

The background of the book cover is a detailed oil painting. The upper portion shows a range of rugged, layered mountains under a soft, hazy sky. Below the mountains is a wide, flat valley. The lower portion of the painting is dominated by a dense field of flowers, including several prominent purple daisy-like flowers with yellow centers, and various green leafy plants. The overall style is classical and detailed.

PURITAN
Treasures
FOR TODAY

*Prizing Public
Worship*

DAVID
CLARKSON

*The LORD loves the gates of Zion
more than all the dwellings of Jacob.*

PSALM 87:2

Public worship has fallen on hard times. In our individualized age, there is little we value doing communally, especially when there is an alternative that can be tailor-fit for our personal wants and preferences. Thankfully, David Clarkson helps us understand the superior privilege of public worship and the responsibilities believers have as they engage in it. He compellingly argues that the glory of God demands the corporate worship of His people. Moreover, public worship is not simply something we should do; it is something we should love. Read this book and learn to prize the ordinary means of grace as God's precious gifts to His people.

"Clarkson's message is one we desperately need to hear today. What is the priority: public or private worship; congregational or individual devotions; or, to bring the discussion up-to-date, physical presence with the church or live stream at home? With Puritan thoroughness and an eye to the practical, he provides a clarifying and convincing case for the supremacy of the church gathered publicly under the means of grace as administered by the ordained ministry."

Terry L. Johnson, *senior minister, Independent Presbyterian Church, Savannah, Georgia*

DAVID CLARKSON (1622–1686) ministered in London until he and other Puritans were removed during the Great Ejection of 1662. He later became copastor with John Owen of an Independent congregation. *The Works of David Clarkson* are published by Banner of Truth.

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Prizing Public Worship

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David Clarkson

Edited by
Jonathan Landry Cruse

Puritan Treasures for Today
Series Editor: J. Stephen Yuille



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Prizing Public Worship

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Preface

Public worship has fallen on hard times. In our individualized age, there is little we value doing communally, especially when there is an alternative that can be tailor-fit for our personal wants and preferences. This kind of consumeristic mindset infiltrated the church long ago and has only become more prevalent in recent years. In a postpandemic world, many people have been introduced to the concept of virtual church and find it can be tucked conveniently into a free hour in their week (when they have one). There is no need to unnecessarily burden one's schedule with dressing up, getting the kids into the car, and commuting. Now church is as easy as the click of a mouse—and even that from the comfort of a couch!

What have we lost when we abandon the in-person, gathered, Lord's Day assembly of God's people? Is *everything* an overstatement? Maybe—but if it is, then just slightly so. I have argued elsewhere that corporate worship is the most important thing we could ever do

in this life.¹ Everything in our day fights against this understanding, so believers need constant reminders of the value and necessity of the public worship of God.

Then, we might ask, what could the Puritans, who lived hundreds of years ago, possibly have to offer us in this regard? They knew nothing of livestream! They didn't have the option to hop in the car and drive twenty minutes up the highway to a church that was more to their liking. Both the individualistic and consumeristic woes that plague the church seem to be so very modern.

While technology has advanced, the human heart has not. The sinful and selfish impulse that steers us from church is nothing novel. As the Puritan movement was largely ecclesiastical, we should not be surprised that the Puritans wrote often on the subject of the church. Yes, they wrote strongly against things like a state-run church, images and icons in worship, and other extravagant and extrabiblical trappings of Roman Catholicism, but they never once diminished the importance of the public assembly.

“In puritan ecclesiology,” writes Leland Ryken, “the visible signs of the church are defined chiefly in terms of certain *activities* and in *relationships* or fellowship among believers.”² In other words, to the Puritans, the very con-

1. See Jonathan Landry Cruse, *What Happens When We Worship* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2020).

2. Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 116; emphasis original.

cept of church included people *coming together and doing something*. The activities were primarily understood to be preaching, sacraments, and prayer.

They did not simply engage in academic treatises on the place of liturgies or on the doctrine of the church generally, but they wrote pastoral and practical works to get people to love the church. What you have in your hands is the collection of three such small works by Puritan minister David Clarkson (1622–1686).

Clarkson was born at Bradford, Yorkshire, and later educated at Cambridge. In 1662 Parliament passed the Act of Uniformity, which required all ministers in the Church of England to conduct worship in accord with the Book of Common Prayer. Clarkson objected and was ejected from his pulpit in Surrey because of his Nonconformist convictions. Like thousands of other Puritan ministers, he waited years before he had an official call. Finally, in 1681 he became the associate minister to John Owen at an Independent congregation in London, succeeding him a year later when he died. Clarkson served as the sole pastor for a few years until his own death.³

While Clarkson is not as familiar as Sibbes, Baxter, or Goodwin nor his works as well known or frequently read, he is well worth knowing, and his work is well

3. Prefatory note to *The Practical Works of David Clarkson* (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1864), 1:vii.

worth reading. Despite his obscurity, one author insisted it was

unquestionable that, in respect of the qualities of a theological writer, Clarkson occupied a very high place amongst the divines of the Puritan period. His vigorous and clear mind, his extensive and varied learning, his fervent piety and zeal for the glory of God and the good of men, enabled him to produce writings remarkable for soundness of reasoning and fervency of appeal, and adorned with the graces of a tasteful eloquence.⁴

Compiled here are three sermons Clarkson preached that have to do with the privilege of public worship and what responsibilities fall on believers as they engage in it. The first was originally titled “Public Worship to Be Preferred before Private,” a sermon based on Psalm 87:2, “The LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob.” The theme of the advantages of public worship continues in part 2, which comes from Clarkson’s first-ever published work, a sermon titled “What Must Christians Do That the Influence of Ordinances May Abide upon Them?” This was inspired by David’s prayer in 1 Chronicles 29:18: “O LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, our fathers, keep this forever in the intent of the thoughts of the heart of Your people, and fix their heart toward You.” A sermon simply

4. Prefatory note, 1:viii.

titled "Hearing the Word" (from Luke 8:18, "Therefore take heed how you hear") concludes the compilation; it is filled with practical tips for how to ensure one receives the preached word with faithfulness and fruitfulness.

In preparing these three sermons for modern readers, I have replaced archaic terms with contemporary words; removed or translated Hebrew, Greek, and Latin; and smoothed out Clarkson's writings at places. In one instance I rearranged a few points for ease of comprehension.

I believe that the title given to this modern edition, *Prizing Public Worship*, conveys well the desire of Pastor Clarkson. Undoubtedly, he argues in a compelling way that the glory of God *demand*s the corporate worship of His people. But Clarkson is not after heartless obedience or rote submission. He writes to inflame the affections so that we would see the beauty and privilege of Lord's Day worship with our fellow saints. Truly, public worship is not simply something we should do; it is something we should love. It should be a treasure to us that we hold dear and never willingly surrender. My prayer is that these pages will help you prize the ordinary means of grace as God's precious gifts to His people.

—Jonathan Landry Cruse

PART 1

The Primacy of Public Worship

*The LORD loves the gates of Zion more
than all the dwellings of Jacob.*

—Psalm 87:2

CHAPTER 1

God Loves the Gates of Zion

Why does the Lord say He loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob (Ps. 87:2)? We may find the reason assigned by the Lord Himself: "But you shall seek the place where the LORD your God chooses, out of all your tribes, to put His name for His dwelling place; and there you shall go" (Deut. 12:5). The gates of Zion was the place that the Lord had chosen for His name to dwell, as the following words explain, the place of His worship: "There will be the place where the LORD your God chooses to make His name abide. There you shall bring all that I command you: your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, the heave offerings of your hand, and all your choice offerings which you vow to the LORD" (v. 11). For the temple was built on, or near to, the hill of Zion. And this, you know, was in particular the settled place of His worship. It was the Lord's delight in and affection for His worship, for which He is said to love the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob.

But it may be replied that the Lord had worship not only in the gates of Zion, in the temple, but also in the dwellings of Jacob. We cannot suppose that all the posterity of Jacob would neglect the worship of God in their families; no doubt the faithful among them resolved with Joshua, "Me and my house, we will serve the LORD" (Josh. 24:15). Since, therefore, the worship of God was to be found in both, how can this worship be the reason why one should be preferred before the other? Surely on no other account but this: the worship of God in the gates of Zion was *public*; His worship in the dwellings of Jacob was *private*. So that, in short, the Lord may be said to love the gates of Zion before all the dwellings of Jacob because He prefers public worship before private. He loved all the dwellings of Jacob wherein He was worshiped privately; but the gates of Zion He loved more than all the dwellings of Jacob, for there He was publicly worshiped.

Hence, we have a clear ground for the following observation: *Public worship is to be preferred before private*. So it is by the Lord; so it should be by His people. So it was under the law; so it must be under the gospel.

Public Worship under the Old and New Covenants

Indeed, there is a difference between the public worship under the law and under the gospel in respect of a circumstance—namely, the *place* of public worship. Under

the law, the place of public worship was holy, but we have no reason to think of any place of public worship under the gospel in this way. And this will be manifest if we both inquire what were the grounds of that legal holiness in the tabernacle or temple and also observe that none of those grounds can be applied to any place of worship under the gospel.

One ground is that the temple and tabernacle were set apart and separated for a holy use by the special express command of God (Deut. 12:13–14). But there is no such command for setting apart any place under the gospel. Worship is necessary, but the place where it occurs is indifferent, undetermined; it is left to human prudence to choose what place may be most convenient. We find no obliging rule but that in general: “Let all things be done decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:40). Men’s consecrations cannot make that holy which God’s institution does not sanctify.

A second ground is that the temple was a part of the ceremonial worship under the law, but there is no such ceremonial worship under the gospel, much less is there any place that is a part of gospel worship. Therefore, there is no such holiness in any place now like in the temple then.

Third is that the temple itself was a means of grace, of worship, under the law. It was in and through the temple that the Lord communicated to His people many mysteries of religion and godliness; through the temple

Christ was represented in His natures, offices, and benefits. But there is no place under the gospel of such use and virtue now, no such representations of Christ or communications of religious mysteries by any place of worship. Therefore, there is no such holiness.

A fourth ground is that the temple was a type of Christ (John 2:19). But all the shadows and types of Christ vanished when He appeared, and there is no room for them in any place under the gospel.

Finally, the temple sanctified the offerings, the services, of that people. The altar sanctified the gift (Matt. 23:19). The worship there tendered was more acceptable, more available, than elsewhere, since it was the only place where the Lord would accept those ceremonial services; also because there is no acceptance but in Christ, who was hereby typified. But these ceremonies being ceased, to think now that our worship or service of God will be sanctified by the place where they are performed or will be more available or acceptable in one place than another merely for the place's sake is an idea without Scripture and therefore superstitious—no, it is against Scripture and therefore profane.

The prophet foretold this: "In every place incense shall be offered to My name" (Mal. 1:11); in every place, one as well as another, without distinction. The Lord Christ determines this in His discourse (John 4:21). The hour is at hand when all such respects will be taken away and all places made alike, and you and your

services as acceptable in every place of the world as at Jerusalem. Hence, the apostle's advice in 1 Timothy 2:8: "I desire therefore that the men pray *everywhere*, lifting up holy hands," not in this or that place only. And the promise of Christ is answerable in Matthew 18:20. He does not say, "Where two or three are gathered together in such a place," but rather, "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them."

Observable is that of Origen's comments on this text: "A Jew indeed doubts not but one place is more holy than another for prayer, but he that has left Jewish fables for Christ's doctrine doth say that the place doth not make one prayer better than another." Likewise, he says in a sermon on Leviticus, "I seek no holy place on earth, but in the heart. This we must take for the holy place rather than a building of stones." Similarly, Augustine says, "When you have a mind to pray, why do you inquire after a holy place?" Superstition had not yet so blinded the world but these ancients could see reason to disclaim that holiness of places that later ages fancied. And it would be good if such superstitious ideas were not rooted in some among us. Those who have a mind to see may, by what has been delivered, discern how groundless that opinion is. But I must insist no longer on it.

Hence, it appears that there is a circumstantial difference between the public worship of God under the

law and under the gospel. But this can be no ground to conclude that public worship is not to be preferred before private under the gospel as well as under the law. For the difference is only in circumstance (the place of worship), and this circumstance is only ceremonial (a ceremonial holiness), whereas *all the moral reasons* why public worship should be preferred before private stand just as true under the gospel as under the law.

Public Worship Briefly Defined

But before I proceed to confirm the observation, let me briefly explain what I mean by *public worship*. Three things are necessary that worship may be public: ordinances, an assembly, and an officer.

First, *there must be such ordinances as do require or will admit of public use*. Such ordinances are prayer; praises; the Word read, expounded, or preached; and the administration of the sacraments.¹ The Word must be read, and prayer is necessary both in secret and in private, but they both admit of public use, and the use of them in public is required and enjoined. These must be used both publicly and privately; the other cannot be used duly but in public.

1. Throughout this book Clarkson will use the term *ordinance* in this broad sense of those things that take place in public worship; in many respects *ordinance* is synonymous with *means of grace*, but do note his meaning is broader than a reference to the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Second, *there must be an assembly, a congregation, joined in the use of these ordinances.* The worship of one or two cannot be public worship. Of what numbers it must consist we need not determine, but since what is done in a family is only private, there should be a concurrence of more than constitute an ordinary family.

Third, *there must be an officer.* The administrator of the ordinances must be one of public quality, one in office, one set apart by the Lord and called to the employment by the church. If a private person in ordinary cases undertakes to preach the word or administer the sacraments, if it is allowed as worship, which is not according to ordinary rule, yet there is no reason to expect the blessing, the advantage, the privilege of public worship.

CHAPTER 2

Why God Prefers Public Worship to Private

In the first chapter, I explained that God prefers public worship over private. In this chapter, I aim to prove that point. Observe these arguments.

The Glory of God

The Lord is more glorified by public worship than private worship. God is then glorified by us when we acknowledge that He is glorious. And He is most glorified when this acknowledgment is most public. This is obvious. A public acknowledgment of the worth and excellency of anyone tends more to his honor than that which is private or secret. It was more for David's honor that the multitude celebrated his victory than if a particular person had acknowledged it only in private (1 Sam. 18:7). Hence the psalmist, when he would have the glory of God most amply declared, does not content himself with a private acknowledgment but summons all the earth to praise Him (Ps. 96:1–3).

The Lord is most glorified when His glory is most declared, and it is most declared when it is declared by most, by a multitude. David shows the way whereby God may be most glorified (Ps. 22:22–23, 25). Then He appears all glorious when publicly magnified, when He is praised in the great congregation. Then He is most glorified when a multitude speaks of and to His glory: “In His temple everyone says, ‘Glory’” (29:9).

The Lord complains as if He had no honor from His people when His public worship is despised and neglected. In Malachi 1:6 the Lord asks,

If then I am the Father,
Where is My honor?
And if I am a Master,
Where is My reverence?
Says the LORD of hosts
To you priests who despise My name.

By “name” here is meant His worship and ordinances, as plainly appears by what follows (vv. 7–8, 11). And He here protests them as tendering Him no honor because they despised His worship and ordinances. Thus, Christ will be most glorified when He will be admired in all those who believe, in that great assembly at the last day (2 Thess. 1:10). And it holds in proportion now. The more there are who join together in praising, admiring, and worshipping Him, the more He is glorified; and therefore, more in public than in private.

The Presence of God

There is more of the Lord's presence in public worship than in private worship. He is present with His people in the use of public ordinances in a more special manner—more effectually, more constantly, and more intimately.

For the *efficacy* of His presence, see Exodus 20:24. After the Lord had given instructions for His public worship, He adds, "In every place where I record My name I will come to you, and I will bless you." It is as though He says, "Where I am publicly worshiped"—for again, the "name" of God is frequently substituted for the worship of God—"I will come; and not empty-handed, I will bless you." This blessing is a comprehensive word, including all that is desirable and all that tends to the happiness of those who worship Him. Here is the efficacy.

