

SERMONS

BY THE

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SERMON II.

ON PREACHING THE GOSPEL.

MARK XVI. 15.

And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature.

SUCH was the commission given by Christ to his Apostles, and, virtually, to all who should succeed them. They were to preach the Gospel to all the world; and it was declared, that “he that believeth, and is baptized, shall be saved; but he that believeth not, shall be damned.”— How momentous was the trust thus reposed in them! They were to be the ministers of eternal life, or of eternal death. With what earnestness were they bound to impress their important message upon the consciences of their hearers!

But *what is it to preach the Gospel?* This is a momentous question, both to preachers and hearers. The Gospel is stated by St. Paul to be the power of God unto salvation unto all who receive it; that is, a dispensation in which the power of God is exerted for the salvation of men. The object of it is the recovery of man from that state of guilt and misery into which he sunk by the fall, and his restoration to the Divine favour and eternal happiness. The means by which this great end is accomplished are made known by the Gospel: Christ, by his death, takes away the guilt of man, and the Holy Spirit sanctifies the heart. Faith is required on the part of man; and this faith is employed by these Divine Agents as their instrument in effecting their own gracious designs. Hence the Gospel itself is said to be the means of salvation.

There are, therefore, several essential points in which the Gospel may be said to consist; and these I shall endeavour clearly, though briefly, to explain. They respect the state of man by nature; his state as renewed by Divine Grace; and the means by which this renovation of the soul is produced.

The whole economy of the Gospel evidently supposes man to be in a state of sin and guilt, under the just displeasure of God, and incapable of extricating himself by the exertion of his own powers: and it implies that no other means have been provided by God for the salvation of man; every law of God being too pure and holy to be sufficiently kept by human weakness.

—Man being in this state of ruin, we are informed by Revelation, that it hath pleased God, in great compassion, to appoint a Saviour. He hath sent his own beloved Son to take upon him our nature, and to make atonement for our sins. He hath likewise sent his blessed Spirit to testify of this Saviour, and to communicate the benefits of his salvation to the souls of men. Through this Saviour, men are to be restored to the Divine favour, and hereafter to be made partakers of the kingdom of heaven. In the meantime, through the influence of the Holy Spirit, they are to be prepared for this heavenly state by the renewal of their souls in holiness, by the mortification of the body of sin, by their growth in grace, and their conformity to the Divine image.

Such is the general outline of the Gospel. To “*preach the Gospel,*” is to make known these truths to men: it is both to declare them in a full and perfect manner, and to enforce and apply them in all their bearings to the consciences of the hearers.

From this brief statement we may form some general judgment on the subject; but, in order to give it additional clearness, I shall proceed to show *what it is not to preach the Gospel.*

We do *not* “preach the Gospel,” if we represent man as in a state different from that which the Gospel supposes. If we do not describe him as fallen and corrupt; if we do not speak of him as yielding to the power of sin, and therefore obnoxious to the just displeasure of a holy God; we give a false view of the subject,—such a view, indeed, as wholly supersedes the grace of the Gospel.

Again: If, allowing the corrupt state of the human race, we assert that there is sufficient power in man to restore himself by his own exertions, without referring him to the grace and power of God, we do *not* “preach the Gospel.” This is to render the sanctifying influences of the Holy Spirit unnecessary. The philosophers of old did not “preach the Gospel;” for they pointed out no other means of reclaiming man than the wisdom of his own reasonings, and the energy of his own exertions.

Further: If we so exalt the merit of any righteous acts which man can perform, as to suppose them sufficient to counterbalance his transgressions, and to render him acceptable in the sight of God, we do *not* “preach the Gospel;” for thus also we make the Cross of Christ of none effect. This was the error of the Jews: they had a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge; for being “ignorant of God’s righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, they did not submit to the righteousness of God.”

Again: If we represent Christ as only an example to mankind, and not as making atonement by his blood for sin; as being a mere man, and not as the “only begotten Son of God,” who came down from heaven to become our Redeemer; we do *not* “preach the Gospel.” For great is the mystery of godliness”—that is, of the Gospel—“God was manifest in the flesh, seen of angels, received up into glory.”

In like manner, if we do not insist that the great end of Christ’s coming in the flesh was to purchase to himself a holy people who should be zealous of good works, to enable them to escape the corruptions of the world, and make them partakers of a Divine nature, we do *not* “preach the Gospel;” for we overlook the very design of Christ in coming upon earth.

