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Book

THE

NEW-JERSEY PREACHER:

OR,

SERMONS

ON

PLAIN & PRACTICAL SUBJECTS.

BY SOME OF THE MINISTERS OF THE GOSPEL,
RESIDING IN THE STATE OF NEW-JERSEY.

VOL. I.

*Edited by George S. Woodhall
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*Woodhall
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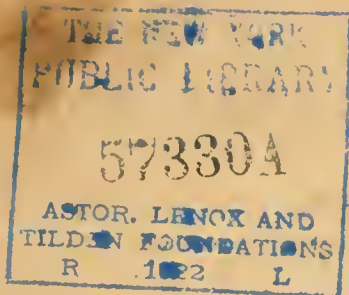
Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech
you by us; we pray *you* in Christ's stead be ye reconciled
to God....2 Cor. v. 20.

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District of New-Jersey, ss.

BE IT REMEMBERED, that on the thirty-first day of March, in the thirty-seventh year of the Independence of the United States of America, George S. Woodhull and Isaac V. Brown, of the said district, have deposited in this office, the title of a book, the right whereof they claim as proprietors, in the words following, to wit:

“The New-Jersey Preacher, or Sermons on plain and practical subjects. By some of the ministers of the gospel residing in the State of New-Jersey. Vol. I. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us; we pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God.— 2 Cor. v. 20.”

In conformity to the act of the Congress of the United States, entitled, “An act for the encouragement of learning, by securing the copies of maps, charts and books, to the authors and proprietors of such copies, during the times therein mentioned;” and also to the act, entitled, “An act supplementary to an act, entitled an act for the encouragement of learning, by securing the copies of maps, charts and books, to the authors and proprietors of such copies, during the times therein mentioned, and extending the benefits thereof to the arts of designing, engraving and etching historical, and other prints.”

ROBERT BOGGS,

Clerk of the District of New-Jersey.

SERMON V.

**ON ATTENDING THE PUBLIC WORSHIP
OF GOD.**

Ecces. v. 1.

Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more
ready to hear than to give the sacrifice of fools.

BY THE REV. JAMES RICHARDS, A. M.

Pastor of the first Presbyterian Congregation of Newark.

NEW-JERSEY PREACHER.

SERMON V.

Eccles. v. 1.—Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear than to give the sacrifice of fools.

IT is our privilege, brethren, to live near the house of God, and often to meet within its sacred walls. We have no such lengths to go as had the ancient church of Israel. The tabernacles of God are in the midst of us, and their doors, from sabbath to sabbath, are opened for our reception. Here we are permitted to send up our prayers and thanksgivings to God, while his servants address us in his name.

With these advantages, should we not grow in grace, and daily ripen for that exalted service which is rendered by saints and angels in the higher courts? But how is the fact? Do not many of the Lord's people cry out, "O my leanness, and barrenness! How far am I from God, and from the happiness of those who come near to him!" Do not others from month to month and year to year, visit this sacred place, without sustaining any important change in their disposition or habits? I fear the salutary caution in the text is too often overlooked. "Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear than to give the sacrifice of fools."

That our future attendance upon God's house, may be more profitable than the past, I propose in the first

place to consider the import of this command, and secondly to urge a serious regard to it.

I. The command before us is, "Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear than to give the sacrifice of fools."

The first part of this precept is a solemn caution against those imperfections, which are wont to attend our public devotions. "Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God."—Do not step heedlessly; but consider well thy path. Remember, it is to the house of God that thou art going—to sacrifice to him, who is acquainted with all thy ways, and whose glory demands the entire, the unequivocal homage of thy heart. Apprised of the temptations which lie in wait for thee, exercise a watchful and jealous care over thy thoughts—over thy words and actions. Avoid whatever may be offensive to God or injurious to thyself, or to thy fellow-worshippers.

This, in few words, is what is meant by keeping our foot when we go to the house of God. But the duty deserves a more particular consideration. There are various things, concerning which the most jealous caution should be exercised, if we would enter into the spirit of this precept.

1. We should beware, in the first place, of entering upon the duties of the sanctuary, in a thoughtless manner, without preparation and without object.

Many hurry to the house of God when the appointed hour of public service arrives, without considering with themselves what object they have in view. They go because others go, or because they themselves have often been; they consider not, the duties to be performed

in the house of God, nor the deep and solemn interest which they have in those duties.

Others possessed of more principle, attend the service of the sanctuary from a conviction of duty—but still they attend without preparation. They stop not to reflect, whose altars they approach, what sacrifices are required—whether these sacrifices are offered with clean or with unclean hands. They rush into God's presence as the horse rusheth to the battle, without that awe upon their spirits which is indispensable to sincere and acceptable worshippers.