For the *constancy* of His presence, see Matthew 28:20: "I am with you always, even to the end of the age," where, after He had given order for the administration of public ordinances, He concludes with that sweet encouragement to the use of them: "I am with you always, every day, and that to the end of the world." Here is the constancy.

See the *intimacy* of His presence from Matthew 18:20: "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them." He does not say, "I am near them, or with them, or about them," but He says, "I am there in the midst of them." It is as much

intimacy as can be expressed. And so He is described in Revelation 1:13 to be in the midst of the seven golden lampstands, in the midst of the church; there He walks and there He dwells not only with them but in them. Hence it is when the public worship of God is taken from a people that God is departed, His presence is gone; like when the ark was taken from the Israelites, Phinehas's wife cried out, "The glory has departed" (1 Sam. 4:21). And why, but because the Lord, who is the glory of His people, is departed? Public ordinances are the sign, the pledge, of God's presence, and in the use of them He does in a special manner manifest Himself present.

But you will say, "Isn't the Lord present with His servants when they worship Him in private?" It is true, but not as much of His presence is offered or ordinarily enjoyed in private as in public. If the experience of any find it otherwise, they have cause to fear that the Lord is angry and that they have given Him some distaste or some offense if they don't find Him most where ordinarily He is most to be found.

This is in public ordinances, for the Lord is most there where He is most engaged to be, and He has engaged Himself to be most there where most of His people are. The Lord has engaged to be with every particular saint, but when the particulars are joined in public worship, there are all His engagements united. The Lord engages Himself to let forth, as it were, a

stream of His comforting, life-giving presence to every particular person who fears Him, but when many of these particulars join together to worship God, then these several streams are united and meet in one. The presence of God, enjoyed in private, is only a stream, but in public it becomes a river—a river that makes glad the city of God. The Lord has a dish for every particular soul who truly serves Him; but when many particulars meet together, there is a variety, a confluence, a multitude of dishes. The presence of the Lord in public worship makes it a spiritual feast, and so it is expressed in Isaiah 25:6. There is, you see, more of God's presence in public worship; therefore, public worship is to be preferred before private.

The Manifestations of God

The clearest manifestations of God are in public worship. Here He manifests Himself more than in private; therefore, public worship is to be preferred before private. Why was Judah called a valley of vision, except that the Lord manifested Himself to that people in public ordinances (Isa. 22:1)? Other nations to whom He has not made this promise are said to “sit in darkness and the shadow of death” (Luke 1:79). In corporate worship are the visions of peace, of love, of life, and blessed are those eyes that effectually see them. Here are the clearest visions of the beauty, the glory, the power of God that can be looked for until we see Him face-to-face.

David saw as much of God in secret as could then be expected, but he expected more in public. And therefore, not satisfied with his private enjoyments, he breathes and longs after the public ordinances so that he might have clearer discoveries of the Lord there:

One thing I have desired of the LORD,
That will I seek:
That I may dwell in the house of the LORD
All the days of my life. (Ps. 27:4)

Why did he affect this as the one thing desirable above all? Why, but to behold the beauty of the Lord? So although David was in a wilderness, “a dry and thirsty land” where there was no water (63:1), yet he did not so much thirst after outward refreshments as after the public ordinances. And why? “To see Your power and Your glory” (v. 2).

If we observe how Christ is represented when He is said to be in the midst of the churches in Revelation 1:13–16, we may thereby know what discoveries of Christ are made in the assemblies of His people.

“Clothed with a garment down to the feet.” That was the priests’ habit. Here is the priestly office of Christ, the fountain of all the saints’ comfort and enjoyments.

“Girded about the chest with a golden band.” This was the garb of a conqueror. So Christ is set forth as victorious over all His people’s enemies.

“His head and hair were white like wool.” Here is His eternity; whiteness is the emblem of it. Therefore, when the Lord is expressed as eternal, He is called the Ancient of Days.

“His eyes like a flame of fire.” Here is His omniscience; nothing can be hidden from His eye. The flame scatters darkness and consumes or penetrates whatever to us might be an impediment of sight.

“His feet were like fine brass.” Here is His power to crush all opposers of His glory and His people’s happiness. They can no more withstand Him than earthen vessels can endure the force of brass.

“His voice as the sound of many waters.” Here His voice is most loud and powerful—so powerful, it can make the deaf hear and raise the dead out of the grave of sin. His voice in private is a still voice; here it is as the sound of many waters.

“He had in His right hand seven stars.” Here is His providence, His tender care of His messengers, the ministers of the gospel, the administrators of public ordinances; He holds them in His hand, His right hand, and all the violence of the world, all the powers of darkness, cannot pluck them from there.

“Out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword.” His word publicly preached is sharper than a two-edged sword (Heb. 4:12–13), pierces the heart, searches the soul, wounds the

conscience. With this Christ goes on conquering and to conquer, in spite of all opposition.

“His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength.” Here the face of Christ is unveiled: the fountain of light and life, the seat of beauty and glory such as outshines the sun in its full strength. So He appears, as He becomes the love, the delight, the admiration, the happiness of everyone whose eyes are opened to behold Him.

As He is here described in the midst of the churches, so does He in effect appear in the assemblies of His people. There is not a clearer, more comfortable, or more effectual representation of the power and wisdom, of the love and beauty, of the glory and majesty of Christ than is found in the public ordinances: “We all, with unveiled face, [behold] as in a mirror the glory of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18).

The Spiritual Advantages

There is more spiritual advantage to be had in the use of public ordinances than in private ordinances. Whatever spiritual benefit is to be found in private duties, that and much more may be expected from public ordinances when duly improved.¹ There is more spiritual light and life, more strength and growth, more comfort and soul

1. Clarkson speaks frequently about the importance of “improving” the ordinances of God. We don’t generally speak in this way, but it refers to the importance of making the most of God’s means

refreshment. When the spouse (the church) inquires of Christ where she might find comfort and soul nourishment, food and rest (see Song 1:7), He directs her to public ordinances: “Follow in the footsteps of the flock”—that is, walk in the path of God’s ancient people. “And feed your little goats beside the shepherds’ tents” (v. 8). Shepherds are (in the language of the New Testament) pastors or teachers, those to whom the Lord has committed the administration of His public ordinances. To them is the church directed for food and rest, for spiritual comfort and nourishment; and it is commended to her as the known way of the whole flock, that flock in which Christ is Chief Shepherd.

In Ephesians 4, the apostle declares why the Lord Christ gave public officers and consequently public ordinances. He gave them “for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (v. 12). Here is edification, even to perfection: “Till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (v. 13). Here is knowledge and unity, even in conformity to Christ: “That we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of

of grace. To *improve* the worship of God, we seek to get something out of it. It means to make the most out of something.

deceitful plotting" (v. 14). There is strength and stability, despite all the sleight and craftiness of seducers: "But, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ" (v. 15). There is growth and fruitfulness, and that in "all things."

These are the ends for which the Lord Jesus gave His church public officers and ordinances, and they will never fail of these ends if we fail not in the use of them. What more can be desired? Here doubts are best resolved, darkness scattered, and temptations most effectually vanquished. Asaph had private helps, as we do, but how powerfully did a temptation prevail against him *until* he went into the sanctuary:

When I thought how to understand this,
It was too painful for me—
Until I went into the sanctuary of God;
Then I understood their end. (Ps. 73:16–17)

Nothing was effectual to vanquish this temptation until he went into the sanctuary. Thus, you see, there is more spiritual advantage in public worship than in private, and therefore it is to be preferred.

The Edification of God's People

Public worship is more edifying than private worship. In private you provide for your own good, but in public you do good to both yourselves and others. And it is a known saying, "That good is best which is most common."

Example has the force of a motive, and we may stir up others by our example. Zechariah 8:20–21 shows this:

Peoples shall yet come,
Inhabitants of many cities;
The inhabitants of one city shall go to another,
saying,
“Let us continue to go and pray before the LORD,
And seek the LORD of hosts.

This was also a common theme with David: “Oh, magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt His name together” (Ps. 34:3); and

Give to the LORD, O families of the peoples,
Give to the LORD glory and strength.
Give to the LORD the glory due to His name.
(96:7–8)

If you separate live coals from one another, they will quickly burn out, but while they continue together, they serve to heat one another. We may enliven one another while we join together in worshiping God, but deadness, coldness, or lukewarmness may seize the people of God if they forsake the assembling of themselves together. Corporate worship is more edifying and therefore to be preferred.

The Prevention of False Faith

Public ordinances are a better security against apostasy than private ordinances. This is an argument worthy of our observation in these backsliding times. He who

lacks the public ordinances, whatever private means he may enjoy, is in danger of apostasy. David was as much in the private duties of God's worship as any while he was in banishment; yet because he was thereby deprived of the public ordinances, he looked on himself as in great danger of idolatry. This is plain from his speech: "They have driven me out this day from sharing in the inheritance of the LORD, saying, 'Go serve other gods'" (1 Sam. 26:19). There was none so profane in Saul's company as to say expressly to David, "Go serve other gods," so how can David make this charge against them? Because by banishing him from the inheritance of the Lord and the public ordinances, which were the best part of that inheritance, they exposed him to temptations that might draw him to idolatry and deprive him of what was his great security against it. Driving him out of public worship was the same, in essence, as saying, "Go and serve other gods," for he accounted public worship the sovereign preservative from idolatry.

We have too many instances closer to home that confirm this. Is not rejecting public ordinances the great step to the woeful apostasies among us? Who falls off from the truth and holiness of the gospel into licentious opinions and practices who has not first fallen off from the public ordinances? Who is there in these times who has made shipwreck of faith and a good conscience who has not first cast the public worship of God overboard? The sad issue of forsaking the public assemblies should

teach us this truth: that public ordinances are the great security against apostasy, a greater security than private duties, and therefore to be preferred.

For this end were they given, that we might not be “tossed to and fro...with every wind of doctrine” (Eph. 4:14). No wonder that those who reject the means fall so woefully short of the end; no wonder that they are tossed to and fro till they have nothing left but wind and froth. This was the means that Christ prescribed to the church, that she might not turn aside to the flocks of those companions, hypocrites, or idolaters: “Feed... beside the shepherds’ tents” (Song 1:8). No wonder that those who shun those tents become prey to wolves and foxes, to seducers and the destroyer. Public ordinances are a more effectual means to preserve oneself from apostasy and therefore are to be preferred before private.

The Works of God

Here the Lord works His greatest works—greater works than ordinarily He works by private means. The most wonderful things that are now done on earth are wrought in public ordinances, though the commonness and spirituality of them makes them seem less wonderful. It is true, we do not call conversion and regeneration miracles, but they come nearest to miracles of anything that is not so called. Here the Lord speaks life to dry bones and raises dead souls out of the grave and sepulchre of sin, wherein they have lain putrefying many years. Here the dead hear

the voice of the Son of God and His messengers, and those who hear do live. Here He gives sight to those who are born blind; it is the effect of the gospel preached to open the eyes of sinners and to turn them from darkness to light. Here, with a word, He cures diseased souls that are otherwise incurable by the utmost help of men and angels. He sends forth His word and heals them; it is nothing more to Him than simply speaking the word, and they are made whole. Here He dispossesses Satan and casts unclean spirits out of the souls of sinners who have been long possessed by them. Here He overthrows principalities and powers, vanquishes the powers of darkness, and causes Satan to fall from heaven like lightning. Here He turns the whole course of nature in the souls of sinners, makes old things pass away and all things become new.

These are wonders and would be so accounted were they not the common work of the public ministry. It is true indeed that the Lord has not confined Himself to work these wonderful things only in public, yet the public ministry is the only ordinary means whereby He works them. And since His greatest works are wrought ordinarily by public ordinances, and not in private, therefore we should value and esteem the public ordinances above private duties.

The Heavenliness of Public Worship

Public worship is the nearest resemblance of heaven. In

heaven, as far as Scripture describes it to us, there is nothing done in private, nothing in secret; all the worship of that glorious company is public. The innumerable company of angels and the church of the firstborn make up one general assembly in the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb. 12: 22–23). They make one glorious congregation and so jointly together sing the praises of Him who sits on the throne and the praises of the Lamb and continue employed in this public worship to eternity.

The Examples of God's Saints in Scripture

The examples of the most renowned servants of God, who have preferred public worship before private worship, is a sufficient argument. It was so in the judgment of those who were guided by an infallible Spirit, those who had most communion with God and had in them the mind of God, and those who had experience of both and were in all respects the best and most competent judges. If we appeal to them, this truth will quickly be put out of question. David, who was a man after God's own heart, shows by his practice and testimony that this was God's own mind. To what I have formerly mentioned, let me add one more reference, wherein he poignantly and affectionately confirms this truth: "How lovely is Your tabernacle, O LORD of hosts!" (Ps. 84:1). He speaks by way of interrogation, insinuating that the tabernacle was lovable beyond his expression. You would better

read this in his heart than in his language. Accordingly, he adds,

My soul longs, yes, even faints
For the courts of the LORD;
My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.
(v. 2)

Oh, what expressions! *Longs*: nothing else could satisfy. *Faints*: it was his life; he was ready to faint, to die, for lack of it. Then we have verse 10: "I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness." David was at this time a king, either actually or at least anointed, yet he professes he would rather be a doorkeeper where he might enjoy God in public than a king deprived of public worship. He would choose rather to sit at the threshold than to sit on a throne in the tents of wickedness where God was not publicly worshiped.

Hezekiah and Josiah were the two kings of Judah of highest esteem with God, as He has made it known to the world by His testimony of them. What was their eminency but their zeal for God? And where did their zeal appear but for the public worship of God? See it of Hezekiah in 2 Chronicles 29:2-3:

He did what was right in the sight of the LORD,
according to all that his father David had done.

In the first year of his reign, in the first month,
he opened the doors of the house of the LORD
and repaired them.

For Josiah, see chapters 34 and 35.

The apostles also are our example, and primitive Christians bear record of this. How careful were they of taking all opportunities that the word might be preached and the Lord worshiped in public! How many hazards did they run, how many dangers, how many deaths did they expose themselves to by attempting to preach Christ in public! Their safety, their liberty, their lives were not so dear to them as the public worship; whereas, if they had been contented to have served the Lord in secret, it is probable they might have enjoyed themselves in peace and safety as well as others.

The Lord Christ Himself, however much above us, did not think Himself above ordinances, though He knew under the old covenant they were soon expiring; nor did He withdraw from public worship, though it was then corrupted. No! Rather, He exhorts His disciples to hear those who publicly taught in Moses's chair, though they had Him, a far better teacher. You find Him frequently in the synagogues, frequently in the temple, always at Passover; and His zeal for public worship was such as they apply that of the psalmist to Him: "Zeal for Your house has eaten me up" (Ps. 69:9).

The Mercy of God

Public worship is the most available for the procuring of the greatest mercies and preventing and removing the greatest judgments—that is, those judgments that are most

extensive and even of universal consequence to a whole nation or a whole church. Public worship is most effectual for obtaining public mercies, for diverting public calamities, and therefore to be preferred before private worship. This is the means the Lord prescribes for this end, and He encourages His people to the use thereof with promises of success:

Blow the trumpet in Zion,
Consecrate a fast,
Call a sacred assembly;
Gather the people,
Sanctify the congregation.
(Joel 2:15–16)

This is the means prescribed, and then see the success (verse 18 through the end of the book). He assures them the issue hereof should be mercies of all sorts, temporal and spiritual, ordinary and extraordinary, and that to the whole nation.

