SERMONS

BY THE

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*RECTOR OF CLAPHAM.*

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

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SERMON XV.

ON THE CAUSES OF UNTHANKFULNESS.

ROM. i. 21.

*Neither were thankful.*

The heathen world is condemned by the Apo­stle, not for the want of knowledge which they could not possess,—for no man will be condemned for wanting that which he had not the opportunity of attaining,—but for not acting up to the know­ledge which they either did possess or might have possessed; in other words, for their criminal neg­ligence and inattention. They in a measure, he says, “knew God.” From beholding his works, they might easily infer him to be a gracious and compassionate Being. For “the invisible things of him,” that is, his attributes, “are clearly seen in the creation of the world;”—for this the words evidently mean;—“being understood” (or mani­fested) “by the things that are made” (by the whole frame and order of the world), “even his eternal power and godhead.” They were, therefore, in­excusable when, knowing him to be a Being of eternal power, glory, and goodness, they did not glorify him as such a Being ought to be glorified; they did not offer him a worship corresponding to these glorious attributes, “neither were thankful;”—they did not, as they ought, feel grateful for his goodness, nor render to him the homage of obedience for the innumerable benefits which they had received at his hands. And, in consequence of their thus criminally neglecting to act up to the light they possessed, God “gave them up” to the folly of their own minds. “Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools” in their religion, and profligate in their conduct; till, at length, they were abandoned by God and given over to condemnation. Of such importance is it, my brethren, to be faithful to the light imparted to us, and thankful for the blessings we have received from God.

Now the blessings which those heathen nations had received were only those which God has given to all mankind;—the blessings of light, of heat, of fruitful seasons, of health, of the faculties and senses of the mind and body. They under­stood, comparatively, very little of the real good­ness of God. His mercy in the redemption of mankind, the Gospel of his Son, the influence of his Spirit, were not made known to them. Still, however, they were highly culpable in their want of thankfulness. They knew enough of the goodness of God to demand gratitude at their hands, and therefore to justify their con­demnation for the want of it. But with how much more force does this argument apply to us, who have the Gospel, with so many other blessings, committed to us! If they were con­demned for their unthankfulness, surely our guilt, if we are thankless, infinitely exceeds theirs.

Gratitude to others for benefits received is so plainly a duty, that it is superfluous to establish it by argument. Neither is it less obvious that the duty is great in proportion to the number and value of those benefits. It follows, therefore, that the duty of thankfulness to God is of the highest and most binding nature, since the num­ber and value of his favours are infinitely great I do not think, indeed, that any persons will, in plain terms, deny the obligation of gratitude to God. Their want of thankfulness does not spring from any doubt, either as to the abstract principle or as to the particular duty of grati­tude to God. But the fact is, that they do not perceive God to be so truly a benefactor to them as he is. This point, then, requires to be made the subject of our consideration. I shall, there­fore, in the present discourse, endeavour to assign some of the causes from whence this mistake as to the beneficence of God arises.

