SERMONS,

PREACHED IN

THE PARISH CHURCH OF GLASBURY,

BRECKNOCKSHIRE,

AND

ST. JAMES’S CHAPEL, CLAPHAM,

SURREY.

**BY**

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SERMON VI.

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THE TWO BUILDERS.

St. Luke vi. 47, 48, 49.—“Whosoever cometh to me, and heareth my sayings, and doeth them, I will show you to whom he is like; he is like a man which built an house, and digged deep, and laid the foundation on a rock; and when the flood arose, the stream beat vehemently upon that house, and could not shake it, for it was founded upon a rock. But he that heareth and doeth not, is like a man that, without a foundation, built an house upon the earth; against which the stream did beat vehemently, and immediately it fell, and the ruin of that house was great.”

Much as all of us within these walls resemble one another, there is yet between us a most affecting difference. Our form and nature are the same; our conditions, and wants, and troubles, are alike; but beneath this outward resemblance, there lies unseen, and perhaps unthought of, a dissimilarity of the very utmost importance. Some of us are the friends of the living God, while others are his enemies. Some of us will live for ever in unutterable bliss, while others will live as long in unutterable woe; in woe greater than was ever experienced in this world of mercy, and bliss higher than was ever known in this world of sin.

It is this awful distinction in our character and end, that the text you have now heard is designed to represent. May the Holy Ghost give you a listening ear and a serious mind, while your attention is directed, first, to the similarity between the men whose conduct is described in it, and, secondly, to the dif­ference between them.

I. 1. As to their *similarity,* you will observe that *they were both builders.* Both are described as actually at work. It is clear then that we have nothing to do, in this case, with the openly profane and careless. Our Lord is referring to persons of a class altogether different; to such as hear, and read, and outwardly respect, his gospel; to such as get acquainted with its doctrines, and precepts, and gracious promises; to just such people as we ourselves are.

We are in danger of losing sight of this fact, brethren. We often send off our thoughts out of this church to others, when the scripture we are considering requires us to keep them fixed on ourselves. Our business now evidently lies at home. The men set before us here are not such of our neighbours as are profaning this sacred day, for each of the persons in the parable is said to hear the sayings of Christ;—they are ourselves, those amongst us, who are now listening attentively to his words.

2. And these men are not builders only; they both, we are told, *build a house,* a fabric of the same description, and intended to answer the same purpose—to be their dwelling place, their place of safety and comfort, their home.

And all of us have the same object in view in our religious profession; at least, if we have any object, it is this—to find a shelter; to get something that will support us under the cares of life, console us in its troubles, and, when eternity comes, be a refuge to us from the wrath of God. And the house that we raise with this object in view, is in appearance the same. We all hear the same gospel, all call on the same Lord, all profess to hope in the same Saviour, all desire to dwell in the same heaven.

3. Observe too that *the house of each of these builders has its strength severely tried.* On both, as St. Matthew tells us, “the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew;” on both, as we are told here, “the stream did beat vehemently each evangelist applying exactly the same words to both buildings, though differing one from the other as to the precise ex­pressions.

We also, brethren, must expect our religion to be brought to the test. Perhaps it has been tried already. If not, a time of trial will overtake it; a time when the real character of it will appear, when it will be seen what hold it has on our minds, and what it can do for us.

This trial begins at different periods, and assails in different shapes. Some are called on to undergo it as soon as they begin to separate themselves from a thoughtless world; others are left alone till a long season of tranquillity has past. In some cases the storms of tribulation are to be withstood; in others, the floods of persecution; in most, the streams of temptation; and in a few, all these combined.

And it matters not, in this point of view, whether our religion is genuine or false. If it influences our conduct, we shall not be let alone. The world and Satan will generally allow us to think as we like, but they will not quietly let us act as though we were acting for eternity.

