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A DISCOURSE

IN BEHALF OF

Domestic Missions,

DELIVERED IN THE

UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,

RICHMOND, VA.,

MAY 24, 1857.

BY

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Published by the Domestic Missionary Society of Richmond.

RICHMOND:
MACFARLANE & FERGUSON, PRINTERS.
1857.

PREFACE.

The following Discourse was prepared for, and delivered before my own people, in the regular course of pastoral labors, and without the remotest idea of any other use or publication. THE BOARD OF MANAGERS OF THE DOMESTIC MISSIONARY SOCIETY OF RICHMOND have seen fit to ask a copy, for a more public circulation.

It is given with some reluctance, because I feel that the importance of the principles and duties presented, deserve a more careful and complete elaboration and enforcement than I had the time to bestow upon them; but if its publication may serve in any good measure the wishes of the solicitors—in the promotion of systematic and enlarged Christian Beneficence, in general, and the more vigorous prosecution of our own legitimate work as a Church and Denomination, I shall be gratefully content.

C. H. READ.

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DISCOURSE.

“Honor the Lord with thy substance, and with the first fruits of all thine increase: So shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy presses shall burst out with new wine.—PROVERBS iii., 9–10.

God is worthy of the first and highest honors from *all intelligent beings* at all times and everywhere,—both in view of what He is, infinite in every conceivable perfection of character, and in view of what He is *to them*, as the fountain and security of all their virtuous happiness and hopes.

To render unto God the honor obviously due to His character and will, is the first dictate of Honesty, Justice and Virtue. He is the first claimant upon our affections and services;—nor can we love, or do *any thing* righteously and prosperously, in so far as the main duties and issues of our existence are concerned, whilst the first and supreme claims of God are either formally, carelessly, or adroitly denied or evaded.

God is infallibly, purely TRUE; consequently, if any man to whom God is made known honors Truth, he will honor God.

God is infallibly, purely JUST; hence, he who honors Justice, will honor God.

“God is LOVE,”—lovely and loving; loving all that is truly good with divine complacency, and full of tenderness and compassion to the weak, the dependent, and erring—unless they persist in refusing

His proffered friendship; and, therefore, he who appreciates true benevolence and mercy—without frailty—will honor God.

There is no such *sentiment*, nor can there be the *practice* of true *Honesty* and *Virtue*—where God is not truly honored—since to withhold from *Him* the first and highest tribute of love and loyalty, is robbery at the outset, made more offensive by continuance, and fatal to the pretension of moral virtue.

His rights as Creator, Preserver, Proprietor and Lord, extend over and interpenetrate all persons, relations, and things, in the spiritual and material world, at all times and every where.

Preceding, underlying, and surpassing as they do, all other rights and claims—all men have, first and always, to do with the rights and claims of their Maker—God.

How, then, is *this claim*,—this first principle of virtue,—to be wisely cherished and responded to? The duty of *honoring the Lord*, with which the text opens, admits of no debate, at least among those who admit His existence and who would revere His Character and Word: *How*, then, shall men honor the Lord?

If God, in His wisdom and love, has specified any particular rules of action for our instruction and guidance in this high interest and duty, it certainly becomes us to consult and to seek to understand those rules, in order that we may intelligently, systematically and effectually accomplish this chief end of our existence.

The text, in harmony with many other express and unequivocal directions of the Word of God,

plainly sets forth *one* of the *permanent rules* by which we are to be governed: "honor the Lord with thy substance, and with the first fruits of all thine increase;" and, as if it were the design of the testifying Spirit to quench the first promptings of selfishness, and to assure us that this Rule, so far from being an invasion upon our personal rights, or an abridgement of our privileges, is, the rather, a prudent and advantageous counsel,—it is immediately added,—"So shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy presses shall burst out with new wine."

This Rule is thus commended to our respect and confidence, both by the *command* and *promise* of Him who ordereth the seasons, who giveth the early and latter rain, crowning the harvest with its plenty, and giving to the vintage its richness and abundance.