We should beware of such thoughtlessness and irreverence when we come into the house of God. We should contemplate beforehand the solemn duties to be performed, and earnestly implore the gracious influences of the Divine Spirit. We should say with the pious David, "O send out thy light and thy truth ; let them lead me, let them bring me unto thy holy hill and to thy tabernacles, then will I go unto the altar of God, unto God, my exceeding joy."

2. But secondly, if we should beware of coming to the house of God in a careless manner, and without any specific object, we ought to be no less solicitous to avoid coming with improper motives.

We ought never to enter the house of God simply for the purpose of passing away an idle hour ; we ought never to enter it, merely with a view to entertainment, as men enter the theatre or the ball-room. Nor should we come hither with the empty design of seeing and being seen ; and still less with the design of making arrangements for business or pleasure for the remainder of the week. Far nobler objects should possess our hearts in such a place. We should come to worship the

King Eternal ; to pay him homage as our Creator and Lord. We should come to hear what God will say to us, by his messengers or by his Spirit ; to learn more of his character and our duty—to have our hearts inflamed with love to him and to one another. We should come to prepare for death and eternity :—to get our minds abstracted from the world—our thoughts, our desires, our hopes supremely placed on heaven.

3. To keep our foot, when we go to the house of God, we must not only attend to the motives which carry us there, but to the whole of our deportment while we are before the Lord.

Our external behaviour must be such as becomes the worshippers of Jehovah. Not light and frivolous, as though we had no reverence for God : not morose and gloomy, as though he delighted in austere and cruel rites ; but solemn and serene as those who worship a being of infinite perfection, and who ardently desire to secure his friendship. Our eye must not wander over the assembly of our fellow-worshippers, as if our chief business was to observe their dress and demeanour ; nor must we recline in the posture of indolence, as though we took no interest in the duties of God's appointment, and were only anxious for the tedious service to close. The whole of our external conduct should be marked with gravity and devotion ; for God is to be worshipped with our bodies as well as with our spirits.

A far more important article is, that our inward man should be duly regulated. The thoughts and feelings of our hearts should be such as an holy and omniscient God will approve.

It is the heart at which God chiefly looks in our devotions. Should we bow before him with the apparent reverence of adoring seraphim, it would be vain, unless our hearts were right. God cannot be deceived and he will not be mocked. All vain and unseasonable thoughts should be carefully avoided when we come into the sanctuary, and our minds exclusively fixed on the great duties before us.

This is often a work of difficulty. Our hearts are naturally unstable as water, continually changing the objects of their attention—wandering like the fool's eyes in the ends of the earth, instead of being swallowed up in the service of God. We had need to bring a solemn and prayerful spirit to the place of our devotions, if we would counteract the temptation which springs from this quarter. We must verily believe that there is a God—that this is the house of God—that these are his worshippers—and this his service, a service in which we are deeply and eternally interested, before we can say with the Psalmist, “my heart is fixed, O God, my heart is fixed: I will sing and give praise. Awake up my glory.”

II. It is not enough, however, that we keep our foot when we go to the house of God; the second part of the precept before us is “that we must be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools:” we must indulge a spirit of solemn and devout enquiry; we must feel a disposition to know and practise the will of God.

As this part of the exhortation relates to a specific and important duty, too often performed in a very unprofitable manner, I must beg you to give it a serious and attentive consideration.

“Be more ready to hear,” says the voice of inspiration, “than to give the sacrifice of fools ;” as though we were in danger of acting the part of fools in the house of God, instead of humbly and earnestly listening to his voice. There are occasions, brethren, when God’s visible worshippers do this ; when they are nothing the better for their attendance upon the services of the sanctuary ; but the worse, when instead of being brought near to God, in the prayers which are offered, or in the truths which are set before them, they go away with their thoughts dissipated and their hearts hardened. They have seen nothing of God ; nothing of themselves. No good purpose has been formed ; no grace awakened ; no virtue strengthened ; no sinful passion mortified. To avoid this unprofitable attendance upon the house of God, the wise man exhorts “to be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools.” But how ought we to hear to come up to the spirit of this precept ?

1. We ought to hear in the first place with attention in opposition to a careless or distracted frame of mind. It betrays a stupidity or levity unworthy of rational creatures not to be seriously attentive to what is uttered in God’s name ; besides of what consequence will it be, that we are addressed on subjects deeply interesting to our immortal being, if our minds are occupied with other things. Can we be intrusted or edified, if instead of attending to the several parts of the discourse, our imaginations are wandering over our farms—transacting the business of our families, or secretly taken up with the advantages or disadvantages of a bargain ?

