

SERMONS

BY THE

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SERMON X.

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE PATRIARCHAL, JEWISH, AND CHRISTIAN DISPENSATIONS.

(PREACHED ON CHRISTMAS-DAY.)

LUKE X. 23, 24.

Blessed are the eyes which see the things that ye see. For I tell you that many prophets and kings have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them.

IT is a common but very just observation, that we are seldom duly sensible of the value of our blessings till we are deprived of them. There is in man an unhappy propensity to look at his wants rather than his mercies; to wish his state better, rather than to be thankful for what it is; and to contrast his enjoyments rather with some fancied state of felicity, than with the inferior blessings which others possess.

This remark is applicable to our case, under the Christian dispensation. How few persons bless God that they dwell in the “days of the Son of Man!” How few comfort themselves amidst the troubles and sorrows of life, with the reflection, that they enjoy spiritual privileges and mercies of the noblest kind, and in the greatest abundance!—My brethren, do you reflect, that you live in the bright day of the glorious Gospel of the Son of God; that all the treasures of the Divine Wisdom and Goodness are displayed to you; that all the promises of the Gospel are yours? Well may I say to you, in the words of my text, “Blessed are the eyes which see the things that ye see: for I tell you, that many prophets and kings have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them.”

The way to know how much we are distinguished is, carefully to compare our situation with that of our fellow-creatures. Let us, then, consider our circumstances as Christians, in reference to those of others (an employment very suitable to the design of this day), and we shall perceive what reason we have to be peculiarly thankful.

But before I enter upon this comparison, I would ask, What is your idea of being truly blessed? Does your heart reply, “It is to possess good health and spirits, agreeable friends and sufficient affluence to supply all the comforts and conveniences of life?” If these be your views, there is a wide dif-

ference between us in the outset. Christ did not come into the world to bestow on his disciples blessings of this description. All these the heathen may enjoy in as large a measure as Christians; and therefore, if this be the turn of your sentiments, you, of course, cannot consider yourself as “blessed” because you live in the days of Christ. In order to form a true judgment on this point, our minds must be spiritual. We must feel the force of eternal things, and acquire a just sense of the value of the present life. We must place ourselves on some lofty point, where we can command at once the view of thousands of ages; and, from that elevation, must form our estimate of this world, with all its comforts and enjoyments. We must set before our contemplation the great and glorious God, and the unspeakable benefit of doing his will and possessing his favour. We must discern the beauty and excellence of holiness; and must perceive the infinite superiority of the soul to the body. Christianity makes the lowest of its disciples philosophers in a juster sense than that in which the term was ever ascribed to the philosophers of old; that is, it teaches them duly to estimate and worthily to love real wisdom. Whoever, therefore, would pass his judgment on the value of Christianity, must have an understanding sufficiently enlightened to comprehend it; a taste sufficiently pure to admire it; and a heart sufficiently holy to love it. The sensual, the worldly, the covetous, the dissipated, the frivolous, want the necessary faculties: “The carnal mind is enmity against God.” “The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”

But I address myself, I trust, to those in this assembly who can duly appreciate that light, and truth, and glory, which the Son of God has revealed. Such persons will enter with pleasure into the comparison which I shall make of our condition in respect to religious privileges, with those, first, of the *Heathen* world; and, then, of the *Patriarchal* and *Jewish* dispensations.

I. Let us survey the state of the HEATHEN WORLD.—Place yourself, for a moment, amongst them, and consider what would then be your situation with respect to *knowledge* and *virtue*.

1. As to *knowledge*—Everything among the heathens was obscure and uncertain. They had arrived at no certain conclusions respecting right and wrong. They were in the dark as to the nature of God. His being, indeed, they could not but confess; his power and wisdom were everywhere apparent;—but what was his character; whether he concerned himself with man or not; whether there were many Supreme Beings, or only One; were questions which to them were covered with an impenetrable veil: and, if any one among them was led to entertain a real regard for truth, he must have been tormented with doubts, and occupied in fruitless inquiries respecting them.