Jehoshaphat also used this means and found success in 2 Chronicles 20. He “set himself to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah” (v. 3). This is the argument he uses: “Your name is in this temple” (v. 9). Immediately the Lord dispatches a prophet with a gracious answer: “Thus says the LORD to you: ‘Do not be afraid nor dismayed because of this great multitude, for the battle is not yours, but God’s.... Stand still and see the salvation of the LORD’” (vv. 15, 17). The event was wonderful: “The people of Ammon and Moab stood

up against the inhabitants of Mount Seir to utterly kill and destroy them.... So when Judah came to a place overlooking the wilderness, they looked toward the multitude; and there were their dead bodies" (vv. 23–24).

Nineveh bears witness to this, who hereby prevented its utter destruction threatened by the prophet within forty days. Nor do we lack instances in the New Testament. Hereby the church prevailed for the miraculous deliverance of Peter from execution (Acts 12:5). And wonderful were the effects hereof to the whole church: "When they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness" (Acts 4:31). This is also seen in Revelation 8:4–5, where you have mention of the prayers of all saints, in a description after the form of public prayers, offered in the temple at the time of incense. And an answer is immediately returned, such a one as brought with it the destruction of the domineering Roman state that then persecuted them. That which is of most public and universal advantage is worthily to be preferred, and such is public worship, and therefore to be preferred before private.

The Sacrifice of Christ

The precious blood of Christ is most interested in public worship. Whatever finds most interest in things of infinite value must be most valued by us. The blood of Christ has

most influence on public worship, more than on private; for the private duties of God's worship—private prayers, meditation, and such—had been required of and performed by Adam and his posterity if he had continued in the state of innocence. They had been due by the light of nature if Christ had never died, if life and immortality had never been brought to light by the gospel. But the public preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments have a necessary dependence on the death of Christ. As they are the representations, so they are the purchase of that precious blood; as Christ is hereby set forth as crucified before our eyes, so are they the purchase of Christ crucified, so are they the gifts of Christ triumphant. On the day of triumph, conquerors used to scatter gifts among the people. Answerably, the apostle represents to us Christ in His triumph as one distributing gifts:

When He ascended on high,
He led captivity captive,
And gave gifts to men. (Eph. 4:8)

And those gifts, he tells us (vv. 11–12), are public officers, and consequently public ordinances to be administered by those officers. How valuable are those ordinances, which are the purchase of that precious blood, which are the gifts Christ reserved for the glory of His triumph!

The Promises of God

The promises of God are more to public worship than to

private worship. Those exceeding great and precious promises, wherever they are engaged, will turn the balance, but public worship has most interest in them and therefore is more to be valued than private. If I should produce all those promises that are made to the various parts of public worship, I should rehearse to you a great portion of the Bible! I will briefly touch some general promises:

His presence: “In every place where I record My name I will come to you, and I will bless you” (Ex. 20:24).

His protection and direction: “For over all the glory there will be a covering” (Isa. 4:5). The Lord will be to the assemblies of His people as a pillar of cloud and fire. His presence will be as much effectually to His people now as those pillars were then. As formerly in the wilderness, the Lord, having filled the inside of the tabernacle with His glory, covered the outside of it with a thick cloud (Ex. 40:34), so will He secure His people and their glorious enjoyments in public worship. His presence within will be like the appearance of His glory to refresh them; His presence without will be like a thick cloud to secure them. His presence will be to the assemblies of His people what the outward tent or coverings were to the tabernacle (Ex. 26:7).

Light and life and joy, and that in abundance—even to satisfaction:

Prizing Public Worship

They are abundantly satisfied with the
fullness of Your house,
And You give them drink of the river of
Your pleasures.
For with You is the fountain of life;
In Your light we see light.
(Ps. 36:8–9)

Life and growth: “Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, and let your soul delight itself in abundance” (Isa. 55:2–3).

Life and blessedness:

Blessed is the man who listens to me,
Watching daily at my gates,
Waiting at the posts of my doors.
For whoever finds me finds life,
And obtains favor from the Lord.
(Prov. 8:34–35)

Acceptance: “Also He brought me by way of the north gate to the front of the temple; so I looked, and behold, the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD; and I fell on my face” (Ezek. 44:4; see also chapter 20).

Spiritual communion and nourishment: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me” (Rev. 3:20). He speaks here to a church, and in public ordinances He knocks hardest.

Grace and glory—yes, all things that are good. There is not a more full and comprehensive promise in Scripture than this: “No good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly” (Ps. 84:11). But what is this to public worship? Why, the whole psalm speaks of public worship, and therefore, by the best rule of interpretation, we must take this as promised to sincere walking with God in public worship. Besides, the particle *for* at the beginning of verse 11 tells us this is given as the reason why David had such a high esteem of public worship, why he preferred one day in God’s house before a thousand. And therefore, this promise must have reference to public worship; otherwise there is no reason to use this as a reason. This promise is to public worship, and what is there in heaven or earth desirable that is not in this promise?

“It is true,” you may say, “there are many great and precious promises to public worship, but are there not promises also to private duties?” It is granted that there are, but not as many, and the argument runs so. The promises are more to public worship than to private. Besides, those that seem to be made to private duties are also applicable to public worship, and that with added blessings. If the interest of one saint in a promise is prevalent with God, how prevalent then are the united interests of many assembled together? So all the promises that the people of God make use of to support their

faith in private duties will afford us much support—no, more—in public. Then add to these the promises that are peculiar to public worship, and the sum will appear far greater and this reason of great force to prove the truth propounded. That is most valuable which has the greatest share in those exceeding great and precious promises, and public worship has the greatest share in these and is therefore most valuable.

CHAPTER 3

Why We May Not Love Corporate Worship

Even as the previous chapter proved the point that God prefers public worship to private, I anticipate that you may make this objection: “Notwithstanding all the arguments brought to prove public worship is to be preferred, I find something to the contrary in *experience*. And who can admit arguments against experience? I have sometimes in private more of God’s presence, more assistance of His Spirit, more joy, more enlargement, more raised affections. In public I often find much dullness of heart. I find my spirit is restricted and unaffected. Therefore, I cannot so freely yield that public worship is to be preferred.”

What do we make of the fact that our experience does not always seem to align with what God lays forth in Scripture? Is this a valid objection in preferring private worship over public? I will endeavor to answer this objection in several ways.

The Fallibility of Experience

Experience is not a rule for your judgment, but the word of God is the rule. Experience is a fallible guide; the word of God only is infallible. If you press your judgment always to follow experience, Satan may quickly afford you such experience as will lead you out of the way. Be scrupulous of following experience when it goes alone, when it is not backed by the word and countenanced by Scripture. It has deceived many. Even in the field of medicine, a pure empiricist is not tolerated. Reason and experience must go together. So here Scripture and experience should go together. Those who live by truth and reason will not allow a few experiences to outweigh many arguments. So you may find you have experienced more of God in private at times, but do you find it so ordinarily? If not, this is no ground to pass any judgment against what I am arguing. It may be that a purge or a vomit does sometimes tend more to your health than your meat and drink. Will you therefore prefer medicine to your ordinary food? It may be in some extremity of cold you find more refreshment from a fire than from the sun. Will you therefore prefer the fire and judge it more beneficial to the world than the sun? Experience must not rule your judgment here, nor must you be confident of such apprehensions as are based on only a few experiments.

There may be a deceit in your experience. All those joys, affections, and enlargements that men find in

duties are not always from the special presence of God. There may be a great flash of spirit and much cheerfulness and activeness from false principles. Some flashes of fleeting affections, some transient and fading impressions may fall on the hearts of men and yet not fall from above. The gifts of men may be sometimes carried very high, even to the admiration of others, even though there is little or no spiritual life. Vigor of nature, strength of body, enforcement of conscience, outward respects, delusive joys, delusive visions, ungrounded fancies, deceiving dreams, and superstitious ideas may work much on men in duties when there is little or nothing of God. When men seem to be carried out with a full gale of assistance, it is not always the Spirit of God who fills the sails. A man may move with much life, freedom, and cheerfulness in spiritual duties even when his motion is from other weights than those of the Spirit.

Moreover, not only those powerful workings that are ordinary but even those that are extraordinary should not be necessarily trusted—such as ecstasies and raptures, wherein the soul is transported so as to leave the body without its ordinary influence, so as it seems without sense or motion; such inward operations on the soul as work strange effects on the body, visible in its disordered impulses and gestures. Such things have been in all ages and may be now from the spirit of darkness transforming himself into an angel of light. Therefore, if such private experiences are produced to

disparage the public worship, the public ministry, or any other public ordinance of God (however they pretend to the Spirit of God), they are to be rejected. The deceits of our own hearts or the delusions of that envious spirit (who has always showed his malice against God's public worship) should not be admitted to render this scriptural truth questionable, that public worship is to be preferred before private. Those assistances that come from the Spirit of God have a better tendency than to disparage the public worship of God, which He Himself is so tender of. And this should be all the more regarded because it is apparent Satan has a design against God's public worship, and he drives it on in a subtler way than in darker times. He would thrust out one part of God's worship by another, that so at last he may deprive us of all. Take thought, then, and examine your experiences to see if there is a deceit in them, as many times there is. They are of no force against this truth: public worship is to be preferred over private worship.

Exceptions versus the Rule

It may be your enjoyments in private were on some special occasion. Some special cases do not lead to forming a general rule, nor are they sufficient promises to draw a universal conclusion. For instance, it may be that you enjoyed so much of God in private when you were necessarily and unavoidably hindered from waiting on the Lord in public ordinances. In this case, when the people

of God bewail the lack of public liberties as an affliction and seek the Lord in special manner to supply that want in private, He is graciously pleased to make up what they are deprived of in public by granting His comforting presence in private. So it was with David in his banishment, yet this did nothing to abate his esteem of or desire for the public ordinances. He was far from preferring private duties before public, though he enjoyed exceedingly much of God in private. Nor must we from such particular cases draw a universal conclusion either affirmatively, that private is to be preferred, or negatively, that public is not to be preferred.

These enjoyments of God in private may be extraordinary dispensations. The Lord does sometimes use these, though rarely. Such extraordinary cases are exceptions from the general rule, and such exceptions do limit the rule but do not overthrow it. They take off something from the extent of it, yet nothing from the truth of it. It holds good still: more of God is enjoyed in public than in private. And this is sufficient, if there were no other argument to establish the observation as a truth, that public worship is to be preferred over private worship.

The Relation between Public and Private Worship

It may be that your enjoyments in private are the fruits of your attendance on God in public. It may be the assistance, the enlargement, the affections that you find in private duties are the returns of public worship. The benefits of

public ordinances are not all, or always, received while you are therein employed; the returns of them may be continued many days after. The refreshment the Lord affords His people in public worship is like the provision He made for Elijah in the wilderness: "He arose, and ate and drank; and he went in the strength of that food forty days" (1 Kings 19:8). When the Lord feasts His people in public, they may walk with Him in the strength thereof in private duties with more cheerfulness and affection many days after. Those who know what it is to enjoy communion with God in His ordinances know this by experience. When the Lord meets you in public, do you not find that your hearts are far better disposed to, and in, private duties? If the assistance you find in private is the fruits of your waiting on God in public, this should rather raise your esteem of public worship than abate it.

You may enjoy more of God in public and not realize it. As there may be a mistake in thinking you enjoy much of God in private when you do not, so there may be a mistake in thinking you lack the presence of God in public when indeed you have it. It is not the strengthening of body, enlargement of heart, flashes of joy, stirrings of affections that argue most for God's presence; after all, there may be much of these when there is little of God. It is a humble soul, one that is poor in spirit, that trembles at the word, that hungers and thirsts after Christ, that is sensible of spiritual wants and distempers, that is burdened with his corruptions and laments

after the Lord and freer enjoyments of Him. He whose heart is soft and pliable, whose conscience is tender, is the one who thrives and prospers in the inward man. And if these are the effects of your attendance on God in public worship, you then enjoy much of God's presence, even if you conclude the opposite.

These are far more valuable than those affections and enlargements by which some judge of the Lord's presence in His ordinances, for these are the sound fruits of a tree of righteousness, whereas those are but the leaves or flourishes of it, which you may sometimes even find in a barren tree. So far as the Lord upholds in you a poor and hungering spirit, a humble and thirsting heart, so far He is graciously present with you. In Isaiah 66:1–2, the Lord speaks as though He were not so much taken with the glory of the temple or with the glow of heaven as with this kind of humility. As sure as the Lord's throne is in heaven, this soul will have His presence. The streams of spiritual refreshments from His presence will water these valleys. Compare this to the arrogant ones who come to the ordinances with presumption and carnal boldness; they will be as the mountains, left dry and parched. You may enjoy the presence of God in public and not realize it (see Matt. 5:8–6). Therefore, if you are mistaken in your experience of public worship, there is no reason it should hinder you from yielding to this truth: public worship is to be preferred before private worship.

The Discipline and Judgment of the Lord

It may be the Lord seems to withdraw from you and to deny you spiritual assistance in public worship. But this He does by means of a trial: to test your love to Him and the ways that most honor Him; to see whether you will withdraw from Him and His worship when He seems to withhold Himself. It is to try whether you will serve God for nothing when you seem to find nothing answerable to your attendance and efforts. If it is so with you, your resolution should be that of the prophet: "I will wait on the LORD, who hides his face from the house of Jacob" (Isa. 8:17). If this is your case, your esteem of His public worship should hereby be rather raised than lowered, since this is the way to comply with the Lord's design in this dispensation. This is the way to procure more comforting returns and more powerful assistance than ever.

It is possible that what you lack of God's presence in public worship is through your own fault. Through some sinful miscarriage, you make yourselves incapable of enjoying God in public worship. Let this be observed and your ways impartially examined, and you will find cause to accuse yourselves instead of objecting to anything against the preeminence of public worship. There is so much self-love in us that we are apt to blame anything, even the worship of God itself, rather than ourselves—yes, when we only ought to be charged and accused!

Let our hearts and ways be searched, and all who have any temptation to object to it will find it thus and may discern the reason in themselves. Ask yourself these questions:

- ✦ Do you not undervalue the public worship and the enjoyment of God in it? Are you not often indifferent regarding whether you enjoy it or not? Is it a sad affliction to your souls when you leave worship without enjoying God in them? Have you bewailed it accordingly? If not, you have too low thoughts of spiritual enjoyments to have much of them. Do you think God will cast such pearls before swine, such precious things before those who trample on them, who despise them?
- ✦ Do you not entertain some prejudice against some public ordinances or against the public minister? Even this is enough to render them less effectual. Why was the public ministry of Christ less effectual among His own countrymen? Why were they possessed with prejudices against Him? (Matt. 13:55).
- ✦ Have you not neglected public worship? Have you absented yourselves from the ordinances without any necessary occasion? Oh, how common is this sin! And how justly they are chastised when the Lord absents Himself from those who are so willingly absent from His public worship. When you withdraw from the

public ordinances, you withdraw from God. And is not here reason enough for the Lord to withdraw from you?

✦ Do you ever come to worship unprepared, with slight and careless hearts, without due apprehensions either of the Lord or of yourselves? This is to affront His majesty; this lays His honor low (Mal. 1:6). No wonder that you do not find power and life-giving virtue in the ordinances; the reason is in yourself, for you hereby provoke the Lord to withdraw from them, and you in them.

✦ Where are your desires after public ordinances, after the presence of God in them, after the spiritual advantages of them? Can you say with the psalmist,

“One thing I have desired of the LORD,
That will I seek:
That I may dwell in the house of the
LORD” (Ps. 27:4)?

✦ Can you say,

“As the deer pants for the water brooks,
So pants my soul for You, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and appear before God”
(42:1–2)?

✦ Can you say,

“My soul thirsts for You;

My flesh longs for You...
To see...Your glory" (63:1-2)?

