

T H E

AMERICAN PREACHER;

O R, A

COLLECTION OF SERMONS

FROM SOME OF THE

MOST EMINENT PREACHERS,

NOW LIVING,

IN THE UNITED STATES,

O F

DIFFERENT DENOMINATIONS

IN THE

CHRISTIAN CHURCH.

NEVER BEFORE PUBLISHED.

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M.DCC.XCI.

S E R M O N I.

O N

MINISTERIAL CHARACTER AND DUTY.

B Y

JOHN WITHERSPOON, D. D. L. L. D.

Col. N. C. P.

2 C O R. iv. 13.

We also believe, and therefore speak.

TO understand what ought to be the character, and what principles should animate the conduct of a Minister of the Gospel, cannot be without profit, even to a private Christian. It will teach him whom to prefer, when he is called, in providence, to make a choice. It will teach him to hold such in reputation for their office-sake, and to improve the privilege of a regular gospel ministry, if he himself is favored with it. And I think it must incline him to make daily supplication to the Lord of the harvest, to send forth faithful laborers into his harvest.

But though there were no such general advantage to be derived from it, my particular charge, and the very aspect of this audience, would easily justify me in making this, for once, the immediate subject of discourse.

Now if we would know the character of a faithful Minister, we cannot better, or more immediately reach our purpose, than by looking into the character, and observing the conduct, and springs of action, of the Apostles of our Lord, who received their commissions immediately from himself, and were not only the first, but the best and most successful Ministers, that ever were employed in the church of Christ.

The Apostle Paul, whose call was so singular, and whose labors were so distinguished, has, in his Epistles to the several churches, planted or watered by him, given us a great light into the chief aims he had in the exercise of the ministry. In this chapter, and the preceding part of this Epistle, he shews the Corinthians, with what visible faithfulness and sincerity he had acted, and what diligence he had used in promoting their eternal happiness.

To save time, I forbear going through the connection of his discourse and only observe, that in the words of our text, he shows what kept him faithful and influenced him to so much diligence in the work to which he was called, by alluding to an expression in the 116th Psalm. It is written, *I have believed, therefore have I spoken. We also believe, and therefore speak.* In this he intimates, that our inward persuasion of the great truths of the everlasting Gospel, could not but have a powerful influence upon him and others, to press the important message, and watch over the souls of those committed to their charge.

In discoursing further at this time, I intend to confine myself to this single truth, which may be easily

deduced from the text: That one of the most essentially necessary, and the most extensively useful qualifications of a good Minister, is, that he be a good man, that he have a firm belief of that Gospel he is called to preach, and a lively sense of religion upon his own heart. After I shall have explained and confirmed this observation, I will conclude with some practical reflections.

Though I have mentioned real religion as one of the most essentially necessary qualifications, I am not ignorant, that taking the words in a strict sense, gifts are more necessary to the being of the ministry than even grace itself. To make the efficacy of the ordinances to depend upon the inward state of the administrator, is a Popish error, and is expressly guarded against by the Assembly of Divines, in our shorter Catechisms, in the following words: *The Sacraments, and it is equally true of every other ordinance, become effectual to Salvation, not from any virtue in them, or in him that doth administer them, but only by the blessing of Christ, and the working of his spirit in them, that by faith receive them.*

But some degree of capacity is evidently necessary in the most absolute sense. A man who is altogether void of knowledge and utterance, or who is deaf and dumb, may be a saint, but cannot be a Minister. This concession, however, takes nothing from the force of the observation, that real Religion is of the greatest importance, and most absolutely necessary to the *faithful* discharge of a Minister's sacred trust. That I may set this in as clear and strong a light as I

am able, let me intreat your attention to the following observations :

I. Real Religion in a Minister will make him knowing, and able for his work. It is necessary for any one who intends himself for the office of the ministry, by diligent study, and the use of those means, with which God in his Providence hath furnished him, to improve his understanding and acquire a stock of knowledge, that he may be a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. In this he can have no such incitement as concern for his Master's Glory. Nay, he that is truly religious, is taught of God the best of Master's, and will have some of his most profitable lessons from his own experience.

