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GRISWOLD ALEXANDER VIETS
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SERMON,

DELIVERED

IN TRINITY CHURCH, BOSTON,

AT THE

FIRST MEETING OF THE CONVENTION

OF

THE EASTERN DIOCESE,

19TH SEPTEMBER, 1810.

BY

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SERMON.

2 TIMOTHY, IV. 1-3.

I charge thee therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom, Preach the word ; be instant in season, out of season ; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all long-suffering and doctrine. For the time will come, when they will not endure sound doctrine ; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears.

SUCH was the charge, so very solemn, which St. Paul, not long before his death, addressed to Timothy, his fellow labourer in the gospel ministry. And when we consider also the exemplary piety and active zeal of this faithful servant of Jesus Christ, it evidently concerns us to reflect upon the duties and the great obligations of this sacred office. If such serious exhortations—such solemn calls to duty were fit and needful for Timothy, who of us can hear them with unconcern ?

In the two epistles, which the apostle wrote to this his “son in the faith,” we have much useful instruction, for those especially who are ordained to preach the gospel.

The passage, selected from the second of these epistles, the last probably that the apostle wrote, is worthy of particular attention ; and the subject it proposes, will not, I trust, be deemed impertinent to the present occasion. It is an earnest call to zeal and faithfulness in the sacred cause of religion, which merits the consideration of “ all who profess and call themselves christians ;” especially those who are appointed to manage the concerns of the church, and chiefly the appointed stewards of its holy mysteries.

The three verses, which have been read, suggest as many heads to our discourse :

In the first, we are reminded of some serious truths, which should always excite our zeal for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the second, we learn some of the most essential duties of those who preach it. And

In the third, an especial reason is assigned for the utmost diligence in discharging them.

These are the points to which our attention is invited : God grant us ears to hear, hearts to understand, and wisdom to improve them.

I. With great solemnity does the apostle introduce this charge to Timothy ;—with no less considerations than the presence of God, and the day of judgment. “ I charge thee, before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom.” These are motives and reasons, which, however common, no serious person can hear without the deepest concern ; nor can any christian

slightly regard them, without inconsistency or insensibility. There are many reasons why we should be faithful and diligent in the discharge of every duty ; but these chiefly should influence our conduct. The duty we owe to God, as our Lord and Saviour, and the assurance that he beholds our conduct ; that our hearts are in his hand, and our secret thoughts no secret to him ; that our Divine Master is the spectator of our actions, the witness of our zeal and faithfulness, and finally shall *appear* in his glorious kingdom to “judge the quick and the dead,” are surely motives to obedience of primary obligation. They, who shall be alive at his coming, with all who sleep in their graves, shall hear his voice and come to judgment. God has appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by this man whom he has ordained. And the apostle calls upon us to live as in his presence here, and as those who must be judged by him hereafter. It is a truth, of which we cannot too often be reminded ; which diminishes the worth of all terrestrial things, and should stimulate every christian to press forward towards the prize of the high calling of God.

This is peculiarly interesting to the ministers of the gospel,—the appointed stewards of the mysteries and manifold grace of God. For it is justly “required in stewards, that a man be found faithful.” How awfully accountable to our Lord and Master are we, whom he has chosen from the world to administer in holy things ! to be instruments in his hands of giving life and salvation to men, and of training souls for heaven and felicity !

How solemn the thought, that the knowledge and practice of truth on earth, and, God only knows how far, the happiness or misery of our fellow creatures in their future state, may depend on the diligence with which we perform our duty ! That many souls on that dreadful day of “ his appearing and his kingdom ” shall ascribe their misery to our unfaithfulness ! God has made us very much dependent. How wretched would be our present existence, deprived of mutual benefactions ! Nor is it any impeachment of divine wisdom or goodness to suppose, that the same economy pervades his spiritual kingdom, and that we may be made instruments of conferring on our fellow creatures, not only temporal, but eternal benefits. And if it be displeasing to God to neglect our duty in the one case, how much more in the other ! If the rich man, who suffers the poor to languish at his gate without relief, shall be condemned, how great is his guilt, who neglects to dispense the riches of grace and salvation to those needy souls, who are made dependent on his ministrations ! If we sin in withholding temporal food from those who need, how much more in keeping back the food of eternal life ! So awful is the responsibility of our stewardship : So tremendous are the conditions on which we hold our sacred office.