I. One cause of our thanklessness to God is, that we are apt rather to rest in second causes than to trace our blessings to their Primary Source.—The view of man is generally too con­fined. He looks at what is near and immediate, rather than at what is more remote. Does he receive any good, it appears to be the fruit of his own labour, of his prudence, his exertions, or of the kindness of his friends. To these, then, the gratitude appears to be due; and to these, and these alone, it is generally offered. The fact, however, is, that the Original Mover and First Cause is the Being to whom our thanks are chiefly due. For—take a similar case. I am desirous of serving a friend. Perhaps the way in which I can most effectually serve him, is by persuading a third person to do something for his benefit; and I accordingly urge this person, and prevail with him. To whom, in this case, is my friend really indebted? Is it to me, or to the third person? While his thanks ought undoubtedly to be given to him, they are yet principally due to me. I am the grand mover and author of this benefit. My kindness is not diminished by the intervention of the means I have chosen to employ.—But although the validity of this reasoning may be admitted in the case of a human benefactor, it is too apt not to be admitted in considering the agency of the Almighty. The man who obtains food and raiment by his own labour does not always ascribe it to the bounty of God. He feels little gratitude to him who first gave fertility to the earth; who waters the grain with his showers; who ripens it with his suns; and who adapts it to the powers of digestion and the purposes of nourishment. Suppose then you deemed it right, before you conferred a favour upon your child, to require of him, as a condition of the gift, some previous exercise or labour—would he, when he received it, argue justly, if he were to say, “I do not owe this to my parent, but to my own labour?” Would you not answer—“I appointed that labour as the means by which the end was to be secured. I promised the blessing; I pointed out the means, and ensured success to them.” The fact is, the favour is enhanced by the appointment of the means where a merciful end is secured to the use of those means. This we discover in other cases, but not where God is the Author of our success. But for the blindness of our understanding, or rather, perhaps, the ingratitude of our hearts, we should, at once, refer every mercy to the Supreme Cause, and observe with astonishment the variety, the extent, and the uniformity of his goodness. We should trace to his love for man the system of the universe. To give light to man, He created the splendour by which we are surrounded. To feed him, he caused food to spring out of the earth. To gratify him, he strewed the face of Nature with flowers, and planted it with groves. To recruit his wearied body, he ap­pointed rest and sleep. He gives success to our labours, and he breathes kindness into our friends.—The day approaches, my brethren, when we shall see that all blessings of all kinds, in all places, and at every period—the tenderness of parents, the affection of friends, blessings apparently the most spontaneous and the most costly, the comforts of life, and the joys of eternity—are all the gifts of a heavenly Hand. Would to God, that we could at once make this discovery! This indeed would open to us new prospects, would almost replace us in Paradise, would display to us its Author walking again amidst the scenes of his own creation, and pronouncing everything to be good. Why should we doubt his pre­sence, merely because he is not revealed to the bodily eye? Why should we doubt his goodness, because he is pleased to impart it by the interven­tion of means and instruments? Paradise was not less replenished by his bounty, because he appointed Adam to dress the garden. The bounty of the monarch is not the less, because he distributes it by the hands of his ministers.

II. A second cause of our unthankfulness to God *is our defective view of his Providence.—*We feel grateful to God when we can readily and distinctly trace any mercy to his Providence. And this is at once recognized in peculiar and striking instances, as in cases of remarkable de­liverance or unusual success. But it is greatly to be lamented, that even our acknowledgment of the agency of God, in some instances, should become a means of diminishing our sense of his agency in others. And this is the case, if, by acknowledging him to act only in particular cases, we exclude the sense of his general inter­ference. The fact is, that God does not act in one case more than in another. He indeed more distinctly reveals to us his agency in some instances, that we may learn to recognize it in all. He sometimes ceases to employ instruments, in order to show us, that when instruments are used, it is still He who works. Far be it from me to check the grateful emotions felt by any person who has experienced what is termed a particular Providence. But this I must say, that the very idea of a particular Providence arises merely from the weakness of our understanding, and our imperfect conception of the Divine agency. For, if we saw the agency of God as it is seen in heaven, we should discover that his providence is as distinct, as particular, as minute in one case as another; that “particular” and “general” are the language of human infirmity: that what is signal and peculiar in our eyes, is common in his; that his hand is always employed; that the “God of Israel never slumbereth nor sleepeth.”