The infidel, the worldling, or the hypocritical formalist may shrink from the Rule in the text as one implying only a costly sacrifice; but the man of true Faith will be ready to adopt it, divinely assured as he may well be, that there is neither *risk* nor *enthusiasm* in complying with the Rule, or in relying upon the Promise. He will feel that his *Eternal Salvation* is suspended upon the integrity of God in His Gospel, and if he may not safely follow His directions and promises in the management of his *worldly property*, there is no longer left to him any security for the incomparably more momentous interests of his Soul!

The philosophy of SYSTEMATIC BENEFICENCE, in the way of devoting *some portion* of our substance

to the promotion of the honor of God, deserves serious consideration, since it is obvious that in a matter of this sort, *principle* and not *mere impulse*, should govern our feelings and conduct.

First. Let it be observed, that God is in no such way *dependent* upon any of His creatures,—men or angels,—as are *earthly governors* upon their subjects. When He lays a requisition upon our substance, for *any purpose*, it is never to be regarded as a part of a system of taxation. Without tribute money, or the forcible seizure and appropriation of the properties of the territory, human governments cannot ordinarily be maintained; but it is not so with God. Maker and Preserver of all creatures and things, as He is, He is of course entirely independent in this respect, of men and worlds, which He has made and can destroy at His pleasure. Thus we hear Him saying to us—“Every beast of the field is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills: if I were hungry I would not tell thee, for the world is mine, and the fulness thereof.”

The mines of precious metals—the treasures of the sea—the precious stones, beyond the eye or reach of human pride or cupidity; these treasures, outvieing all the opulence of men, monarchs and subjects, are all His own. There is a vast kingdom and there are august palaces, in the earth and in the sea,—brilliant with jewels and with massy pavements, and thrones of gold, and silver, and gems;—palaces and thrones all tenantless, save by God, whose they all are, by undisputed right and possession. Surely the Monarch of Heaven, Earth, Seas, Time and Eternity, is suffi-

ciently independent. And not only *treasures*, but *agents*, as well, aside from *human* skill, and tongues, and hands, are ever ready at God's disposal. A *fish* once brought to Christ and His disciples, tribute money. A *raven* once conveyed bread to the neglected and famishing prophet. *Angels* have led forth the armies of the Church, and visited God's Saints in prison. And I doubt not that if we could but hear from above and around us such minstrelsy of praise to God and the Lamb, as the Shepherds of Bethlehem once heard, we should conclude that neither Heaven nor earth need be without *choirs*, cheerful, sweet, and acceptable to the ear of Jehovah, if never a human note of praise should again be heard on earth or in Heaven.

Secondly. It would seem to follow, that, since God has not set in operation the great system of *human Beneficence*, as necessary to the maintenance of His power, as a Governor, nor to His essential glory, as a Sovereign—He has had and still has in view, *the good of those upon whom this beneficence is enjoined*; that in requiring us to cherish benevolent feelings and liberal sympathies, to “Honor Him with our substance,” to “do good and to communicate,”—He has arranged matters in all the relations of life, domestic, social, and religious, upon the great principle that *Beneficence* is itself a *blessed virtue*, and that it is indeed “more blessed to give than to receive.”

God delights in good, and in doing real good; and in His method of doing good He has devised the best means, and selected the most appropriate channels. He calls into concurrence and co-opera-

tion with Himself, *human agency* to bless *human beings*, thereby opening channels for the flow of good through one man's heart to another.

The rills and streams of water, which make the mighty ocean, fructify and beautify the fields through which they pass ; so the hearts of all those persons through which God's mercy flows unobstructed and unabsorbed by selfishness, are themselves graciously enriched, whilst they are made the happy and honored contributors to the great sum of human blessedness. The selfish man's heart, into whose grasp more or less of substance comes, to be *hoarded* and not benevolently distributed again, answers to the *stagnant fens* and *swamps*, where noxious miasma and rank weeds are produced ; drainage turns the *swamp* into a *beautiful meadow*, where surplus harvests are gathered, where flocks may feed and lie down in safety, and beauty gladdens the vision of the passer-by.

The running current of benevolence is a health imparting current. A stagnant heart and a stagnant well resemble each other ; both need *the bucket*,—the appeal, to communicate, to distribute.