All was also dark with respect to the circumstances of man in the world: how he originally came into it; how evil obtained so general a prevalence there; what was the Creator's design in giving us existence;—all this was matter of uncertain speculation. The same darkness and doubt prevailed with respect to the future. 'Whether man would exist at all after the death of the body; and, if he did, where, and in what manner, were points which no one could satisfactorily determine. Socrates himself, one of the wisest and best of the heathens, although, while pleading his cause, he had ably discoursed concerning the happy state of the good in another life, yet plainly confessed the uncertainty of all human conclusions respecting futurity, in thus taking leave of his judges: "And now I am going off the stage: it is your lot to live, and mine to die; but whether of us two shall fare the better, is unknown to any but to God alone."

2. In the heathen world, also, *vice* dreadfully prevailed. And what authority was there to check its prevalence? What principles strong enough to enable men to resist it? Their worship was base and degrading, offered in general to idols representing beings who were described as the patrons of corruption. Their ideas were worldly, sensual, and grovelling. They had no sentiments fitted to transport their minds beyond the present scene, or to raise them above the lusts of the flesh. And was not that an awful and melancholy state, in which ignorance and vice thus prevailed? But, alas! how many professed Christians are there among us, who do not discern the misery of such a state! How many, even of these, desire no benefit from the knowledge they possess of the truths of Revelation! How will the heathens themselves rise up to condemn them! Socrates declared, that *he* would be contented to die many times if he could but be assured that those things were true, which he wished to be so, respecting a future state. Some professing Christians, on the contrary, who have the knowledge of these things distinctly revealed to them, are indifferent about it. Far from accounting it an evil to live amongst heathens where vice should abound, they would probably prefer it. They desire to be unchecked by the secret suggestions of conscience, or the remonstrances of religion: so true is that remark, which I before made, that it is necessary to be spiritually-minded in order to judge of the value of Christianity.

II. But let us turn our eyes from the state of the heathens, to the fairer view of those who were in some measure enlightened by Divine knowledge. Even here we shall see great reason to be thankful for the higher dispensation under which we live.

Here, however, it will be proper, first to notice some common points of resemblance between the Patriarchal and Mosaic dispensations, by which they were brought into close alliance with the clearer dispensation that suc-

ceeded them. They both declared the Unity of God, and the evil of idolatry: they both described the will of God to be the only rule of right. They both affirmed the corruption of human nature, and pointed to sacrifices as an atonement for sin. They both taught men to live a holy and godly life, and, by faith, to wait for a better, that is, a heavenly country. They both instructed their followers to seek their peace and happiness only in God, and inculcated continual trust and dependence upon him. They both required man to love God, and to obey him cheerfully, uniformly, constantly. They both had frequent, though obscure, references to the Saviour who was to come, and both were under the sanction of the Almighty. Yet, notwithstanding these points of agreement, by which also they approximated to the clearer light of the Gospel-dispensation, many of their privileges and advantages fell exceedingly short of those which we have the happiness to enjoy.

To speak first of the PATRIARCHAL DISPENSATION—One great instance of its inferiority was *its want of clear and sufficient authority*. Probably the laws and observances enjoined by it were first communicated by God to Adam, and transmitted by him to his children. Now it is easy to see that such a religion would become more and more obscure, imperfect, and corrupt in every succeeding generation. Many things would be forgotten, many misunderstood, many improperly added.