A striking instance of this misconception ap­pears in the very meaning assigned to the word “Providence.” Men call it a “Providence,” when they receive some unexpected deliverance or blessing. But they do not call a loss, or a disease, or a misfortune, a Providence. Yet the term Providence means an instance of God’s special care over us. And are we competent judges of the nature of the Divine dispensation towards us? It is certain that on this point the views of God differ most widely from our own. He calls that good which we deprecate as evil. In this case, then, whose views of good are to be surrendered? Shall God give us blessings only according to our conception of them? Or shall he exercise his own superior wisdom, and impart real good, even though we resist it, though we weep over it, though we pray against it? I fully believe, that in that invisible world, in which we shall be able to form a true conception of the goodness of God, we shall discover mercy where we once discerned only severity, and shall thank God for the disappointments, the trials, the sufferings endured below, as the most signal instances of his providential care.—When it is inquired, “Who will show us any good?” it is of great importance first to determine what is “good.” Now, in truth and reason, that is good which is durable, which is eternal, which is holy, which unites the soul to God, the Fountain of all good; and that is evil which is transitory, which is polluted, which tends to no good moral end, which is sensual, which alienates the soul from God. Allow this to be just, and it gives us a key to the Divine administration, which unlocks many of its difficulties, and establishes the goodness of God, where, perhaps, it is apt to be least recognized by his creatures. Many, for instance, are disposed to think they have no particular grounds for thankfulness; that their lot has even been hard, and their mercies few;—that the Providence of God has been rarely extended to them. But on what is this conception of the dealings of God with themselves founded? Evidently on this principle, that nothing is good but temporal good. If God had given them unusual success in their undertakings, or unexpected accessions to their fortune, and health to enjoy their prosperity, then, indeed, they would have acknowledged themselves debtors to his mercy. But under different circumstances as to outward things, they acknowledge no such obligation. Thus falsely do we estimate our condition. Is it not evident, that such a judgment allows no importance to those gifts which are represented in Scripture as the chief of the Divine mercies? The worldly sufferer thinks little of the bread of eternal life which has been offered to him, of the inestimable gift of the Son of God, of the innumerable promises that, if he will trust God and serve him, God will be a Father to him, and will “never leave him nor forsake him.” He forgets the unwearied patience and forbearance of God, sparing and blessing him when his sins called for vengeance. He forgets the strivings of the Spirit of God within him; his secret suggestions and admonitions to his conscience. He forgets the various mercies, even of a temporal kind, which he has enjoyed; the health, and the daily sustenance, the vigour of mind, the perfect use of his senses, the kindness of friends, the affection of a wife or children, the alleviations of sorrow and the mitigations of pain. All these are passed by as of no value. The mind is morbidly fixed upon something which it passionately de­sires, and foolishly esteems the only good, and cries, “Give me that, or I die. Give me that, or I possess no mercies.” Thus Ahab pined and fell sick, and lay upon his bed overwhelmed with distress, because he could not obtain the vineyard of Naboth for “a garden of herbs.” He could not perceive that he had any mercies to be thankful for, while he could not gratify this wish of his heart. And thus it is with mankind in general. They look not at what they possess, but at what they desire. Otherwise, on a just comparison, it would clearly appear, that the gifts even of the most afflicted, when duly estimated, exceed, in an infinite degree, their privations and sufferings.

III. It is a third source of unthankfulness to God, that men *do not consider themselves indebted to him,* except for *peculiar* or *distinguishing mercies.—*For the mercies they share in common with others, they think little gratitude is due.

Now I would wish such persons to consider, whether the diffusiveness and extent of the bounty of God form any just cause of unthankfulness. What would they think of a child who should say, “I am not indebted to my parent; for he feeds, and clothes, and takes care of my brothers and sisters, as well as of myself?” Is it only some exclusive blessing which will excite your gratitude? Must you have something which distinguishes you from others, to call forth your thankfulness? Must your pride be gratified to make you thankful? Then, in truth, your gratitude is only a modification of your pride.—The fact is, my brethren, that the very extent of those blessings we share with others, demands additional gratitude. Indeed, such mercies are, in all respects, the most valuable. Compare such a gift as the light and heat of the sun, with any petty comforts granted to an individual, and observe its superiority. All private mercies may be compared to the dew which fell only upon the fleece of Gideon. But general mercies are like the dew of heaven descending, not alone upon the single fleece, but on the general surface of nature, refreshing the thirsty fields, and clothing them with verdure and beauty.—Surely the blessing cannot be lessened to me because others also are blessed. It is to be measured by the value of the gift, which is not diminished because others partake of it. Every one ought, in this respect, to consider himself as the only inhabitant of the world. In this case, how grateful would he be for the various mercies around him! But, if so, I desire to know why the enjoyments of others should diminish his gratitude, when their happiness does not in­terfere with his, or the sense of their comforts diminish his own?

