

SERMONS,

PREACHED

IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF

HIGH WYCOMBE.

BY

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SERMON XX.

THE WEDDING GARMENT.

ST. MATTHEW xxii. 11, 12, 13.

When the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding garment; and he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither, not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless. Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

IN this parable, the gospel of Christ is spoken of as a rich feast, prepared for the needy, and open to all who are willing to share its provisions. The Jews, to whom the tidings of this feast were first sent, are described as rejecting the gracious invitation, while the Gentiles are at length made willing to accept it, and from among their starving multitudes, “the wedding is furnished with guests.” Among these guests however, we read in the text of one who appears to have been regarded as an intruder, and to have brought on himself, by his presence among them, shame and destruction.

Let us examine, first, the resemblance between this man and the other guests; secondly, the difference between him and them; thirdly, the causes from which this difference proceeded; and, fourthly, the consequences to which it led.

I. *The points of resemblance between this man and the other guests*, appear to have been three; he was *an invited, a needy, an expecting* guest.

He did not come uncalled to the feast, for the same invitation that brought the others from the highways to it, brought him there also. And he needed its provisions as much as they needed them, for he too had been taken from the streets and lanes of the city, from among the houseless and poor. He seems also to have expected a share of these provisions, as well as his companions. He goes with them into the king’s house, and seats himself as a welcome guest at the king’s table.

In these three respects also all of us resemble one another. *We have all been invited to the gospel feast.* We have all heard of that rich provision made for our souls in the covenant of grace, and we have been told that there is not a sinner breathing on the earth, who may not take of these provisions and live—take of them freely without money and without price, and live a never ending life of safety and of joy.

And are we not all equally needy? Our souls are perishing for want of the mercies of the gospel, and must soon perish for ever, if they do not receive

them. Whatever difference there may be amongst us in other respects, here there is none. Providence may have raised this or that man above the level of his brethren; grace may have made some of us children of mercy, while others are still the children of wrath; but neither providence nor grace has made the slightest difference as to our common poverty, our spiritual need. We are all guilty, and must be pardoned; we are all ungodly, and must be sanctified; we are all helpless, and must be strengthened; we are all lost, and must be saved. Old and young, rich and poor, “all like sheep have gone astray;” we are all miserable offenders; there is no health in any one of us.

We are too, for the greater part, *expecting, like this man, to share in the bounties of the feast to which we have been invited.* Careless as we are about religion itself, and much perhaps as we dislike its spirituality and purity, we still hope that its rewards will ultimately be ours. We know that we are not such Christians as the saints of old were, nor as some around us appear to be; we know that we have not that deep and abiding contrition, that spirit of prayer, that deadness to the world, that spirituality of mind, that earnestness and decision in religion, which the Bible requires; but though we may sometimes have misgivings and fears on account of our deficiencies, we do not despair. We have been baptized in the name of Christ; we occasionally, or perhaps regularly, attend his house and table; we join in no amusements which we do not think innocent and rational; we are free from any flagrant vices; and surely, we say, a merciful God will not call us to a strict account for our frailties; he will remember the weakness of our nature, pardon, for Christ’s sake, our sins, and when we die, take us to heaven.

It is astonishing, brethren, how confidently a man will often hope for the blessings of the gospel, while he despises and positively hates the gospel itself. Our hope often seems to be the strongest, when the foundation on which it rests, is the weakest. Who amongst ourselves has, at the present moment, the firmest hope of salvation? That man perhaps, who since he entered this church, has not had one thought in his mind, which has not been worldly and sensual, and who, when he leaves it, will laugh to scorn the very truths he has here professed to believe, openly profane the sabbath, and brave the vengeance of God by pouring contempt on his laws. On the contrary, he among us who is arrived the nearest to heaven, who most loves the earthly sabbaths of the Lord and is most afraid of profaning them, who will go from this sanctuary and turn his own house into a habitation of praise, he whom angels will this day follow to his closet that they may again rejoice there over a sinner that repenteth—that man perhaps, at this very moment, scarcely dares to cherish the faintest hope of heaven, is fearing and trembling.

II. But notwithstanding this resemblance, there was *one point of difference between the man here spoken of and the other guests* at the marriage

feast, and that an important and ruinous difference. He “had not on a wedding garment.”

What then are we to understand by this wedding garment? One thing is plain, that be it what it may, it was nothing that this indigent guest could have procured for himself. He was taken as a beggar from the public street, and had no means of providing himself with apparel suited for the palace of a king. This wedding garment therefore cannot relate to any thing which is to be obtained by means of our own sufficiency or worth. Whatever is referred to by it must be something which we do not naturally possess, something which we must receive as beggars from the hand of God.

