

314
David Watkins
to Rev. William Wa

MR. STRONG'S
CONSECRATION SERMON.

Dr. Nathan Strong's works still remain
in Manuscript

A

SERMON,

DELIVERED AT THE CONSECRATION OF THE

NEW BRICK CHURCH

IN

HARTFORD.

DECEMBER 3, 1807.

BY NATHAN STRONG.

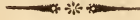


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1808,

CONSECRATION SERMON.



PSALM XCIII. 5.

Holiness becometh thine house, O Lord, forever.

THE occasion of our meeting is one which rarely happens, and ought to be observed with great seriousness.—While we feel it a pleasing employment to dedicate this place to the service of God and the duties of worship, let us remember that it ought to be done with reverence, and fervent prayer, that the Lord would now enter into this his Sanctuary, and make it the place where he will reveal his glory, and cause the graces of his spirit to abound to us and to all his people, who shall succeed us here, in worshipping him. It is the employment of the saints above to worship God, and the saints on earth do never so much resemble them, as when they are engaged in the same service.

There is a sanctity in the place where God reveals himself, and we draw near to him in the duties of devotion. Under a sense of this truth, the patriarch said, of a place where he had received a manifestation of divine glory, “How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the

house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!" Whoever comes with a light mind into the place where God is usually worshipped, or a heart filled with the pleasures or enmities of the world, doth not know how glorious Jehovah is; he doth not consider what reverence becometh creatures when before their Maker; nor doth he realize the pleasure there is in true devotion. Rational beings were made to adore and serve their Creator, and their happiness in these duties is the greatest they can ever receive. Certainly we ought to esteem those times and places sacred, which are devoted to the worship of God. No one ever appeared to have a greater sense of these truths, than David, who wrote our text. The sanctuary of God, to him, was the most delightful and solemn place: the most delightful, because he there saw his Redeemer; and the most solemn from his meditations, on the infinite glory of God, as it is displayed in the works of nature, providence and the face of Jesus Christ. We cannot have a more lively idea of christian happiness, in the house of God, than is given by this sacred writer. "How amiable are thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts, my soul longeth, yea even fainteth for the courts of the Lord, my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God; blessed are they that dwell in thy house, they will be still praising thee."

There will be no intermission of that service, which is the greatest blessedness of the saints.

He further adds, "They go from strength to strength, every one of them in Zion appeareth before God." It is the place where the faith, love, and every grace of his children grow to a strength, which raiseth them above the power of temptation and the afflictions of the world.

"A day in thy courts is better than a thousand; I had rather be a door keeper in the house of God than to dwell in the tents of wickedness;" "for the Lord is a Sun;" it is the place where he enlightens, where his glory shines on the mind, and guides us into a knowledge of all truth: "The Lord is a shield;" it is the place where he gives us strength, and a sense of the safety of trusting in his protection: "The Lord will give grace and glory;" it is the place where he sanctifies his church, and this beginning of grace is the kingdom of God and the beginning of glory." "No good thing will be withheld from them that walk before him;" it is the place where he hears the prayers of those who regularly attend his ordinances, and is intreated to grant unto them all the blessings which pertain to this life and that which is to come.

Having heard a description of the happiness he had in the temple of God, lest any should think it to be an unhallowed pleasure, let us now attend to the words of the text.

"Holiness becometh thine house, O Lord, forever."—It was happiness, which flowed

from a holy temper. In the house of God, our desires should be directed to him; our enquiry should be concerning him, his law and the method of his grace, by which he delivers sinners from the punishment due to their iniquities.