Let me the rather intreat your attention to this, that those who are most apt to disparage piety are also apt to speak in terms of high approbation on the subject of literature and science—Observe, therefore, that true religion serves both to give a man that knowledge which is necessary to a Minister, and to direct and turn into its proper channel the knowledge which he may otherwise acquire. It is an approved maxim in every science, that practical and experimental knowledge far exceeds that which is merely speculative; at least, tho' the last may make the prettiest show, the first, is by much to be preferred for use. Any wise man, if he was to go a dangerous voyage, would readily prefer as his pilot, one, who had much experience, and had sailed often that way himself, to one, who had studied navigation in the most perfect

manner ashore. So, my brethren, every man who regards his soul would choose for his *spiritual* guide, one, who appears to have the wisdom to save his own, and would expect by him to be best directed, how to avoid the rocks and shelves in his passage, thro' this dangerous and tempestuous ocean of life.

But if this maxim holds true in other science, it holds yet more strongly in Religion, which cannot be truly known unless it be felt. There is an inseparable connexion between faith and practice, truth and duty; and therefore he that is a stranger to the one, is ignorant of the other. I am not insensible that a bad man may espouse, and plead for a great part of the system of divine truth; but as he cannot cordially embrace it, so I am inclined to think that he never truly understands it. The Apostle Paul declares, that it is only by the Spirit of God which is given to every real Christian, and more especially to every faithful Minister, that a man is enabled to treat rightly of Divine Things, *Now we have received, not the Spirit of the World, but the Spirit which is of God, that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God; which things we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him, neither can he know them for they are spiritually discerned.* As the real Christian from that character is best disposed to seek after, so he is by the same means best fitted to improve and apply his knowledge of spiritual things. This will appear, if we consider what ought to be the

great work of a Minister. He hath to do chiefly with the hearts and consciences of his people. His business is to convince the ungodly; to awaken the secure; to enlighten the ignorant; to direct and strengthen the weak in the faith, and in general as a wise physician, to administer the medicine proper to the various conditions and disorders of his hearers. Now it must, at first sight, appear, that he who is a stranger to the power of godliness, and knows nothing of the spiritual life himself, must be utterly unfit for discerning how it thrives, or assisting and promoting it in others. That man must surely be most powerful in searching, and most skilful in guiding the consciences of others, who has been accustomed to examine and direct his own.

I only farther observe upon this particular, that true Religion will purify, and direct into its proper channel, the knowledge he may otherwise acquire. It is a great mistake to think, sound learning is an enemy to Religion, and to suppose that an ignorant ministry is the best or safest. There is no branch of human knowledge of which a Divine may not be the better, or which a good man will not improve to the glory of God and the good of others; tho' some of them are more important than others; and it is necessary to give to any of them, only such proportion of our time, as is consistent with our great and principal aim. Now true Religion is the great preservative against mistake or abuse of any kind on this subject. A bad man is apt to study, merely to gratify his own fancy; and there is a false luxury and delicacy in feeding the mind as well as the body. A bad

man is also exceedingly prone to intellectual pride and self-sufficiency; than which, there is not a vice more dangerous in itself, or more contrary to the character of a Minister of the New Testament. But he who is sanctified by Divine Grace, as he has every motive to diligence in acquiring knowledge, so the single purpose to which he will wish to apply it, is to serve God in the Gospel of his Son.

II. Real Religion in a Minister will make him happy and chearful, ready and willing to do his duty. There is a great difference between the prompt, and speedy obedience of a servant who loves his master and his work, and the reluctant labor of him who only deceives him, that he may eat of his bread. A truly pious man undertakes the office of the ministry from love to God, with a view to promote his glory, and what he hath counted his interest in the world: viz. the welfare of the souls of men. An unholy Minister undertakes this employment only as a trade to earn by, and has it at least as his highest aim to promote his own worldly advantage. It is easy to see in what a different manner these different persons will act, and in what different light they will view the sacred duties of their function. He who truly believes the Gospel and loves its Author, will reckon it his highest honor when he is called to recommend it to the belief of others. He will be apt to teach, and will find a pleasure in carrying his message; besides the reward he expects from him who employs him, and will undergo with chearfulness every fatigue he is subjected to, in the execution of his office. On the other hand, he who is actuated by a contrary