IV. But I pass on to notice a fourth cause of the unthankfulness of man,—a cause I am sorry to assign, because deeply disgraceful to human nature. I may say, then, that *the very num­ber of the mercies of God tends to diminish our gratitude for them.* Painful and affecting consideration! Yet, alas! it is just. For, exa­mine the common feelings of mankind: is it not evident that some extraordinary instance of the bounty of God excites more gratitude than the more valuable mercies, of every day? The continued enjoyment of our senses, the nightly refreshment of sleep, make scarcely any impres­sion, because they are common and continual. But if a sense, apparently lost, is restored; then we feel much gratitude to our Benefactor. The same disposition is seen in other cases. If a parent gives to his children something new and unex­pected, they are more thankful than for their daily food and clothing. Thus, also, although the unexpected bounty of a friend may at first excite thankfulness; yet, if repeated every day, it is received with diminished gratitude, and at length the withholding of it is resented as an injury. If it be urged in reply, that this springs from a principle in human nature; I allow it to be so: but it is surely no amiable or excellent principle. It shows that the sense of gratitude does not keep pace with our mercies; but, on the contrary, is blunted by the repetition of them;—an infirmity which argues a depraved nature and a corrupt heart; a disposition which is banished from heaven. Nor is this the full extent of the evil. From the same depravity it arises, that the very feeling of obligation is attended with pain, especially where the debt is large. Men love to be independent, and therefore hate an obligation. And, however affecting and terrible the fact may be, the same spirit of independence denies even the gratitude we owe to God.

V. I add only one more source of unthankful­ness to God; namely, a prevalent view of his cha­racter as a just and holy, rather than as a kind and compassionate God.

It is unfortunate for us, that when we first begin to hear or think of God, it is generally, rather as a Lawgiver or Avenger of sin, than as a kind and merciful Parent. We enjoy his mercies, without knowing their Author. We find them in the world, and find thousands around us enjoying them in common with ourselves: but soon we discover pleasures we should wish to enjoy, or dispositions we should be glad to gratify. But we are forbidden, and, perhaps, told, “If you enjoy them, God will be angry—God will punish you.” Who, then, is God? A Being, we begin to imagine, great indeed and powerful, but at the same time strict and terrible; a Being who will one day call us to judgment, and condemn to eternal torments those who disobey him. Thus, the first impressions of God formed on the mind (which have a considerable future in­fluence on us) are unfavourable to Him; for we do not then perceive that his justice is only a modifica­tion of his mercy, and that he never acts arbitrarily in restraining or commanding his creatures, but only with a view to their good. On the contrary, we become accustomed to look upon God only as a Judge. We see and feel many evils in life, and are ready to ask, “Why does not God, if he is so merciful a Being, prevent them?” It is in vain, therefore, to expect much gratitude where such a view is entertained of the Divine Being. Dread is scarcely compatible with gratitude and love.

These, then, are some of the principal causes of that want of thankfulness to God which prevails in the world. We ascribe to second causes too much, and to the Primary Cause of all good, too little. We entertain false views of the provi­dence of God. We mistake the nature of good. We underrate the mercies enjoyed by us in common with others. We undervalue our own ordinary mercies. We early imbibe partial and unfavourable views of our Creator.

A very different idea then of God, my brethren, ought to prevail. We ought to look upon him as the best, most gracious, and most amiable Being; as our constant Benefactor, kindest Parent, wisest Counsellor, and unceasing Friend; whom, to know, is to love; in whose “presence is fulness of joy, and at whose right hand are pleasures for evermore.”

O that I could give you, my beloved flock, such a view of the gracious God whom we serve, as would cause you to esteem his service “perfect freedom!”—May the Spirit of God bless what I say, to promote, in some degree, so excellent an object! Amen.