With what faithfulness then and zeal, ought we to watch, “ as they who must give account ” to our heavenly Master, and stand with others before his judgment. How ought we to take heed to ourselves, and to our doctrine, lest, after preaching to others, we become cast-

away. Freely have we received ; freely are we commanded to give. “ Son of man,” saith the Lord by his prophet,* “ I have made thee a watchman ;—therefore hear the word from my mouth, and give them warning from me. When I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die, and thou givest him not warning,—to save his life,—he shall die in his iniquity ; but his blood will I require at thy hand.”

II. How we shall discharge this duty, and *deliver our own soul*, we thus are taught by the holy apostle : “ Preach the word : be instant, in season, out of season : reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all long suffering and doctrine.” It has pleased God to appoint, that, chiefly by the ordinance of preaching, men shall receive the knowledge of his salvation. He chose this foolish and weak thing of the world, to confound the wise and the mighty. Twelve apostles, in the lower ranks of life, with nothing of this world to recommend them, were sent, as the heralds of peace and salvation, to bear the banners of a crucified Saviour through the earth. These were to encounter the prejudice of the Jews, the ignorance of the Gentiles, the pride of learning and philosophy, the power of idolatry, and the corruption and depravity of all mankind. In the strength of God they went, and they prospered. Preaching remains still the sacred ordinance by which God ordinarily imparts to man the knowledge of his grace and faith in him. For as our apostle says, “ How shall they call on him, in whom they have not believed ? and how shall they

* Ezek. iii.

believe in him, of whom they have not heard ? and how shall they hear, without a preacher ? and how shall they preach, except they be sent ?” The ordinance is important as it is divine ; and Timothy, as indeed every one ordained to that ministry, is here exhorted to zeal and faithfulness.

“ Preach the word,” says the apostle, comprising in two words an injunction of vast import. To preach the word,—to preach the gospel,—and to preach Jesus Christ, are common scriptural phrases of the same meaning. For though *the word* includes all holy scriptures written for our learning, and the whole law of God, the same scriptures teach, that “ Jesus Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one who believeth.” All the prophets center in him as the way and the life. The law looks forward, and the gospel back to him alone, as the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sins of the world. St. Peter, in his discourse before Cornelius, has given us a good explanation of what we may understand by *preaching the word*. “ The word,” he says, “ which God sent unto the children of Israel, *preaching peace by Jesus Christ*, (he is Lord of all,) that *word*, I say, ye know, which was published throughout all Judea ;—how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power :—whom they slew and hanged on a tree : him God raised up the third day.—And he commanded us to preach unto the people and to testify, that it is he which was ordained of God to be the judge of quick and dead. To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name, whoever be-

lieveth in him shall receive remission of sins." This then is the *word* which we are to preach ; That Jesus Christ is the Lord our righteousness, who died for our sins, and rose again for our justification, and that eternal salvation is to be obtained through faith in his merits. This was the subject of St. Paul's preaching, who " testified, both to the Jews and also to the Greeks, repentance towards God, and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ." Such should be the theme of our discourses. Whatever we teach and however good in itself, which has no respect to the Redeemer, nor our salvation through him, is not his gospel, nor is it *the word*, in the apostle's sense. We must preach the doctrines of the Saviour's cross ; such as the sinful, fallen state of man ; the redemption, which is through his blood ; the necessity of a conversion from sin, and renovation of the heart, through the sanctifying influence of the Divine Spirit, with the insufficiency of our best deeds and merit, and of our natural strength to attain acceptance with God and eternal life. We must preach " repentance towards God," as the necessary preparation for his heavenly kingdom, and the comforts of the gospel. We must set forth " faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ," as the condition of salvation through his blood ; as the element of christianity ; as the life and soul of moral goodness.