Hence it has often been considered as referring to the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ, to that perfect obedience which, as the substitute of his people, he rendered to the law of Jehovah, and which, by an act of grace, is imputed or transferred to them as soon as they believe in him, and constitutes the only title to heaven they can ever possess. This righteousness is often spoken of in the scriptures under the figure of a garment, and it may be alluded to under this term in the text; but considering the passage in its connection with the whole parable, or rather with the series of parables, of which it forms a part, it may perhaps appear to require a different interpretation. The object of Christ throughout this lengthened conversation with the Jews, appears to have been to forewarn them of their approaching rejection by God, and to declare the ground of this rejection—their disobedience to his laws, while they professed to be his people; in other words, their want of sincere, practical religion. This one thing which they wanted, he seems to have had in view when he made use of the expression before us, and it consequently may be considered as denoting real, heartfelt piety.

But here the question arises, What is real piety? It is, brethren, a state of mind suited to the spiritual feast to which we are invited. It is a humble heart, a broken and contrite spirit; a mind deeply impressed with a sense of its own unworthiness, and loathing itself on account of its complicated guilt: such a heart as David had, when he watered his couch with his tears; or that abased publican, when he smote on his breast and cried for mercy. It is a praying heart; a heart seeking with all its powers the salvation of Jesus, and willing to make any sacrifice in order to obtain it: such a heart as the trembling gaoler had, when he cried, “What must I do to be saved?” such a heart as beat in the breast of Paul, when he said, “Yea, doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus, my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung that I may win Christ.” It is a believing heart; a heart trusting in the righteousness of Christ alone for pardon, laying hold of his promises, hoping in his mercy. It is a holy heart; a heart hungering and thirsting after righteousness, loving

God because he is a holy God, delighting in his law because it is a holy law, desiring his kingdom because it is a holy kingdom.

The wedding garment is, in short, a wedding spirit, holiness, a conformity of our desires, tempers, thoughts, and affections, to those spiritual blessings which are offered us in the gospel; a conversation such “as becometh the gospel of Christ,” a walking worthy of “the vocation wherewith we are called.” We are accordingly told by Saint John, that when the marriage of the Lamb was come, and his wife, the church, had made herself ready, “to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen clean and white, for the fine linen is the righteousness of the saints.” In this righteousness our meetness for heaven consists. Without this we can neither enter heaven nor enjoy its blessedness. It is this which distinguishes the Christian from every other man; and it is for want of this, that multitudes who are expecting mercy, will be rejected by God, and banished for ever from his presence.

Not that this holiness of heart can give us any claim on the divine favour. It is itself a gift of mercy. If we are “meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light,” it is “the Father who hath made us meet;” “we are his workmanship, created anew in Christ Jesus unto good works.” The holiest man therefore has no more cause for boasting, than the most sinful. The apostle Paul, when, at the close of his life, he could appeal to all around him and even to his God, and say without fear of contradiction, “I have fought a good fight; I have finished my course; I have kept the faith”—this noble apostle, at the very hour when his eyes were fixed on his crown, and his hands almost laying hold of it, and his ears about to hear from the throne of the Eternal, those sounds which are never heard even by the highest angel without causing him to triumph anew in his glory, “Well done, good and faithful servant”—at this very hour the faithful Paul had no more claim on the happiness of heaven, than when he was first beaten to the ground and cried for mercy.

III. But why was not this man arrayed in a wedding garment, as well as the other guests? *To what causes must we trace this difference between him and them?* It is plain that it must be traced to himself; and yet we do not see at first wherein he was culpable, and may be ready to think that he was condemned by the king for that which was his misfortune, rather than his crime. He was evidently too poor to buy a proper dress for this occasion; and had he been ever so rich, he was brought to the feast so suddenly, that the necessary time was not allowed him to provide one. It must however be remembered, that it was customary in many of the eastern nations for the master of the house to furnish the guests, whom he invited to any feast, with suitable apparel. Now we may undoubtedly conclude that this was done in this instance; nay, we are sure that it was done, for we find all the guests arrayed in wedding garments except this man. He therefore had been offered one, but

from some motive or other he had refused it. *Carelessness* perhaps, mere inconsideration, led to this refusal. He might not think it a matter of any importance in what dress he was clad, and heedlessly hurried into the room just as he had left the highway. Or it might be *pride*. He might think his own clothes sufficiently good for the occasion; or, if not, he might be unwilling to appear there in a borrowed robe. At all events, there was great *irreverence* in his conduct. He had no adequate conceptions of the dignity of the king, and consequently he cared not how he appeared before him, so that he obtained a place at his banquet; or perhaps he thought him careless and inattentive, and expected to pass unobserved among the multitude of other guests.

