

SERMONS

BY THE

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SERMON XVI.

THE TARES AND THE WHEAT.

MATT. xiii. 28–30.

The servants said unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? But he said, Nay, lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest.

THE chapter from which my text is taken contains a variety of parables tending to illustrate the nature of that kingdom or church which Christ was about to establish in the earth. One circumstance is especially noticed—that it should not consist exclusively of those who, like the Head of the Church, should be holy and without guile; but that it should comprehend a mixture of the wicked and the righteous. This fact, which subsequent experience has but too sadly confirmed, is expressed and illustrated in the Parable of the Tares. “Good seed” was to be sown in the Church:—such doctrine was to be delivered as was calculated to produce the fruits of righteousness alone, and to collect within the Christian pale a “holy and peculiar people, zealous of good works.” But “an enemy” should sow tares also. Corrupt principles and affections, proceeding from another hand than that from whence the good seed came, would spring up and produce men of corrupt minds and unholy lives. These, however, should be permitted, in the wisdom of God, to continue in the Church, together with the righteous, till the great day of judgment, in which a final separation should take place. The Christian Church, then, taking the word in its wider signification, consists of good and bad mixed together. It is like a “net cast into the sea, which gathers of every kind; which, when it is full, they draw to shore, and sit down and gather the good into vessels, but cast the bad, away.”

Since it has pleased Divine Wisdom thus to permit the tares and the wheat, the wicked and the righteous, to grow together, let us consider what duties arise from such a state of things, and what useful purpose it may be designed to promote.

I. We may learn from it, that SOMETHING MORE IS REQUIRED OF US IN ORDER TO BE REAL CHRISTIANS, THAN THE OBSERVANCE OF EXTERNAL FORMS AND CEREMONIES.—It is not enough that we are baptized in the name of Christ, make a profession of faith in him, attend his house, are members of his Church, and are partakers of the most sacred rites which commemorate his death. All these things are common to the whole body

of professing Christians; to the bad, as well as to the good; to the “tares” as well as to the “wheat.” But from all this we can no more rationally conclude that we are really members of the Church of Christ here, and shall be partakers of the blessings of his kingdom above, than a Jew would conclude with certainty that he was entitled to the blessings promised to the seed of Abraham, because he was born of Jewish parents, and admitted by circumcision into the covenant of God. For, as the Apostle argued, “he is not a Jew” (entitled to all the blessings belonging to that chosen race) “who is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew which is one inwardly, and that is circumcision which is of the heart; in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.” So we may justly reason, with regard to the Christian Church—“He is not a Christian who is one outwardly, neither is that baptism which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Christian who is one inwardly, and baptism is that of the heart: that regeneration, of which baptism is only the outward and visible sign.”

We are all, I fear, too apt to take it for granted that we are Christians (unless some very gross transgressions disturb our consciences), because we are born in a Christian country, and bear the name of Christ: but the representation given in my text ought to render us careful that we possess a better title to Christianity. The great question with us should be, “Are we members of the eternal church?”—But what is the eternal church? What is it which constitutes a right to that holy and venerable title of Christian? Where is the line to be drawn between those who are Christians by profession only, and those who are Christians indeed?—With respect to some persons, whose sins are numerous and great, there may be no hesitation in classing them among the “tares:”—and with respect to some righteous persons, whose righteousness shines forth like the sun in the noon-day, there can be no doubt but they belong to the number of real Christians. But the bulk of mankind may be said not to come under either of those descriptions. Their state is more indeterminate. It may indeed be truly said, that the distinction between merely nominal and real Christians consists in the wickedness of the one, and the righteousness of the other. This does establish an effectual separation between them in the nature of things; and this separation is clearly discerned by that God who “seeth the heart;” and who will one day “judge every man according to his works.” But let it be remembered, that “wicked” and “righteous” are terms which bear a different import with different people. Many persons think themselves righteous, at least not wicked, who, it is to be feared, will appear in a different light at the day of judgment. If, therefore, the righteous and the wicked are here mixed together under one common name of Christians; if it requires much attention to draw the line of distinction between them; and if it is to be

feared that many persons deceive themselves with the hope of being Christians, because they are members of the external church, is it not incumbent upon us all seriously to inquire what constitutes the scriptural title to the name of Christian, and impartially to examine whether we may claim it? Let us not appeal, for the safety of our state, to the general customs of the world.

The “tares” grow up in the church, as well as the “wheat.” Let us not make our boast of external forms and privileges. The wicked, as well as the righteous, may be partakers of them. Nothing but a lively faith in Christ, influencing the heart, and producing the fruits of righteousness, can render us Christians in the sight of God.