- ✦ Can you say,
"My soul longs, yes, even faints
For the courts of the LORD;
My heart and my flesh cry out for the living
God" (84:2)?
- ✦ Oh, if there were such desires, there would be few such complaints, few such objections. Were there such desires, the Lord would quickly clothe His public ordinances with their rightful glory and power. But is it not reasonable that they who desire so little should enjoy so little as well?
- ✦ Do you not give way to deadness, slothfulness, or carelessness in public worship? Do you stir up yourselves to lay hold on God? It is the diligent hand that makes rich. "He who has a slack hand becomes poor" (Prov. 10:4). If public worship doesn't come to you like a ship laden with precious treasures, remember that "He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Heb. 11:6).
- ✦ Do you come in faith? Do your thoughts and hearts work on a promise when you are going to public ordinances? You know who said it: "Unless you believe, you will not see the power of God" (see John 11:40). If Christ could do no mighty works because of their unbelief, what do you think the ordinances can do?

- ✦ Do you ever come for a secret agenda or private reason other than to meet with God? Have you never come for custom, because it is fashionable and a public shame not to come to it? Have you never come simply to avoid church discipline or the displeasure of others? Have you never come to quiet a guilty conscience? If you come to church for anything other than to get God, life, and the Spirit, then is this not the very reason why you should leave without them?
- ✦ Haven't you ever neglected putting the public ordinances into practice? Haven't you neglected to draw out the efficacy of them in private by prayer, meditation, and the exercise of faith? Do you think the act of public worship itself is sufficient, laboring for nothing but what you find in the exercise? Do you think your work is done when the minister is done? Oh, no. If you would enjoy God in the word, then your work is really just beginning. The ordinances are like grapes. It is not enough that they are given into your hands; if you would have the sweetness and nourishment of them, they must be pressed. That is your responsibility in private. The negligence, carelessness, and slothfulness of men in not improving public ordinances in private causes God to withdraw Himself and His blessing in public.

These and such evils provoke the Lord to deny His presence and withhold the comforts and blessed advantages of public worship. You need only read your own hearts for an answer to this issue. It is not because the Lord is found less in public than in private that you find less of Him there. It is because you make yourselves incapable of enjoying Him and unfit to find Him.

The Objective Benefits of Public Worship

Suppose what is alleged were true, that you did find more joys, enlargement, assistance in private worship; that there was no mistake in these experiences; and that this was the norm—which I am far from granting. Yet, allowing all the advantage imaginable in this respect to private duties, even still public worship is to be preferred for a host of other unobjectionable reasons formerly given. I will now give two.

First, public worship is a more public good, is more edifying, the advantage more common and extensive, the benefit more universal, and therefore to be preferred before private, as much as a universal benefit is to be preferred before a particular or a public good before a private one. He is a man unworthy to live in a commonwealth who will prefer his private interests before the public good. It is a nobleness of spirit to be public spirited; the light of nature discovers an excellency in it, religion and gospel principles much more require it, and the Lord Himself does commend and encourage

it with special rewards. Our first question should not be, Where may I receive most good? but, Where may I do most good? The saving of souls should be preferred before our comforts, and the advantage most valued that is most extensive and universal. Such is the advantage of public worship, and therefore it is as far to be preferred before private as the public good before a man's private interest.

Second, let us suppose you truly did find more comfort and benefit in private worship than in public worship; even so, the glory of God is to be preferred before your advantages. You must prefer what most advances God's glory, not what most promotes your particular interests. And God is most glorified in public worship. Here, in corporate praise, is given the amplest testimony to His glorious excellencies and the most public acknowledgment of His glory. There is no way that we can glorify Him without acknowledging His glory, and the more public this acknowledgment is, the more He is glorified. It is most public in public worship, and therefore this is as much to be preferred before private as the glory of God should be preferred before your private advantage.

CHAPTER 4

Reproving Two Errors

There are too many who undervalue public worship and need this rebuke and correction, but especially these two sorts: those who prefer profane things, and those who prefer private worship before public worship.

Those Who Prefer Profane Things

It is one thing to prefer private duties of worship, which are excellent and singularly advantageous in themselves. But how heinously do those sin who prefer things that are base and sinful before public ordinances; those who prefer their ease, their worldly employments, their lusts or unlawful recreations before them?

Do those who will not take the pains or effort to come not prefer their ease more than the worship of God? Who will excuse themselves by very slight and trivial occasions from coming to the place of public worship? The Lord has not made the way to His worship as tedious or toilsome as it was under the law. There is not the distance of many miles between us and it, nor

will it cost us several days' journey to have the opportunities of public worship. We have it at our doors! And yet such slothfulness, such contempt there is of it, that we will sometimes scarcely stir out of doors to enjoy these blessed liberties. A little rain, a little cold—we will take anything as a sufficient excuse to be absent. The people of God in former times counted it their happiness that they might come to the public ordinances, though through rain and cold and wearisome journeys (Psalm 84). But where is this zeal for God's worship now? Is there not much less, when the gospel engages us to much more? May not even the unbelieving Jews rise up in judgment against the slothfulness of this generation and condemn it? No such thing would hinder them from coming to the gates of Zion at the appointed seasons no matter how far away they lived or how unseasonable the weather seemed. Yet many among us make every sorry thing a lion in the way and thus prefer sloth and ease before God's public worship.

Others prefer their worldly occasions before the public worship of God and willingly embrace any earthly business offered in order to stay away from the ordinances. Esau was stigmatized as a profane person for preferring the stew before his birthright, but those who prefer the things of the world before this singular prerogative of worshipping God in public exceed Esau in profaneness. What a special privilege it is! How few are those in the world who enjoy it! Does the Lord grant

this honor so as to have it and Himself in it despised? It is a special, peculiar favor—a singular prerogative. Oh, what profaneness it is to prefer outward things such as are common to all, to the worst of all, before this special blessing! Yet how common is this profaneness! The thinness of our assemblies regularly testifies to it. One part of the day is thought enough by some, too much by others, for God's public worship, whereas we think nothing too much for the world. Oh, the Lord's infinite patience!

Others prefer their lust before it, would rather sit in an alehouse or in the seat of scorners than wait at the posts of wisdom. Many would rather spend the time that the Lord has allotted for their souls in sports and recreations than in the public worship and think one whole day in seven too much, will rob God of all or part of it to recreate. Oh, that such profaneness should be so common where the light of the gospel has so long shined! The Lord prefers the gates of Zion, but these prefer Meshech and the tents of Kedar.

I beseech you, consider the heinousness of this sin. The Lord calls His worship His name frequently in Scripture, as though His worship were as dear to Him as Himself. Do you then despise God Himself while you despise His worship? Jesus said that to despise His apostles was to despise Him (Luke 10:16), and the same would be true of despising His worship. And what do you think it is to despise Christ? How jealous has the

Lord always showed Himself of His worship! Some of the most remarkable judgments we meet with in Scripture have been inflicted for some miscarriage about His worship. For this Nadab and Abihu were consumed with fire from heaven; for this Eli's family was utterly ruined; for this Uzziah was smitten with leprosy, Uzzah with sudden death, and Michal with barrenness for an error in the outward part of worship. The Lord is a jealous God, jealous especially over His worship. If you despise that, you are in danger; His jealousy will burn like fire against you. Don't you despise it when you prefer your ease, worldly affairs, lusts, idleness, recreations before it? This is to profane the holy, the glorious name of God. And "the Lord will not hold him guiltless"; which must also mean the Lord will certainly judge, surely condemn, the one who does so.

Those Who Prefer Private Worship

They also deserve reproof who prefer private worship before public worship, or even view them as equal. I will list only two particular instances wherein this is evident.

First, *when private duties are used in the time and place of public worship*. How ordinary is this among us! When you come too late to wait on God after the public worship is begun, I see it is common to fall to your private prayers, whatever public ordinance is in hand. What is this but to prefer your private praying before the public worship and so to despise the ordinance at

hand? What is it but to thrust public worship out of its season and put private in its place? It is held indeed to be a great point of devotion and reverence; that is the pretense for it. But this pretended reverence casts a real disrespect on the public ordinance then used. For the mind is withdrawn from it in the sight of God and the outward man in the sight of men, and so public worship is hereby disrespected in the sight of both God and men.

The intention may be good indeed, but that cannot justify what is sinful and evil since we must not do evil that good may come of it. And this is evil since it is sinful to prefer a private duty before a public ordinance.

It is against the apostle's rule, which he prescribes for the regulating of public assemblies: "Let all things be done decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40). That is not done in order which is not done in its place and season. But this is neither the place nor season for private prayers. It is the time for public worship! Therefore, it is the private worship that is now unseasonable. Nor is this the place of private prayer; the place for that is your closet, according to Christ's direction (Matt. 6:6), and He makes it the badge of hypocrites to use their private prayers in public places (v. 5). A good thing out of its place and season may become evil. This is not the place, the time for your private prayers. Therefore, it is a disorder to use them here; and what is here disorderly is, by the apostle's rule, sinful, and therefore I beseech you, let it be avoided. Do not expect the Lord to accept

your private devotion when it casts disrespect on His public worship.

Second, *when men absent themselves from public worship under pretense that they can serve the Lord at home as well as in private*. How many are apt to say that their time may be as well spent at home in praying, reading some good book, or discoursing on some profitable subject as in the use of ordinances in public assemblies. To them, private prayer is as good as public, or private reading and opening the Scripture as profitable as public preaching. They say of their private duties, like Naaman of the waters of Damascus, "May I not serve the Lord as acceptably, with as much advantage, in private exercises of religion? May I not wash in these and be clean?" (see 2 Kings 5:12). They do not see the great blessings God has annexed to public worship more than to private worship.

But if it is really true that one is as good as the other, then why should the Lord prefer one before the other? To what purpose did the Lord choose the gates of Zion to place His name there if He might have been worshiped just as well in the dwellings of Jacob? How do men of this thinking run counter to the Lord? He prefers the gates of Zion not only before one or some, but before *all* the dwellings of Jacob; and they prefer one such dwelling before the gates of Zion. What is this but to disparage the wisdom of God? What presumption is this, to make yourselves wiser than God and to

undertake to correct Him? He says the gates of Zion are to be loved and public worship to be preferred before private; you say no, you see no reason that one should be loved as well as the other. Who are you, man, who thus disputes against God?

Application

To conclude, let me show you the sinfulness of preferring private worship above public worship in the previously mentioned respects, as well as others, by applying what has been delivered. To prefer private before public or by not preferring public before private in your judgment, affection, or practice, you neglect the glory of God, which is most advanced in public. You slight the presence of God, which is there most revealed, that presence which is the greatest happiness the people of God can expect in heaven or on earth. You undervalue the manifestation of God, those blessed visions of life and peace, which are most evidently, most comfortably represented there; those manifestations that are the dawning of approaching glory, the first glimpses of the beatific vision.

You despise those blessings of the soul that are here more plentifully gained. You prefer a private supposed benefit before public edification. You expose yourselves to the danger of backsliding, which is in public more effectually prevented. You scorn the Lord's greatest works on the souls of sinners, which are there ordinarily

effected. You slight heaven, which is there in a more lively manner resembled. You disparage the judgment of the most renowned servants of God who in all ages have confirmed this truth by their testimony or practice. You make yourselves less capable of procuring public mercies or diverting public calamities, slighting the means most conducive to this end. You undervalue the blood of Christ, whose influence is there most powerful. You despise those great and precious promises of the gospel, which are more engaged for public worship than private worship.

O, consider how heinous the sin is that involves the soul in so much guilt, that is attended with so many provoking evils! Lament this sin as much as you are guilty of it, and let the sinfulness of it engage you to be all the more watchful against it.

CHAPTER 5

Spiritual Helps to Prioritizing Public Worship

Give to the public worship of God the glory that it deserves. Let it have the preeminence that the Lord has given it. Prefer it before private in your thoughts, affections, and practice. Get higher thoughts of public ordinances; get affections corresponding to those thoughts. This would be manifest by both a frequent and affectionate use of these ordinances, by your praises for the enjoyment of them, and by your prayers for the continuance of them.

This is a duty required by both the text, Psalm 87:2, and the times we live in. When there is so much disrespect cast on the worship of God, your endeavors should be all the more for its advancement. This is the way to prove yourselves faithful to God, steadfast and upright, in the midst of a declining generation. This duty always finds acceptance with God, but now He will receive it better because there is a stream of temptation and opposition against it. O, do not allow your souls to enter into the secret of those who dishonor God by despising His

public worship, who blaspheme God by speaking contemptibly of His name, which He records among us and thereby graciously distinguishes us from the neglected world. I might enforce this with many motives, but what more forcible than this in the text? "The LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob."

Those who love in the same manner are herein like the Lord. This is the highest pitch of excellence that angels or men can aspire to: to be conformable to the Lord, to be like Him, to have any resemblance of Him. This is the way: when we love public worship, the same mind is in us that is in the Lord (as far as likeness may be admitted where there is an infinite distance). In this way you will be followers of God as dear children, whereas those who despise the public worship of God despise God Himself and actually comply with Satan in one of his most mischievous designs against God and His people. It is not out of any respect of private worship that Satan endeavors to advance it above public worship. Rather, his design is to withdraw professors from both, for he knows they stand or fall together. You will find those who withdraw from public worship will not long make conscience of private worship (unless the Lord breaks Satan's design).

If you will not be carried away with the error of the wicked and fall into the snare of the devil, keep up the honor of public worship. To that end, observe the following directions.

Helps for Honoring Public Worship

Get high thoughts of God. The Lord and His worship are so nearly related that they are either esteemed or despised together. He who has high thoughts of God will be able to properly apprehend God's worship, wherein His glory most appears (Ps. 102:16). We see it in David. No one had a higher sense of God. See with what raised expressions he extols Him, for example, in Psalm 146. And no one had a higher esteem of public worship, as appears in those affectionate expressions already mentioned. If you have high thoughts of God, that will be of high esteem with you wherein He most appears, wherein He is most enjoyed. "In His temple everyone says, 'Glory!'" (29:9), for in public worship He appears most glorious. If you have low thoughts of God, no wonder that you undervalue His worship! If you have a high esteem of God, you will have a comparable esteem of His name and of His worship. So in Psalm 48, they profess their high thoughts of Zion and the public ordinances (vv. 2–3), and you may see the reason in verse 9: "We have thought, O God, on Your lovingkindness, in the midst of Your temple." If you apprehend God as great and holy and fearful and glorious, it will help you to such thoughts of His worship as becomes His great and holy and fearful name. His worship is His name.

Get a proper sense of those things on which the preeminence of public worship is grounded. It follows, regarding the church and ordinances, in Psalm 87:3: "Glorious

things are spoken of you, O city of God!" It was the city of God in these respects, and in no other respect could so glorious things be spoken of it. Here is the sweetest enjoyment of God, the clearest discoveries of His glory, the powerful workings of the Spirit, the precious blood of Christ in its force and efficacy, the exceeding great and precious promises in their sweetest influences, spiritual life and strength, soul comforts and refreshments, the conversion of sinners, the edification of the body of Christ, the salvation of souls. These are the glorious things that are spoken of public worship; get a high esteem of these, and public worship will be highly valued. Look on public ordinances in their glory—as they give the greatest glory to the God of heaven, as they are the greatest glory of His people on earth—and this will raise a spiritual mind to high apprehensions of them. Will you not honor that which is most honorable to God, that which is your greatest honor? Here, the Lord, if anywhere in the world, receives the glory due to His name (Ps. 29:1–2). To worship God in public is the way to give Him the glory due to His name. And is not this of highest value? It is your glory, too. Public ordinances are the glory of the people who enjoy them. Where the Lord has placed His name, there His honor dwells. When the Lord has erected His public worship in a place, then glory dwells in that land; when this is removed, the glory is departed. That which is most your

glory demands your highest esteem. Look on this as your glory, and then you will account it highly valuable.