In a word, if we represent man as in no need of a Saviour, or if we ascribe to him the ability to deliver himself; if we leave Christ out of our view, or substitute anything in the place of his meritorious death, perfect righteousness, and prevailing intercession; or if we do not insist on the necessity of the sanctifying influence of the Spirit; we evidently do not preach the Gospel: we do not glorify Christ, or exalt his Spirit as we ought: we give false views of the state of man, and therefore fail in rightly preparing him for eternity.

In the several cases I have mentioned, the Gospel may be justly said not to be preached at all; because either some doctrine opposed to it is introduced, or some essential part is omitted.

But the Gospel may also be preached *imperfectly*, and may thus fail, in a considerable degree, of fulfilling the great ends for which it was designed.—This is the case when the several points already stated, as characterising the Gospel, are not exhibited in their proper and full proportions: when either a clear view of the whole is not given, or a distorted image of it is presented; when one part is unduly magnified, and its connection with the rest is not distinctly shown; when the outline is not properly filled up; when the points, more peculiarly applicable to the circumstances of the hearer, are not brought forward; or when a close and direct application to the conscience is omitted.

We have hitherto described the mere outline of the Gospel, an outline which it requires much knowledge and wisdom to fill up. Some further detail, therefore, is necessary.

The Gospel in itself is plain and simple: it professes to be so. It was intended for the poor and unlearned; and therefore, if not plain, must be useless. It was given by God, in all whose works a noble simplicity bespeaks the perfection of the Creator. It was delivered by Christ and his Apostles,

who professed to come, “not with excellency of speech,” or worldly wisdom, but with plainness; and indeed they were the very models of simplicity in all their discourses. However high may be the subjects, they are so simplified by the strong and artless representations of the inspired writers, that “he who runs may read.” Moreover, the Holy Spirit is promised, to enlighten the ignorant. In short, so intelligible has the Gospel been rendered, that nothing is required but a humble and teachable spirit, a diligent attention to the Sacred Oracles, and earnest prayer to the Giver of all wisdom for his illumination.

But though the truth is thus sufficiently manifest to those who are duly prepared to receive it, there is in men an unhappy blindness of mind, a perverseness of judgment, a corruption of heart, and a regard to worldly interest, which render him incapable of discerning spiritual objects in their true form and just dimensions, and according to their real beauty. Hence it is that even the professed Ministers of the Truth, with the same documents in their hands, with the same words of our Lord, and the same writings of the Apostles before them, have often differed so materially from each other in the character of their discourses, that plain and illiterate men have been greatly perplexed, and have been at a loss to know what was the Gospel.

Some preachers, for instance, have dwelt almost entirely upon the evidences in favour of Revelation. This is, unquestionably, to give a very imperfect view of the Gospel; for, however important it may be to establish these evidences in their full force, this cannot be considered as constituting the whole, or even the chief part, of the message of the Christian Minister.

Others have been copious in describing the duties of man, and the obligations of morality; while they have very feebly urged, and, very sparingly explained, those doctrines which constitute the only foundation of Christian practice; while they have left too much out of sight that Saviour by whose blood alone we can be cleansed from our iniquities.

Others, sensible of this error, have fallen into an opposite extreme. On points of doctrine they have sufficiently dwelt; but of Christian practice they have spoken only in general terms, and without adequate explanation.

Others have failed through want of a pointed application of the truths they have delivered. They may have stated the grand doctrines of Scripture, but not in a way to interest their hearers. They have propounded them as speculative points; as if a cold and heartless knowledge of the truth could be effectual for salvation. The animated appeal to the feelings, the close application to the conscience, the tender address, as of a father to his children

over whom he tenderly watches, have been wanting; and thus their preaching has been unfruitful.

Another error has been that of not sufficiently filling up the outline. It is the business of the preacher to bring general truths to bear upon individual cases. It is not the constant repetition of the same form, even of sound words, which can be styled a complete delivery of the truth. The truth must be distributed into particulars; it must be amplified; it must be variously elucidated; it must be brought home to the consciences of the hearers, to their lives, to their several trials, to their peculiar circumstances; so that they may clearly and fully understand it. The preacher of the Gospel is to be as the "householder, who brings things new and old out of his treasury:" he is "rightly to divide the word of God:" he is "to give to each a portion in his season."