In hearing the word of God attentively however, it is important to remark, that our attention should be direct-

ed more to the truth itself, than to the manner in which it is communicated.

It is the truth which instructs and edifies. "Sanctify them through thy truth," said our Lord in his prayer for his disciples, "thy word is truth." It is by manifestation of the truth to every man's conscience in the sight of God, that the great end of hearing the gospel is attained. Believers therefore are considered not only as having purified their souls by obeying the truth; but as persons who are begotten by the word of truth, and born again, not of corruptible but of incorruptible seed, by the word of God which liveth and abideth forever.

Whatever has not truth for its basis, however it may gratify our taste or delight our imaginations, is like a gilded cloud, which presently disappears and leaves no trace of its form or beauty behind. We want something to fix our principles and to operate as a constant and powerful spring to our actions. Nothing but the truths of God's word carried home to our hearts will do this. To these then should our attention be chiefly directed, when the servants of the Lord address us in his name.

2d. Again, if we would be more ready to hear than to offer the sacrifice of fools, we must hear the word with *reverence*; we must hear it as the word of God, not as the word of man.

Instead of considering the preacher as coming to play a part before us for an hour, while we have nothing to do but to judge of the success with which that part is played, we must consider him as an ambassador of the Lord of Hosts, charged with a solemn message to our souls. We must consider him as coming in God's name and in effect speaking the words of God. As far as he

speaks according to the sacred oracles, this is the fact, and it is a fact which we should distinctly recognize.

Too often God is overlooked in the administration of the word. What is heard is not regarded as the authoritative voice of Jehovah, though it be uttered in language which he himself has dictated, but as the simple, unauthorised effort of human talents and skill. This is one reason that the word of the Lord takes so little effect—that it so seldom comes to men in demonstration of the Spirit and of power. Confining their attention to the mere instrument, they lose sight of their relation to God, and of those tremendous sanctions of divine authority, which make the words of truth enter into the soul.

It is one thing to be interested or even fascinated with the powers of the speaker, and another to be edified. We may go from the house of God, admiring and praising the gifts of those who address us in his name, while the Lord hath sent leanness into our souls. Then only shall we profit by the labours of his servants, when his voice is heard in their voice, when we reverence their message as the message of the Lord of Hosts and honour them chiefly for their master's sake.

I speak the more freely on this subject, because it is evidently a fault among the hearers of the gospel of the present time, that the preaching of the word is considered rather as a matter of entertainment, than as a solemn institution of heaven designed for their salvation. I tremble to think how this must appear in the eyes of the great God who is jealous for the honour of his institutions, and who will not suffer them to be perverted or contemned with impunity.

5d. I hasten to observe, in the third place, that if we hear the word of God as we ought to do, we shall hear it with an humble and teachable disposition, in opposition to a proud and captious spirit.

This our Lord pressed upon his disciples, when he said, "Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, shall in no case enter therein." And the apostle Peter urges the same thing upon believers, when he exhorts them "to receive with meekness the ingrafted word of truth, which is able to save their souls." It is the meek whom God hath promised to guide in judgment; the meek whom he will teach his way.

They who preach the gospel are required to do it with a spirit of meekness; and they who hear must have the same spirit. There cannot be a *readiness* to hear, where there is not a humble and child-like temper. There may be a disposition to enquire, or rather to speculate and build systems of our own; but there can be no disposition to receive the distinguishing and humbling truths of the gospel, till we are in some measure humbled ourselves. Our pride must be laid in the dust before we shall be willing to take our own character, or the character of God, as it is given in his word. Then only shall we be willing to hear and learn of the Father, when we are willing to place God on the throne, and ourselves at his foot-stool. Mary, at the feet of Jesus, listening with joy to the gracious words which fell from his lips, is an example of that humble and teachable spirit, which ought to inspire our bosoms when we attend upon the institutions of the sanctuary.

4th. To this we add, as an important article, that we should hear the word of God with close and pointed application to ourselves.

Many a judicious sermon has been lost, for want of being personally applied by the hearers. What does it avail that the character of individuals is drawn with strength and exactness; that their sins and dangers are pointed out with a bold and faithful hand, if they never bring the subject home to their own hearts; if after being told every thing, but "thou art the man," they are looking on the right hand or on the left to find the person to whom the observation or remark applies? Alas, brethren, what is more deceitful than the human heart; and where does its deceitfulness more manifestly appear, than in the artifices employed to hide from its own view the unsightly image of itself, frequently and faithfully presented in the glass of God's word. How ardently should we pray, "Search me, O God, and know me, try my reins and my heart. Let the light of divine truth penetrate my bosom. Let thy word, quick and powerful, and sharper than a two-edged sword, pierce to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and become a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart."

