

THE
WORKS
OF
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CONTAINING
AN AUTHENTIC NARRATIVE, &C., LETTERS ON RELIGIOUS SUBJECTS, CARDIPHONIA,
DISCOURSES INTENDED FOR THE PULPIT,
SERMONS PREACHED IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF OLNEY,
A REVIEW OF ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY, OLNEY HYMNS, POEMS,
MESSIAH, OCCASIONAL SERMONS, AND TRACTS.

TO WHICH ARE PREFIXED
MEMOIRS OF HIS LIFE, &c.

BY THE REV. R. CECIL, A. M.

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LETTER XIII.

ON HEARING SERMONS.

DEAR SIR,

I AM glad to find that the Lord has at length been pleased to fix you in a favoured situation, where you have frequent opportunities of hearing the gospel. This is a great privilege; but, like all other outward privileges, it requires grace and wisdom to make a due improvement of it: and the great plenty of ordinances you enjoy, though in itself a blessing, is attended with snares, which, unless they are carefully guarded against, may hinder, rather than promote, your edification. I gladly embrace the occasion you afford me, of offering you my advice upon this subject. A remembrance of the mistakes I have myself formerly committed, and the observations I have made upon the conduct of professors, considered as hearers, will, perhaps, in some measure qualify me for the task you have assigned me.

The faithful ministers of the gospel, are all the servants and ambassadors of Christ; they are called and furnished by his Holy Spirit; they speak in his name; and their success in the discharge of their office, be it more or less, depends entirely upon his blessing: so far they are all upon a par. But in the measure of their ministerial abilities, and in the peculiar turn of their preaching, there is a great variety. There are “diversities of gifts from the same Spirit; and he distributes to every man severally according to his own will.” Some are more happy in alarming the careless, others in administering consolation to the wounded conscience. Some are set more especially for the establishment and confirmation of the gospel-doctrines; others are skilful in solving casuistical points; others are more excellent in enforcing practical godliness; and others again, having been led through depths of temptation and spiritual distress, are best acquainted with the various workings of the heart, and know best how to speak a word in season to weary and exercised souls. Perhaps no true minister of the gospel (for all such are taught of God) is wholly at a loss upon either of these points; but few, if any, are remarkably and equally excellent in managing them all. Again, as to their manner, some are more popular and pathetic, but at the same time more general and diffuse; while the want of that life and earnestness in delivery is compensated in others, by the closeness, accuracy, and depth of their compositions. In this variety of gifts, the Lord has a gracious regard to the different tastes and dispositions, as well as to the wants of his people; and by their combined effects, the complete system of his truth is illustrated, and the good of

his church promoted with the highest advantage; while his ministers, like officers assigned to different stations in an army, have not only the good of the whole in view, but each one his particular post to maintain. This would be more evidently the case, if the remaining depravity of our hearts did not afford Satan but too much advantage in his subtle attempts to hurt and ensnare us. But alas! how often has he prevailed to infuse a spirit of envy or dislike in ministers towards each other, to withdraw hearers from their proper concernment, by dividing them into parties and stirring them up to contend for a Paul, an Apollos, or a Cephas, for their own favourites, to the disparagement of others who are equally dear to the Lord, and faithful in his service? You may think my preamble long: but I shall deduce my advices chiefly from it; taking it for granted, that to you I may have no need of proving at large what I have advanced.

As the gifts and talents of ministers are different, I advise you to choose for your stated pastor and teacher, one whom you find most suitable, upon the whole, to your own taste, and whom you are likely to hear with the most pleasure and advantage. Use some deliberation and much prayer in this matter. Entreat the Lord, who knows better than you do yourself, to guide you where your soul may be best fed; and when your choice is fixed, you will do well to make a point of attending his ministry constantly, I mean, at least the stated times of worship on the Lord's day. I do not say, that no circumstance will justify your going elsewhere at such times occasionally; but I think the seldomer you are absent the better. A stated and regular attendance encourages the minister, affords a good example to the congregation; and a hearer is more likely to meet with what is directly suited to his own case, from a minister who knows him, and expects to see him, than he can be from one who is a stranger. Especially, I would not wish you to be absent for the sake of gratifying your curiosity, to hear some new preacher, who you have, perhaps, been told, is a very extraordinary man. For in your way such occasions might possibly offer almost every week. What I have observed of many, who run about unseasonably after new preachers, has reminded me of Prov. xxvii. 8. "As a bird that wandereth from her nest, so is the man that wandereth from his place." Such unsettled hearers seldom thrive, they usually grow wise in their own conceits, have their heads filled with notions, acquire a dry, critical, and censorious spirit; and are more intent upon disputing who is the best preacher, than upon obtaining benefit to themselves from what they hear. If you could find a man, indeed, who had a power in himself of dispensing a blessing to your soul, you might follow him from place to place; but as the blessing is in the Lord's hand, you will be more likely to receive it by waiting where his providence has placed you, and where he has

met with you before.