II. Hitherto we have noticed only the duty which the mixture of the righteous and the wicked ought to impress upon us, of examining seriously to which class we belong. It is proper next to state SOME PECULIAR ADVANTAGES WHICH MAY RESULT FROM SUCH A DISPENSATION, BOTH TO THE WICKED AND TO THE RIGHTEOUS.

1. And first let us consider the *advantages arising to the wicked* from this mixture in the Church of Christ.

If it be any mercy that sin is in any measure restrained, it is a mercy that the righteous are continued in the world. For their presence, in a variety of ways, tends to stop the progress of sin, and to promote the practice of holiness. The influence which they possess, not only by their unblemished life, but by means of their natural connections, by the ties of relationship and friendship, is used by them for the most important purposes. Their conduct in their necessary intercourse with the world, their maxims, their general spirit and temper, are like leaven, which pervades the mass, and gives a character to the whole. If all persons were wicked, it is obvious the evil would extend itself far more widely and rapidly than when checked, as it now is, by the presence and holy endeavours of the righteous.

Again: The wicked derive great benefit from the presence of the righteous, in the participation of many mercies and blessings which are communicated to an unworthy world for their sake. Ten righteous persons would have saved Sodom. The whole posterity of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, were spared and blessed, through many successive generations, on account of the piety of their ancestors. Children inherit the prayers of their parents,—often the most valuable legacy which they can receive; and a blessing descends upon a whole family, or nation, for the sake of the righteous contained in it.

But the great purpose for which the righteous appear to be left among the wicked is to instruct and reform them. The wicked, through the presence of the good, have the benefit of holy examples. Hence, they not only

see in the Bible the excellence of religion, but they have proof of the practicability of its duties, in the lives of those of “like passions” with themselves; of men endued with a nature as frail, and assaulted by as many temptations. Perhaps their friend, perhaps their brother, once, like themselves, careless and corrupt, is now become a devout worshipper of God, and lives in obedience to his will. What a call is this from God to themselves! What an instance brought home to them, of the excellency of holiness and the power of grace! What just remonstrances also are now likely to be made to them; what affectionate entreaties, and what constant attention paid to their spiritual welfare! If they continue in sin, they have to resist the reproaches of conscience, and the force of example. What can they now plead in apology for their conduct? Will they say, that the customs of the world in which they live are too strong to be resisted? They see before them those who have effectually resisted these customs.—Will they plead the vivacity of youth, the power of their natural temper, or the violence of their passions? They see those who are as young as themselves, who were once, perhaps, not merely as much, but even more, under the power of their passions, now living under the control of religion.—Do they urge the distraction of business? There are some employed in the same occupations with themselves who, nevertheless, make salvation their principal concern.—Is poverty or prosperity, is sickness or health, made the plea for neglecting their souls? Let them look around: witnesses stand up on every side, to testify that these circumstances form no exception to the possibility of serving God.—Are they at a loss to know what is real religion; or, through inattention, do they neglect to read the description of it in the Sacred Writings? Behold the living model set before their eyes.—If, in the society of the righteous, they must be struck with something in their views, sentiments, manners, and habits, contrary to their own, which at once condemns themselves and supplies the model they need: they “see their good works,” and learn to “glorify their Father which is in heaven.”

2. Let us, secondly, consider in what light the *righteous* should view this mixture of the righteous and the wicked in the world, and what advantageous influence it ought to have on their conduct.—Is it true, then, that you who make a profession of religion are as “a city set upon a hill, which cannot be hid?” Are you the “salt of the earth?” Is it by the shining of your light before men, that they are to be led to glorify your Father which is in heaven? Is your example to be the comment upon Scripture? And is your conduct to be the most powerful preacher of righteousness to an unrighteous world? Are the honour of religion, the glory of Christ, and the salvation of your fellow-creatures, in a great measure entrusted to you? “*What manner of persons, then, ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness?*” Say not with Cain, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” but consider, that

it has pleased God to continue the righteous amongst the wicked, in order that the latter may be benefited. Let the impression, then, they receive from you, be favourable to the interests of religion. Little will people regard what they hear, if what they see does not correspond with it. The tongue may deceive, but actions speak the truth; and to them alone will the world give credit. Remember also, that one instance of evil, one inadvertent action, one unguarded expression—I had almost said, one imprudent look—has more power to harden, than many righteous deeds have to reform. Consider, moreover, how necessary it is you should use all the influence you possess over others for beneficial purposes. Your children, your servants, your relations, your friends, are placed by Providence immediately under your care; and from what they hear from you and see in you, they will form, in a great measure, those ideas of the utility and necessity of religion which will influence their future life.