We must also teach the necessity, and exhort men to the performance of every religious duty,—of every gospel ordinance, as the evidence, not of our righteousness, but of our faith. The sacred ordinances of our

religion, are, on God's part, testimonials of his love to us in Jesus Christ. On our part they are publick acknowledgments of our unworthiness to merit life eternal ; of our inability to save ourselves ; of our gratitude for God's mercies ; of our trust in the Lord our Redeemer, and submission to his righteousness.

Moral virtue, though not in itself the word we are to preach, is also a very necessary part of our preaching. It is " a faithful saying," and it is our duty to " affirm constantly, that they who have believed in God be careful to maintain good works." We are to teach the strictest and purest morality : not indeed as the foundation of our hope, or ground of our justification ; not as entitling us to heaven and happiness : but as the just return for God's goodness ; as a grateful acknowledgment of his mercies ; as a cordial compliance with his will ; as the proper fruit of christian faith ; as a participation in the Saviour's cross, and a conformity to his holy example, necessary to the glorious rewards of his heavenly kingdom.

Such is the morality we are called to preach, founded on a faith in the doctrines of the gospel ; and it is the only morality which will be of much real benefit to mankind. Let us expatiate ever so finely on the inherent beauty and amiableness of virtue ; though we " speak with tongues of men and of angels" of the natural fitness of moral rectitude ; though we earnestly declaim against the vices of the age, and expose to view the deformity of sin, we shall never remove it from the heart, nor make men better, till we make them chris-

tians. When was the heart ever changed, or the world reformed, by this kind of teaching? Will the best precepts of morality, independent of the truths and motives which the gospel reveals, awaken sinners to repentance? Our flowery disquisitions on the various duties of life, though polished smooth as marble, will be as cold, nor touch the heart with the pure flame of devotion. That virtue is amiable, none can deny. But are its charms alone sufficient to counterbalance the allurements of the world, and restrain the inordinate propensities of corrupted nature? No: we must preach the *word*; we must preach the gospel: we must preach Jesus Christ, and him crucified. We must cleanse the fountain, that the streams may be pure. The word, the quickening word of God must be “grafted inwardly in the heart,” before it will “bring forth the fruit of good living.” They, who are whole, need not a physician; and they, who think themselves whole, feel not the want of one. Men must be sensible of their sinful, perilous state, before they will “hunger and thirst after righteousness;” which yet they must do, before they are fed. For God fills the hungry with good things, and the vainly rich he sends empty away. How shall we apply to the great Physician, till we are sensible, that “we have no health in us?”

The apostle further exhorts Timothy to be zealous and active in preaching this word. “Be *instant* ;” be pressing, prompt, and urgent, making no delay. In business of such interesting concern, no time is to be wasted. God only knows what blessings may attend

our pious labours : he only knows what irreparable evils may result from our negligence.

Nor must we neglect any favourable opportunity. "Be instant, *in season ; out of season.*" For "to every thing there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven." Accordingly "the Lord said, Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom his Lord shall make ruler of his household, to give them their portion of meat in due season?" It highly concerns us all, who are invested with that sacred office, the stewardship of our Lord's household, to put this question to our own hearts.

Wisdom and good order require, that there should be stated times and seasons for preaching the gospel. The apostle's words, "in season, out of season," imply that certain times for this service were then observed. The first day of the week, called therefore the Lord's day, was no doubt then *in season*, as it has been since. Timothy is directed, and we of course, to preach, not only on this day, set apart for that sacred purpose, but occasionally at other times, as opportunity occurs of being useful. "In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening spare not thy hand." While men have ears to hear, let us not withhold the word. Let us be watchful of fit times to dispense the treasures of the gospel, and give to all their portion *in due season*. Let not indolence, nor any influence of worldly things, set us to find excuses for neglecting this duty ; but imitate our heavenly Father, who is more ready to give, than we to ask or receive.