Delight in the worship of God. We soon disrespect that which we take no pleasure in; and therefore, when the Lord is commanding the sanctifying of His Sabbath, he says this:

If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath,
From doing your pleasure on My holy day,
And call the Sabbath a delight,
The holy day of the Lord, honorable. (Isa. 58:13)

If it is not your delight, it will not be honorable. If you are of the temper of those who say,

When will the New Moon be past,
That we may sell grain?
And the Sabbath,
That we may trade wheat? (Amos 8:5)

If public ordinances, like praying and preaching, are a burden to you, then not only private duties but the base things of the world will take the place of it in your minds and hearts. When we are weary of a thing and take no pleasure in it, we easily give way to any suggestion that may disparage it. Let the worship of God be your delight, the joy and solace of your souls. Be glad of all opportunities to worship God in public, in season and out of season, like David: "I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go into the house of the LORD" (Ps. 122:1). Let it be your food and drink to be thus employed. Go,

like to a feast; sit down under the shadow with great delight while the fruits of worship, the shadow of heavenly enjoyments, are sweet.

Get spiritual hearts. All the glory of public worship is spiritual, and spiritual things "are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14). A carnal man cannot discern why the public ordinances are so highly valuable. Custom and other respects may persuade him to use them, but he will never perceive the glory, the spiritual value of God's worship, till he has a spiritual eye. Christ Himself was foolishness to the Greeks because they saw no further than His outside (1 Cor. 1:23). So was the preaching of Christ to carnal Jews and Gentiles; so it is, more or less, to all natural men unless some outward respect, some plausible ornament commends it. A spiritual eye can discern a glory in public worship even when it appears simple and contemptible. As the unbelieving Jews viewed Christ, so carnal men view His ordinances: there is no form or attractiveness therein to command any extraordinary respect. They see no beauty therein that they should desire them.

Look on the public ordinances with the eye of faith. If you consult only with sense, you will be apt to say like the Assyrian, "What are the waters of Jordan more than the rivers of Damascus?" (see 2 Kings 5:12). What is there in publicly reading the word more than reading at home? What is there in public preaching more than in another good discourse? Sense will discern no more in

one than in the other. But the eye of faith looks through the prospect of a promise and so makes greater, more glorious discoveries; passes through the mean outside to the discovery of a special, inward glory; sees a special blessing, a special assistance, a special presence, a special advantage in public worship no way so discoverable as by the eye of faith through a promise. Unbelievers lack this perspective and therefore see no further than the outside.

Faith can see the wisdom of God in preaching, which the blind world counts foolishness, as they did the apostle's preaching. Faith can see a glory in those ordinances that, in the eyes of carnal men, are simple and contemptible. When the child Jesus lay in the manger, in a poor, despicable condition, the wise men saw, through those poor swaddling clothes, such a glory as commanded their wonder and adoration when many others in the same inn saw no such thing. And why? The wise men looked on the child Jesus through that word from heaven whereby He was made known to them. The outside of public worship, now under the gospel, is like those poor swaddling clothes. But Christ is wrapped in them, and there is a spiritual glory within that a believer discerns and accordingly values when an unbeliever sees no such thing. That worship which to sense and unbelief is simple and contemptible is to faith looking through a promise, the most glorious administration under heaven. The eye of faith must be opened, or the ordinances will not be valued.

The Lord has given more encouragements to faith under the gospel and therefore may expect more exercise of it than under the law. And His dispensations are answerable. His children under the law were in their minority (Gal. 4:1). The outside of His worship was then glorious, the administration of it in state and pomp; He allowed the children what would please their senses. But now, under the gospel, since they have come to riper age, He allows no such bright externals nor prescribes no such pomp as sense is taken with; the glory is spiritual and such as is only visible to faith. And yet the glory of the second temple is greater than the first; the public worship under the gospel is more glorious than under the law. Though there is no golden censer in the ark overlaid with gold; no cherubim of glory shadowing the mercy seat; no such ornament to take the senses, yet there is a far more exceeding glory (2 Cor. 3:7–11), but it is such a glory as is only discerned by the eye of faith. This you must exercise if you would give to the public worship of God the glory that is due to it.

Labor to draw out the virtue and efficacy of public ordinances to make the most of them. When you find the refreshing comforts, the blessed advantages of public worship, you will not need many motives to give them their due honor:

As we have heard,
So have we seen
In the city of the LORD of hosts,

In the city of our God:
God will establish it forever. (Ps. 48:8)

When they had not only heard but seen what God was to His people in His public worship, no wonder that they express their high esteem of it:

Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised
In the city of our God,
In His holy mountain.
Beautiful in elevation,
The joy of the whole earth,
Is Mount Zion. (vv. 1–2)

Helps for Benefiting from Public Worship

We have so far considered how we ought to think about the public worship of God in an honorable manner. Allow me to offer some helps now as you approach the means of grace, for I want you to reap such advantage by them that your esteem of them will be raised as well. To that end, consider the following points.

Don't come unprepared. No wonder that unfruitfulness under the ordinances is so common when neglect of preparation is so ordinary. Ecclesiastes 5:2 instructs, "Do not be rash with your mouth, and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God." Do not come rashly, without sufficiently considering with Whom you have to do and what you are doing. Do not come with guilt and pollution on your consciences (Ezek. 23:21, 29). We must separate ourselves from such things if we

would have God receive us (2 Cor. 6:17). Do not come with minds and affections entangled in the world, but rather, "take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground" (Ex. 3:5). Do not come with careless, indisposed spirits, with hearts unfixed (Ps. 57:7). Do not come with that carnal, dull temper which your hearts contract by meddling with the world. Plow up the fallow ground. If you sow among thorns, you will reap little to raise your esteem. "I will wash my hands in innocence; so will I go about Your altar, O LORD" (26:6).

The psalmist alludes to the custom of the priests, who were enjoined under the law to wash their hands and feet when they went about the service of the tabernacle. As this was exemplary to the people then, so it is to us now to teach us with what preparedness we should approach God.

Get acquainted with your spiritual condition. Come having awareness of the state of your souls, whether it be the state of grace or nature, what your spiritual wants are, what your inward distempers are, what your temptations are; otherwise, you may hear much to little purpose, not discerning what is seasonable; otherwise, many a petition may pass unobserved when you know not what most concerns you. Oh, if professors knew their soul's condition well and were thoroughly affected with it, the word would come in season. It would be like apples of gold. The ordinances would be as rain on the

newly mown grass; they would distill a fruitful influence. And professors' souls would grow as the lily.

Come with hearts hungering after the enjoyment of Christ in His ordinances. This affection has the promise: "He...fills the hungry soul with goodness" (Ps. 107:9; cf. Matt. 5:6). Sense of emptiness and poverty brings you under the aspect of this promise, under the sweet and gracious influences of it; whereas conceitedness of our own abundance, senselessness of our spiritual destitution shuts up the treasury of heaven against us. "The rich He sends empty away" (Luke 1:53). Or consider Psalm 81:10,

I am the LORD your God,
Who brought you out of the land of Egypt;
Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it.

Our souls should stretch themselves wide open in earnest longings after God; this is the way to be filled with the rich blessings of spiritual ordinances.

Use the ordinances with holy fear and reverence (e.g., Ps. 2:11). The confidence that the Lord approves in His children is not a carnal boldness. When we are admitted to most intimacy and familiarity with Christ, when we are invited to kiss the Son, yet there is still a holy fear required: "Serve the LORD with fear" (2:11). When we have cause to rejoice in the Lord's gracious condescension to us poor worms, still we must tremble in apprehension of that overpowering glory and excellency which we approach (Heb. 12:28–29). The house that

the Lord prefers before the temple is a trembling heart (cf. Isaiah 66). And if He chooses it for His habitation, He will richly furnish it; His presence will be to it light and life, joy and strength, grace and glory.

What you do in public worship, do with all your might. Shake off that slothful, indifferent, lukewarm attitude which is so odious to God. Let your whole man produce this worship. Do not think it is enough to present your bodies before the Lord. Bodily worship profits spiritually as little as bodily exercise. Worship that is done with only the body is only the carcass of worship; it is soul worship that is the soul of worship. Those who draw near with only their lips will find God far from them. Not only lips, mouth, and tongue but mind, heart, and affections; not only knee, hand, and eye but heart, conscience, and memory. All must be pressed to attend on God in public worship. David does not only say, "My flesh longs for You" but "My soul thirsts for You" (Ps. 63:1). Then will the Lord draw near, when our whole man waits on Him; then will the Lord be found, when we seek Him with our whole heart.

Let your whole man wait on God; serve Him so with all your might. Let His worship be your work, and be as diligent in it for your souls as you are in other employments for your bodies. Spiritual slothfulness is the ruin of souls; it brings them to consumptions and leaves them languishing under sad distempers. Those who will not stir up themselves to lay hold on God

will be bowed down under many infirmities. Soul poverty will be the consequence of spiritual sloth (“a great destroyer,” Prov. 18:9). Far from increasing his store of grace, he will greatly waste what little grace he has. The maxim of Proverbs 20:4 holds in a spiritual sense: “The sluggard does not plow in the autumn; he will seek at harvest and have nothing.” His soul will be in a beggarly condition, as though it had nothing, even in harvest, in the midst of plenty, when others are reaping the sweet fruits of public ordinances and laying up store against winter. In the midst of their plenty, the spiritual sluggard will have nothing (Prov. 20:4). It is the diligent man who will be enriched with precious substance, even the precious advantages of public worship. The Lord is the rewarder of those who seek Him diligently. Those who are diligent in preparing for it, diligent in attending on it, diligent in improvement of the ordinances—their souls will be rich, rich toward God. The Lord will bless them with such spiritual riches in the use of public ordinances as will raise their esteem of them.

PART 2

Profiting from Public Worship

*O LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel,
our fathers, keep this forever in the intent of
the thoughts of the heart of Your people, and
fix their heart toward You.*

—1 Chronicles 29:18

CHAPTER 6

Practices to Inhabit

In 1 Chronicles 28 we have David's oration or, if you will, his sermon, the design of which was to excite the people to a contribution for erecting a temple and promoting the public worship of God. It begins in verse 2 of that chapter and is continued to the sixth verse of the next.

This sermon was effectual on the audience. David had the happiness (which the best orators and most powerful preachers often lack) of not only speaking what was in itself persuasive but in actually persuading his hearers to comply with his design. The effect thereof is expressed in 1 Chronicles 29:6–8: they offered, and (which was the marrow and fatness of their offering) they offered willingly. Though will-worship¹ is the worst service of all others, those who serve God

1. Will-worship is worship that originates in the heart of man and is self-invented, as opposed to true worship, which comes from and is directed back to the Divine.

willingly are the best worshipers. Therefore, in this sermon David commends such service to his son: "As for you, my son Solomon, know the God of your father, and serve Him with a loyal heart and with a willing mind" (28:9). None serve God with a perfect heart, but those who serve Him with a willing mind, to such a temper were the people wrought by this powerful exhortation in 29:9: "with a loyal heart they had offered willingly to the LORD." Hereupon, David, much affected with his success in this affair ("King David also rejoiced greatly" [v. 9]), his soul being now on the wing, he flies to God by prayer and concludes his sermon.

The prayer consists of petition and thanksgiving, neither of them conformed to any common model but suiting the particular occasion now before him. He blesses God for making such an impression on the hearts of the people as moved them to offer so cheerfully, so generously in 1 Chronicles 29:10–18, and beseeches God still to keep their hearts in such a temper to make this holy impression durable and abiding: "LORD God of Abraham...keep this forever in the intent of the thoughts of the heart of Your people" (v. 18). In this verse, we have the enforcement of the petition and the matter of it. It is enforced from the covenant of God, by virtue of which He was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel and had laid an obligation on Himself to have a gracious respect to their posterity; hence, this expression to pray for covenant mercies and to pray in faith

is frequently used, being no small encouragement to the faithful.

The matter of the petition—what he prays for—is that the effect of his words would be durable and lasting on the people, that the efficacy might abide on their souls; that it might sink into the depths of their hearts and stick fast there; that it might pierce through their fancies and imaginations into their mind and thoughts, and through their thoughts into their hearts and affections; that the Lord would keep it there, and continue it long there, even forever.

David understood what a slippery and inconstant thing the heart of man is, how like a deceitful bow, to which he elsewhere compares it (Ps. 78:57); how apt to slacken suddenly when it has been bent to any good inclinations or resolutions by the power of the word or any other ordinance. What an unhealthy womb it is; how ordinarily holy impulses miscarry before the heart has gone out its full time with them. What danger there was lest their righteousness—which now made such a flourishing appearance—might prove like the morning cloud or the early dew and be gone after a moment. And therefore, having raised their hearts to so good a posture, he takes the best course to fix them there. His words having had a powerful influence on their souls, he uses the best means to render it durable and abiding.

From what David says here, we can assert this

doctrinal truth: *the people of God should endeavor to keep the influence of the ordinances abiding on their souls.*

The question, then, is before us: *What must be done that the influences of the ordinances may abide on us?* By the *ordinances*, we understand those principally that are public: the word, sacraments, and prayer. The text and this exercise lead us to have a more special respect to the word, which we will observe a little so as not to exclude the rest. By the *influence of the ordinances* is meant the effect they have on us while we are employed in them; their gracious or comforting efficacy, that which tends to make our hearts and lives more holy or more comfortable; that whereby our souls are quickened, strengthened, restored, or refreshed. By its *abiding on us*, understand the continuance of this effect after the duty is done, so that the ordinances of God are not like those human ordinances (which the apostle speaks of) that perish in the using (Col. 2:20, 22). Another way to put the question is like this: What course must we take so that the gracious and comforting efficacy of public ordinances may not only reach us while we are employed in them but may continue on us afterward so that we may walk under their sense and power always? To resolve this without further preamble, the course you must take for this purpose lies in the practice of some things and the avoiding of others. The things to be practiced are as follows.

Get New Hearts

Get new hearts, and get them daily more and more renewed. An old heart is a heart of stone (Ezek. 11:19), and the hardness of it is not removed except by degrees. What will sink deep into a tender heart, a heart of flesh (36:26), will glide off from an old heart like water from a stone without leaving any impression; and where none is left, none can continue. The good seed that fell on stony ground sprang up indeed, but it did not live long; it withered away as soon as it sprang up (Luke 8:6). But those who with an honest and good heart heard the word, kept it and brought forth fruit with patience and perseverance (v. 15); the fruitful influences of the word dwelled on them. A good and honest heart not only hears the word but keeps it; not only brings forth fruit but persists in doing so.

The more tender, humble, and spiritual the heart is, the more spiritual fruit and advantage it reaps from the ordinances and the longer it continues in possession of those advantages. The less the soul is renewed, the more resistance it offers to the ordinances; and the more they are resisted, the weaker is their efficacy; and the less their efficacy is, the less while it continues. A heart thoroughly sanctified is to the ordinances like tinder, which soon takes fire and is apt to keep it; whereas a carnal, unmortified heart is like green wood, whose moistness giving check to the activity of the fire is not soon kindled and will soon go out if it is not well looked

to. Naturalists observe that transmutation is easy in symbolic elements that agree in some prime qualities: water is more easily turned into air than into fire. A holy and spiritual heart will be easily wrought on by holy and spiritual ordinances, for here is an agreement in qualities; and the more agreement, the less opposition; and the less the opposition is, the more easily will it be mastered. The power of the ordinances will more easily both take place and keep possession. Holiness makes the soul both receptive and retentive of holy impressions. Make it but your great business to grow every day more holy, and it will not be so hard a matter to have the ordinances work effectually on you or to have their efficacy continue with you.

Come with Hungry Hearts

Labor to be much affected by the ordinances while you are employed in them. Slight impressions will soon be worn out, and weak influences will quickly spend themselves and vanish. If the ordinances have only a little effect on you while you are under them, it is not likely to last long; for that which is little is near to nothing, and that which is so near to it may soon come to nothing.

