

**INEQUALITY OF INDIVIDUAL WEALTH THE
ORDINANCE OF PROVIDENCE, AND ESSENTIAL
TO CIVILIZATION. A SERMON PREACHED
BEFORE HIS EXCELLENCY JOHN DAVIS,
GOVERNOR, HIS HONOR SAMUEL T.
ARMSTRONG, THE HONORABLE COUNCIL, AND
THE LEGISLATURE OF MASS., JANUARY 7, 1835**

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Inequality of Individual Wealth the Ordinance of Providence, and Essential to Civilization. A sermon preached before his excellency john davis, governor, his honor samuel t. Armstrong, the honorable council, and the legislature of mass., January 7, 1835 by Jonathan M. Wainwright

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JONATHAN M. WAINWRIGHT

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A

S E R M O N

PREACHED BEFORE

HIS EXCELLENCY JOHN DAVIS,

GOVERNOR,

HIS HONOR SAMUEL T. ARMSTRONG,

LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR,

THE HONORABLE COUNCIL,

AND

THE LEGISLATURE OF MASSACHUSETTS,

ON THE

ANNUAL ELECTION,

JANUARY 7, 1835.

BY JONATHAN M. WAINWRIGHT, D. D.
Rector of Trinity Church, Boston.

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1835.

Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

IN SENATE, JANUARY 9th, 1835.

Ordered, That Messrs. WILLARD, GRAY, and G. BLISS, be a Committee to wait on the Rev. JONATHAN M. WAINWRIGHT, and present him the thanks of the Senate, for the discourse delivered by him yesterday, before the Government of the Commonwealth, and to request a copy thereof for the press.

Attest,

CHARLES CALHOUN, *Clerk.*

*Inequality of individual wealth the ordinance of Providence,
and essential to civilization.*

S E R M O N .

Deuteronomy, xv. 11.

THE POOR SHALL NEVER CEASE OUT OF THE LAND.

FROM these words we must of necessity infer that there existed amongst the Jews a marked inequality in the distribution of wealth ; and moreover, that this condition of things was not accidental or temporary, but was to be regarded by them as perpetual. The same prominent feature being equally discernible in our own and in all other communities of civilized men, two questions obviously claim our attention. First, is this distinction between the rich and the poor essential to the improvement and happiness of man, or may we anticipate its removal at some future period, and under some more favorable combination of the elements of the social compact? And again, if we cannot reasonably look forward to its removal, but are constrained to believe that it is a distinction arising out of the nature of man and the present order of God's providence, can such a con-

clusion be adduced as an argument against the wisdom and goodness of that great Being who created man, *and hath determined the bounds of his habitation.** Thus a very important and interesting subject of discourse is suggested to us by the text, and one which I trust will not be deemed inappropriate to the present occasion.

I am aware that it is a difficult and delicate one to treat of, and also that it may require the introduction of topics not generally regarded as within the province of preachers of the gospel. [A]† As, however, the civil authorities of the State must be supposed to acknowledge the truth and excellency of religion, when they come up to the house of God annually, in solemn form, as the opening act of their session, it would seem to be a fit opportunity to exhibit religion in what may be called its temporal aspect, as advancing and sustaining principles essential to the welfare and happiness of civil society. This I conceive it does, when it recognizes and sanctions the principle of inequality in the distribution of wealth amongst men; and when it declares, both in express terms, and by the particular duties it enjoins on the rich and on the poor, that this is to be acquiesced in as a permanent condition of society. But it may be said, that religion recognizes and

* Acts, xvii- 26.

† See Appendix.

sanctions many other things, which, in the present advanced state of knowledge and morals, are either not essential to the welfare of civil society, or else are absolutely detrimental to its true interests; as, for example, a kingly government, and the condition of slavery. It is incumbent therefore upon the advocate of religion, who believes that the declaration of the text will remain true while this state of probation lasts, to vindicate the Divine Benevolence in this respect; and to show, that if it is ordained that *the poor shall never cease out of the land*, it is so ordained because such an appointment is essential to the true happiness and progressive improvement of the human family. This will be the object of my discourse, and I respectfully request for it the candid and patient attention of this distinguished audience.

In pursuing my design, I shall, in the **FIRST PLACE**, interpret the broad assertion contained in my text, and suggest some important limitations that may be reasonably prescribed to it.

SECONDLY, I shall endeavor to prove that the inequality of condition, which it implies, is essential to the political, the intellectual, and the moral and religious improvement of the human race, and,

LASTLY, I shall point out how the more grievous and repulsive circumstances attending upon this con-

stitution of the social state, may be meliorated, if not entirely removed.

·I. *The poor shall never cease out of the land.* Is this declaration of the inspired law-giver, to be regarded as exclusively applicable to his own country and people, or must it be extended to all nations, and to all future periods of time? We know that up to the present moment these words have been most truly prophetic of the condition of civilized man. Under every form of government, and in every varied state of society, distinctions, caused by the unequal distribution of wealth, have existed. Notwithstanding they have been often denounced as unjust and injurious, and efforts have repeatedly been made, both by legislative interference, and during the excitement of political commotions, to remove them; yet all has been unavailing. Nor have we any reason to believe that this condition of our being can be altered by any exertions of man, his own nature remaining what it is, and the arrangements of Divine Providence, in relation to him, continuing unchanged. Whilst one man is weak of body, and another possesses athletic strength; while the intellect of one is dull and inactive, and that of another bright and vigorous; while the energies of one are paralyzed by frequent and long continued sickness, and another is incited to constant activity by unin-

errupted and elastic health—so long will *the rich and poor meet together** in human society; and so long must we acknowledge that *the Lord is the maker of them all.**

These are causes sufficient to produce the effect, setting aside those that originate in the vices of men, as dissipated living, prodigality, improvidence, contrasted with the virtues of temperance, frugality and prudence. But notwithstanding the clearest indications that such is the ordinance of an overruling Providence, yet there have never been wanting those who have inveighed against it, and have thus either openly or by inference, *charged God foolishly.*† Some taking counsel of their own benevolent but visionary feelings, and wishing to distribute happiness more equally amongst men, have thought that this could be done by more nearly equalizing their outward condition; others have been incited by a restless impatience under their comparative inferiority, and have hoped to extend their own boundaries by *removing the ancient landmarks;*‡ others, again, impelled by inordinate and unprincipled ambition, have been ever eager to catch the ear and secure the favor of the unthinking multitude, by flattering their ignorant prejudices, and inflaming their unhappy jealousies against those they esteem more favored by

* Proverbs, xxii. 2. † Job, i. 22. ‡ Proverbs, xxii. 28. Deut., xvii. 17.