And what is it, brethren, but carelessness, pride, and irreverence, which keeps so many of us satisfied with the form, while we are destitute of the power, of godliness? We are most awfully *careless* about the matter. We hear of the things which concern our everlasting peace, death and judgment, heaven and hell, grace and salvation; but we do not seriously think about them. We have no desire, no heart, to think of them. Born for eternity, and sometimes proudly boasting of the loftiness of our destination, we yet live as though we regarded it all a delusion, and looked on the grave as the last end of man. And if we are forced by sickness, by sermons, or by conscience, sometimes to think about that world whither we are going, *pride* rises in our minds, and keeps us from seeking the grace which has been provided for sinners. We think that we can do without it; that our prayers and services, our own miserable righteousness, will supply its place. We despise and hate the humiliating salvation which Christ died to purchase; and rather than degrade ourselves by having recourse to it, we are determined to encounter some risk, to go into eternity when we can remain here no longer, and take the same chance as our neighbours in that unknown world.

This carelessness and pride are always connected with *irreverence*, with low thoughts of God. We strip him of those infinite perfections which the Bible ascribes to him, or, at least, we limit and curtail them; we bring him down as nearly as possible to a level with ourselves; we make him a phantom; and then we despise him. We know not the greatness of God, or never, brethren, should we trifle with him. We know not “the power of his anger,” or we should not brave it. We know nothing of his purity, or we should tremble to stand before him in our own righteousness. It is ignorance, ignorance of the living God, of his majesty, of his holiness, of his justice, which keeps us so light-hearted in our sins, and so proud in our meanness. One glimpse of his glory, one right thought of the character of him whose word “shaketh the heavens and the earth,” whose “wrath burneth like fire,” and in whose sight his own heavens are not clean, would make many of us tremble, pour an unknown flood of light into our minds, and fill us with wonder and alarm. It would lead us to exclaim with Isaiah, “Woe is me, for I am undone;” with

Job, "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth thee; wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

Inconsideration therefore, pride, and irreverence, appear to have been the causes to which the difference between this man and the other guests must be traced.

IV. Let us proceed to consider, lastly, *the consequences to which it led.*

1. The first of these was *detection*. For a time he seems to have remained undiscovered and unsuspected among his companions. His garments might possibly bear some faint resemblance to theirs, or if not, every man might be too intent on the feast before him to pay much attention to the difference. But this did not last long. In the midst of his fancied security and high expectations of enjoyment, "the king came in to see the guests," and in a moment his eye is on the man. "Friend," he says, "how earnest thou in hither, not having a wedding garment?"

We know the spiritual application of this question. It tells us that we may deceive ourselves and others by a profession of religion, but that we cannot deceive God. However closely we may resemble his people, however trifling our cherished lusts may be and however secretly indulged, however long we may have passed among the wise and good for his servants, he has never been imposed on by us, never for one moment wavered in his judgment of us, never even hoped that we were his children. His eye, like a flame of fire, pierces through the thickest covering, searches our hearts, and sees reigning there unsubdued and, it may be, unresisted, that love of sin which men behold not, which angels perhaps observe not, which we ourselves suspect not. He can tell which of us, in the midst of our infirmities, is clothed with the robe of righteousness, and which of us, in the midst of our specious godliness, is refusing to put it on. Nay, he not only can perceive the difference, but is actually at this very instant marking it. His eye is even now fixed intently on each of us, watching every movement of our minds, and discovering the secret desires and transactions of our inmost souls. He knows where our thoughts are, and how they have been employed since we entered his house; whether they have been trifling or serious, unclean or holy, humble or proud; whether we have been striving to fix them on high and heavenly things, or suffering them to wander at liberty among low and earthly things, our farms and our merchandize. And for what end does he thus inspect us? If we are his friends, that he may help and bless us; if we are his enemies, that he may judge and expose us; that he may bring our iniquities to light; that either in this world or the next, he may strip us of our disguise, as he stripped Gehazi and Judas, and cause all around us to wonder at the suddenness and fearfulness of our shame.

2. Detection however was not all which the folly of this man brought on him. It was followed by *confusion*. He could not answer the question of the king. A consciousness of guilt dismayed him, and he stood “speechless.”

And thus shall all the ungodly be confounded. They may for a season vaunt themselves in their self-sufficiency, and find plausible excuses for all their iniquities. Man is never at a loss to palliate and justify wickedness. In the garden of Eden he first practised the art, and he has been practising it, with dreadful ingenuity and apparent success, ever since. God bears with our miserable reasonings now, but he will not bear with us when he comes to judge the world. Then will every mouth be stopped, and every self-justifying sinner be struck dumb, and every proud transgressor be covered with “shame and everlasting contempt.”