The house of God is not a place for us to mingle earthly and holy joys, for they are not in their nature capable of being united. It is not a place for us to appear occasionally, with a formal profession, and a cold pretence of devotion, in order to make an atonement for a life filled with iniquity; as no atonement can be made by men, through any of their services, for the sins which they commit. The sanctuary is a place for deep mourning on account of sin, for great searching of heart, and that honest self-examination, by which we become acquainted with our own imperfections. It is a place to come to the blood of Christ for cleansing from sin: to make strong intercession for the spirit, which sanctifies, and is the earnest of the saints future inheritance: It is a place to behold the glorious majesty of Almighty God, before the brightness whereof the angels veil their faces: It is the place where we are to seek that holiness, by which we shall be prepared to dwell forever in the presence of our God.

By the course of our remarks we are led to inquire—

1st. The scriptural meaning of the word holiness.

2d. Why it is especially becoming in the house of God: and,

3d. We will conclude with some reflections, suited to the occasion.

Holiness, when applied to inanimate things, means that they are appropriated to some use in the worship and service of God.—In this sense, holiness was ascribed to the Jewish temple, its utensils, the beasts offered in sacrifice, the people who had purified themselves according to the law, the ministers who offered sacrifice to God, and to all the external rites of their worship. They were consecrated to a sacred use, and might not, without sin, be applied to any other. Inanimate things cannot be holy in the most strict understanding of the word. But still, it is a mark of respect due to the glorious majesty of God, to have certain times, places and things, appointed to his service, in such a manner, as not to be united with secular interests, or the common works and pleasures of the world. It has a happy effect on our minds to have it thus. Our weakness is such that we need every assistance in devotion. We are so affected by sensible things, that without their aid we fail in that warmth of the affections, which is due to a great subject, and by their influence we are very liable to be seduced. Entering into a place, which, from our childhood we have been accustomed to esteem sacred, has a powerful tendency to elevate our affections to divine

things, and recall them from the world to the great truths of religion, and our own duty. Our Saviour judged there was a great impropriety in making the same place a house of prayer, and a resort for worldly purposes; therefore, he called the temple a den of thieves, when it was thus used. No event did ever more strongly excite his holy indignation. I would here suggest the impropriety of applying our churches, as is the custom in many places, to other uses beside the worship of God. Thus mingling things holy and unholy has a powerful influence to destroy christian reverence. It is my duty as a minister of religion to suggest the truth; but it is the right of others to see it observed.

My brethren, you are now assembled to declare this place holy, in the sense that hath been described, and to set it apart for the service of God our Redeemer. If there be any meaning in this transaction, your practice now says—“When we enter these doors, we will consider ourselves in the presence of God; we will remember that he is, in a peculiar manner, within this place; when gathered here, we will bar our hearts against every thing that is profane or unholy; we will consider this house as an entrance into heaven; the holiness of the God whom we adore, gives a sanctity to the things around us: this is our heaven on earth:—It is our heaven, because God hath promised to meet us here; Oh! that it might be to us like heaven

above, where the saints offer praise around the throne of God and the Lamb. When we enter into the solemn presence, we will leave the world; and, O God most gracious, grant thy holy spirit, to fulfil these our desires.”

2d. Holiness sometimes means the external covenant relation, which the people of God bear to him and to each other. In this sense, the whole nation of the Jews, whether they were or were not sanctified by the spirit of God, were a holy nation. They were distinguished from the heathen, who were not his people, and to whom he had not given his covenant and lively oracles.—In this sense, the greater part of us are holy. We have been educated in a belief of the christian religion, baptized in infancy, taken into the arms of the church, and many of us have personally assumed the covenant of the Lord, and made use of his ordinances. In fidelity to my hearers, I must here observe: That this holiness will prepare no one for heaven.—We ascribe it to many, who are altogether destitute of the evangelical graces, and to whom the Judge, in the last day, will say, “depart from me, I never knew you, ye workers of iniquity.” The visible holiness which we now consider, will always flow from a holy heart; but it may, in some instances, be found where there is no conformity to God; and without holiness of heart, no one shall see and dwell with him.