When our Saviour said "the *poor* ye have always with you, but *me* ye have not always," He must be understood, obviously, as pointing to the diversified and constant spheres and opportunities for the cultivation and exercise of *noble* and *amiable* as well as *useful affections* and *offices* among mankind. In the admirable treatise entitled "*The Divine Law of Beneficence*,"—which I could wish the privilege of placing in the hands of every Christian and every

man,—the point in hand is thus presented: “God’s benevolence could have reached its objects *without* our concurrence, if it had not made *us* its objects, and formed the design of *blessing us* in its course by enlisting us as *co-workers*.”

“When He put in motion the broad mechanism of His mercy, He put upon it the laws of action and reaction, and made the work of Heavenly charity, in all its branches, twice blessed—blessing him that *gives*, and him that receives. He laid on us a necessity of cultivating benevolent affections. If we could so arrange one’s circumstances and throw around him such influences, as to keep him habitually and constantly giving to the poor; if we could bring to act upon him a constant succession of calls that he would not resist, we should bring him under the best means of cultivating benevolent dispositions; and this is what God does with us in laying on us the necessity of giving alms. The fact that He could have published the gospel and fed His poor *without us*, while He could not, *without our concurrence in giving*, secure to us the *blessedness which attaches to those that give*, indicates that His main design in laying on us the necessity of giving, was to give scope to our benevolent affections. For this end He has ordained that we shall have the poor with us always, and in so many forms of human distress besetting our path, pleading for the forth-puttings of that charity which is the highest excellence of our nature. Yea, He has placed all the interest which we have *in the evangelizing of the world* on such a footing, that it will advance no further than His

redeemed people pour forth the means of its advance; that in that forth-pouring, the Church may take in those riches of grace in which the whole work of redemption has its termination. In other words, He will not have the evangelizing of the world advance *faster than the sanctifying of His Church*; and will sustain a reciprocal action between the two, advancing together."

So far forth as the opportunity for observation, and a somewhat careful notice of the habits and dispositions of men and communities furnish data, I am persuaded that the *wisdom* and *goodness* of God have been, and are unmistakably proved, in this arrangement of things; and that man's highest good and happiness, both in this world and for the world to come, are the certain and legitimate results of a concurrence in this divine economy of beneficence, whensoever and by whomsoever practiced.

Who are they, generally, if not always, who complain of "*frequent calls*" and of *much giving*? Not *those*, if my observation is correct, who in point of fact, give *most frequently*, and *most* according to their ability.

The liberal giver, acting from right principles, and not from ostentation or constraint, is the *happy man*,—who would give more if he had more at his disposal, because he loves to give. Giving does him good. The small contributors, (I mean *small*, according to *their ability*,) and those who seldom or almost never give—these are they, who every where grieve and complain at the burden of supporting the poor and spreading the Gospel.

Beneficence is active goodness, and as such, is a law of happiness. Parsimony starves the soul, and makes it ungenial, peevish and fretful.

It is not for blind and indiscriminate bounty that we plead. *All appeals* for our substance, under the plea of charity, are not, certainly, meritorious appeals; nor is *all giving*, under the notion of charity, wise and beneficent. We must discreetly distinguish, as one has expressed it, "between *mendicity* and *mendacity*," as also between true liberality and false prodigality. But find the person who shuns and shrinks from the proper claims of humanity and the Gospel, withholding the little, or much, that it is in his power to bestow, and there you find an unthrifty soul,—a man who turns his back upon Christ, upon His representatives, upon His cause—a person alike un blessing and unblest.

"We do not relish this constant solicitation of money, and especially from the pulpit," say some; whilst the announcement of a forth-coming collection, preceded by a "charity sermon," is enough to disengage some persons from attendance on such occasions. Little do such persons seem to realize that Jesus Christ, the Maker and Lord of all, first impoverished Himself for them, in His humiliation on the Cross; and that when He sent forth His disciples, He chose *poor men* commanding them to go forth empty handed, relying for their maintenance upon the free will offerings of generous hearts. Little do they seem to realize that the Saviour, so to speak, "clothes Himself in rags and casts Himself on man's compassion—for no purpose so much as to

give man the reflex benefit of his own benevolent acts."

If it has been shown that the injunction of the text, to "*honor the Lord with our substance*," is for the giver's good as well as the receiver's, and pleasing to God,—that it calls into play the virtues of gratitude, benevolence, self-denial and sympathy with God and man,—we may now turn to the consideration of the *System* to be adopted by individuals and communities, or churches, in obedience to this divine injunction. Time and words need not be spent, one would think, to show that so fundamental and important a matter as this, should not be left at loose ends, subject to sudden impulse, or to careless neglect.