3. And then too shall the self-deceiver and hypocrite receive another fruit of their guilt—*destruction*, “everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his power.” “Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

This fearful sentence seems to comprehend three evils—bitter disappointment, banishment from God, and acute suffering.

We all know how much bitterness there is in disappointment, especially when it comes altogether unlooked for, and after hope has been long cherished; but what disappointment can equal that of losing heaven at the very hour when we are expecting to enter it? of having those presumptuous hopes which we have so long and so fondly indulged, blasted in a single moment, and ending in eternal banishment from God; in utter exclusion from the presence of him, out of whose presence there can be no blessedness, no rest? And who can say what this banishment includes? None understand it, but they who have experienced it. If we were in our right mind, the very thought of it would appal us. It cuts us off from all possibility of happiness; it fixes a great and impassable gulph between us and all the glories which the blessed God has provided for his children; and not only this, it sends us into everlasting fire, into all the anguish “prepared for the devil and his angels,” into a world of the most bitter grief and most intense suffering, a world of darkness, of “weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth.”

And now, brethren, let us ask what these things are to us.

To the *openly profane and worldly*, they speak the language of terror. They set before them, not one like themselves, turning his back on the marriage feast, forgetting in his sins and cares the invitations of the gospel, and when reminded of them, pouring contempt on them; but one who actually comes to this feast, who appears to seek the mercies of Christ, associating with his friends, and regarded by them as one of their number. And what is

the end of this man? Confusion and destruction. You know the inference. If this seeming friend, this man who lacked only one thing, was thus condemned, and condemned solely because this one thing was lacking, what sentence will be passed on you who are the open enemies of God? what punishment shall you endure, who are destitute of every thing that he requires in his people?

And what *professor of religion* can meditate on this scripture without great searchings of heart?

You know perhaps you want of the precious blessings of the gospel; you desire them; you profess to seek, and you expect to receive them; but what do these things prove? Nothing; absolutely nothing. The great question still remains undecided; the wedding garment may not even yet be put on; and without this, of what avail are professions and desires? Of what avail are favourable appearances and rising hopes? Will they blind the eyes of the King, when he comes in to see the guests? Will they withstand the ministers of vengeance, when the command is given, "Take him away?" Will they cheer the gloom of outer darkness, and silence the wailing which is heard there? Alas, no! Were you the only hypocrites, the only hollow professors, among the assembled myriads of the human race, your God would discover you. Were you more like his people than Balaam or Judas, he would condemn you, his angels would cast you out of his presence, hell would receive you. The wedding garment must be worn, or the provisions of the heavenly feast remain untasted. A gospel spirit must be attained, or the mercies of the gospel lost.

Let us come to the point, brethren. Have we "put on the Lord Jesus Christ?" Have we "washed our robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb?" Or rather have we thrown off altogether our own filthy raiment, and entreated the Redeemer to clothe us with "the garments of his salvation," to cover us with "the robe of his righteousness?" Trusting no more in our good than in our bad works, are the merits of Christ our only dependence, our only hope, our only plea? Do we bring a gospel spirit to the gospel feast, a humble, praying, believing, and holy heart? Surely it becomes each of us to turn his eyes inward, and to examine himself by these tests. It is a trifling with ourselves, and a mocking of God also, to try ourselves by any other. If we cannot bear a trial like this, if we cannot bear the examination of our own consciences now, when all is long-suffering and goodness, how shall we bear the piercing glance of the living God, when "the heavens being on fire shall melt with fervent heat," when "the Lord Jesus Christ shall be revealed in flaming fire, taking vengeance?"

And what if conscience should condemn us? There is no ground for despair. The King's wardrobe is still open, and we are invited to go to it and take that wedding garment which will cover and adorn our souls. "I counsel thee,"

says Christ, “to buy of me white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear.” And at what price is this raiment to be bought? At a price which the poorest may pay. All he requires of us to part with in exchange for it, is self-conceit, carelessness, pride, and irreverence. Only let us be content to surrender these, and then he will bring forth the best robe, and put it on us, and rejoice over us, and be glad. We shall sit down at the marriage supper of the Lamb. He will give us a full, a satisfying share of the feast; a fulness of pardon, that will cleanse us from all our sins; a fulness of holiness, that will make us in the end pure as his angels; such a fulness of joy, as will leave us nothing to wish for; a glory, that will be more dazzling than the sun shining in the heavens in his strength, and more durable than the brightness of the stars.