After the death of Adam, there was no acknowledged standard of appeal, no source of knowledge but tradition. Hence we find that, after a very few ages, idolatry universally prevailed; and the true knowledge of God was nearly obliterated from the face of the earth. It does not appear that there were then any stated public ordinances. We do not hear of persons assembling in numbers to worship God. Men had no Scriptures which they could read in order to enliven their affections, to animate their zeal, or to exalt their hope. They had no priests ministering before the altars. Moreover, their views of another state, as well as of a Redeemer, were extremely dark and imperfect; for, however Enoch or Noah or Abraham might look forward to a future Deliverer, and a blessed eternity, it is certain that the generality of men in that day had a very small share of such light and knowledge. Even Abraham himself is represented as stretching forward with eager desire to “behold the day of Christ.” He was aware that an era of great illumination was approaching; and that an illustrious Saviour would descend from heaven. He earnestly desired to “see that day;” and he was specially favoured with an anticipation of it, and “was glad.” In a word, the Patriarchal dispensation was intended to be of no long duration. It was calculated for a few families, rather than for a world. It answered, however, some important purposes: it manifested the need there was of a superior revelation, and it then gave way to the economy introduced under Moses.

On the MOSAIC DISPENSATION we now proceed to offer a few remarks.

The Apostle, in the Epistle to the Galatians, asks this question,—“To what, then, serveth the Law?” If, as he had been stating, the Law could not give life; if it did not disannul the great promise given to Abraham of the blessings to be communicated to the world by a future Messiah, to what serveth the Law? It was added,” he says, “because of transgression, till the seed should come, to whom the promise was made.” These words supply us with an idea of the precise nature of the Jewish covenant. It made no alteration with respect either to the mode of man’s acceptance, or the duties which were owing to God and man. It did not change either the way of salvation or the general nature of religion: but it was added as a temporary expedient, in order to maintain the knowledge of God and of his laws; in order to enhance the sense of the evil of sin; and in order to prepare the minds of men for that Redeemer who was to rise upon the world, like the sun in his strength, bringing light and life to the nations.—Under the Patriarchal dispensation, men had gradually lost the knowledge of God. They seem to have forgotten him partly through the want of those religious institutions which might have preserved the mind from wandering after the vain superstitions and idolatrous worship of the heathens. God therefore chose one nation from among the rest of mankind, to be the depository of his truth. He arrested the attention of his people by the most remarkable signs and miracles. He united them in one worship by means of peculiar rites. He captivated their senses by a religion of external pomp; and thus, while the substance of the former religion was preserved, the form and dress were varied. The Divine purpose was thus answered. If a perfect religion was not established; if clear and just views of doctrinal truth were not communicated; yet, under the external covering of ceremonies, the substance of truth was preserved. Every sound doctrine known before was retained and enlarged; every doctrine to be afterwards developed was obscurely shadowed out; and a multitude of restraints and peculiar ordinances were added, in order to secure the public celebration of the worship of the one true God.

Now it is obvious from this account of the imperfect nature of the Jewish dispensation, how earnestly the “kings and prophets,” who lived under it, would “desire to see the things which we see,” and to “hear the things which we hear.”—That dispensation may be considered as having been inferior to the Christian, in the following particulars.

1. It was *chiefly composed of types and shadows, of forms and ceremonies.*—Its ordinances did but “shadow forth good things to come;” but “the body was of Christ,” who was the perfection and accomplishment of the whole. We cannot wonder, if we consider the ignorance and corruption of man, that the worshippers under the Law should place too high a value upon these ceremonies, and should too little regard the substance. The error arose from the very nature of the dispensation under which they were placed.

2. The Jewish dispensation abounded with *severe and burdensome impositions*.—The devout worshippers of that dispensation were subject to costly duties, to chargeable sacrifices, to painful abstinences, to troublesome purifications. If but by chance they touched an unclean thing, they were obliged to submit, both to a temporary confinement and to the expense of a sacrifice. They were required to take three journeys to Jerusalem in every year; a requisition often attended with great inconvenience. In a word, they were under “a yoke” which they were “not able themselves to bear.” But the yoke is taken from our shoulders. We are no more subject to severe commands, and painful restrictions; but, like, a son in his father’s house, are subject to the law of love.

