborers by wages, instead of driving them by the whip. When that plan is once adopted, education and religious teaching and agricul-

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tural improvements will soon follow, as matters of course. It is not to be supposed that the transition from slavery to freedom would be unattended with inconveniences. All changes in society involve some disadvantages, either to classes or individuals; even the introduction of a valuable machine disturbs, for awhile, the relations of labor and capital. But it is important to bear in mind, that *whatever difficulties might attend Emancipation would be slight and temporary; while the difficulties and dangers involved in the continuance of Slavery are permanent and constantly increasing.* Do you ask in what way it is to be accomplished? I answer, that must finally be decided by legislators. It is *my business* to use all my energies in creating the *will* to do it, because I know very well that ‘where there is a *will* there is a *way*.’ So, I earnestly entreat all who wish well to their country to aid me in this work.”

One word more, my friends: we can turn nowhere, to no department of life,—there is no interest, no occasion, on which this great topic does not meet us with its appeals. By all our relations, personal, domestic, and religious, we are bound to take pity on our oppressed brother, and to yield to the entreaties of the noble Christian woman who speaks with so much power in behalf of human rights. The holiday season

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of the year has again arrived, when we have the opportunity of enjoying the relaxation that comes through communion with the beautiful scenes of Nature. Can we thus refresh ourselves, and feel that we owe no duty of sympathy and aid to those who are shut out, by oppression, from all the security and pleasure that we enjoy? Can we go into the country, full of beauty and melody, and hide ourselves there from our own flesh? Can we look into the faces of our friends and children, and have no concern for those who have no security for any natural tie, who can call neither husband nor wife, parent nor child, their own? O dear friends, in the hour of your joy, remember that great multitude of suffering ones! I can ask nothing better for you than a tender humanity, making you faithful to man and to God. When that shall reign and inspire the nation, our light shall break forth as the morning, and our brightness be as the noonday. Until then, with all our boasted enlightenment, “we wait for light, but behold obscurity; for brightness, but we walk in darkness. We stumble at noonday as in the night; we look for salvation, but it is far from us.”