

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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SERMON XXXIII.

OPPOSITION TO MESSIAH UNREASONABLE.

Why do the Heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord, and against his Anointed; saying, Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us. PSALM ii. 1–3.

IT is generally admitted, that the institutes of Christianity, as contained in the New Testament, do at least exhibit a beautiful and salutary system of morals; and that a sincere compliance with the precepts of our Lord and his apostles would have a good effect upon society. Few infidels have ventured to contradict the common sense of mankind so far as to deny this. Nor can it be denied, that the author of this institution, if we judge by the history and character given of him by the evangelists, exemplified, in the highest perfection, by his own conduct, the precepts which he enjoined to his followers. While he lived as a man amongst men, the tenor of his behaviour was such as became the friend of mankind. Though he submitted to a low estate, and often suffered hunger, thirst, and weariness, we do not read of his having wrought a single miracle merely for his own relief. But the wants and calamities of others continually excited his compassion and engaged his assistance. He gave sight to the blind, health to the sick, and sometimes wiped away the tears of mourners, by restoring their dead to life. He endured hunger himself, but once and again provided food for multitudes, lest they, having nothing to eat, should have fainted by the way. Nor did he confine his acts of benevolence to his followers, but was easy of access, and granted the request of all indiscriminately who applied to him. He went about doing good (Acts x. 38), and often put himself in the way of those who would not otherwise have known him. And though he was opposed, calumniated, and laughed to scorn, he continued unwearied and determined in the same cause, bestowing benefits on all around him, as occasions offered, and returning good for evil. May we not with reason ask, Why then did Jews and Heathens, priests and people, scribes and Sadducees, rage so furiously against him, who did nothing amiss, who did all things well? Why did persons of the most opposite interests, parties, and sentiments, who could agree in nothing else, so cordially agree in opposing Messiah?

The gospel breathes the spirit of its great Author, and has a direct tendency to make men happy and useful. Wherever it was published, in the first age, among the Heathens, many of them turned from the worship of dumb idols to serve the living and true God. It taught and enabled them to renounce ungodliness and worldly lusts, and to live soberly, righteously, and godly (Titus ii. 12); and it still produces the same effects. The world now

bears the name of Christian; but under this new and honourable name it retains the same spirit as formerly. Many who are called Christians, are no less under the power of evil tempers and evil habits, than the Heathens to whom the apostles preached. But where the gospel of the grace of God reaches the heart, a real and observable change is produced. The profane person learns to fear an oath, the libertine is reclaimed, the drunkard becomes sober, and the miser kind. Wherever the truth of the gospel is known and received, instances may be found of persons who were a terror and a burden to their families, being delivered from the stings of a guilty conscience, from the dominion of headstrong passions, from the slavery of habitual wickedness, and made peaceful, useful, and exemplary members of society, by what the apostle calls the preaching of the cross. And we challenge history to show that an abiding, consistent reformation was ever effected by any other doctrine, in a single province, or city, or village, or even in a single family.

What then shall we say of that zeal which kindled the fire of persecution against our Lord and his apostles, and his followers, through a succession of ages? What is the common principle, the bond of union, which at this day connects people who differ so widely in other respects, and points their displeasure from all sides against this one object? In a former discourse,* I briefly mentioned the principal grounds of that dislike which the Jews manifested to Messiah's personal ministry, and I observed, that they are deeply rooted in the nature of fallen man, and therefore not peculiar to any one age or nation. The gospel always did, and always will produce the same happy change in those who receive it, and provoke the same opposition and resentment in those who do not. The actings will be different as circumstances vary, but the principle is universally the same. In this island, which the good providence of God has distinguished by many signal and peculiar favours, the spirit of our constitution and government is friendly to liberty of conscience and the rights of private judgment; so that our religious profession does not expose us to the penalties of fire and sword, stripes or tortures, imprisonment or banishment. Such trials have been the lot of our forefathers, when the servants of God, under the names of Gospellers or Puritans, were treated as heretics of the worst sort. We are bound to acknowledge with thankfulness the blessings of religious and civil liberty which we enjoy. But the world at large around us is not more favourably disposed to the grace and rule of Messiah's kingdom, than it was in the days of Heathen and Popish darkness. The tongue at least is unrestrained, and out of the abundance of the heart the mouth will speak. The gospel offends the pride of men, by considering them all on a level, as sinners in the sight of God; and by proposing only one method of salvation, without admitting any

* Sermon xvii.

