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SOCIAL WORSHIP THE DUTY OF THE ENGLISH  
ABROAD.

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**A SERMON**

PREACHED TO

THE ENGLISH CONGREGATION

IN THE

PROTESTANT CHURCH AT BONN,

*On Sunday, Sept. 18, 1839,*

AT THE

CLOSE OF THE ENGLISH SERVICE

FOR THE YEAR.

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BY THE

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MALACHI iii. 16, 17.

*Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another ; and the Lord hearkened and heard it ; and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name. And they shall be mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels ; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him.*

THE position of these words in the Bible, and the circumstances under which they were written, give them an especial claim to our serious attention. They stand, you see, almost at the very close of the Old Testament. The word of the Lord had become very precious, or, at least, very rare, in those days, and was not now to be heard again for nearly four hundred years. The Jews, who had enjoyed the blessing of a succession of inspired teachers from the days of Moses to those of Malachi, were now to be left without farther

warning than was conveyed in the written records of an earlier revelation. They were reinstated, it is true, in their ancient city after a dreary captivity, and their worldly circumstances were certainly prosperous, when compared with what they had been some time before; but in spiritual matters they were now about to suffer what was apparently a great deprivation, in the loss of that open manifestation of God's presence, which had never failed to be vouchsafed to them through his prophets, even in the gloomiest days of their sojourn in Babylon. Now when this silence came upon them, after the many distinct proclamations of God's word, to which they had before been accustomed, it was only natural, that those who delighted in heavenly privileges should be dispirited. And it was in all probability to guard against such feelings that the words of our text were written, for they at once point out the remedy to which God's people applied in those days of silence, "Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another;" and tell also of the promised blessing by which God encouraged the use of such a remedy, "The Lord hearkened and heard it; and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name: and they shall be

mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels : and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him."

Such were the circumstances under which these words were at first written ; but they are not less applicable to the Christian Church now, than they were to the Jewish then. Since the Apostles fell asleep the word of the Lord has been silent amongst us. The only direct access that Christians have had to inspired truth for eighteen hundred years, has been through the records of earlier times ; and men's hearts, we know, have often been ready to fail them, as they looked for the promise of the Saviour's coming again in person more fully to instruct his people. And under such circumstances the words of the text have continually been a comfort to Christians, as they were of old to the Jews. Those who have feared the Lord in all ages of the Christian Church, have sought, according to God's appointment, to console themselves under the silence of a discontinued revelation, by speaking often one with another on the truths which were in former times revealed ; and they have not doubted, that, when they were so engaged, the Lord has hearkened and heard them ; and that to this very day a book of remembrance is written before him for them who

thus shew that they fear the Lord, and think upon his name.

The general lesson then which the words of the text distinctly inculcate is, that, as at all times, so especially under such a state of things as that in which the Christian Church has been since the Apostles' days, God's people are bound not to forsake the assembling of themselves together, that they may think upon the Lord, and hear his word. The duty of meeting together at stated times for worship is so plainly recognized by all members of the Christian Church, that under ordinary circumstances it would seem almost unnecessary to insist upon it. But as we are now apparently about to close to-day the Service which we have been enabled to keep up for the last three months, and as many of those who now hear me are probably prepared to be less regular in future in assembling themselves for worship, while some it is to be feared, excusing themselves by circumstances, intend to give up the practice altogether, it would ill become a Minister of Christ to let men thus quietly relapse into neglect of this most important Christian duty without warning. I shall therefore endeavour, in connexion with the words before us, to bring forward one or two plain state-



ments, which may serve to shew the importance of this duty.

It is of course true, that men often fail altogether to profit by the public worship of the Church. Nay, it is true, that they are often only the worse for having frequented it, because the dead formality of their prayers, or the carelessness with which they have heard the sacred word, has only served to harden their hearts against the influence of God's Spirit. And hence, rashly attributing to the Service that failure which is caused only by their own deliberate sinfulness, men have not hesitated from time to time to assert, that they see no great good in meeting together for worship: that, as religion is a thing which must be left to every man's own conscience, so a man may pray if he will by himself, and read the Bible by himself, and be quite as good a Christian as if he went to Church.