Till this trial comes, we can know but little of ourselves. Almost any religion will stand in a calm. It is temptation—trifling, worldly, and sensual companions; it is affliction—dis­appointment, poverty, sickness, mental oppression; it is a change of scene, or circumstances, or society; these are the things which show us what manner of men we are, and often surprise and confound us by the discovery they make.

But even if we could escape all these things, we cannot escape the trial of that day which will lay bare the secrets of every heart; a day which will place an assembled world at the judgment-seat of Christ, and leave not a single self-deceiver unstripped, not a single hypocrite undismayed, not one trembling believer disappointed or unblessed.

II. Thus far then we trace a perfect similarity between these two characters; and this similarity is to be found in real life every day and in almost every place. Men who are Christians in name only, often bear so close a resemblance to those who are Christians in truth, that the most quick-sighted observer fails to perceive the difference. It is known only to their own hearts. It is perhaps unknown even there; neither they them­selves, nor men, nor angels, mark it; none but the heart-search­ing God. Still this difference, though for a time concealed, is great, is most important, is in fact such, that in the midst of fair pretensions, and promising appearances, and blameless conduct, and perhaps lively feelings, it ruins the soul. Let us proceed then to enquire wherein it frequently consists.

1. *One of these men built his house with foresight; the other heedlessly.*

When they began to work, the air was quiet and the sky clear; no storms were rising nor floods swelling. One of them was deceived by this calm, and built his house as though it were to have nothing to try it. The other, on the contrary, expected winds and rains, the rushing torrent and the sweeping tempest; and he acted accordingly; he built a house that would withstand their shock. Now a real Christian resembles him in caution. Other men are satisfied with a religion that will an­swer their present purpose, quiet their own conscience, and make them respectable among their neighbours. There is no forethought, no spirit of enquiry, no earnest anxiety to be right, mixed up with it. And the reason is plain—they are unac­quainted with the greatness of the evils for which they need a remedy. They have never really known the plague of their own heart; never seen their guilt in its true colours; never felt the condemned, perishing, and helpless state into which sin has brought them; never discovered how near they are to a dreadful hell. They have slight views of the law, slight views of sin, slight views of the awful holiness of God.

Not so however the true Christian. The Holy Spirit has shown him the misery of his lost condition; he has enabled him to see his present wants and the evils that are coming on him. A re­ligion therefore which will satisfy his own conscience and his neighbours, is not what he cares for; he wants a religion that will bring pardon and strength with it, purity and salvation; a religion that will satisfy his God. He looks forward. It is for futurity that he most anxiously wishes to provide. He labours for something that will endure a storm; a faith that will support him when every thing else gives way; a hope that will bear him up when conscience stings, and Satan accuses, and death strikes; a refuge for his soul amidst the convulsions and terrors of a departing world.

2. And this foresight causes him to differ in another respect from the mere pretender to religion; for observe that *the first of these men in the parable is a pains-taking, the other a com­paratively indolent builder.* One builds his house “on the earth,” where he can erect it without much cost or labour; but the other digs deep “into a rock;” and there, while the struc­ture of his fellow-builder is rising rapidly before his eyes, he is employed below the surface, cutting into the unyielding stone.

It is precisely thus in spiritual concerns. It is an easy thing to make a profession of piety, and as easy, in certain situations, to give to that profession the appearance of reality. We every day see persons who have suddenly attained, without labour or difficulty, a degree of confidence which makes the inexperienced wonder, and the aged mourn. A few short weeks or months seem to have carried them farther towards heaven, than years of conflict have brought their humble neighbour. They are ready with joy to put on the top-stone of their building, almost before it was hoped that the foundation was really laid. We dare not say that in every case all this fair appearance is falla­cious; but this we say, brethren—as you love your souls, aim not at such a show of piety as this. True religion is a laborious work, and the most important parts of it are those which require the greatest labour, and make the least appearance. The heart must be the chief object of solicitude. Dig deep there. Strive to get that humbled, softened, broken; to get into it something like a just sense of its desperate wickedness, and a just abhor­rence of its pollutions. Strive to get its “high imaginations” cast down, its self-will subdued, its evil lusts rooted out. Strive to have it touched with the love of Christ. Be practical Chris­tians; men of enquiry, and watchfulness, and exertion, rather than confidence; of fear and trembling, rather than triumph; of secret prayer, rather than open display. As “trees of right­eousness, the planting of the Lord,” aim to strike your roots deep, rather than to raise your heads high; to be prepared for the blasts of winter, rather than to be admired in the summer calm. Bring forth fruit, but let it be fruit “in its season,” and “to the glory of God.”