difference of plea or character. It offends them likewise by its strictness. Like Herod, they might perhaps consent to do many things (Mark vi. 20), if they were left at liberty to please themselves in others, in which, though expressly contrary to the will of God, they will not submit to be controlled; and therefore they are much displeased with the gospel, which, by affording no allowance or connivance to the least known sin, but prescribing a rule of universal holiness, crosses their inclinations and favourite interests. When Paul preached at Ephesus, Demetrius and his companions perceived that their craft was in danger. This was the real cause of their anger, but they were ashamed to avow it; and therefore their ostensible reason for opposing him was of a religious kind (Acts xix. 28), and they professed a great concern for the honour of Diana. Few perhaps would have given themselves much trouble to promote or preserve the gain of the craftsmen; but a pretended regard for the worship which had been long established, was a popular topic, which wrought powerfully upon the superstition of the ignorant multitude, and thousands were presently induced to join with them in the cry, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians."

The like arts are still practised with the like success. The same secret motives are disguised by the same plausible pretences. The deceitfulness and wickedness of the heart appears in no one instance more plainly than in the cavils which are repeated and multiplied against the grace of the gospel. When we preach a free salvation by faith in Jesus, and propose his obedience unto death as the sure and only ground of acceptance with God; when we say, in the words of the apostle, to the vilest of sinners who feel the burden, and fear the consequences of their sins, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved" (Acts xvi. 31), an alarm is raised, and a concern pretended for the interests of morality. The doctrine of salvation by faith only, is charged with opening a door, a floodgate for licentiousness, and it is supposed, that if this doctrine be true, people may live as they please, and still comfort themselves with the expectation of heaven at last. Considering our natural propensity to trust in ourselves that we are righteous, I do not wonder that persons who are comparatively sober and decent should speak thus, while they are ignorant of the strictness of the holy law of God, and of the depravity of their own hearts. But I sometimes wonder that they are not a little disconcerted by the characters of many (so different from what they suppose their own to be) who join with them in the objections they make. For in this point, with the sober and decent, the licentious and profligate readily concur; and whoremongers, adulterers, drunkards, and profane swearers, almost equal them in gravely expressing their apprehensions that the doctrine of salvation by grace will prove very unfavourable to the practice of good works. How very remarkable is this, that the virtuous and the vile, the most respectable and the most infamous people, should so frequently agree in sentiment, and unite in opposing the gospel, professedly from the

same motive. But thus it was at the commencement of Messiah's kingdom: kings, rulers, priests, and people, all conspired and raged against him. Herod and Pilate, the Jewish elders and the Roman soldiers, the Pharisees and the Sadducees thus differed, and thus agreed. They hated each other till he appeared; but their greater common hatred to him made them act in concert, and they suspended their mutual animosity, that they might combine to destroy him.

I may seem to have digressed from the immediate scope of my text, but I judge it proper to bring the subject home to ourselves. If I confined myself to prove that the enemies of our Lord, when he was upon earth, were very unreasonable and unjust in treating him as they did, I should have an easy task, and I suppose, the ready assent of all my hearers. But there may be persons present, who, though they little suspect themselves, are equally misled by prejudices; and under a semblance of zeal for a form of godliness, oppose the truth and power of it, upon the same principles and in the same spirit as the Jews and Heathens did of old. The Jews who condemned Messiah to death, blamed their forefathers for persecuting the prophets who foretold his appearance (Matth, xxiii. 30, 31); but their own conduct towards him was a proof, that had they lived in the days of the prophets, they would have acted as their fathers had done. So the resentment that many, who bear the Christian name in this day, discover against the doctrines of the gospel, and against the people who profess them, is a proof that they would have concurred with those who crucified the Lord of glory, had they lived in Jerusalem at that time.

In this prophecy, David, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, speaks of the future as actually present. He saw the resistance that would be made to the person and kingdom of Messiah by the powers of the world; that they would employ their force and policy to withstand and suppress the decree and appointment of God. The question, Why? implies that their opposition would be both groundless and ineffectual.

1. It was entirely groundless and unreasonable. Messiah was indeed a King, and he came to set up a kingdom that should endure for ever. But his kingdom is not of this world; and, if rightly understood, would give no umbrage to human governments. It does not interfere with the rights of princes. His subjects are indeed primarily bound by the laws of their immediate King, and they must obey God rather than man (Acts. v. 29), if man will presume to enjoin such laws as contradict his known will. But with this exception, it is a part of the duty they owe to their Lord, to obey those whom he has placed, by his providence in authority over them. The kingdom of Messiah has little to do with what we call politics. His people are taught to render to Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's (Matth. xxii. 21), and to yield a peaceful subjection to the powers that be, under whatever form of government their lot may be cast. They are strangers and pilgrims upon earth