To the question, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" The Scriptures return first the general answer, "honor the Lord with thy substance;"—this applies to *every man* who has *any substance*, more or less.

The next question which will naturally arise in the mind of a conscientious person, will be the question of *proportions*; as, first, what proportion of his substance is to be given; and second, what general or particular line of discrimination is to be observed in the distribution of his bestowments?

In canvassing the *first* of these questions, the following land-marks to be kept in view, are:

1st. That we, ourselves, and all that we have are God's. In our best judgment and activities we are His stewards.

2nd. The amount to be set apart specially for God, is to be some just proportion of our sub-

stance—of “*the first fruits of our increase*,” or income,—and not of the scanty fragments which may perchance remain after luxurious, extravagant and wasteful expenditure upon ourselves. A man may set apart *something* from his *substance in hand*, or from his *earnings* or *income*, be it more or less, and conform his personal and family expenses and permanent investments to the remainder, and thus be in a greater or less measure a habitually and consistent charitable man; whilst, on the other hand, if he consults first his pride, appetite, or love of selfish aggrandisement, he may have, or think he has *nothing* to appropriate to the habitual honoring of God. Thus it comes to pass that not a few persons, of very moderate substance at any time in hand, and whose income is comparatively very small, do, by a preconceived and systematic arrangement and purpose, contribute even more, annually and regularly, than other persons whose substance and income are much larger. Whilst those toward whom God has dealt and is dealing *bountifully*, should devise bountifully and with grateful joy, it is to be remembered that the “*two mites*” of the poor widow, cast into the treasury, received the approving notice of Him who knew the full worth and workings of charity; who gave Himself for sinful men,—who said, “it is more blessed to give than to receive.”

It is with our substance and with *the first fruits of our increase*, and not with the uncertain leavings of the year, that we are to honor God. To those who plan *in advance* to honor Him, and begin to do

it with their *first fruits*, He promises well filled barns and swelling presses. The parsimonious plan, in the outset, is therefore narrow policy *for ourselves*;—it is “*contracting the harvest, by sparing the seed-corn.*”

3rd. It is obvious from the whole Scripture, Old Testament and New, that the design of God has ever been to cultivate in man a truly *generous* and *discreet* spirit. “The nature of an act of charity,” (as has well been said,) “requires some liberty of determining *when* and *how much* to give. Room has been left for the heart to play between the different degrees of generosity.”

“If our Lord, after the purchase of our redemption, had written and hung out upon the skies a *tariff*, adjusting each one’s tax for charities to *so many dollars and cents*, He would have bound the conscience; but He would have constructed a system of taxation rather than of charity, which would have changed the whole nature of the duty, and its whole influence upon the heart.”

4th. A specific and precise rule of proportions can hardly be applied to every person, for the obvious reason, that when two persons might calculate upon *the same income*, the one might have but himself to provide for, whilst the other might have a numerous family dependent upon his most frugal management.

With these land-marks in view,—is there any *general rule*, safely applicable to *all*,—to persons of very moderate means, and even to those who depend solely for support upon their daily industry,—and *beyond which*, others, more liberally endowed, should

feel themselves called upon of God to contribute of their abundance?

Taking the Scriptures for our guide, I am led to believe that there is such a rule. The person who has *no substance*, in possession, but who has hands and skill wherewith to *labor*—every such person has *this talent*, at least, in trust from God; and to such the injunction of the text comes home personally, “honor the Lord with *thy* substance, and with the first fruits of all *thine* increase.” The injunction touches first *the substance in hand*, and next, with that, or in default of that, *the increase or products of labor*; thus reaching equally the retired capitalist and the active business-man, and calling to the service of God the invested treasure and the productive labor.