3. The Mosaic dispensation is inferior to the Christian, inasmuch as the latter *is founded upon better promises*;—better, as being of a more sublime and excellent nature, as being promises of spiritual and eternal things, such as grace, pardon, peace, and eternal life.—The Mosaic dispensation, considered as a particular covenant made with the Jews at Mount Sinai, promised no other than temporal blessings; plenty, and prosperity, and the happiness of this life. These were the benefits chiefly held up to view. I do not say, that spiritual and eternal things were not revealed; but then they were not exhibited with that fulness and clearness which characterise them in the days of the Son of man. Under the Christian economy, all the promises are pure and spiritual. It is not a temporal Canaan; it is not external prosperity; it is not the pardon of ceremonial uncleanness that are promised; but the kingdom of heaven, reconciliation with God, the forgiveness of sin, and eternal life. Temporal gifts indeed are held out to us, as well as to them; but, with this remarkable difference:—to them, earthly benefits were types and pledges of spiritual; to us, spiritual blessings are assurances of temporal so far, and so far only, as the Divine Wisdom shall see fit. The spiritual truths proposed before were dimly revealed, and few of the people understood them: but, for us, the veil is removed, and we “behold the glory of the Lord with open face.” The views entertained by the Jews, of the state of man in another life, were probably gross and carnal; but, to us, the Gospel has perspicuously shown the invisible things of the other world:—it has instructed us in the nature of that heaven which is promised to the righteous; a state of spiritual joys, of pure and rational delights; a conformity of our nature to that of God himself, and an endless and uninterrupted communion with him. In this respect, the light of our days was emphatically foretold to be “as the light of seven days;” and it was declared, that no man should have occasion to tell his neighbour to know the Lord, for that “all should know him from the greatest to the least.” The meanest believer of our day may possess a clearer knowledge than kings and prophets of the former time.

4. Another remarkable circumstance, in which the superiority of our dispensation consists, is, *the larger and more abundant communication of the Holy Spirit*.—To the Jews, it was granted, as it were, by drops: on us, it is abundantly poured forth. The plentiful effusions of the Spirit were reserved, as the great blessing of the evangelical state. It was foretold, that God would “pour water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground;” that he would “put his Spirit within men,” in the Gospel-times, and cause them to “walk in his statutes, and to keep his judgments to do them.” Hence the Apostle while he styles the Law a ministration of death, characterises the Gospel as the ministration of the Spirit. The Gospel was to make men partakers of a Divine nature, quickening them by the operation of the Spirit, and cleansing them from their sins. Oh invaluable privilege! Oh glorious distinction! What a rich consolation for the weak and unworthy children of men, that God will vouchsafe to them the help of his own Spirit to guide them in the way of peace, and to lead them to everlasting glory!

5. Further: The Christian dispensation excels the Mosaic in *the manner of its establishment*.—The Law was delivered with pomp indeed, but with an awful pomp. It was ratified by miracles, which Moses was enabled to perform; but even these had in them something terrible. They were demonstrations of justice and anger. By his judgments God desolated the land of Egypt; he overwhelmed Pharaoh and his host in the Red Sea; he punished the Israelites. But when Jesus came, “the Mediator of a better covenant,” a different appearance was exhibited: “God” was “manifest in the flesh,” and came to dwell among us. He displayed Divine power indeed; but it was not to punish or to affright mankind. All his actions had one character, and that was a character of beneficence. Innumerable were the miracles of kindness and love, by which the Saviour manifested his good-will to man.

6. The Christian dispensation is superior to the Jewish, *in respect to the spirit of its institution*.—The spirit of the Gospel is a spirit of liberty. We are required by it to “love God with all our heart, and soul, and strength.” We also find him exhibited in it as a Being of such benignity, that those who truly believe cannot fail to love him. This principle of love being once established in the heart, we are left to manifest it in the way most natural and expedient. The positive rights ordained are very few: the yoke is easy, and the burden light. Nothing is required which we do not ourselves see to be reasonable; nothing which does not evidently conduce to our own benefit.

In a word, to use the metaphor sanctioned by the Apostle, while under the Law, we were at “school under tutors and governors,” and “differed in nothing from servants.” But, now, we are brought home to our Father’s house. Now we are “one with God, and God with us;” we dwell in peace with him; we become sons of God by being disciples of Christ. We look up to him with confidence, and trust to dwell in his immediate presence for ever.