Now in answer to such objectors, in the first place, I take it upon myself to say, that there never was a religious man who thus reasoned. The moment a man is enabled, by the grace of God's Holy Scripture, to conceive in his heart what true Christianity is, he sees at once, and becomes daily more convinced by his growing

experience, that to join in worship with his fellow-Christians, is one of the very best means for edifying his soul. Hence the more he becomes impressed with the reality of things unseen, and the more his heart is opened to understand the boundless field of duty which lies before him as Christ's disciple, the more does he appreciate the blessing of social worship; the more regular does he become in frequenting the public assemblies of the Church, and in calling his family together every day, that they may read God's word, and pray together. So long as a man is not deeply impressed with the necessity for such worship, so long does daily experience teach us, that he is sure to remain in other things also a very heartless Christian. There may be no flagrant violations of propriety in his outward conduct; but there is sure to be no symptom given of that inward love to God and man, which must ever be the basis of an active Christian life of faith.

Thus it may well be maintained, that daily experience establishes the fact of a distinct connexion between growth in Christian holiness, and a regard to the duty of meeting for social worship. And this connexion is proved by what we observe of communities, quite as much as by what we observe of individuals; for it is an undoubted

fact, that social worship never comes to be neglected in any nation, without all true vital Christianity perishing along with it.

Now this is only what might have been expected, even from considering the merely natural effects of such social worship. Nothing surely can better serve to remind men, that they are all fellow pilgrims in the same laborious course; that whatsoever be our differences of riches, or station, or ability, we are all equally lost by nature, alike in our sinfulness, our fears of God's justice, our hopes of a common redemption, and bound all to labour for the good of one another's souls. These solemn truths, which form the very basis of Christianity, cannot, to speak naturally, be better fixed in our minds, than by the associations which our joining together heartily in worship, as members of Christ's Church, are calculated to call up.

But even supposing that what is urged by the wicked were true, and that no plain visible advantage were to be traced as resulting from social worship, the obligation to keep up the practice of it would still be binding on us quite as much as ever. Our text may plainly enough remind us, that such meetings have been pleasing to God in all ages of his Church. And whether we can see good

resulting from them or not, we are therefore bound to frequent them. An Apostle has told us plainly not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together, and censured those whose manner it was so to neglect their duty. And our Lord himself, we all remember, has made the well-known gracious declarations, that "if two of us shall agree on earth as touching any thing we ask, it shall be done for us of our Father which is in heaven;" and that "where two or three are gathered together in his name, there is he in the midst of them." Thus no man can discontinue habitual attendance on social worship, without open disobedience to God's word, and an unchristian disregard of our Saviour's promises. It is plain from these promises, that our Lord intends it to be a rich means for infusing spiritual blessings into his faithful disciples' souls. No matter whether we see the desired result following or not : here, as in a thousand other Christian duties, we are bound to work in faith. And those who neglect the means which their Lord has thus promised to bless, do so at their souls' peril.

Such is the plain obligation that lies on all Christians, not to forsake the assembling of themselves together. But it seems necessary on this occasion to consider a little more closely how

this obligation is binding on those here present. And this perhaps will be best seen, by reflecting shortly in detail on some of the peculiar circumstances in which all are placed, who, like many that now hear me, have taken up their residence in a foreign country. Let us look at some of the especial dangers to which those in such a situation are exposed, and the consequent obligation to watchfulness under which they all lie. And we may thus see how they are especially bound to be regular in social worship.

One of the greatest evils of being forced to withdraw ourselves from our native country is, that we are too often thus separated from those blessings of religious instruction which our Church affords: and the melancholy effects of such a separation are too often to be seen in the careless and ungodly lives, which our countrymen lead, when withdrawn from the restraints of home. We are told, (to the scandal of Christianity,) that in more distant lands, as for example in India, where our countrymen are brought into intimate daily connexion with the Heathen, they seem often rather to sink to the level of those amongst whom they sojourn, than to labour as Christians ought to teach them the way to heaven. And thus by their ungodly lives many who are called Christians, not only

ruin their own souls, but throw a serious stumbling-block in the way of those outcast wanderers, whom God has given them the means of guiding into Christ's fold. And deep indeed must be the guilt of all who thus abuse such precious opportunities.