It is not enough that your hearts are a little warmed, but they must burn within you while Christ is speaking to you or you are speaking to Him if you would have that heavenly heat to be lasting (Luke 24:32). The good seed in the parable miscarried on one sort of ground

because it had no deepness of earth, quickly withered because it took no deep root (Luke 8:5–6). If the ordinances pierce no further than the surface of the soul, if the work of them is only superficial, if they do not penetrate into the depths of the heart, the efficacy of them is not likely to continue.

Therefore, prepare your hearts before you draw near to God; get them so disposed that they may be capable of lasting influences. First Chronicles 29:18 directs us to this: “O LORD...keep this forever in the intent of the thoughts of the heart of Your people, and fix their heart toward You.” The heart is prepared for the Lord when it is made *tender* and *sensible* and *open*.

Bring *tender* hearts to the ordinances, get them broken up beforehand; “break up your fallow ground, and do not sow among thorns” (Jer. 4:3; see also Hos. 10:12). A tender heart drinks in divine influence. What can make no impression at all on a flint will sink deep into softened wax.

Come with *sensible* hearts, understanding your spiritual lack and need, burdened with your lusts and corruptions, pained with your inward distempers and foul grievances. I cannot commend to you anything more effectual to make you capable of great and lasting advantages. Such a quick sense of your spiritual condition will *open* your hearts and make them ready to receive so much from the ordinances as will not be soon spent. “Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it”

(Ps. 81:10). It is desire that opens the heart, and the stronger the desire is, the wider it is opened; then is the soul wide open when it pants and breathes after God, when it hungers and thirsts after holiness, as appears by equivalent promises (Ps. 107:9). “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled” (Matt. 5:6).

What we get by holy duties is soon spent because it is so little—but we get so little because we desire no more! We come to the ordinances, too, like the Egyptian dog, which laps a little as he runs by the side of the Nile but does not stay to drink.² We take only a taste of them as in transit, too little and too cursorily, whereas Christ invites us to eat and drink abundantly (Song 5:1). Such cursory tastes may cheat you a little, but they will not furnish you with strength for continual service; you must feed, and feed hungrily, and come with a strong appetite that you may be able to contain much. A little will not serve you long.

Meditate and Reflect

Think on the ordinances after your use of them; be much in meditation if you want their effectiveness to continue long. Often consider what you have heard, what you have prayed for, and what you have received

2. Egyptian dogs were known for racing up and taking a timid drink at the river but then quickly returning to shore out of fear that Nile crocodiles might eat them if they stayed to drink too long.

and are obliged to by the sacraments. Much of heaven and holiness is engraved on these ordinances, and the seal is, as it were, set on the heart while you are under them. But considering them afterward lays more weight on the seal and impresses it deeper, and so makes the imprint both more plain and more durable; for the deeper it is, the longer will it be before it is defaced.

Most men lose their souls—and the best men lose great advantages for their souls—because of lack of consideration. There is a quickening, a healing, a comforting, a strengthening virtue in the ordinances, and this virtue may fall on your souls while you are employed in them, but you cannot expect it will stay with you unless you fix it there; and there is no better way to fix it than consideration. This will rouse it up when it lies dormant and inactive. This will put life into it when it grows weak and languid. This will both diffuse and fasten it; yes, it will heighten and improve it. David says, “My heart was hot within me; while I was musing, the fire burned” (Ps. 39:3). The heart takes fire at the mind, and it is musing or consideration that kindles it and keeps it in and blows it up. Those sparks that fall from heaven on your hearts while you are hearing or praying will die; they will go out and come to nothing unless you fan them into flame by meditation.

“He sent His word and healed them” (Ps. 107:20). The word has a salve for every soul sickness, but so that it may be effectual, the bandage must be laid on and kept

on until the cure is wrought. The preacher may apply it and lay it on the infected part, but it will not be kept on without meditation. "How sweet are Your words to my taste," says David (Ps. 119:103). How did they come to be still so sweet? Why, they were his meditation day and night! The delicious relish of them continued because he kept them still on his palate by ruminating and musing on them.

The word of God in Scripture is like honey in the comb, that which is incomparably sweeter; by meditation you squeeze out this sweetness, and it will still be dropping comfort and sweet refreshment on your souls while you are pressing it by consideration. "I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you" (1 John 2:14). If you desire to be strong and stay strong, the word of God must abide in you. How can it abide in you if it does not have permission to stay in what is but the portal of the soul, if it does not abide in your minds? You lose all for lack of consideration; both the gracious and the comforting influences of the ordinances slide from you through this neglect. And no wonder it is so great a damage to you since it is so great a sin. You cast the word behind your backs and throw the ordinances at your heels when you do not mind them after you have done with them. And will the Lord encourage any with a durable blessing under such guilt? Will not this provoke Him rather to curse your blessings and blast them in the bud?

Meditation is a known duty and commonly insisted on; and therefore, you may be tempted to slight it, whereas indeed, on this account, you should the more regard it. For since it is a known duty, the neglect of it is a known sin. To say nothing of how inconsistent it is either with grace or comfort to live in a known sin, how can you expect that the effectiveness of ordinances will continue while you neglect the means that the Lord has appointed and commended to you as most effectual for the continuance thereof? The blessing of the ordinances will not abide on him who continues in sin, especially when his sin is the neglect of the medium that should fix the blessing on him.

Pursue Change

Let the effectiveness of the ordinances now be pursued into action; if they convince you of any neglected duty, immediately begin practicing it. If they make you more resolute against any carnal or worldly lust, get yourselves immediately to the mortifying of it. If they kindle any holy affection to Christ or His people, give some real expression of it without delay. If they revive any languishing grace, let it be exercised. This was David's practice: "I made haste, and did not delay to keep Your commandments" (Ps. 119:60).

You will find this one of the best actions for fixing and securing those good impulses that are raised in your minds and hearts by the ordinances. When the blossoms

of a fruit tree are once knit, though the flourish thereof is gone and you see nothing but the bare rudiment of the expected fruit, yet you think it more secured from the injury of frosts and winds than if it were still in the flower. Good inclinations, when they are once reduced into action, are thereby, as it were, knit and brought to more consistency. They are then well past one of their critical periods, where most miscarry and so are more likely to live and continue with you.

Besides, the act strengthens that good motion and disposition which led to it and so makes you more ready for another act, and that disposes to more acts, and those to better, and repeated acts create a habit. The hearts of the people being raised by Hezekiah's zealous speech in 2 Chronicles 29 were kept up in that posture till the work designed by him was finished—until religion was restored and reformed. And how did this come to pass? Why, the thing was done suddenly ("the events took place so suddenly" [v. 36]); he pursued the people's good inclinations and brought them into act suddenly. He struck while the iron was hot.

When your hearts are heated by the ordinances, set immediately on your work; the very first impulse affords a great advantage if you capitalize on it. Possibly in the vigor of it you may overcome those great difficulties and oppositions that have been too hard for you formerly and may otherwise give you impediment hereafter. And this being mastered, your progress will be easier; you may

go on toward heaven under the power of the ordinances with fewer interruptions of these divine influences. James 1:22–24 says, “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer [i.e., if he doesn’t do it now, as appears by what follows], he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was.” The mirror reveals what spots and stains are on his face so that he can wash them off or what is disordered about him so that he can correct and compose it. But if he does not do this immediately, if he puts it off till some occurrence diverts him from the thoughts and remembrance of it, his looking in the mirror will prove but a loss of time, a vain curiosity. Your use of the ordinances is likely to prove no better if you do not practice what they lead you to without delay. It is likely to be no different from such a viewing of yourselves in a mirror: a mere fruitless speculation.

Strive to Bind the Ordinances to Your Heart

You must take much pain with your hearts if you would have them retain the virtue and effectiveness of worship. The effect of it should be as a nail fastened in a sure place, but the heart is so hard and knotty that you cannot drive it in without many blows. It will require all your strength to force it in far enough and all your care and watchfulness to keep it in when it is there. They

grossly mistake Christianity who take it to be consistent with our carnal ease and slothfulness; who place it in notions or opinions; in fair shows and a specious profession; in forms, gestures, or external observances; in conforming to this or that mode of worship or discipline. It would be good for the world if one could be a Christian so easily, but those who please themselves with such fanciful ideas err, not knowing the Scriptures. In the New Testament, the action of a Christian is expressed by “striving,” “wrestling,” “running,” and “combating”—exercises wherein he that would not be bested must strain all his spirits, stretch all his sinews, put forth all his strength. The one who is a Christian, indeed, must “wrestle” (Eph. 6:12), “press on” and “press toward” (Phil. 3:12, 14; see also Heb. 12:14), and “strive” (Luke 13:24). His daily course must be combating to achieve victory, running as for a crown, striving as for life.

The power and life of holiness can neither be attained nor upheld without an effectual use of the ordinances; the ordinances will never be effectual to purpose unless their virtue abides on the heart. Holiness meets with such reluctance and opposition from the heart (so far as it is unrenewed) that it can never be fastened there without striving and struggling and earnest contending; it must be done despite our own ease, carnal pleasures, natural inclination, and all the resistance of the body of death. If you think this too much, you think it too much to be Christian indeed, however you pretend to

the name. Those who are acquainted with their own hearts find it very hard to get them raised to a spiritual and heavenly temper, very difficult to get them pulled up (though they have the advantage of the most powerful ordinances) to any good posture; and even when with much exertion they are finally up, it is exceedingly difficult to keep them there. Alas, we seem to be forcing a weighty stone up a steep hill; when with much toil we get it near the top, we take our hands off a little, leave it to itself, and down it runs further in a moment than we can get it up again in some hours.

Our way to heaven lies up the hill. That which is spiritual and heavenly is above us; the natural bent and tendency of our hearts is downward. As there is no getting them up without toil and pains, so when we have raised them a little but leave them to themselves and grow only a little remiss and negligent, down they run suddenly, and we will quickly find them at the bottom of the hill in a carnal, lukewarm, earthly temper. When our hearts are effectually touched and raised and moved in the use of ordinances, there is no keeping them in a quick and lively motion without striving and struggling and, as it were, forcing them on with might and main. The influence of the ordinances falling on a lazy soul is quite lost and merely thrown away on it: "The lazy man does not roast what he took in hunting" (Prov. 12:27). So he loses all his former labor because he will not take a little more pain; a lazy soul loses all the advantages

he gets by following the ordinances for lack of care and industry to retain and improve what he has.

Submit to the Spirit

Comply with the Spirit of God. Both the rise and continuance of these influences are from Him. When you do not comply with Him, you grieve the Spirit and provoke Him to withdraw; and when He withdraws, these influences will be discontinued. If you detain the truth in unrighteousness, if you confine it to your minds so that the power thereof does not descend on your hearts and affections and does not come forth in your lives and actions, you imprison the truth, and that is a great affront to the Spirit of truth.

If when the Spirit of God calls you to take up the cross, to leave all to follow Christ contentedly and cheerfully in a low, reproached, afflicted condition; or when He calls you to a higher degree of self-denial, mortification, and holiness, you hang back or turn aside and refuse to follow His conduct, this grieves the Spirit of holiness.

If you decline His methods for others, if you shrink back from the work you are engaged in when it grows hazardous, or strain your consciences to secure your outward enjoyments, or will not be influenced by Him (further than is consistent with your ease, credit, safety, and worldly interest), you dishonor the Spirit of wisdom.

This provokes the blessed Spirit to withdraw, and when the fire is gone, the heat will not continue for long.

If you refuse to continue under the influences of the Spirit in some things, it is righteous with Him not to continue them on you in others. If you fear the displeasure of man more than grieving Him, if you lean more to the hopes of this life than His supports and consult with flesh and blood instead of being directed by the wisdom that is from above, it will be no wonder if He gives you over to your own conduct and, intermitting His own, leaves you under the influences of your carnal fears and worldly hopes.

Attend the Public Means Frequently

Be frequent in the use of the means of grace. Good impressions usually wear off in the intervals of holy duties, and the longer these intervals are, the more danger there is. Therefore, make these interims as short as may be by quick returns to the ordinances. It is observed that places under the equator are not as hot as some climates at a further distance from it, and this reason is given for it: for those living under the equator, the sun is more vertical and the beams fall perpendicularly, causing a more intense heat; yet because the nights are equal in length with the days, the coolness of those long nights allays the heat more than in places where the nights are shorter. Long intermissions of holy duties are like long nights; you may find them by experience to be great coolers. You may live under more powerful ordinances than some others, yet if they are more frequent and

diligent in the use of what they have, they are likely to have more spiritual warmth than you, and that with less allay and intermission.

Besides, when the advantage you have gained by one ordinance is declining and wearing off, the use of the same or of some other may revive and recover it if you take it speedily before it is too far gone. Further, a slight impression that is not likely to last long may be reinforced for a longer continuance if you lay yourselves quickly under the instrument that first made it. When Elijah had once tasted of the provision the Lord made for him in the wilderness, he lay down (so says the text), as having had enough; but the angel calls him to it again, for, he tells Elijah, “the journey is too great for you” (1 Kings 19:6–7). Hereupon he arose once more and did eat and drink and “went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights” (v. 8). When tasting will not meet your needs, a little will not be enough; so long a journey as yours will spend much. Nothing but a frequent, often repeated use of the ordinances will furnish you with such strength as will last you many days.

Pray

Finally, look up to God for the continuance of this influence; pray, and pray in faith. Seek Him and depend on Him for it; He will be found of those who seek Him (Matt. 7:7). You have His promise for it, and dependence on Him obligates Him too: “The expectation of the poor

shall not perish forever" (Ps. 9:18). It is not honorable for Him to fail those whom He has encouraged to rely on Him; an ingenuous man will not do it, much less the faithful God. David takes this course in the text; he prays and encourages his faith while he is praying by that interest the faithful have in the Lord by virtue of the covenant: "O LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, our fathers, keep this forever" (1 Chron. 29:18).

The Lord Himself leads us to this in Deuteronomy 5. The people were much affected, in that they had heard the Lord's voice (v. 24). This brought them to a noble resolution in verse 27: "Tell us all that the LORD our God says to you, and we will hear and do it." Hereupon the Lord thus expresses Himself: "Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and keep all My commandments...forever" (v. 29). What greater encouragement can we have to desire this of God than that He expresses Himself desirous that we should have it?

Faith is the main strength of prayer, and the great supports of faith are these two facts: that He is able, and that He is willing. These are to faith like the two pillars of the temple, and the names of them are very fitting: "He set up the pillar on the right and called its name Jachin [i.e., 'He will establish'; 'He is willing'], and He set up the pillar on the left and called its name Boaz [i.e., 'in Him is strength'; 'He is able']" (1 Kings 7:21). Faith has both these pillars to support it in this

business. You will not question, I hope, that the Lord is able to continue His influences. "He is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us" (Eph. 3:20). And that He is willing He puts out of question when He uses such an expression that among men signifies a passionate desire: "Oh, that they had such a heart in them." Now, what one is both able and willing to do will be done. Both reason and faith see ground enough to conclude this. Pray then, and pray believing, for as the Lord is able to do it, so it is according to His will; and whatever you ask according to His will, believing, will be done (Matt. 21:22).

CHAPTER 7

Pitfalls to Avoid

So much for what you are to practice. There are also some things to be avoided if you want the influence of the means of grace in worship to be lasting. These we will comprise in four particulars.

Do Not Perform Holy Duties Negligently

First, a heartless, formal, negligent attendance on the ordinances will be so far from procuring a durable blessing that it will actually fix a curse on you: “Cursed is he who does the work of the LORD deceitfully” (Jer. 48:10; see also Mal. 1:8, 14). If you invert the apostle’s advice (“And those who use this world as not misusing it. For the form of this world is passing away” [1 Cor. 7:31]) and deal with the things of God as you should do with those of the world; if you pray as though you did not pray and hear as though you did not hear and use the ordinances as though you did not use them, they will be useless to you. Worship will be like the sun on a winter day, which thaws the earth a little at noon but then freezes

it up harder the next night. Therefore, let your hearts be engaged in every holy duty: “Who is this who pledged his heart to approach Me?” (Jer. 30:21). You must hear as for life: “Set your hearts on all the words which I testify among you today.... For it is not a futile thing for you because it is your life” (Deut. 32:46–47).