But as human nature is prone to extremes, permit me to give you a caution on the other hand. If the minister under whom you stately attend, is made very acceptable to you, you will be in the less danger of slighting him. But be careful that you do not slight any other minister of Christ. If, therefore, when you come to hear your own preacher, you find another in the pulpit, do not let your looks tell him, that if you had known he had been there you would not have come. I wish indeed you may never think so in your heart; but though we cannot prevent evil thoughts from rising in our minds, we should endeavour to combat and suppress them. Some persons are so curious, or rather so weak, that if their favourite minister is occasionally absent, they hardly think it worth their while to hear another. A judicious and faithful minister, in this case, instead of being delighted with such a mark of peculiar attachment to himself, will be grieved to think that they have profited no more by his labours; for it is his desire to win souls, not to himself, but to Jesus Christ. I hope you, my friend, will always attend the ordinances with a view to the Lord's presence; and when you are in your proper place, consider the preacher (if he preaches the truth) as one providentially and expressly sent by the Lord to you at that time; and that you could not choose better for yourself, all things considered, than he has chosen for you. Do not limit the Almighty, by confining your expectations to a single instrument. If you do, you will probably procure your own disappointment. If you fix your hopes upon the man, the Lord may withhold his blessing, and then the best men and the best sermons will prove to you but as clouds without water. But, besides the more stated seasons of worship on the Lord's day, you have many opportunities of hearing sermons occasionally in the course of the week; and thus you may partake of that variety of gifts which I have already spoken of. This will be either a benefit, or otherwise, according to the use you make of it. I would recommend to you to improve these occasions, but under some restrictions.

In the first place, be cautious that you do not degenerate into the spirit of a mere hearer, so as to place the chief stress of your profession upon running hither and thither after preachers. There are many who are always upon the wing: and, without a due regard to what is incumbent upon them in the shop, in the family, or in the closet, they seem to think they were sent into the world only to hear sermons, and to hear as many in a day as they possibly can. Such persons may be fitly compared to Pharaoh's lean kine; they devour a great deal; but for want of a proper digestion, they do not flourish; their souls are lean; they have little solid comfort; and their profession abounds more in leaves than in fruit. If the twelve apostles were

again upon earth, and you could hear them all every week; yet if you were not attentive to the duties of the closet, if you did not allow yourself time for reading, meditation, and prayer; and if you did not likewise conscientiously attend to the concerns of your particular calling, and the discharge of your duties in relative life, I should be more ready to blame your indiscretion, than to admire your zeal. Everything is beautiful in its season; and if one duty frequently jostles out another, it is a sign either of a weak judgment, or of a wrong turn of mind. No public ordinances can make amends for the neglect of secret prayer; nor will the most diligent attendance upon them justify us in the neglect of those duties, which, by the command and appointment of God, we owe to society.

Again, as it is our trial to live in a day wherein so many contentions and winds of strange doctrines abound, I hope you will watch and pray that you may not have itching ears, inclining you to hearken after novel and singular opinions, and the erroneous sentiments of men of unstable minds, who are not sound in the faith. I have known persons, who, from a blameable curiosity, have gone to hear such, not for the sake of edification, which they could not expect, but to know what they had to say, supposing that they themselves were too well established in the truth to be hurt by them. But the experiment (without a just and lawful call) is presumptuous and dangerous. In this way many have been hurt, yea, many have been overthrown. Error is like poison; the subtlety, quickness, and force of its operation, is often amazing. As we pray not to be led into temptation, we should take care not to run into it wilfully. If the Lord has shown you what is right, it is not worth your while to know (if you could know it) how many ways there are of being wrong.

Farther, I advise you, when you hear a gospel sermon, and it is not in all respects to your satisfaction, be not too hasty to lay the whole blame upon the preacher. The Lord's ministers have not much to say in their own behalf. They feel (it is to be hoped) their own weakness and defects, and the greatness and difficulty of their work. They are conscious that their warmest endeavours to proclaim the Saviour's glory are too cold; and their most importunate addresses to the consciences of men are too faint; and sometimes they are burdened with such discouragements, that even their enemies would pity them, if they knew their case. Indeed, they have much to be ashamed of; but it will be more useful for you, who are a hearer, to consider whether the fault may not possibly be in yourself. Perhaps you thought too highly of the man, and expected too much from him; or perhaps you thought too meanly of him, and expected too little. In the former case, the Lord justly disappointed you; in the latter, you received according to your

faith. Perhaps you neglected to pray for him; and then, though he might be useful to others, it is not at all strange that he was not so to you. Or possibly you have indulged a trifling spirit, and brought a dearth and deadness upon your own soul, for which you had not been duly humbled, and the Lord chose that time to rebuke you.

Lastly, as a hearer, you have a right to try all doctrines by the word of God and it is your duty so to do. Faithful ministers will remind you of this; they will not wish to hold you in an implicit and blind obedience to what they say upon their own authority, nor desire that you should follow them farther than they have the scriptures for their warrant. They would not be lords over your conscience, but helpers of your joy. Prize this gospel-liberty, which sets you free from the doctrines and commandments of men; but do not abuse it to the purposes of pride and self. There are hearers who make themselves, and not the scripture, the standard of their judgment. They attend not so much to be instructed, as to pass their sentence. To them the pulpit is the bar at which the minister stands to take his trial before them,—a bar at which few escape censure, from judges at once so severe and inconsistent. For as these censors are not all of a mind, and, perhaps, agree in nothing so much as in the opinion they have of their own wisdom, it has often happened, that, in the course of one and the same sermon, the minister has been condemned as a legalist, and an antinomian; as too high in his notions, and too low; as having too little action, and too much. Oh! this is a hateful spirit, that prompts hearers to pronounce *ex cathedra*, as if they were infallible, breaks in upon the rights of private judgment, even in matters not essential, and makes a man an offender for a word. This spirit is one frequent unhappy evil, which springs from the corruption of the heart, when the Lord affords the means of grace in great abundance. How highly would some of the Lord's hidden ones, who are destitute of the ordinances, prize the blessing of a preached gospel, with which too many professors seem to be surfeited. I pray God to preserve you from such a spirit (which, I fear, is spreading, and infects us like the pestilence), and to guide you in all things.

I am, &c.