3. But there is a still more important difference between these builders—*one looks well to the foundation of his house; the other is indifferent about it.* The building of the one has a foundation, and that foundation stands on a rock, is let into it; the structure of the other has no foundation whatsoever. He chooses the spot that seems to him the most pleasant and inviting, and there, without any farther thought, perhaps in op­position to much friendly warning, he erects his dwelling on a bed of sand.

And here we discover the main difference between the Christian and the mere professor. The Lord Jesus Christ is the rock on which the one stands, while the other is resting elsewhere. In the one case, charities, or prayers, or doctrines, or feelings, are the grounds of dependence. When the man has misgivings concerning eternity, he thinks of what he has done, or suffered, or experienced, and is quieted. In the other case, all these things, as grounds of hope, are thrown aside. There is still a disposition to overvalue them and lean on them; but the heaven-taught sinner struggles to keep it down. He knows that such a disposition indulged is nothing less than death to the soul; and casting away his own righteousness, he “submits himself to the righteousness of God.” He flies to the great Redeemer, and stays himself on him. In him he finds all that he wishes for, and all that he needs. Christ be­comes his “all in all.” So entirely is his confidence grounded in him alone, that could he be separated from him, though he were as devout as David or as holy as Paul, he feels that he must perish, perish as surely and as fatally as the most aban­doned sinner. He hears the sayings of Christ, he does them—that is the evidence and proof of his faith; but it is not his hope—his hope rests on that “chief corner-stone, elect and precious,” which the eternal God has “laid in Zion.”

4. There is one point more to be noticed;—mark the differ­ence in *the end of these men.* And in order to understand the language in which this is described, we must bear in mind that rains in eastern countries are heavier, and continue longer, than in our own. They consequently, in mountainous regions like Judaea, often form torrents; and these, as they rush down from the heights, are sometimes so furious in their course, that none but the strongest buildings can resist their violence. Hurricanes also frequently accompany them, and add to the devastation they create. Our Lord presents to us in this parable a scene of this kind. He describes the rain descending, the floods gradually rising, the winds blowing; at length the sweeping torrent rushes down. Now comes the hour of trial. Will the two houses stand? The stream takes them; “it beats vehe­mently upon them. One shakes for a moment, and the next moment it is gone. And which is it? The baseless fabric that was erected on the sand. All the labour and expense of the builder are now lost, and instead of finding a shelter in the habitation he had raised, it has served only to proclaim his folly and expose him to shame. And mark the time at which it fell. It was in the storm, in the very hour when the man had the most need of it, and expected the most from it.

And thus does the self-deceiver fall. Affliction perhaps brings him low, or perhaps the prospect of death. In other cases, the assaults of temptation first undermine and then over­throw his weak principles. The world entangles and pollutes, till it brings him to cast off even the form of godliness. Some bosom sin leads him captive and at last betrays him.

But even if he stands unmoved by these things, his religion must come, in the end, to a test which none can escape. In the great day of judgment, “every man’s work will be tried as by fire,” and then the expectation of thousands will perish, perish at the very moment when they look for it to be realized. In the midst of flattering friends and rising hopes, they die; and what follows? A sudden and mournful ruin. “The ruin of that house is great,” so great, so tremendous, that eternity cannot repair it, nor time blot out the remembrance of it. We may sigh over the desolations of an earthquake; we may think of mouldering cities, of Babylon the great and Rome the power­ful, and mourn over the strange havoc which has laid them low; but what are ruined cities to a ruined soul? The flaming temple at Jerusalem is said to have forced tears from the eyes of its heathen conqueror; but what again was the fall of that splendid fabric, when compared with the everlasting destruction of an undone sinner? The Lord would not so much as stretch forth his arm to save the one; he sent his only begotten Son to the cross to redeem the other.