You must wrestle in prayer. In this duty, your hearts should be, as it were, in a conflict, in an agony: “Now I beg you, brethren, through the Lord Jesus Christ, and through the love of the Spirit, that you strive together with me in prayers to God for me” (Rom. 15:30). Your prayers should be such as the other apostle describes: “The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much” (James 5:16). This is a prayer full of the Holy Ghost, wherein that blessed Spirit is operative, exerting its force and energy. Such a prayer that shows the soul to be possessed of the Holy Spirit and acted on by Him—so as all the powers of that soul are set at work and put on a motion toward God effectually—such a prayer avails much, procures great advantages, and those of long continuance.

Generally, in all holy ordinances your souls should stretch out themselves to reach the Lord. They should spring up to Him in acts of love and desire, and clasp about Him with delight and complacency, and lay hold on Him with a humble and filial confidence. We do all fade as a leaf, says Isaiah 64:6, and the reason thereof

follows in the next verse: "There is no one who...stirs himself up to take hold of You."

Beware of the World

Second, do not meddle with the world more than necessary, and when it is needful, engage only with fear, caution, and vigilance. Carry yourselves among worldly objects and employments as though you were among cheats and thieves; they have the art to pick your hearts slyly and to rob them of what is more precious than gold when you think little of it.

Do not let your minds and hearts plunge themselves in the world; nothing sooner extinguishes divine influences than this puddle. When the cares, delights, and employments of the world are immoderate or unseasonable, they "choke the word" (Matt. 13:22).

When your hearts are warmed in holy duties, you should be as cautious and wary about how you venture into the world as though you are going into the frosty air when you are in a sweat. What is kindled by the word or prayer can be quickly puffed out by the world when you rush into it unwarily! It requires as much care to keep it in as to keep a candle lit when you would carry it through the open air in a rainy, blustering night. The further you are above the world, the longer you may retain any spiritual impressions. Geographers write about some mountains whose tops are above the middle region of the air, and lines and figures that have been

drawn in the dust there have been found (they say) in the same form and order, untouched, undefaced a long time after. And the reason is because they are above those winds and showers and storms that soon wear out and efface any such marks in this lower region. The lower your minds and hearts and conversations are, the more in the hurry of this boisterous world, the less will anything that is heavenly and spiritual abide on them. The soul could never be brought into so good an order, even by the help of holy duties, that a little unwary engaging in earthly business will ruffle, disturb, and quite discompose it.

When by the power of the ordinances your souls are set on motion toward Christ and heaven, if you would hold on in a continued course, you must beware of worldliness and keep free, as much as may be, from earthly encumbrances and entanglements. "Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us" (Heb. 12:1). Let us persevere and hold out in the gracious and heavenly course that the gospel has put us on. But that this may be done, one great impediment must be removed; "the sin which so easily ensnares us" must be shaken off. That sin, as commentators suggest, is *worldliness*. No sin has more superficial pretenses to excuse, vindicate, and justify itself; no sin has more fig leaves to cover its nakedness and to shroud it from discovery and conviction than worldliness. This must be

shaken off; it is the great defacer of heavenly impressions, the chief interrupter of holy inclinations. If you would hold on when the impetus that is impressed on you by any ordinance has set you going, beware of the world; beware of worldliness.

Avoid Sinful Thoughts and Habits

Third, take heed of any unrestrained affections or inclinations. Such excesses give the heart a strong bias, and holy duties can keep it in check but a little. When this is once passed over, it will hold on in that course to which it is most swayed. The ministry of John the Baptist had some influence on Herod ("When he heard [John], he did many things, and heard him gladly" [Mark 6:20]), but sensuality being predominant, those better inclinations were quite overpowered. The word had some effect on Simon Magus; he believed and, being taken for a believer, was baptized and afterward "continued with Philip" (Acts 8:13). But a strong affectation of vainglory suppressed those better inclinations, and the worst got the upper hand (v. 21).

Take heed of an imbalance even as to lawful things—your relations, studies, ordinary callings, and so forth. This will not permit you to come as often to holy duties, to stay as long in them, or to be as intent on them as is requisite for the deep impressing of their efficacy; and after they are done, this will hurry your souls from under those thoughts and exercises that should fix

and settle their virtue and influence on your minds and hearts. When you have created a disordered habit, it pulls your heart down with it like gravity pulls objects to the ground. If your heart meets with resistance in a holy ordinance, it will struggle to break through it, restless until the force is removed, until the power of the ordinance is shaken off that checks an inclination natural and acceptable to it. And what hopes are there in this case that the efficacy of any holy duty will last long?

Beware Presumption

Fourthly, do not rest in the best performance of any duty or in any assistances you find therein, though they are special and more than ordinary. If this satisfies and exalts you, you will be apt to grow secure and careless, not looking to the improvement of ordinances when once they are over, and that is the way to lose all. We are apt to get the most dangerous colds when we are in the greatest heats. And it is observed that some professing Christians have had the foulest falls after they have been most elevated in holy employments.

Resting on the mere outward performance of a duty when the heart is not engaged is an open pit that none fall into except those who are blind. But resting on the duty affectionately performed is a more secret and more dangerous snare. The one who reckons he has *done enough* because he has *done well* may be apt to think he is not obliged to look further after it. And

so the continued influence of the duty on his heart and life, which is indeed the principal advantage of it, may be neglected and consequently lost for want of looking to.

To conclude, do not make the ordinances your end, but use them as the means to attain it. They are not enjoined us for themselves but in order to something more desirable; their end is something further than their use. Take heed you do not place all your religion in hearing, praying, and communicating; neither count yourselves religious enough because you are much and often in these duties. This is to make them your end, and then you will rest therein without proceeding further; and so you will stay short of that for which they were principally intended—namely, the keeping of your hearts and minds in a settled posture of holiness and righteousness. Further, you will neglect that by which this main end of the ordinances is only to be attained—namely, the continuing of their influence on you.

Conclusion

But that I may not conclude without something of application, having laid your duty before you and showed you how it may be performed, let me now press you to the performance of it by one consideration that will have the force of a motive where there is any sense of soul concernments.

If the efficacy of the ordinances does not abide on you, you cannot be fruitful under them—at least, you

will be able to “bring no fruit to maturity,” as the expression is (Luke 8:14). You may bring forth buds or leaves or blossoms, but if their influence does not remain, what you bring forth will never come to ripeness and perfection. It will be crude and sour at best, and sour grapes are as bad as no fruit in the Lord’s account; unfruitfulness will provoke the Lord to deprive you of the gospel and ordinances:

He expected it to bring forth good grapes
But it brought forth wild grapes....

“And now, please let Me tell you what I will do to

My vineyard:

I will take away its hedge....

I will lay it waste;

It shall not be pruned or dug....

I will also command the clouds

That they rain no rain on it.” (Isa. 5:2, 5–6)

The meaning of this parable (as far as concerns our purpose) is expressed by another threat, denounced for the same sin, in Matthew 21:43: “The kingdom of God [i.e., the gospel of the kingdom] will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it.” And Christ’s threatening of Ephesus amounts to as much: “Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love” (Rev. 2:4–5). The first impressions of the gospel were worn off and vanished. And what follows? “I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent” (v. 5). So this sin will

pull up your hedge and break down your wall, level all your securities, and then lay you open to the boar of the wood and the wild beasts of the field. Instead of digging and pruning you, it will devour and lay you waste. This sin will provoke Christ to let the stars fall out of His right hand so that you will be left to perish for lack of vision. This sin will provoke the Lord to take the gospel of the kingdom from you and leave you under the hellish influences of the Prince of Darkness. This sin will overturn your lampstands and extinguish your lights, leaving you nothing but the snuffs.¹ This sin will deliver your strength into captivity and your glory into the enemy's hand. This sin will smite the shepherds and scatter the flocks and lay the heritage of God desolate. This sin will cause your sun to set at noon and turn the day of your gracious visitation into a sad and dismal night. This sin will turn the place which has been a valley of vision into a seat of darkness and a "valley of the shadow of death" (Ps. 23:4).

If, then, you would avoid a judgment that strikes not only at your estates and lives but at your souls; if you would prevent the dreadful stroke that may reach not only you but your posterity, your children and children's children; if you would not have them and you, and thousands and millions with you, bereaved of the gospel and the means of grace and life, take all care and

1. That is, the charred wick.

pains that the influences of public worship do not slide from you, that they do not become like water spilled on the ground.

Be faithful and diligent in the use of the aforementioned directions and all other means that may be effective to fix them. And if hereby your hearts are wrought up to such a resolution, the “LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, our fathers, keep this forever in the intent of the thoughts of” your hearts (1 Chron. 29:18).

PART 3

Hearing the Word

Take heed how you hear.

—Luke 8:18

CHAPTER 8

Hearing and Hearing Well

In the first part of Luke 8 we have the parable of the sower, which is set forth, explained, proven, and applied. Jesus *sets forth* the parable in verses 5–8:

A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell by the wayside; and it was trampled down, and the birds of the air devoured it. Some fell on rock; and as soon as it sprang up, it withered away because it lacked moisture. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up with it and choked it. But others fell on good ground, sprang up, and yielded a crop a hundredfold.

The *explanation* is given as well. Jesus gives the preface to His explanation in verse 10:

He said, "To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is given in parables, that

‘Seeing they might not see,
And hearing might not understand.’”

In other words, Jesus says, “To you it is given to know savingly, effectually; to others no further than to make them inexcusable.” But the explanation itself is in verses 11–15: what is meant by “seed” (v. 11); what is meant by “the wayside” (v. 12); “on the rock” (v. 13); “among thorns” (v. 14); and “good ground” (v. 15).

The parable is *proven* by the causes of several events. In verse 5, the cause of the unfruitfulness of the seed by the wayside was (1) “it was trampled down”; (2) “the birds of the air” (i.e., the devil) “devoured it” (took it away); and (3) the hearer “[did] not understand it” (Matt. 13:19). In verses 6 and 13, the unfruitfulness of that on the rock was (1) it “lacked moisture”; (2) it “had no root”; and (3) “temptation.” In Mark 4:17, additional causes are “tribulation or persecution arises for the word’s sake,” which in Matthew 13:6 is called the sun. That among thorns was unfruitful because the cares, riches, and pleasures of this life choked it. Mark 4:19 says, “The cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.” That on the good ground was fruitful because (1) “those who, having heard the word” have “a noble and good heart” with which to receive it (Luke 8:15); (2) they understand it (Matt. 13:23); (3) they keep it; and (4) they “bear fruit with patience” (Luke 8:15).

Finally, the parable is applied. Jesus makes use

of it by both an exhortation and an admonition. The exhortation is verse 16, where He urges us to manifest fruitfulness by means of an analogy: "No one, when he has lit a lamp, covers it with a vessel or puts it under a bed, but sets it on a lampstand, that those who enter may see the light." Then the exhortation is undergirded with a proverb: "For nothing is secret that will not be revealed, nor anything hidden that will not be known and come to light." But pay careful attention to the admonition then given: "Therefore take heed how you hear" (v. 18). This admonition will be our focus.

Observations

Those to whom the gospel is preached must take heed *how* they hear. What does this mean exactly? The command applies to the act of hearing, the object of hearing, and the manner of hearing.

As to the *act*: Take heed *that* you hear. This is implied and necessarily supposed. The mode of preaching supposes the act of hearing, and it is expressly called for in Luke 8:8: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

As to the *object*, or *matter*: So take heed *what* ye hear. "How" with Luke is "what" with Mark. Mark concludes the parable with this admonition: "Take heed what you hear" (4:24). We must be concerned that it is good seed as well as good ground, that this seed is the seed of God, who sows wheat, not tares.

As to the *manner*: This is the main point, though the others are necessary as well. If we don't hear all,

don't take heed to what we hear, and neglect the means and the duty, then we have no hope of being fruitful. If we don't receive seed, we can bring forth nothing but briars and thorns, cursed fruits destined to the fire. If you hear but do not take heed what, you miscarry. If you don't receive good seed, you cannot bring forth good fruit. If tares are sown only, there can be no reason to expect wheat. If you take heed what but not how, all is in vain—if you receive good seed but not in a right manner, if you hear what is good but not as those who are good, it will be for nothing. You must receive good seed as good ground, not as the highway, or else no good will come of it. If ever you would reap benefit by hearing, you must take heed how you hear. It is in vain to hear, in vain to hear what is good, unless we hear it *well*.

The Necessity of Hearing Well

Since it is primarily the *manner* of our hearing that is intended by our Savior in His admonishment, that will be my focus, too. I do not need to go far for reasons why we need to hear well; this parable gives an abundance.

Few Hear Well

There are not many good hearers. In fact, the majority are unable to bring the seed to bear fruit and life; therefore, there is a need to take heed. Of four sorts of hearers in the parable, three are nothing, and only one is good. There is only one sort of good ground. The seed

is lost on three; they are barren, fruitless. In each of those three sorts there are many more bad than those that are good: "Many are called, but few are chosen" (Matt. 22:14).

Many have common, rocky, worldly hearts; few have good and honest hearts. Though the multitude of hearers are as the sand of the sea, only a remnant hear well (Isa. 10:22). Those who hear are like the multitude of trees in a vast forest, yet those that bear fruit in hearing are so few in number that a child can write them down (Isa. 10:19). Good ground is only like a little island to the large continents of Africa, Asia, and America. The majority who hear perish; few hear savingly.

This should be a strong argument for you to take heed how you hear the word of God. If you were to sail a gulf where millions had drowned from not listening to the captain and only a few escaped, would you not pay attention to the captain? If one would have told the Israelites, when they came out of Egypt, that if they would not listen to Moses, all those hundred thousands would perish in the wilderness and only two or three enter into Canaan, would they not have taken heed how they listened to him? The Lord gives us warning beforehand so that we would take heed, listen well, and be saved.

Danger

There are many enemies to oppose and many impediments to hinder you in hearing, and where there is great

danger and much difficulty, there is reason to take heed. Here are enemies within and without; many that are powerful, active, implacable; difficulties impossible to overcome except by almighty power—from ourselves, Satan, the world, afflictions, allurements, blindness, ignorance. The heart is unclean, desperately evil, and evil beyond knowledge. It is hard, rocky, and resists the word. The word can make no impression, find no root; the multitude of lusts makes it so there is no room for the word.

Satan opposes hearing with all his strength and craft since it is the principal means of salvation: “Then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved” (Luke 8:12). He is resolute and able too: Jesus likens his craft to the multitude of birds in the air, nimble to pick up the seed of the word in an instant (Mark 4:15). It is his meat to do it, as birds feed on corn. He is a bird of prey.

The world opposes on the right hand and the left—on the left hand with afflictions, tribulation, persecution hot and scorching like the sun (Matt. 13:6); on the right hand with riches, pleasures, honors, cares—to get them, keep them, and lust after them. “Now the ones that fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life” (Luke 8:14). These are like thorns to choke it and leave no room for it to root in or for moisture to nourish it. These overtop it, crush it down. There is no good engrafting among thorns. The soul spends its strength

and spirits on this love of the world, and thus there is no power to conceive the word, and no strength to bring forth fruit.

The Advantages or Disadvantages

This is in the text: "For whoever has, to him more will be given; and whoever does not have, even what he seems to have will be taken from him" (Luke 8:18). Mark explains and applies it to the purpose: "With the same measure you use, it will be measured to you; and to you who hear, more will be given" (4:24). According as you measure to God in hearing, so will He measure to you in blessing or cursing. This could mean the gospel continued, increased in light and glory; more of God's presence, Spirit, workings, motions, inclining; more knowledge increased. It could mean light to you, which is darkness to others. You will have comfort and more refreshing; it will be like marrow and fatness; grace more strengthening and nourishing; "shall go out, and grow fat like stall-fed calves" (Mal. 4:2).