principle, tho' he is obliged, that he may raise his wages, in some sort to do his duty; yet how heavily must it go on, how tedious and burthensome must it be, both in preparation and performance? He will count his service at the Altar, and his work among his people, as a toil and drudgery, and reckon all that redeemed time that he can save for himself, from the duties of his office.

Perhaps it may be thought that there lies a strong objection against this observation from experience; as it appears that such Ministers as have least of Religion, commonly go most lightly under the charge, and are far from feeling any burthen in what is committed to them; whereas the most pious and faithful Ministers seem to have a weight upon their spirits, and such a concern for the salvation of their people, as cannot but take much from their chearfulness in the work to which they are called. In answer to this, observe, that an unfaithful Minister is not easy and chearful because his work is agreeable to him, but because he takes as little of it as may be, and seeks his pleasure more than his duty. Certain it is, that the work of the ministry must be irksome and uneasy to him that believes not, except so far as he makes it subservient to ambition, and displays his own talents when he should be feeding his people's souls. This I confess, which the Apostle justly calls preaching ourselves, may be abundantly gratifying to the most corrupt heart. On the other hand, that concern for his people which is upon the heart of every faithful pastor, is far from being inconsistent with the most solid peace and desirable pleasure aris-

ing from the discharge of his duty. It is like the exercise of pity and compassion to the distressed, in him, who is acting for their relief, which, though in some sense painful, is yet accompanied with the approbation of God, and conscience, as flowing from a rightly disposed mind, and therefore to be cherished and cultivated rather than suppressed. There is a time for every good man to mourn, and a time to rejoice, and perhaps the one is even more salutary than the other; for we are told, that God will appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, *to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oyl of joy for mourning, and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.*

III. Real Religion in a Minister will make him faithful, and impartial, in the discharge of his trust. The God in whose presence we stand, and in whose name we speak, is no respecter of persons, and neither should we be in doing his work. There is commonly a great variety of persons, of different stations and of different characters, committed to the inspection of a Minister; the pleasing or displeasing of whom, has a considerable influence in his worldly ease and interest. This is a great temptation to be unfaithful, and often leads to speak unto them *smooth things, and prophecy deceit*; or at least, not to deal with all that freedom and impartiality, that his duty to God requires. In every unregenerate man, worldly interest in one shape or another, either vanity or gain, is the supreme motive of action: And therefore, as most men are impatient of reproof, it cannot be supposed, that an un sanctified Minister

will venture to provoke their displeasure, or to gall them with unacceptable truths. The favor of the great, or the applause of the multitude, he certainly will seek, more than the edification of any. On the other hand, he who truly fears God and believes what he teaches, will act with faithfulness and boldness. He will remember that if he seeks to please men, he cannot be the servant of Christ. He will therefore no farther obtain, and indeed no farther wish to obtain their favor, than as a diligent discharge of his duty approves him to their consciences in the sight of God; or forces the approbation of the impartial, notwithstanding the resentment of particular offenders. It is only the fear of God, can deliver us from the fear of man. I do not pretend that all who fear God, are wholly delivered from it: but surely, bad men, must be far more under the government of this sinful principle. The one may fail occasionally, the other is corrupted wholly. There are two reasons which incline me particularly to insist on that faithfulness, which can only flow from true piety.

1. That preaching, in order to be useful; must be very particular, and close, in the application. General truths and abstract reasoning have little or no influence upon the hearers, as the ignorant cannot, and the wise will not, apply them to themselves.