The grand and distinguishing doctrines of the Gospel are plain and easy; but they are also most comprehensive. Their truth may be readily acknowledged by all; but to detail and apply them fully is the labour of a whole life. It is easy, for example, to admit that we are sinners; and undoubtedly the sinfulness of our nature forms a very important doctrine of the Gospel; but of how small importance is the mere loose and general acknowledgment of this truth! It must be explained. The workings of sin, in its diversified forms, must be pointed out. The numerous lusts of the flesh and spirit which lurk in the human heart, must be stripped of their disguise. The love of ease and of pleasure must be exposed. Pride, whether assuming the character of self-conceit, of boasting, of vanity, or the desire of praise, must be exhibited to view. Covetousness, with its several indications; worldly ambition, in its various shapes; the spirit of impatience, of envy, of resentment, in their secret operations all these must be developed, in order that we may truly display the nature and extent of that corruption from which it is the design of the Gospel to set us free. And, without doubt, he who thus exposes sin to view gives also the best proof of the necessity of a Divine Influence on the soul, and is preaching the Gospel as truly and effectually as if he were directly proclaiming the "glad tidings" of forgiveness in Christ Jesus,

In like manner, he who largely explains the holy tempers which adorn the character of the renewed man; he who describes the fruits of the Holy Spirit, "love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance;" may surely be said to preach the Gospel, provided he neglect not to add a clear and full exhibition of all the other parts of true religion. It is owing to a narrow and imperfect view of the Gospel, that we confine that

name to the doctrine of faith in Jesus Christ; we ought to include in it all those other doctrines which were equally taught by Christ and his Apostles.

It appears to have been the practice of our blessed Lord and his Apostles, to turn their peculiar attention to the prevailing faults of those whom they addressed: these they forcibly and directly attacked. Our Lord saw that the Pharisees, for example, were the chief opposers of spiritual religion: he therefore constantly reproved them, and exposed their hypocrisy to the people. He perceived that false interpretations were put upon the Law of Moses: he therefore gave a full and explicit view of its purity in the Sermon on the Mount. He “marked how the people chose out the chief rooms at a feast and hence he took occasion to rebuke pride, and to inculcate humility. He observed the Apostles to be worldly and ambitious: he therefore frequently commended to them heavenly-mindedness, and deadness to the things of this world.

A great part, also, of the Epistles was directed against existing errors and vices. A Corinthian is guilty of incest, or disorderly practices prevail in the administration of the Lord’s Supper: these require and receive the correction of the Apostle. It is this particularity of detail in the Epistles which renders them so instructive and interesting. It is thus that Scripture becomes “profitable, not only for doctrine,” but “for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.” The Apostle, actuated by these views, commanded Timothy not only to preach the word, but to “reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long-suffering;” knowing that “the time would come when men would not endure sound doctrine, but, after their own lusts, should heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears.” He was to watch against the rising evil, and thus “do the work of an evangelist,” and “make full proof of his ministry.”

The Gospel, it is to be observed, was intended not only to convert men, but to build them up in the faith, the love, and the obedience of Christ. Hence we find some difference in the strain of the apostolic preaching, at different times and to different persons. When addressing those who were unacquainted with the truth as it is in Jesus, they declare it to them with all fidelity and plainness. Afterwards, the same Apostles urge, upon the same people, new exhortations, more particularly suited to their actual condition. They “feed them no longer with milk,” as infants, but with “strong meat.” If an Apostle finds, at a succeeding period, that they abused the Gospel of grace to purposes of licentiousness, we hear him sharply reproofing them,

and saying that “faith without works is dead,” and that a man cannot be “justified by faith, if it be alone.”

By this accommodation of the instructions of the teacher to the circumstances of the hearers, an admirable pattern is afforded of the manner in which we ought to teach others; for, doubtless, the Apostles as much fulfilled the high commission they received from Christ, when they reprov'd sin, unmasked hypocrisy, and rectified mistakes, as when they first delivered the simple doctrine of Christ dying for sinners, and exhorted men to be reconciled to God.

We must guard, then, against an imperfect or partial representation of the truth. Christ, indeed, must always be held up to view as the great Agent in our salvation. He must be described as the Spring of all obedience; the Sun of the system, whose influence will pervade every part; the Centre, in which all the rays must meet. But yet the very perfection of preaching consists in filling up this extensive circle, in delivering the whole counsel of God, and in giving to each part a degree of attention that shall be exactly proportioned to its rank and importance. Of the relative importance and rank of these parts a perfect scale is afforded by the Scriptures.

These observations may suggest several useful inferences, with which I shall conclude.