We are further commanded to “reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all long suffering and doctrine.” The preacher of the word must be attentive, not only to the “due season ;” but also to the respective wants and condition of his hearers, that he may give to all their *portion of meat*. “Of some,” says St. Jude, “have compassion, making a difference, and others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire.” Presumptuous, daring sinners, will need reproof, and often rebukes. We are not to flatter men in their sins, nor put soft names upon those transgressions which incur the wrath of God, and lead to endless misery. “Knowing” ourselves “the terrors of the Lord,” we must cease not to warn the wicked of their danger, and “persuade men,” as they fear God, or regard their future happiness, to flee from sin. Those who stand we must exhort to perseverance and “patient continuance in well doing ;” that with purpose of heart, they cleave unto the Lord, holding fast the profession of their faith without wavering ; that, “leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ,” they “go on unto perfection,” “adding to their faith virtue, —knowledge, —temperance, —patience, —godliness, —brotherly kindness, and —charity.” Give them just notions of the doctrines and the duties of christianity ; that they neither neglect good works, nor improperly trust in them. Teach them to “rejoice with trembling :” to fear without despair, and to hope without presumption. Thus should our preaching, far as possible, be adapted to the wants of all ; to awaken sinners to righteousness ; to rouse the careless to vigilance ;

to strengthen the wavering with faith ; to comfort the fearful with hope, and check the too confident with fear.

Such is the duty we assume, when we receive the sacred office of ambassador of Christ, and are authorised to speak in God's name, and by his authority to mankind : an office ever to be undertaken with great reverence and a deep sense of its importance, and after discharged with equal care and fidelity. Timothy, though of an infirm constitution, and ill bodily health, is exhorted to be thus extremely diligent. And how cautious then should we be, that no excuses of a vain or trifling nature shall satisfy our conscience in neglecting so great a duty.

III. The apostle adds, in the third verse of the text before us, an especial reason for the active zeal which he recommends : “ For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but, after their own lusts, shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears.” This unpleasant part of our subject must not pass unnoticed. To what *time* he has reference, when these schisms and corruptions would commence, it is unnecessary to inquire. Our own time is that with which we are chiefly concerned ; and unhappily to our own time this prediction but too well corresponds. That there is an unwillingness to “ hear sound doctrine” is much too evident from the many contradictory doctrines which are received, and the various sects into which the church is divided. We live in an age and country, when and where, should we call in question the right of any to “ heap to themselves teachers,” and such

teachers as their "ears" prefer, no authority of the apostle would shield us from the charge of bigotry. The ordinance of preaching is not more liable to abuse by the indolence or vain-glory of those who are called to the ministry, than by the carnal propensities and caprice of hearers. There is no doubt but many are led to hear sermons by "itching ears," to gratify curiosity, to be amused with novelty, or to be flattered and confirmed in favourite opinions, rather than by better motives. "Whereas there is among you envying, strife, and divisions,—while one saith, I am of Paul, and another, I am of Apollos, are ye not carnal?" This propensity of christians to "walk as men,"—to regard more their own pleasure and selfwill, than the will of God, and the peace and harmony of his church, is indeed, as the apostle intimates, and sad experience verifies, what renders the labours of Christ's ministers more arduous and difficult, and induces the necessity of greater exertions. It becomes therefore our duty in all our preaching, in season and out of season; in all our reproofs, rebukes, and exhortations to have a singular eye to this evil. Let us be careful to teach that doctrine only which is "sound," and to "contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints." Let no worldly motives of pride or selfishness, no influence of party spirit, no prejudice of education, nor any considerations of interest or popularity ever induce us to "fashion our doctrines to the varying hour," or neglect "to declare the whole counsel of God." At the same time let us follow after the things which make for peace in the

church, and after that charity which is its bond of perfectness. For the truth's sake let us give up every thing but the truth ; and while we become all things to all men, let it be as the ozier bending before the storm, with the root invariably fixed and immoveable. It being so indispensably necessary to the success of our ministry, and the general prosperity of religion, that we are zealously active in propagating the doctrine which is sound, let us not turn to the right hand nor to the left, nor be weary in well doing. Let us ever imitate that constant and glowing, yet dignified and temperate zeal, equally remote from lukewarmness and enthusiasm, which was so perfectly exemplified in our blessed Saviour, and so happily followed by his holy apostles.