It is an obvious inference to be drawn by the righteous from the mixture of bad and good in the Church, that they themselves are placed here to be tried. True friendship is proved only by a season of adversity: true wisdom discovers itself in difficult and intricate cases: and, in like manner, true piety displays itself in a world of temptation and corruption. It would be an easy thing to be religious where all are religious; where the strong tide of custom impels us in that direction. But God places his servants, for the trial and improvement of their piety, in a sinful world. They have to struggle with evil customs, and to display their love to him and their regard for religion, not merely before a few persons agreeing with them in sentiment, but before the world, and that part of it “which lieth in wickedness.” The reality of Daniel’s fear of God was proved, by his persevering in prayer when it was forbidden. The sincerity of the faith of the primitive Christians was tried by the persecutions they endured. To suffer reproach, or contempt, or loss, for Christ’s sake, is often more difficult than to be active in exertions for his cause. In the world, in short, there are abundant opportunities for the trial of the reality of our principles and piety.

A further advantage arising to the righteous from their continuance in this evil world is, that it furnishes them with greater opportunities of honouring God than even if they were removed at once into the kingdom of heaven. For in heaven many holy qualities cannot be exercised, for which we have here continual opportunities. Here is the “faith” and “patience of the saints:” there faith will be superseded by sight; and patience will have no place, where there is no suffering. Here we have the opportunity of standing up faithfully and courageously for the honour of God, and of proving our love to him by our actions: but in heaven there will be no evil customs to resist, no sinful affections to mortify, no bad men whom we may reclaim, and whom we may thus lead to join us in glorifying God.

Learn then, O Christian, to value this life as an opportunity of honouring God; very short, indeed, but very precious. We are too apt not to discover the value of opportunities till they are lost. We lament that we live in a world of sorrow and sin, and we hope soon to be admitted into a more pure and holy residence. But, when admitted there, if anything could give us pain, it would be to consider how many opportunities, once possessed, of honouring God, are now irretrievably lost. *There* will be no sick to visit, no naked to clothe, no afflicted to relieve, no weak to succour, no faint to encourage, no corrupt to rebuke or profligate to reclaim. A new sphere of virtues will present themselves; brighter, indeed, and more glorious than those which presented themselves on earth, but not affording such opportunities for manifesting the love we bear to God. Happy are they who labour “while it is called today.”

III. Having thus examined the subject proposed to you, I shall conclude with two observations of a practical nature.

1. In the first place, the mixture of the righteous and the wicked, far from supplying to the righteous an excuse for not profiting so much as they ought by the means of grace, is rather an argument for their giving themselves up more fully to do the work of God, while the opportunity of doing so is afforded.—And how infinitely important is the present period of their existence! How much may they do in it, both to glorify God and to benefit their fellow-sinners, and also to qualify themselves for the inheritance of the saints in light! Actuated by these views, let them be careful to improve their necessary intercourse with the wicked, to their mutual advantage. Let them not deem the time spent in their society lost. There are means of turning it to good account, which a mind duly sensible of the infinite value of the present life will discover, and a heart impressed with the sense of Divine things will eagerly embrace. Let them beware of esteeming the present state of things useless and uninteresting; of merely *suffering* life as a kind of necessary evil. Let them not so engage in earthly pursuits as to forget the noble ends for which a Christian is destined, and the manner in which he is called to accomplish them. Let them always remember, that, as there is an essential difference between the tares and the wheat, such a difference must also discover itself between the righteous and the wicked; a difference which ought not to be lessened by a gradual accommodation to the customs, and manners, and maxims, and habits of the world. And, in fine, let them always bear in mind, that it is the “fruits of righteousness” which constitute the essential difference between the “wheat” and “tares,” and which will regulate the final separation of the good and bad. They who have lived together here in the external church will be separated by the

angels, “who shall gather out of the kingdom of Christ all things that offend, and them which do iniquity, and shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth: then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father.”

2. Lastly, while we see the “wheat” and “tares” thus permitted to grow up together till the harvest, let us call to mind, both the difference of their nature and the cause of that difference. The tares, or weeds, cannot produce food for the nourishment of man. In like manner, there is an absolute difference of nature between the righteous and the wicked. The righteous possess a new nature implanted in them by the Holy Spirit. They are become “new creatures in Christ Jesus.” Once unprofitable and corrupt, through faith in Christ they have been made partakers of the influence of the Holy Ghost.—Such, then, is at once the difference and the cause of it. Christ has become a quickening principle in them. He giveth life to the dead, strength to the weak, wisdom to the ignorant, and grace to the corrupt. Let us therefore, my brethren, call upon him to plant us in his field, to watch over our growth, to water us with the dew of his grace, and, at length, to “gather us into his garner.”