But let us turn from this scene of desolation to a brighter prospect. The house on the rock stands. The stream beat as vehemently against it as against the other house, but it could not even shake, much less overthrow it. And what, brethren, can harm the sinner who is resting on the Rock of ages? What can trouble do? It may be felt, but it cannot destroy. Let it “come in as a flood,” and let persecution and temptation add to its shock; it may make the feeble sufferer shrink as it ap­proaches; it may leave on him as it retires some marks of its fury; but he is neither overthrown nor shaken. And let judg­ment come, he is still unmoved. “Thousands may fall at his side, and ten thousands at his right hand;” worlds may be wrecked and disappear; but there stands his house still, a secure and quiet habitation, an everlasting, nay, a glorious mo­nument to Jehovah’s praise.

We are now come to the end of the parable. There are several truths which this review of it ought to leave impressed on us.

It shows us, first, *the object of true religion.*

The gospel is one great remedy for human ills, and more especially for that greatest of all conceivable evils, a hopeless eternity. Its main design is not to moralize or comfort, but to “save the soul alive.” Now a real Christian regards the gospel in this light; he seeks salvation by it. He needs present con­solation as much as other men, and is as thankful for it when it comes; but this is not his first or great concern; he is anxious that it may be well with him at the last; that when he dies, he may have a refuge in eternity.

Is this, brethren, the object at which you are aiming? Is this the chief subject of your prayers and hopes? Have you ever thought of this? While weeks and years are passing swiftly on, while perhaps labour, and trouble, and sickness, are hastening you to your graves, do you ever remember that you have a precious and immortal soul to save? that you have no­thing less than hell to escape, and nothing less than heaven to win? Many of us never think of this. We build for the world diligently, painfully. O what cares, and anxieties, and toils, do we undergo in the work! But as for eternity, we build not at all; or if we attempt to provide a refuge from its miseries, what is it that we raise? A poor, miserable hut, which the slightest breath lays on the ground.

And how long shall it be thus with us? It will be thus to our dying hour, unless we bestir ourselves; unless we call upon God to arouse us; unless we resolve to lose any thing or every thing, rather than our souls.

We may learn here also *the nature of true religion.* It is something more than a form, a creed, a feeling, a succession of hopes and fears. As it is represented in this text, it is a build­ing, a work, a progressive labour. Its object is the salvation of the soul, and its character is simply this—an earnest and un­ceasing effort to attain that object, a working out of this salva­tion. And this it aims at, not in any way which self-righteous­ness may dictate or human wisdom prescribe, but in a way appointed by God and revealed in the gospel of Christ. Our Lord accordingly distinguishes the real from the nominal Christian by this test—the one “doeth his sayings,” the other “doeth them not.” This is in fact the one grand distinction between vital religion and ungodliness, the turning point be­tween heaven and hell.

Is your religion then of this practical kind? In order to come to a true knowledge of its character, it is not enough that you ask yourselves whether you have heard of the salvation of Christ, and desire it, and have felt your hearts burn at the pros­pect of it;—have you sought it? Have you actually gone to Christ for it? Have you embraced his gracious offers, that you may obtain it? And how are you living in the world? Look back to the past week. Has your life throughout it been “a life of faith on the Son of God?” a life of self-denial, of humiliation, of prayer, of patient and active love? What is the present temper of your minds? You are sitting here attentive perhaps, and to all appearance devout; but are you sitting here, like Mary at the feet of Christ, to hear his sayings, that you may go away and practise them? Is the language of your heart, at this very moment, that of the converted Saul, “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” If you cannot bear such questions as these, your condition is sad. You may surpass your Christian neighbour in knowledge, in zeal, in liveliness of feeling, in a reputation for godliness; your house may rise higher than his, and appear as secure; but dig deep, brethren, be practical, pains-taking, laborious Christians, or you will soon be without a dwelling, and your souls without a rest.