3d. We are led to inquire, What holiness is, in the most important and excellent sense, that the word is used? Christian holiness, to which the promises of eternal life are made, is a conformity of the will and affections to the moral character of God, as he hath revealed himself in the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is a resemblance of our hearts to the divine attributes and law. Holiness is a term of general signification, a comprehensive name, not of one, but of all graces and virtues, and of the principle from which they arise, implanted in the heart by the spirit of God. The holiness of God is the whole rectitude of his most glorious nature, his wisdom, truth, justice and goodness. Holiness, applied to the law, is its resemblance of the law-giver himself; applied to men, it means their conformity to God, their obedience to his commandments and to the gospel, in the exercise of faith, repentance, love, truth, justice, resignation, good works, and the consecration of their whole being to the service of him, who made and redeemed them. Christian holiness being the work and gift of the Divine Spirit, is called the renewing of the heart, and being created anew in Christ Jesus to good works. The spirit of Christ imparts a holy disposition, which is exercised in such graces as are called the fruits of the spirit, love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, meekness, faith and repentance. Every man, in his natural

state, is destitute of christian holiness. All our use of means will not produce this divine temper, unless it is accompanied by the gracious influences of the Holy Spirit.

The Lord is as much the creator of spiritual life in the souls of his people, as he was in the beginning of the heavens and the earth. There never was a holy exercise in creatures, which was not created and preserved by a divine power, thro' the use of such means, as his wisdom hath appointed in his church. When God imparts holiness to his saints, he makes them in their measure, to resemble himself; hence, the change is called being made partakers of a divine nature, or a communication of grace for grace, a communication of graces to our hearts, resembling the moral rectitude of his own glorious nature.

In heaven, there is but one moral character; in the Lord our God, the object of all adoration, infinite, unchanging, and self-existent holiness; in his saints, a resemblance of him upheld by the power of his spirit. O my brethren, how blessed will communion with this company be, in the open vision of God.

Irreligious persons frequently think it unreasonable that a holy disposition should be strongly urged upon them, as a preparation for eternal life. How strange their delusion! how little do they consider that heaven is a holy state, the Lord whom we serve infinitely holy, and that

saints and angels act in perfect obedience to the divine will. How unhappy would unholy sinners find themselves in such company! My brethren, while you rely on the atonement of Christ for pardon, seek holy dispositions and a christian practice, as the only qualifications which will prepare you for eternal life, and the only sure evidence that you have been made partakers of the grace of God.

Our next enquiry was, Why holiness is especially becoming in the house of God?

After the description that hath been given of the nature of christian holiness, little need be said to convince every mind of its necessity for a right worship of God, and that the want renders us guilty in his sight.

God hath been pleased to institute worship, both public and private, for two purposes; his own glory and our good. The profit is to be our own, to prepare us for a more near approach to him in the temple above; for no man can be "profitable to God, as he that is wise may be profitable to himself." Although the Lord our God is essentially present in all places, he hath promised a special blessing in the sanctuary, where he meets us to hear our prayer and praise, clearly discerning the dispositions with which we approach him.

Shall we come, with vain minds, into the presence of him by whom we are soon to be judged? Shall we meet the Almighty in the exer-

aise of sinful passions? Or shall we think ourselves preparing for eternal life, without any of the pure desires and practical virtues which resemble that most glorious state?

When the Lord calls, and we approach him without seriousness, it must be expected he will say to us as he did to his ancient church, "When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hands; when ye spread forth your hands I will hide mine eyes from you; when ye make many prayers I will not hear.

The want of seriousness in the house of God always incurs guilt, and is impiety against him in the place of his presence. Bitter will be the death of all sinners; but most bitter the death of those who fall from christian ordinances; from frequently hearing the word of God, by a stupid or unsteady attendance in the sanctuary. Remember, my brethren, this house and the use to which you have appointed it, unto all of us, will be a "savor of life unto life, or of death unto death."

I next pass to an improvement of the subject, and to some observations which are appropriate to the congregation who meet in this house.