The *least proportion* which any one, who is or ought to be a self-supporting person, should think of setting apart for God, would seem, from the Scriptures, to be *One Tenth*. Before the Mosaic economy, and dating back as far as the annals of any custom on this subject can be traced, in sacred or profane history, we find this *One Tenth* proportion inaugurated and in practice with as much apparent authority as the early use of *sacrifices* in divine worship. Thus, anterior to the Jewish ritual, we find Abraham giving his Tenth to *Melchizedek*, that eminent type of Christ,—and Jacob also vowing the same proportion to God,—each of which instances of honoring the Lord with their substance, is recorded not only as a proper and acceptable expression of grateful depen-

dence on God, but as a matter of existing and acknowledged obligation.

How this proportion of *One Tenth* was afterwards incorporated in the Jewish Code, and so perpetuated under a specific rule, applicable to all, may be gathered from the very precise terms of the Levitical statutes. But it is further to be observed, that whilst this proportion of a Tenth was made a *universal law*, a wide margin was still left for the exercise of a liberal spirit among *those* who, by God's blessing upon their skill, industry, flocks and husbandry, were made *capable of a larger liberality*.

Beyond the operation of the One Tenth rule, applicable to every Israelite, additional free-will offerings were invited by God, according to the ability and willingness of individuals. Thus: "speak unto the children of Israel," (said God to Moses,) "that they bring me an offering: of every man that giveth it willingly with his heart, ye shall take my offering." Herein was allowed discretion. "That which every man felt willing to give," (says the author before quoted,) "God invited him to bestow; but when the willing spirit ceased, the offering was not pressed." It is still called, and really was as much God's as was *the Tenth*, but yet it was ordinarily left optional with the Israelite. To him was said, as to his successor in this Christian dispensation,—“Let every man do as he is disposed in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity.”

How this system of beneficence was responded to, we may gather from Josephus, who says: "Let no one wonder that there was so much wealth in our

temple, since all the Jews throughout the habitable earth, and those that worship God, (that is proslaves,) nay, even those of Europe and Asia, sent their contributions to it, and this from very ancient times."

Waiving the further prosecution of this line of argument,—as many facts yet unnoticed would authorize,—suffice it to say, that the principle and moral power of the *One Tenth rule* not only *preceded* but *survived* the Levitical dispensation, founded as that rule is, upon the righteous claim of God; and not only so, but beyond the application and operation of this *One Tenth* proportion of each man's substance and gains, there is both a wide sphere and a divine call inviting to generous sympathy and action all those who have the means and the heart to relieve the destitute, and to help forward the cause of Christ and Salvation, by the support which they may give to the divinely instituted means of grace. Any argument which, at any time, could be brought to bear upon a *Jew*, as a proper motive to large-hearted and self-denying beneficence, may now be addressed, with increased power, to the *Gentile*—the *Christian*. "God is still the Sovereign Lord of all, and therefore to be honored by His creatures in those gifts which He has bestowed upon them. Man is still the recipient of blessings, and bound to show in some sensible manner his gratitude and love.

The interests of religion are to be upheld in a world which, if left to itself, would quickly turn aside from, and forget and oppose the truth. The widow, the orphan, and the destitute are still among us, recom-

mended to us by that same God who gave them in charge to His ancient people. In one most important aspect the need of a *Tenth*," (from all, and more from many,) "is more felt in the *Christian* than in the *Jewish Church*. The *latter* was not *Missionary* in its character; its calling was to uphold the faith among the chosen people; while that of the *Christian* is to bear the name of Christ to every dark land of heathenism, and never to stay its labors till every child of the great common Father has been brought home to the Shepherd and Bishop of his soul."

In *every other aspect* the Gospel dispensation is more large and free in its grace and practical benefits to man and the world, than was the Jewish; and it were strange, indeed, if now under the commission to preach the Gospel *in every land and to every creature*, there should be a relaxation of the bond of grateful loyalty to God, and of sympathy for man.

The time of God's more abounding grace should be the time of man's more abounding and joyful beneficence. Did the Israelite remember, with willing offerings, his redemption from Egypt? How much more should we remember the great redemption from sin and hell by Christ?

Did the Israelite sustain by offerings to God a form of religion which was so local and typical—confined to a single mountain and nation? How much more should Christians lay themselves, and their substance, and the first fruits of all their increase at His feet, who bought us with His blood,

who intercedes for us in Heaven, and who is preparing mansions for us to inhabit in Eternal Glory?