But if the guilt of these appears so great, we must not forget that our sin will be the very same, wherever we dwell, if by our unchristian lives we cast a stumbling-block in the way of those amongst whom we sojourn. It will not be denied, that in our native country there is at least an outward activity on the subject of religion, which is seldom to be met with elsewhere. And what must men of other countries think of all this outward display at home, if the moment we have passed the sea, we leave religion and its institutions behind us! Men must surely conclude, that all the systematized religious activity which exists in England can be worth very little, and certainly is not deserving of imitation, if those who come forth from the very centre of it shew themselves but little imbued with any Christian spirit. If the young, sent by their natural guardians into foreign lands that they may give themselves to the pursuit of knowledge, abuse the confidence which is thus reposed in them, and allow themselves in sinful

acts, of which they would be ashamed within the circle of their own homes—if their elders fall into a dull worldly way of living, unmarked by any daily acts to shew that they are members of the Christian Church—if both young and old are willing to live at least *somewhat* less strictly than they would have done at home—let all reflect, that, by every such indulgence, they are not only contributing to the ruin of their own souls, but also casting a serious stumbling-block in the way of the improvement of others.

To consider this a little more closely: it seems, that when Englishmen come to live in a foreign country, instead of giving way to carelessness, we are bound to be especially watchful, as well for the sake of our own country, as for the sake of those amongst whom we live, and also for the sake of ourselves.

Our own country, and its branch of Christ's Church, have a right to claim that we should be especially watchful, for otherwise we shall be sure to bring discredit upon it, and so to impair its means of Christian usefulness. Again, we are bound to be thus watchful for the sake of those amongst whom we sojourn. There is no country, however high its rank in the scale of Christian civilization, that may not borrow somewhat to its

eternal advantage from the institutions of others; and if by the help of the Holy Spirit we let our light shine brightly before those amongst whom we have our dwelling for a time, shewing in our daily lives that we have profited by the rich Christian privileges in the midst of which we were educated at home, we may be the instruments in God's hands for causing new institutions of active Christian usefulness to be established in foreign lands, and thus may bring a real blessing, instead of, what we too often bring, a curse, on those who receive us.

But for the sake of our own souls especially must we be thus watchful. If we are exposed to temptation at all times, we are so above all when we sojourn in foreign countries. This is especially true of those who are living separate from their families; but it is true in its degree of all. We know, that the influence of public opinion often serves to guard men from gross sins, and thus, by God's blessing, is often the instrument of keeping their hearts more ready to be formed by the Holy Spirit to a thorough Christian frame. Now this public opinion never can have much influence when we are living amongst those for whom we have no natural strong regard, with whom we are connected only for a time, and on whom our



prospects in life in no way depend. And hence in a foreign country, for the young especially, temptation assumes a strength which it does not possess at home: and we are thrown back as our only defence on our wavering Christian principle, unsupported by those other safeguards with which the presence and watchful care of surrounding friends might have fenced it. And thus it is that in foreign lands we have especial need to be ever praying, that God by his Holy Spirit would give us more and more Christian strength of character, since without this we cannot for a moment stand.

But besides that we are thus left in a more defenceless state exposed to the attacks of temptation, it is plain also that temptation itself in many ways assumes a more subtile form. In all those matters, which lie in the province of things indifferent in themselves, there is great danger of self-deceit at all times; but this danger is increased tenfold for those who are living in a foreign country.

To make this more clear. It will at once be granted, that there are several points of outward conduct, in which we are accustomed to observe at home a greater degree of strictness, than we see practised abroad. Now there is no need to enquire whether the neglect of this strictness is distinctly

sinful in those who have been brought up under totally different circumstances from ourselves. It is by no means our business to judge the conduct of others. But of this we may be certain, that if *we* follow their example, we are guilty of deliberate sin. No matter whether the point be a thing indifferent in itself; if it be one of those ties which from our education, or the custom of our country, has been employed by God to keep our hearts nearer heaven, we cannot allow it to be broken without deliberate sin. Thus, for example, there are many things which we see practised around us on the Lord's day, which we cannot say are distinctly forbidden by God's word, but which from our childhood we, in our own country, have been accustomed to regard as most unsuitable. Now in no one such point can we suffer our good old rules to be broken in conformity with the new customs that surround us, without loosening the hold which, by God's providence, things heavenly have gained over us, and thus being guilty of the deliberate sin of at least recklessly exposing ourselves to many temptations. He, who, in conformity with the practice of the world that surrounds him, approaches even in one little point to a less Christian observance of the first day of the week than that to which he was accustomed in his childhood,

has made the first step in that downward course of compromise, which has led many thousands before him to give up one by one, first their religious observances, and at last even their plain moral duties. And it is clear that none are more in danger of such compromise than those who are living as strangers in a foreign country, where many of men's ideas as to what are the outward marks of a holy life are very different from those to which at home we are accustomed. We are strongly tempted, and find it very easy to copy, those points in the conduct of strangers in which they are less strict than ourselves: experience tells us, that it is not so easy to be imitators of those secret Christian graces of the heart, in which they may be well qualified to be our teachers.