2. The other reason is, that private admonition, and personal reproof, are a great part of a Minister's duty, and a duty that cannot be performed by any man, who hath not a steady regard to the presence and command of that God, who hath set him to watch for the souls of his people, as one that must give an account:

IV. Real Religion in a Minister, will make him active, and laborious in his work. Diligence is absolutely necessary, to the right discharge of the pastoral duties, whether public or private. It requires no small attention and labor, to seek out fit and acceptable words, as the preacher expresses it, to stir up the attention of the inconsiderate, to awaken secure, and convince obstinate sinners, to unmask the covered hearts of hypocrites, to set right the erring, and encourage the fearful. An unbelieving Minister, must be careless and slothful. As he is unconcerned about the success of his work; he cannot have any great concern about the manner of performance. But he, who believes the unspeakable importance of what he is employed about, both to himself, and to his people, cannot fail to be diligent. He knows that he himself must answer to God, for the care he has taken of the souls committed to his charge; and that if he does not faithfully warn the wicked to turn from their ways, their blood will be required at his hand.

Oh! my brethren, what a striking consideration is this, to suppose ourselves interrogated by the Supreme Judge, concerning every sinner under our charge? Did you earnestly warn this unhappy soul, by earnest exhortations in public, and by serious affectionate expostulations in private, to consider his ways? It is an easy thing, by a partial, or cursory performance of our duty, to screen ourselves from the censure of our fellow-men; but to stand at the judgment seat of Christ, and answer there for our diligence, is a more awful trial.

Will not also a concern for his people's interest, animate a pious Minister to diligence? If he is truly pious, as he loves God, he loves his brother also. The Apostle Paul says, *Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men.* If a man in good earnest, believes, that everlasting misery must be the portion of all who die in an unrenewed state; what pains will he not take, to prevent sinners from going to that place of torment?

One who could see a fellow-creature, in the rage of a fever, rushing to the brink of a precipice, and not restrain him, would fall under lasting infamy. Must not the same compassion move the heart of a serious person, who sees his fellow-sinners, going blindfold to the pit of perdition?

It is their not believing these things, that makes them so fearless in sinning; if you truly believe them, will you not make an effort to alarm them? There are no motives like these to diligence—he that believes, will certainly speak.

V. In the last place, real Religion, will make a Minister successful in his work. This it does, both as it fits him for doing his duty to his people, which has been illustrated above, and as it adds to his precepts, *the force of his example.* First, it makes him successful as it fits him for his duty. It is true indeed, that God only can give the blessing upon a Minister's labors, and that he can save by many, or by few, by the weakest, as well as by the ablest instrument: yet we see from experience, that in all ordinary cases, he proportions the success, to the propriety, or sufficien-

cy of the means. Neither is there any surer mark, that God intends effectual benefit to any part of the world, or the church, than when he raises, and commissions men, eminently qualified, to plead his cause. Therefore, real piety, even in this respect, contributes to a Minister's success. If diligence in all other things produces success, it must be so also in the ministry. If he that lays out his ground with the greatest judgment, prepares and dresses it with the greatest care, has the most plentiful crop: if the shepherd that waits most diligently upon his flock, feeds them in the best pasture, and leads them to the safest shelter, has the most increase; then that Minister, who does his duty most wisely, and most powerfully, will also see most of the fruit of his labors.

But real, and unaffected, yet visible seriousness, has also its own proper additional influence on a Minister's success. An apparent and visible impression upon the speaker's mind, of what he says, gives it an inexpressible weight with the hearers. There is a piercing heat, a penetrating force, in that which flows from the heart, which distinguishes it not only from the coldness of indifference, but also, from the false fire of enthusiasm or vain glory. Besides all this, the example of a pious Minister, is a constant instruction to his people. It ratifies his doctrine, while he not only charges them to do what he says, but to be what he is. This will receive much illustration from its contrary.

A Minister who has a careless, untender walk, defeats, by his life, the intent of his preaching. Though in reason, it cannot justify any one in disobeying.

wholesome instructions ; that the instructor despises them himself ; yet it is one of the most common excuses men make for themselves, and few excuses seem to set their consciences more at ease. Loose and careless persons, think themselves quite at liberty to despise the reproofs of their pastor, if, while he teaches others, he teaches not himself.