The inspired Apostle covers the entire ground, when he says, "For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead; and that He died for all, that they which live *should henceforth not* live unto themselves, but unto Him which died for them, and rose again." And to show how the grace of Beneficence was understood by the Apostle, as one of the cardinal characteristics and offices of Christians, he says to the Corinthians,—“Therefore as ye abound in every thing, in faith, and utterance, and knowledge, and in all diligence, and in your love to us,—*see that ye abound in this grace also.*”

The Christian character,—if it be possible for it to exist at all without the positive and habitual exercise of *the true spirit of beneficence*,—is a most deformed and inconsistent thing; and, I think, we may safely conclude that true piety, in any good measure of healthful exercise, will not only prompt its possessor to a cheerful and habitual beneficence, but with the injunctions, encouragements, examples and promises of the sacred oracles in view, the intelligent believer in the word of God will be careful not to dishonor the integrity of Him who preserves to us our faculties, who ordereth the seasons, who can guide the good and guard from ill,—and who says, “*honor the Lord with thy substance, and with the first fruits of all thine increase: so shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy presses shall burst out with new wine.*”

Brethren and Friends! It has seemed to me that I might be doing a proper, and, as I would hope, an *acceptable service*, in thus presenting this general subject to your notice. If I mistake not, there are not a few here, as in all our congregations and communities, who will feel it to be an advantage to have some settled principles of action, in the discharge of their duty as stewards of God. You have not been, nor can you be satisfied to leave this high and ennobling duty of honoring God with your substance to casual impulses and fitful frames of feeling.

It will as certainly promote your happiness, as your usefulness, to sit down, as it were, at the foot of the Cross of Christ, and with the world around you, the light of God's Word upon you, and the reckoning of eternity before you, to decide what is your proper sphere and rule of duty and privilege in the way of beneficence. You will readily see that the various organized operations for the maintenance and spread of the Gospel must be, as indeed they are sadly hindered by *the irregular and uncertain pecuniary support* which they receive, as a result of a want of determinate and steady principle on the part of their patrons. With a treasury one year full, and the next two or three years almost empty, because the contributors have no fixed principles of action, how can any Board of Managers commit themselves, through their various employees, to any systematic and far-reaching plans. But let the stream of bounty from our God flow regularly through the hearts and hands of men, as His almoners, and what might be temporarily diminished by

the possible misfortunes of here and there an individual, or community, would be compensated by the increase from other persons and quarters crowned with special success, and thus the wheels of beneficent action would only cease to move when the fountain of beneficence in the heart of God ceases to flow toward mankind.

It was my purpose, in entering upon this subject, to present some observations upon the *general principles of discrimination in the distribution of our offerings*; but time forbids even an outline of what seems to me important to be said under this head, and it must be deferred to some other convenient opportunity.

Upon the grounds, and in view of the principles now spread before you, I come not as "*a beggar*," or with any sense of condescension from the proper dignity of a man, and, what is more, of a minister of Christ,—to ask your offering in behalf of DOMESTIC MISSIONS, *within our own Presbyterial bounds*, and as managed by "The Domestic Missionary Society of Richmond," acting as the organ of Hanover Presbytery.

The list of churches aided by this Society is as follows,—Duval Street Church, in this city; Portsmouth, Piedmont, Leesville, Morris, Appomattox, New Kent or Olivet; the Holmes Church, in Northampton, and the McKemmie, in Accomac. Besides which, we have a missionary, with an embryo church, in Henry county. The unoccupied field open to us is wide, whilst some of the fore-mentioned churches still require aid for a time. If, as may be hoped,

some of the churches now aided shall soon become self-supporting, the amount which has heretofore been received into the treasury, from all sources, or even if doubled, can be well employed in a good and necessary work. It is proper to remind you that some of the old, firm, and most liberal friends of this cause, and of every good work among us, have been removed by death. Will their sons and daughters take their places? The ladies of "The Circle of Industry" have persevered nobly and well, setting a good example to all. The "Southern Aid Society," of which Dr. J. C. Stiles is the diligent and true-hearted Secretary, continues its liberal aid.

This is to the regular members of this congregation the annual call for this cherished object. If any of you can increase your former offerings, it is hoped you will cheerfully do so. If any have allowed this truly important matter to pass without due consideration and support, it is affectionately and earnestly commended to your faithful regards.