We discover, thirdly, in this scripture, *the wisdom of true religion.*

What is wisdom? Is it not this—the pursuing of a good end by the best means? Then the religion of which you have just heard, is wisdom. It is not merely the glorious object which it seeks, that proves it such, for every kind of false reli­gion professes to lead to heaven; nor yet is it some degree of activity in the pursuit of this object—the foolish as well as the wise builder raised a house: it is the means which it em­ploys, that stamps its character, its simple obedience to the commands of Christ, its earnest labouring after salvation in God’s way and manner. And such a religion can never fail us. That man is “wise unto salvation,” who thus seeks it. “Blessed is that servant whom his Lord, when he cometh, shall find so doing.” “He doeth the will of God;” and though “the world passeth away,” he “abideth for ever.”

But let us not mistake. This parable was intended to show us the necessity of practical religion, and it solemnly warns us against trying our profession of it by any other test than by our works; but it does not ascribe our salvation to any thing that we can do. On the contrary, it gives to something out of man all the glory of his safety. Why could not the rushing floods shake the house of the wise builder? Because it was better built than the other? No; simply because it rested on a better foundation. “It fell not, for it was founded on a rock.” It was the rock, and the rock alone, which saved it.

Hence we may learn, lastly, *the folly of that religion which trusts for salvation in itself* And yet this is precisely the character of the religion which thousands make their confidence. Ask the great multitude of those who call themselves after the name of Christ, where their hope of heaven rests; they all speak of Christ as the only Saviour, but their answer shows that the ground of their hope is not in him: it is in themselves; in their faith, their knowledge, their experience, their righteous­ness; in something that can no more bear the weight of an im­mortal soul, than a quicksand can support a temple, or a reed bear up the heavens.

On what, brethren, is your hope founded? Are you building on a rock, or on the earth? To ascertain this point, you must ask no longer the questions which were before pressed on you. The enquiry now must be, Have I ever seen the utter insuffi­ciency of all I can do to blot out my sins or save my soul? Am I casting entirely away my own righteousness as a ground of dependence, and resting only on the perfect righteousness, the atoning blood, the love, the grace, the power, of Christ? Do I feel that were he to fail me, I should be overwhelmed at last in inevitable ruin? and am I sure that he will never fail me? that he is a “precious corner-stone, a sure foundation?”

It may be that your conscience misgives you, or rather that the Holy Spirit is at this moment discovering to you the rot­tenness of your hopes, the madness of your expectations. It may be that, feeling your house shake, you may be ready to ask, “What must I do to be saved?” The question is very easily answered. What advice should you give to a stranger whom you should discover, in summer, building in a water-course, on a spot which you knew would become in winter the bed of a torrent? What should you say to your brother or your friend, who had laid the foundation of a dwelling on shifting sand? Would you recommend him to adorn, or alter, or even attempt to strengthen, his walls? No; your language would be, “Down with it, down with it even to the ground.” The same advice we give to you. Painful and humiliating as may be the step, renounce your present hopes. Begin anew. Place yourselves in the situation of men who have a long eternity before them, without having made the slightest provision for it. Flee to Jesus Christ for safety, as though you had never before heard of his name; and flee to him at once, as though this very night the rains were to descend and the floods to swell, as though this very night death and judgment were to come. The Lord hath “laid in Zion for a foundation, a stone, a tried stone: “it is Christ the Lord. He tells you that “he that believeth in him, shall not make haste, shall never be confounded.” He tells you too, that if not resting on him, not “rooted and grounded” in him, you must fall. “Judgment,” he says, “will I lay to the line, and righteousness to the plummet, and the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters shall overflow the hiding-place.”