This was the first church, established in Connecticut, in which the ordinances of the gospel have been regularly administered. The venerable Thomas Hooker, and his assistant in the ministry, the reverend Samuel Stone, arrived

to New England in 1633. In the year 1636, they with their company, consisting of about one hundred persons, removed to this place, in the month of June. Mr. Hooker was acknowledged to be one of the most correct divines in the christian world: and Mr. Stone an affectionate and faithful preacher of the gospel. Mr. Hooker departed this life July 9th, 1647, and Mr. Stone July 20th, 1663. Two eminent Pastors in the church, Mr. Whiting and Mr. Haynes, succeeded those who were last named. In the time of their ministry, the church divided, and Mr. Whiting became the Pastor of our sister church, in the south part of the town. To Mr. Haynes, in this church, Mr. Foster succeeded. He was eminent for piety and died in youth.

The next Pastor of this church was the Rev. Timothy Woodbridge, who was ordained, Nov. 18th, 1681, and died April 30th, 1732. Some very aged people here and in the vicinity were baptized by his hand. Many, who are now in the grave, have related to us, how they were convinced of sin, and enlightened into a knowledge of the truth under his ministry. To him succeeded the Rev. Daniel Wadsworth, who was ordained, September 28th, 1732. He was a close student, an accurate reasoner, and evangelical preacher. He died, November 12th, 1747, aged 43. His memory is precious to many of our aged christians. He was succeed-

ed by the Rev. Edward Dorr, who was ordained in April 1748, and died October 20th, 1772, aged 50.

The present Pastor of this church, was ordained January 5th, 1774. There have been nine Pastors of this church, since the first settlement of the town.

The first house for public worship was built in the year 1638, stood 99 years and was then taken down. It was placed a little distance eastward, from where the state house now stands.

The foundation of the second house was laid August 8th, 1737, and was dedicated December 30th, 1739.

The second house was taken down in December 1805, to give room for the building in which we are now convened for the worship of God. The foundation of this house was laid, March 6th, 1806, and is so far completed, as to be fit for present use. Sundry things ought to be noticed with gratitude by this people. The liberality with which means have been furnished, the preservation of the lives and limbs of those who have been employed in erecting the building; and the harmony of the congregation and those who have been their agents, are circumstances which ought to be considered with thankfulness. On our removal from this ground, the Lord prepared for us a place for worshipping him, and in our return, may he by the influences of his spirit be with us.

** This was the site of the first church
afterwards converted into a school house*

It is the presence of God, which assisteth men to worship him : It is a spiritual service which pleaseth him, and neither the strength nor magnitude of the place will sanctify our future services.

Both the subject and occasion of the day, lead me to express some thoughts on the nature of christian worship. To worship God is one of the first and most important Christian duties. All true worship is in the spirit of holiness, of faith, of love, and meekness : It is drawing near to God in humble expectation of mercy through the merits of his Son Jesus Christ : It is forsaking the world and all its vanities, that we may present ourselves before him, who searcheth the hearts of the children of men ; together with a regular attendance on all such christian ordinances, as the great head of the church hath appointed for the use of his people.

Both the subject and the occasion reprove those, who attend the house of God with levity and a worldly temper : Is not this a common sin ? Do not many come to the holy place, without considering its sacredness and the use to which it is dedicated ? When God instituted the ordinances of worship, he did not mean to be mocked, or that we should attend without advantage to ourselves. To come here, without remembering it is the place where the Lord meeteth his people, and that we need to be cleansed through the blood of Christ and by his Spirit,