Nay, not only is it thus with the profane, but even those who have the greatest regard for Religion, are not so much affected with the same truths, when spoken by one they think indifferent about them, as when spoken by one, who seems to feel what he speaks, and who lives as he teaches.

Experience greatly confirms the whole of this reasoning—for wherever an eminently pious Minister has lived, and labored long, there is commonly to be found the most knowing, serious, sober-minded, and judicious people ; nay, the very memory of such a Minister, is often long continued, after he is gone, and his example is proposed by his hearers, to their children's children.

From all these considerations, I conclude, that the most important qualification of a good Minister, is, to be *a believing preacher*, and that, if he saves his own soul, he will be the probable mean of saving them that hear him.

I proceed now, to make some improvement of the subject.

Reverend fathers and brethren,

As we would wish our people to do, let us take heed how we hear, and make a faithful application

to ourselves, of what hath been said upon the subject. Let it engage us to a serious examination of ourselves, lest while we preach the gospel to others, we ourselves should be reprobates. This ought to be the subject of our frequent and serious thoughts, for several reasons. We are in danger of thinking ourselves too easily safe, by comparing that outward regularity, to which our office itself, even from secular motives, obliges us, with the licentious extravagance of profane sinners. We are in danger of mistaking our frequent thinking and speaking of the things of God, in the way of our calling, for an evidence of true Religion, in ourselves. We may also, perhaps, mistake those gifts with which God hath furnished us, for the benefit of his own people, as the fruits of the spirit, and of gracious dispositions in our hearts. A Minister, is as much liable to self-deceit as others, and in some respects, more so. We have therefore much need, often to make trial of our state, as well as to give all diligence, to make our calling and election sure.

But let us beware of imagining, that this discourse is only applicable to such, as have no real faith in Christ. God forbid! that there were any Minister among us, a complete unbeliever, counting the Gospel a fable. But faith, and every other gracious disposition grafted upon it, are capable of many degrees of improvement and strength; and in proportion to the strength of our faith, and the impression we have of divine things, will be our diligence, and consequently our success, in the work of the ministry. Let us therefore impress our minds, with a more and

more lively sense, of the important truths which we teach and hear. Let us not starve ourselves, while we are feeding others: but study to arrive at a greater degree of love to God, and delight in him; a greater conformity to his blessed image, in purity of heart, and integrity of life. Let us in a special manner, study to attain to more and more intimate communion with God in secret, which is the sign of our dependance upon him, and the very exercise of love to him, which is the mean of constancy, and the source of joy in Religion.

Above all, let us set our affections upon the things that are above, where our Redeemer sits, at his father's right hand. As our profession is to be pilgrims, and strangers in the earth, to live by faith, and not by sight; let us study, to raise our hopes of, and desire after, the heavenly inheritance. By this, we shall not only believe, but know, and feel the value of true Religion, which cannot fail to make us diligent in seeking the good of others.

Oh! my brethren, what reason have we to be inwardly ashamed at the weakness of our faith, and the coldness of our love, as they shew themselves, by our indifference in the duties of our office? We are often ready, both to complain, and wonder that our hearers are so little affected with the most awful considerations: that they can hear with indifference of everlasting happiness, and set without fear under the denunciations of eternal wrath: that we cannot persuade them, it is of importance to think what shall become of them forever. But is it not also to be wondered at, that we ourselves can often speak of

these things, with so little emotion? Can we ever be sufficiently affected, with the danger of our hearers, when we consider, that we must either save them by convincing and converting them now, or deliver our own souls, by witnessing, justifying, and perhaps pleading for their condemnation at the last day? However plain and simple these truths are, of the final judgment of ministers and people, they are quite unfathomable in their meaning and importance to both. It is strange that we can think of them without the deepest concern, or even speak of them without tears.

Let us pray that the Lord would increase our faith, that believing we may speak, and that our speech may be with such efficacy, by the blessing of God, as many sinners may be thereby brought to everlasting life; that we may approve ourselves to him that sent us; and that when Christ, the chief shepherd shall appear, we may receive a Crown of Glory that fadeth not away.