We should make this prayer, brethren, because it is from God only that a serious, self-applying spirit can be obtained. It is his eternal power alone which can make his word sink down into our hearts and take effectual root there.

5th. We shall give the sacrifice of fools, unless we hear the word of God with a believing and obedient mind.

Founded on the veracity of God, it demands the full and unwavering assent of our hearts. Containing a glorious system of truth and duty, it ought to be affectionately received and obeyed. To obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams: and it is

chiefly for the purpose of bringing our hearts to the obedience of the truth, that the truth is proclaimed in our ears. This is constantly held up as one great end of all the instructions, warnings and reproofs of the scriptures; and the very perfection of scripture itself, is represented by its being "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be thoroughly furnished unto all good works."

We cannot be said to *hear* the word of God in the highest and best sense, unless we obey it: for in the language of scripture it is often one and the same thing.

Thus we read, "Hear, O my people and I will testify unto thee. O Israel, if thou wilt *hearken* unto me, there shall no strange god be within thee, neither shalt thou worship any strange god. But my people would not *hearken* to my voice and Israel would none of me;" i. e. they would not obey. "Put your burnt offerings unto your sacrifices, saith the Lord of Hosts, and eat flesh. For I spake not unto your fathers, nor commanded them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt-offerings and sacrifices. But this thing commanded I them, saying, obey my voice; but they *hearkened* not nor inclined their ear. They did not obey; but walked in their own counsels, and went backward and not forward."

These scriptures while they teach us, that to *hear* and *obey* are often one and the same thing, suggest to us also the immense importance of obedience. They teach us that all our sacrifices and oblations will be vain without this; that neither hearing nor praying will avail us any thing, unless they proceed from a spirit of sincere obedience to the divine will.

I close this discourse, brethren, by urging a serious attention to the subject now laid before you.

“Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear than to give the sacrifice of fools,” is the voice of Jehovah himself, directing his worshippers. Shall we regard it as such? Shall we set a double watch over our hearts and over our whole conduct when we come into the house of God? Yes; let us say, “God is to be feared in the assembly of his saints, and to be had in reverence of all them that are round about him.” While we would not be hasty to utter any thing in his presence, let us not trifle with any thing uttered in his name. God is in heaven and we upon earth: let us hear him with submission; let us adore him with reverence; let all our services be begun, continued and ended in him.

We urge this not only because it is God’s command, but because it is in itself reasonable. Such a service is due to the great God, who gave us our being and all our powers. Any thing short of this, is a reproach to his character, and infinitely unworthy of the relations we bear to him. The worship of his people on earth should bear a resemblance to that which is paid him in heaven.

It should be a joyful anticipation of that exalted service, in which our enlarged and sanctified powers shall be employed through the ages of eternity. O! what preaching, what hearing, what praying, should we have, could our eyes be fixed on the temple above, and our devotions kindled from the fire of those altars which burn with increasing brightness before the throne of God forever!

But I ask, what will it profit us, to appear in the house of God, and attend upon its services, unless we do it in the manner which God has prescribed? Shall we enjoy the Lord in his ordinances? Shall we find his temple a Bethel? Shall we be made to say, with Jacob, “surely this is none other than the house of God, and the very gate of heaven?” No! all will be darkness and insensibility; the light of divine truth will not shine into our hearts. We shall not be humbled for our sins, nor consoled with the hopes of pardon—we shall not be animated to run in the way of God’s commandments, nor made meet for the service and bliss of the heavenly world. Unless we keep our foot when we go to the house of God, our services, instead of preparing us for the upper sanctuary, may set us farther and farther from God’s kingdom. Privileges abused, while they harden the heart and blind the mind, often provoke God to give men up as incorrigible and to leave them to remediless destruction. If we are not brought to wait upon God, in this world, in the spirit of true worshippers, we shall never be admitted into his presence in the world of glory. All the advantages we have enjoyed on earth will augment our guilt and aggravate our doom. The sermons we have heard, and the prayers and thanksgivings in which we have joined, will be remembered only to sting with keener anguish and to overwhelm with deeper despair. Every man who shall not learn to keep his foot when he goes to the house of God, will eventually curse the place of his birth—he will wish that he had been born among the savage tribes of the wilderness—where no temple of God is to be seen—no voice of mercy to be heard, rather than at the doors of the sanctuary, where, from his infancy, the public worship of God

has been celebrated and the oracles of divine truth explained.

May God pour his spirit upon us, and prepare us for his service in his earthly courts. In due time, may he call us to the general assembly and church of the first born, to worship in that glorious temple, where his face shall shine with unclouded beams forever.—AMEN.