will bring great guilt upon us.—On entering the places, which have been set apart as sanctuaries of the Lord, our meditations ought to be such as these, How dreadful is this place, where God meets his people to hear their prayer and praise ! I have come before the maker and redeemer of men, who upholds all things, and in whose presence I shall soon stand as my judge, to be approved or condemned for this appearance ! Covered with guilt and iniquity, I have come before him, from whom no secret is withheld, for he looketh on my heart and all its transgressions ! I have come to this place, with a professed intention to renounce all sin in my heart and in my life, and prepare for a state of eternal holiness. Here by faith, may I behold eternity with all its rewards placed before me. I never should have presumed to pray, if infinite grace had not invited me to the duty. O, most gracious Saviour, have mercy on me the chief of sinners ; cleanse me in thine own blood, renew me by thy spirit, assist me to keep my heart, may the things of the world be banished from my meditations when I attempt to worship thee, and do thou bless thine own institutions for my eternal salvation.

The subject and the occasion do also reprove those who customarily neglect the instituted ordinances of religious worship. There are many such persons, even in this land of Christian light. Many spend their sabbaths in vain con-

versation, in a secret attention to secular interests or in amusement, and their faces are rarely seen in the congregation of God's people. It is to be feared they do not pray, either in the closet, the family or the sanctuary. Those who think so little of God as not to pray unto him, cannot be animated with the spirit of Christian love.

A large assembly is collected in this place, among whom it may be presumed, there are some, who are rarely seen in any place of worship. My hearers who are of this character, suffer me to speak freely unto you, for it is required both by the occasion and for the discharge of my own duty. What hath drawn you here at this time? Is it the novelty of consecrating this house? Or is it the expectation of hearing some new thing? I assure you there is no new thing to be heard concerning the law of God or the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That the law of God condemns all men, and that our salvation must be by grace through the merits of Christ and the sanctification of the Spirit, are old truths. Is not eternal salvation, in the presence of God and his glory, a stronger call to attend the weekly institutions of worship, than the novelty of this occasion is to call us together this day? It is a truth, which I ought to suggest, that those who neglect the stated worship of God, are not only endangering their own souls, but devoting their offspring to ruin. The pow-

er of example and education is great.—May the Lord have mercy on the lambs of the flock who are not nurtured in the way to eternal life, by those whom his providence hath appointed to instruct and pray for them !

Surely this people will suffer the exhortation of their aged minister to maintain in this place and house, the pure doctrines of the gospel.— You will always find a true christian faith and holiness to be connected. A crucified Saviour is the foundation both of forgiveness and sanctification. Abide in him, and you will persevere in duty ; depart from him, and you must stray from the way of life. The pure doctrines of the gospel, the divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ, the sinfulness of man's nature, the necessity of our being forgiven through the cleansing of Christ's blood and the renewing of his spirit, are those doctrines which will give you comfort.— These are the doctrines which were taught by that venerable line of christian pastors, who have ministered in this church ; which were believed and obeyed by your fathers, and through which they died in peace. These are the only doctrines, which will support us in death, and prepare us for glory hereafter. How solemn is this place ! which is surrounded by the sleeping dust of our fathers and friends, who have gone before us to the eternal world, and is now by this religious service consecrated to the worship of Almighty God !

My dear Youth, you behold the zeal of your fathers, who have erected this building, and who daily pray that you may long live to worship the God whom they have served. Forsake not the God of your fathers; cease not to serve him and obey his commandments. We who stand where the word of God is dispensed, do now, in his awful presence, charge you, that when the fathers sleep, this place may be holy to the Lord. As David said to his son Solomon, so we say to you: "Know thou the God of thy father, and serve him with a perfect heart and willing mind, if thou seek him he will be found of thee; but if thou forsake him, he will cast thee off forever."

Ye Fathers, who are my brethren in age, let us rejoice in the foundation which is laid for the worship of God in this place, after we shall sleep in the dust. Let us pray for the peace of this place, and when our eyes are closed in death, may we meet in the temple not made with hands. Of Zion, let us say "Peace be within thy walls, and prosperity within thy palaces. For my brethren and companions sake, I will now say, peace be within thee, because of the house of the Lord our God, will I seek thy good.

AMEN.