And, as the Christian dispensation in so many points exceeds those which have preceded it, so it will continue without change as long as the world shall endure. God has now given to the world a Revelation adequate to its wants—a system which secures the glory of God, and the happiness and holiness of man. There may, indeed, be periods when the Spirit shall be even more liberally poured out than in the first ages of Christianity. These seasons will arrive. They are devoutly prayed for by the whole Church. They are confidently anticipated in the prophecies of old. The time, blessed be God, shall come when “the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the seas.” But, even then, he will vouchsafe, not a new revelation, but a more glorious manifestation of the old. Nothing need be added; for the work of the Son of God is completed, and it is the office of the Spirit only to give efficacy to that work. All that is sufficient for the conversion, the edification, and the final glory of mankind, has already been accomplished in the dispensation of the Son of God.

Behold, then, my Christian brethren, behold the hope to which God has invited you. Know your privileges and blessings. How many of the prophets of old, when the Spirit of God had inspired them to foretell of your days, searched diligently to discover of what manner of things they were instructed to speak, and who were the persons to whom such blessings should belong. What would Abraham, what would Moses, what would David, what would Isaiah not have done or suffered, to “see the days” in which you live! They beheld them only afar off, and yet the sight transported them with joy. They called upon the whole earth to “rejoice and break forth into singing,” on account of the great things which God would do for his people in the latter days. These are the “latter days.” The days of glory are those in which you live: the night is spent: the “Sun of Righteousness” has arisen in all its splendour. The full Revelation of God has been placed before your eyes. You dwell in the Church of Christ: all his ordinances are set before you. Every Sabbath are you called upon to taste of the mercy and goodness of the Lord. The seals of his covenant are offered to you; and all the treasures of his Gospel, and all the promises of his word, are daily exhibited to your view. It is surely then your part to *value* and *improve* these inestimable privileges.

It is your part *to value* them,—You ought to esteem them the chief good of your lives; a privilege incomparably superior to any other; a blessing for which, every morning and every evening, upon your bended knees, with the deepest gratitude, you ought to bless God. The Gospel should be your consolation in adversity—a sufficient compensation for all your losses. Of other blessings you may be deprived; but this will survive the shock of accident, and the ravages of time. But do you value, as you ought, the benefits pro-

cured by Jesus Christ? Have you weighed the import of that argument of the Apostle, "He that spared not his own Son, but hath given him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" Let your consciences faithfully say, whether you have duly prized this inestimable Gift.—Let us suppose the day of judgment arrived: you are called to the bar, and hear a voice, saying, "Here is one to whom much indeed has been given, for this man, the Son of God died: to him the Holy Spirit was offered: the promises of God were continually sounding in his ears: all the Divine love and mercy were set before him, in order to draw him to God." But if you should have disregarded these mercies and blessings, what will you answer? Will you reply, that your thoughts were too much engaged by the concerns of time and sense to attend to these subjects? Where, then, was your gratitude? Where was your true wisdom? What will be the force of such an apology before the angels, before the kings and prophets, who desired to see the things you see, and to hear the things you hear," but were not allowed so great a privilege?—You are now too much occupied to attend to these things. Occupied about what? About the trifles which perish with the using!—You are now satisfied without these things. Satisfied with what? With joys which will shortly flee away for ever!

I observe, lastly, that it is our first duty—I say again, our first duty—to *improve* the religious advantages we possess. We rejoice that Christ was born into the world. But for what end was he born? It was not only to make atonement for sin, but also to gather to himself a "peculiar people, zealous of good works." Let us not "glory" in the mere name of Christians. Our business is to consider the ends for which Christ came, to follow him in the regeneration, to appropriate to ourselves his atonement by a lively faith, and to receive his laws as our own laws, and to make his life the model of our own. If we do these things, we shall be blessed indeed—blessed, not because we have been born into the world, but because we have been born in "the days of the Son of Man."