(1 Pet. ii. 11), their citizenship, treasures, and conversation, are in heaven; and they have no more direct concern with the intrigues and parties of politicians, than a traveller has in the feuds and disturbances which may happen in a foreign country through which he is passing. They are to obey God, they are to obey kings and governors in subordination to God; they are to render to all their dues; tribute to whom tribute, custom to whom custom, honour to whom honour, Rom. xiii. 1–7. But where they cannot comply with the laws of government without breaking the laws of God, then they are not to obey, but to suffer patiently, committing their cause to him whom they serve; well knowing that he is able to protect or relieve them, so far as his wisdom judges it fit, and to make them abundant amends for all they can suffer for his sake. I am not a direct advocate for the doctrines of passive obedience and non-resistance in the largest sense. I set a great value upon the blessings of civil and religious liberty, I reverence the constitutional rights of nations, particularly of our own. But they are all dependant upon the will of our Lord; and I know not by what means they can be preserved to a people, when their sins have made them ripe for judgment. But let the dead bury their dead, Matth. viii. 22. God will never want instruments, when it is his pleasure to relieve the oppressed, or to abase the proud. For these purposes, he overrules the councils and affairs of men, pours contempt upon the designs of princes, and takes the wise in their own craftiness. The subjects of his spiritual kingdom have only to commit their cause to him, to wait upon him, to observe and to admire his management. Their best interest is always safe. And even the troubles they meet with, are appointed for their good. But if they so far conform to the world, as to take an active and decided part in the disputes and contentions around them, they usually dishonour their Christian character, and obstruct their own peace and comfort. There may be possibly some exceptions. God may sometimes place a servant of his, by the leading of his providence, in a post of high political importance, as he did Joseph and Daniel, but I believe such instances are few; and if any venture of their own accord beyond the proper line of their calling as Christians, the event is usually grief and loss to them. They are described in his word, as those who are quiet in the land (Psal. xxxv 20), and such should be their deportment.

We are sure it was thus, in the first and golden days of Christianity. The Roman government was then absolute, arbitrary, and oppressive. Tiberius, Caligula, Nero, and others who presided over it, and bore the name of Roman emperors, were beyond measure vile and abominable: one of them was, by a decree of the Roman senate, sentenced to death as a public enemy to mankind, but the Christians neither disputed their right, nor disobeyed their authority. Kings and rulers, therefore, have nothing to fear from the gospel of Christ. The maxims of sound policy would engage all their influence in facilitating its progress, for true Christians will assuredly be good subjects. Impatience of subordination, contempt of lawful authority, tumults, riots, and

conspiracies, are evils which would have no place if the gospel was generally received. But princes have been usually exposed to the flattery of designing men, who, by their arts and misrepresentations, have seduced them to act contrary to their true interests. Their mistaken efforts to suppress that cause, which, if maintained, would have been the best security of their thrones, have often stained the annals of their reign with innocent blood, and filled their dominions with misery. History furnishes many instances of kings, who might otherwise have lived beloved and died lamented, that have involved themselves and their families in the calamities with which they unjustly punished those who deserved their protection. For,

2. Opposition to Messiah and his kingdom is no less vain and ineffectual, than unreasonable and groundless. Nor is it vain only, but ruinous to those who engage in it. What did the Jews build when they rejected the foundation-stone which God had laid in Zion? They acted, as they thought, with precaution and foresight. They said, "If we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him; and the Romans shall come and take away both our place and our nation," John xi. 48. Foolish politicians! Did they preserve their city by crucifying the Son of God? The very evil they feared came upon them. Or rather, being abandoned of God to their own councils, they brought it upon themselves. In a few years the Romans, with whom they appeared so desirous to keep upon good terms, destroyed their city with an unheard-of destruction, and exterminated them from the land. This was an emblem of the inevitable, total, irreparable ruin, which awaits all those who persist in rejecting the rule of Messiah. The nation, the individual, that will not serve him, must surely perish.

Ah! if sinners did but know what the bonds and cords are, which they are so determined to break; if they knew that his service is perfect freedom, if they were aware what more dreadful bonds and chains they are riveting upon themselves, by refusing his easy yoke, they would throw down their arms and submit. They think, if they yield to the gospel, they must bid adieu to pleasure. But what will become of their pleasure, when, the day of his forbearance being expired, he will speak to them in his wrath, and fill them with hopeless horror and dismay?

Bless the Lord, ye favoured few, whose eyes are opened, whose hearts are softened, and who are become the willing people of this Saviour. Yet a little while, and he will appear again, and then you also shall appear with him in glory!