They may, in the first place, serve to correct the error of those who would confine the preaching of the Gospel to that particular class of doctrines which relates to the forgiveness of sins by Christ Jesus.—These doctrines, indeed, are the prominent part of the Gospel; but they are not the whole of it. The office of the Christian Minister is much more arduous and extensive than this opinion would imply. It requires a deep knowledge of the heart, with all its movements; and a careful attention also to the state of the hearers. In some congregations, the exposition of doctrinal truths is chiefly wanted; in others, that of the practical parts of religion is more immediately required; and the preacher must adapt himself to both. To preach the Gospel doctrinally, and to preach it practically, may perhaps appear to superficial judges to be two distinct and even contradictory strains of preaching. Such, however, was the case in respect to St. Paul and St. James. Both preached the Gospel with wisdom and ability; both were inspired by the same Spirit: yet to many the one has doubtless appeared to hold a language inconsistent with that of the other. Cool reflection and attention to circumstances, will serve in this, as in many other instances, to reconcile the apparent contradiction.

We may further learn from these observations the necessity of caution in deciding what it is to preach the Gospel.—There are many sources of mistake on this point. Wise, and learned, and good men, have often differed, and even on some questions of importance. Let us not be rash or confident in our judgment. Who has not had occasion to retract errors into which he has fallen? I frankly own that I have varied in my sentiments on some points where I formerly thought that I had truth clearly on my side. I trust that the doctrines I now deliver are those which are clearly contained in the holy Scriptures. I can truly say, they have been adopted after a careful perusal of the Sacred Writings, after much observation of the state of mankind, and much serious reflection. But I would not be confident that I shall never see reason to alter my judgment in some particulars; though not, I trust, upon any material point. It certainly is my earnest and daily prayer to God, that where I am wrong I may be set right; and that I may both clearly perceive, and faithfully preach, the whole truth as it is in Jesus. And this also I may affirm as before God, that I neither deliver any doctrine without a full conviction of its truth, nor keep back any from regard to man. Still I every day see more strongly the necessity of guarding against that spirit which decides upon great points hastily and dogmatically, and without candour or reflection. It is natural for men to form rash judgments. How striking were the instances of this even in the days of the Apostles! Could there be any doubt, while they were yet alive, as to what was the truth, or who were the preachers of it? Yet even in their congregations, and among the persons awakened by them, false teachers arose, who pretended that they knew the truth better than the Apostles themselves; and, strange to say, they were believed and followed! “Lord, what is man!” How blind and rash; how soon carried away by prejudice, or betrayed by a hasty judgment! Let us, my brethren, learn caution and humility.

We may infer, also, from what has been said, that nothing new is to be expected in the preaching of the Gospel. What is new must, on that very account, be false. Yet many persons seem anxious to discover something which was never heard of before; something which is to operate as a charm in effecting their salvation. All that can be delivered by the ablest men has been already revealed in the holy Scriptures; and there truths will be found to be clear in proportion to their importance. Let none of us, then, neglect the treasure we already possess, in order to go in search of something new. Let us take the Bible into our hands, allowing to it its just weight and authority and it will not fail plainly to make known to us the whole counsel of God.

The desire of novelty often leads to fatal consequences. Many are ever seeking, but never find the truth. Many love to repeat some favourite expression, or to dwell on some favourite topic, to the neglect of more important points. Many cherish a fond regard to doctrines, without attending to practice; while some make use even of religion itself to stifle the remonstrances of conscience. Hence, too, come dissensions in the church. One says, "I am of Paul; another, I am of Apollos;" and thus, as the Apostle tells us, they "prove themselves yet carnal." It has been the policy of Satan to undermine the church rather than to attack it openly. An avowed denial of any truth would alarm the mind; but the exaltation of one part of the Gospel, to the disparagement of the rest, is not so soon perceived to be equally productive of danger.

Lastly: Let us ever remember, that it is the practical application of old and well-known truths to the conscience which is chiefly wanted, and from which Satan would divert our attention. What does the mere speculative belief of any truth avail, if it be not brought into effect? You believe, for instance, the sinfulness of your nature:—then, mark it well; trace it through all its windings; cherish tenderness of conscience; confess your sins before God; be deeply humbled for them; strive against them, in the name of Jesus Christ. Thus you will walk in the right way. The hour is at hand, when empty words will not be allowed as a substitute for holy deeds. We may build upon the true Foundation, wood, or hay, or stubble; but that day will try every man's work of what sort it is. God grant that we may then be found to have received the truth in the love of it; and to have brought forth its appropriate fruits, to the glory of God and the salvation of our souls. *Amen.*