Nor is it less our duty to hear sound doctrine, than to teach it ; and we must take heed what we hear, no less than what we teach. The gospel is not sent to please the ear, nor flatter the capricious humours of man ; but to make us wise unto salvation ; to change the heart, and bring it in subjection to the will of God. The question is not what men prefer, but what God has taught. The orator of this world is at liberty to accommodate his discourse to the various interests, tastes, and opinions of mankind : but we must deliver to you the message, which we have received. We " cannot go beyond the word of the Lord to do less or more." We must preach his word, and declare his counsel. We must carry our commission in our hand ; nor can we lawfully depart from the holy commandment given

unto us. We are not at liberty to prophesy smooth things, or to select popular and pleasing subjects, but must often speak things ungrateful to our hearers. Being ambassadors for Christ we must be about his business, and pray you in his stead to be reconciled to God. We must “reprove, rebuke, and exhort with all long suffering and doctrine.” Remember therefore, that God is wiser than man, and that in his name we speak, “as though God did beseech you by us.” And most solemnly do we beseech you, to let no considerations of separate interest, or personal feeling, or worldly affections ever influence your minds to reject or pervert the pure word of God, or to do any thing, which will frustrate its prosperity, or cause or perpetuate divisions in the church of Christ.

Finally, let us all, each in his respective station, unite in the glorious work, to which it has pleased God to call us, and with sincere hearts and pious zeal, labour to establish and extend the Redeemer’s kingdom. The very interesting and important business, which has called us here, calls also for our united exertions in the sacred cause. Great reason have we to bless God for the unusual harmony, which has hitherto prevailed among the members of this and the preceding convention, and among all the churches which we represent. Is it not a most auspicious indication “of his favour and goodness towards us, and that he favourably alloweth this charitable work of ours” in attempting to “strengthen the things which remain,” and revive our churches from their languid state? Humbly may we hope, from his

mercies past, that he will bless and prosper our present work. The peculiar state of our church in this new Diocese calls loudly upon all its friends, and especially upon us of this convention, to make those great exertions enjoined in our text, and every other exertion which its interest requires. God is promising, as we may humbly trust, a great blessing upon our labours. Apparently, an opportunity is given us, of seeing the church prosperous in our day, and of conferring great and durable benefits upon posterity. Should we lose this favourable season, God only knows, if he will vouchsafe another. Now is the accepted time. Let us be awake to a sense of God's mercies, and of our own duty. Let us be zealous,—let us be united, as a band of brethren, in every requisite effort. Of the divine favour we may be assured, if we are not wanting to ourselves. But without labour we are not to expect fruit. Though we “hear sound doctrine;” though we are ever so orthodox in our creeds and articles; ever so regular and apostolic in our worship and discipline; yet, if we are careless and inattentive to the duties of our profession, our labours will not prosper; tares will be sown among the wheat; “they will heap to themselves teachers,” and our churches will decline. This are we taught in the word of God, and this we are taught by long experience of christianity from the seven churches of Asia, in the apostle's days, to seventy times seven in our own age, and even in our own country.

Let us labour especially in preaching the word, and propagating sound doctrine. Let us always be found
we

at our post upon the watch tower of Zion, prompt at every call, and every season. While men will hear the gospel, let us not withhold it ; but always “ fill the hungry with good things,” and let it be their own fault, if any are “ sent empty away.”

May it please God, in his own good time, to grant us once more an Episcopal head, duly qualified for the sacred office, and invested with the same authority as Timothy, the first bishop of Ephesus, to “ reprove, rebuke, and exhort ;” to “ ordain elders in every city,” and every parish, where they are needed ; to visit and oversee the churches, and complete the administration of all the gospel ordinances. This we may humbly hope with his blessing will be a great and effectual means of prospering the work which we have in hand.

And let us add to our exertions, humble and devout supplications to Almighty God, that he will inspire us with holy zeal and heavenly wisdom ; that he will direct our counsels and deliberations ; strengthen our hands and bless our labours to his glory, and to the good and salvation of his people.

And to Him, the only wise God, be ascribed all glory and praise, both now and forever. AMEN.

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