We see then, from the very nature of the circumstances in which most of us are placed, that, while dwelling in a foreign country, we have especial reason for Christian watchfulness, and for improving every means which God has promised to bless for communicating his Holy Spirit, and thus giving us Christian strength of character. And one of the most important of such means is brought before us in the text, a means of which it is plain that many of us in our present circumstances are much tempted to be very negligent.

He who takes up his abode in a place where he has no opportunity of joining in the public worship of the Christian Church, and is content to go on month after month without hearing the word of God preached, or partaking of the Holy Communion, is, to say the very least, making a very bold and dangerous experiment. Who is there who thinks for a moment, that is not sensible of the attempts which the world is ever making to chill all the better affections of his soul, and engross him with its low concerns! And how much must the world's power be increased, if we do not seek to counteract it by the heart-stirring associations of Christian worship, and by seeking the spiritual help which our Saviour has promised through them to impart! Hence, living here in a foreign country, we are bound to take every possible opportunity for joining in the worship of our fellow-Christians.

Now there are of course very many of our countrymen travelling in foreign lands, who from circumstances are quite unable, even if an opportunity is offered, to join, in the worshipping assemblies of the people amongst whom they sojourn. These have plainly put themselves in a situation which is very disadvantageous for their souls. No mere considerations of personal con-

venience, nothing but a sense of some Christian duty thereby to be performed, could justify Christians before God for placing themselves in such a situation. And as long as they feel themselves compelled by such duties to remain in this situation, they are bound to take all the means that are left to them for counteracting its great evils. Now let us see what these means are. Our Lord has promised to be present, wherever two or three are gathered together to worship him. And hence he will be present with every family, which morning and evening draws together to thank him for mercies received, and to pray for their continuance. Thus diligent family worship may in some sort serve as a temporary substitute, where the worship of the Church is a thing impossible: and hence also, in such circumstances, those friendly meetings are to be prized most highly, in which men are not ashamed to implore God's blessing on their endeavours to assist one another in the study of his word. Men are willing enough to draw together for purposes of worldly pleasure. It is strange that they should feel so reluctant to do so when it is for their eternal benefit. And yet how very clearly does the text encourage all such Christian meetings. If they that fear the Lord will only speak often one to another for their

mutual edification, and pray together, "the Lord will hearken and hear them, and a book of remembrance shall be written before him for them that fear the Lord, and that think upon his name; and they shall be mine, saith the Lord of Hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him."

And now, brethren, we are about to close the Service, in which we have been enabled to worship together for the last three months, by a solemn participation of the Lord's Supper. The text you see tells us to look forward to the time when the Lord will make up his jewels: the end of our united worship, and the quickly passing months, call us to the same thought: and the solemn rite in which we are now to be engaged is intended, at each season of its return, to be a preparation for that great day. Many of us have, I trust, during the week past, by God's help, examined into the state of our hearts and lives with more care and more detail than the habitual self-scrutiny of every day admits of. And among the subjects that ought to have occurred to the thoughts of many of us in this examination, is the use which we have made of this Service which is now closing; and the steps we have taken for continuing henceforward our

social worship in some other way. No one of us can look back on the opportunities of grace past, without deep cause for regret, that prayers have been so often offered up in a dull worldly spirit, and that the most solemn truths of Christ's religion have been so coldly spoken, and so coldly heard. May God grant a better blessing on that very solemn part of our united worship which still remains! and while we meet at our Saviour's table, and speak one to another and to him of that great sacrifice which he has offered for our souls, may the Lord hearken and hear, and may our names be written in the book of remembrance before him, as fearing the Lord, and thinking on his name! It would indeed be a blessed thing if those, who now are brought together to-day as it were by chance, at a distance from their homes, to worship at their Saviour's table, should all meet once again on that day, when the Lord makes up his jewels, as spared for his sake, whose death we are now to commemorate, and whose strengthening aid we are now to seek in his own appointed ordinance.