Or the lampstand will be removed and a famine of hearing will come (Amos 8:11); your pastors will be removed into corners (Isa. 30:20); the Spirit will withdraw; light will end in darkness, stench, delusions (2 Thess. 2:11); joy will end in terror and despair, and you will lie down in sorrow (Isa. 50:10, 11). The graces you seemed to have and your fair appearances will all vanish. Outward blessings will be removed and turned into war

and desolation. Satan will be loosed. Then there will be no balm in Gilead, no physician, no bread of life for the dying soul, no support for the sinking sinner, no hopes, no Christ, no pool for the diseased soul, or no Spirit to trouble the waters, no manna, or no appetite. There will be no strength or sweetness, like when Israel overate the quail: "He gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul" (Ps. 106:15). And when the gospel is gone, all outward judgments rush in. After the white horse—Christ with the gospel—is neglected, comes the red horse of war, the black horse of famine, the pale horse of pestilence, and other judgments (Revelation 6).

Blessings and Curses

The gospel, according as it is heard, is a great mercy or a great judgment, a blessing or a curse; therefore, there is great reason to take heed. The abuse of the greatest mercy may curse it. It lifts up to heaven or casts down to hell; it is the savor of life or of death (2 Cor. 2:15–16). The gospel either advances salvation or aggravates condemnation. The gospel is the cords of love or the snares of death; it softens or hardens (Isa. 6:9–10; Matt. 13:14–15); enlightens or darkens eyes (John 9:39; 12:40; Rom. 11:10); opens the heart to Christ or shuts it against Him. If one should tell you that this diet, depending on how you use it, will be life or death, would you not take heed?

The gospel is like the water of jealousy, and a bad hearer is like the adulteress. To him it is bitter water,

which causes a curse (Num. 5:11–31). To a good hearer it is sweet, blessed, the water of life, fruitfulness, and causes him to conceive seed (v. 28). The word brings you nearer heaven or further from it; it does good or hurt, makes better or worse; it is medicine or venom; a quickening spirit or killing letter. It returns not in vain but “shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it” (Isa. 55:10–11).

He appoints His servants, like in Jeremiah 1:10, not only to build but to pull down, not only to plant but to root out and destroy, and puts His words in their mouths for that end (v. 9). It blasts those who do not blossom and flourish under it; it overthrows where it does not edify; consumes where it does not refine like fire; it is a sword, either piercing the heart savingly or mortally.

They are in a more desperate condition who hear amiss and do not take heed how they hear than those who cannot hear or who never had the gospel. Their sin is more heinous since it is against the clearest light and the greatest mercy (see John 9:41; 15:22). The punishment is more grievous, more severe, sudden, certain. “Under the whole heaven such as has never been done as what has been done to Jerusalem” (Dan. 9:12). The reason is often given, “We have not obeyed the voice of the LORD our God” (v. 10; see also v. 14). The dregs of God’s wrath were poured on them because they had tasted the quintessence of His mercy. There were no people like them in gospel enjoyments; therefore, there were

no people like them in grievous sufferings. For what caused that fearful desolation, see 2 Chronicles 36:16: “They...despised His words...until the wrath of the LORD rose against His people, till there was no remedy” (cf. Heb. 2:3).

The nearer to heaven any are lifted up by gospel preaching, the lower they will sink into hell if they do not heed it. It will be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah, for Tyre and Sidon—the most heathen, most abominable people in the world, those who have been most notorious for both vile abominations and dreadful sufferings—these will fare better in the day of judgment and suffer less in hell than gospel despisers! The finger of justice will lie heavier on these than it lies on them; those everlasting burnings will be made seven times hotter. These will rise up in judgment against them: the queen of the South, “Woe be to thee, Bethsaida, and you, Capernaum” (Luke 10:12–15; 11:31).

Eternity Is at Stake

It is the eternal concern of souls. Hearing is the provision made for the soul’s eternal well-being; its everlasting welfare depends on it. If you fail here, your souls perish without remedy. For salvation comes by faith, and faith comes by hearing. It is an act of eternal consequence. According to our hearing, so will the state of our souls be to eternity. It is not a temporal interest, but eternal.

What and how you hear in time determines your state on into eternity.

Hearing God's word well does not concern reputation, body, or estate—but *your immortal soul*. If a friend should say, "Take heed to my advice, and you will live in good fortune and preserve your reputation unstained, but if you will not hearken to me, you will live in perpetual disgrace and contempt," who would not diligently observe what such a friend suggests? Is there not more reason to take heed how we hear God? His word concerns eternal glory, theirs but temporary opinion and repute. If a skillful physician should come to a patient desperately sick and assure him if he hearkens to his advice he will recover, but if not he will certainly die, who would not in that case take heed to his advice? The Great Physician of souls prescribes hearing as the only way to recover our sick, desperately diseased souls. Will we not take heed how we hear? The gospel preached holds forth a sovereign recipe for a dying soul. Will we not hear and take heed how? There is no hope for your souls but in Christ, no benefit by Christ but by faith, no faith but by hearing. If we miscarry in hearing, not only our estate or bodies but souls miscarry and perish eternally without recovery. Is it not a reason to take heed how we hear? Will we be heedful to advice for body and estate and not for our souls, for temporals and not for eternal?

It Is God's Word

The gospel preached is the word of God. It is not the word of man, though it come by a man. God is the fountain, man is but the conduit pipe; He the author, man the instrument. This is because by *word of God* is meant not only what is written but what is equivalent to it. What is agreeable to it—if not expressed in the same words that are in Scripture, yet if in others so as to express the mind of God, His intention—is still the word of God. It is His word if it is His sense and meaning, though not tied to the form of words in which it is written. An ambassador may be sent from a king to a foreign state with short instructions to transact public affairs. Though the ambassador does not tie himself to the words and letters of his instructions, if he expresses the meaning and prosecutes the intentions of his master in words of his own, they are still received as the words or message of his master. Ministers are Christ's ambassadors (2 Cor. 5:20) who speak the word of God (Heb. 13:7).

What is deducible from Scripture by just consequence, what is drawn from Scripture by necessary consequence, is Scripture. What follows from the word of God is the word of God, if not directly then by consequence. Christ justifies consequences by His own practice; in proving the resurrection by Scripture, He proves it by consequence: "God is...the God...of the living" (Matt. 22:32; see also Luke 20:37). What we draw

from the words of men by consequence is not always their judgment, for man is shortsighted, of a narrow understanding, and therefore cannot see all that may be drawn from his words. But the Lord's understanding is infinite and immensely comprehensive; when He spoke and inspired His word, He foresaw all possible consequences and will own those that are just to be His word as well as the letter from where they are drawn. If He had spoken at large and expressed all that is consequent, the world could not have contained all the books. Rather, He expressed His mind in brief for our convenience and has appointed and enabled and authorized His servants, His deputies, to explain, enlarge, deduce, and apply what would have been impossible or inconvenient to have delivered at large.

He gives His word in Scripture as a lump of precious metal, more precious than gold, and appoints ministers to beat it out into large plates; and as gold is the same in the lump and mass and in the plate, so is the word the same word of God as it is read and as it is preached. He gives us His word in the Scriptures like honey in the comb, then appoints the ministers of the gospel to squeeze it out—but it is the same honey in or out of the comb.

Only take this caution: that if the gospel preached is to be received as the word of God, it is required that he who preaches it should be sent by God, invested with His authority, appointed to be His vicegerent, sent as

ambassador from Him. Otherwise, doctrine agreeable to God's word cannot be delivered authoritatively as the word of God. It is like silver; though it is precious in itself, it is not currency without the magistrate's stamp and impression. A private man may deliver things agreeing with the instructions of an ambassador, yet no state will look on them as the words of a king because he is not authorized by him to deliver them.

Ministers are sent by Christ: "Go...teach" (Matt. 28:19 KJV). Made Christ's vicegerents, they have the honor and authority of ambassadors; they are Christ's mouth. "No man takes this honor to himself, but he who is called" to it (Heb. 5:4). They are supplied with abilities since Christ promises to be in and with them (Matt. 10:40; Luke 10:16; John 13:20).

Therefore, when delivered by those who are sent with authority from Christ to preach that which is equivalent, agreeable to, deducible from the word of God is the word of God. Such is the gospel that has long been and is daily preached to you. Take heed, then, how you hear, for it is the word of God.

Take gospel preaching more seriously than if it were the word of a king, the greatest potentate. Yet in the word of a king there is power; it is as the roaring of a lion, striking reverence into hearers. What heed would one take to hear a king—how composed, how reverent, attentive, obsequious. But what is it then to hear the King of Kings, Lord of Hosts, Prince of the kings

of the earth—in comparison to whom all kings are like worms!

It is more than if one from the dead should speak to us, as is plain in the parable in Luke 16:29: “They have Moses and the prophets,” who, being authorized to speak from God and as God, do deserve so much reverence, obedience, attention. In so many words Christ says, “If they will not hear them, if they do not respect My word from them, My authority in them, it cannot be expected they should mind one from the dead; though one from the dead might tell them his experience, yet this might be as soon questioned and more easily evaded than those sent by Me” (see v. 31).

It is more than if an angel from heaven should speak if not sent; even if he spoke so heavenly, seraphically, yet if it does not agree with the word, the word of God in the mouth of the meanest worm would be better entertained (Gal. 1:8; Heb. 2:1–3). How attentive and heedful would we be if an angel should speak with the tongue of angels! We should be much more attentive when God speaks, when it is the tongue of God.

No, it is far better than even if God Himself should appear and speak directly to us! His glory and majesty would terrify us. No one can see Him and live. For Israel at Sinai, the sight of the glory of the Lord was like devouring fire (Ex. 20:18–19; 24:17). Will we despise this treasure because it is in an earthen vessel; this light

because it appears in an elementary body; this water of life because it passes through a lead pipe?

No matter how we receive it, God looks on it and accounts it His word. And He will resent our refusing to take heed to the word more heinously, in some respect, when He speaks by men than if He had spoken it Himself; for He condescends to our weakness, speaking *to us* by one of us. Because in this instance we despise not only His word but also His mercy in delivering His word in such a familiar way. We might be afraid if He should speak immediately and dare not listen; but now, speaking by one of us, there is no excuse not to listen. If we will not take heed how and what we hear, it is simply because we will not. Hearers, generally, are guilty of a sin proportionate to the sin of the Jews. There is a similar mistake about the word of the Lord with us as there was about the Lord of the Word with them. They did not take the Word for God because it *appeared* in flesh; we do not receive the gospel as the word of God because it is *delivered* by flesh. Their mistake was fatal and woe-ful. They crucified the Lord of life because He came in the likeness of sinful flesh; we trample underfoot the word of life because it is preached by sinful flesh. The mistake was their ruin, and so it will be for us. Come to hear expecting God to speak; hear it as the word of the great God.

Coming Judgment

The manner of how you hear God's word is that by which you must be judged at the last day (John 12:48; Rom. 2:16). The sentence is already passed in the gospel: he who believes will be saved. The execution accordingly will be at the last day; evidence will be brought in by the gospel. Christ will say, "In the gospel the way of life was laid open; herein the paths of death were discovered; herein unbelief, impenitency, disobedience were noted as damning sins. And yet, even so, you would not avoid them."

As He says in Luke 8:17, "For nothing is secret that will not be revealed, nor anything hidden that will not be known and come to light." At the day of judgment, an account of every sermon will be required and of every truth in each sermon. Of every idle word we must give account (Matt. 12:36). If of every idle word, much more of every idle act; if we will be held accountable of what we speak to others, much more of what God speaks to us; if of unedifying speaking, much more of unprofitable hearing. The books will be opened, all the sermons mentioned that you have heard, and a particular account required: why you imprisoned such a truth revealed, why you committed such a sin threatened, why you neglected such duties commanded of you. The gospel, at the last day, if neglected, will plead you inexcusable. You cannot say, "If I would have only known, I would have acted differently!" Oh, what a fearful account! So many

sermons slept through, not regarded, prejudiced, hated, forgotten, and gone unpracticed.

We must give account of all talents and all enjoyments. If we must account for common mercies, how much more of special, extraordinary mercies! And there is none like the gospel, and therefore no account so exact. Other mercies are like only one talent; the gospel is like five in proportion to one (see Matt. 25:14–30). If he who did not improve *one* talent received such a heavy sentence—“cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness” (v. 30)—what will he expect who neglects, hides, and does not improve *five*? If “every transgression and disobedience” in the use of less mercies “received a just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect” the gospel, “which at first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him?” (Heb. 2:2–3). “Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard” (v. 1). There is no wrath as fierce as God’s for the contempt of mercy and of the greatest mercy in the gospel—no plea, no excuse, no escaping.

CHAPTER 9

Impediments for Not Hearing Well

What has been said thus far serves as a reproof to those who will not hear, neglect opportunities to hear, or make light of hearing the word. If it is a duty to hear well, it is certainly a sin not to hear. If it is a sin not to hear right, it is a great sin not to hear at all. It is a common sin, national sin, and one that threatens ruin to the gospel. Manna is loathed, and light is hated. The sin of this place! A thin congregation makes me jealous with a godly jealousy out of love for your souls. Aren't you absent for petty reasons? A little rain, the cold season, chores, or even prejudice against God's messengers—these all keep you at home. Doesn't this make light of the gospel? Others travel across sea and land, or would run from sea to sea, to hear the word of God preached—you will not stir out of doors.

Read the parable of Matthew 22. A king made a feast at the marriage of his son and sent his servants to invite guests. They made excuses; for example, one had married a wife. The king was enraged and sent out his

armies to destroy and burn their city, determining that not one of them should taste his supper. God in the gospel offers to espouse us to His Son, to feast us with delicious things, the pleasures of His house; He *invites* us. But if we neglect it, we will never taste of Christ. The children of the kingdom will be cast out. It will be with you in this nation and this place as with the Jews: He turned from them to the Gentiles. He will take Christ and the gospel from you and give it to Americans, and when the gospel is gone, then look for destruction and desolation. The Lord convince you of the sinfulness of this sin!

The Sinfulness of Not Hearing

It is a high contempt of God and of Christ. Contempt is the highest degree of dishonor. Men cannot endure it, much less God. He is infinitely above us, and we are worms; He stands in no need of us. It is for our good, our happiness that God gives His word to be preached; therefore, to not listen is to despise God in His dearest and most glorious manifestation and mercy. If a great king should send an ambassador to a poor, impotent man lying on a dunghill, a stranger and enemy to him, to offer reconciliation, to adopt him, to make him heir of his kingdom, if this wretch should refuse to hear him, would it not highly exasperate the king? So it is here: the Lord sends to us lying in our blood, poor and blind. Mercy slighted turns into the greatest fury. The arm

of God's vengeance will fall heavier on gospel slighers than on any people in the world. "It will be more tolerable in that Day for Sodom" (Luke 10:12). "Why," they might object, "it is only man who delivers it; if it were God, we might expect severity." No, it is all one, for He adds, "He who hears you *hears Me*" (v. 16).

If you will not hear God now, God will not hear you in the time of distress, though you may make many prayers (Isa. 1:15):

So will I choose their delusions,
And bring their fears on them;
Because, when I called, no one answered.
(Isa. 66:4)

And He says, "I will number you for the sword, and you shall all bow down to the slaughter; because, when I called, you did not answer" (Isa. 65:12). "I will laugh at your calamity" (Prov. 1:26; see vv. 24–31; cf. Jer. 7:14–16).

The time may come when all outward refuges and supports will fail, at least on your deathbed, when it will be in vain to call to men and angels. If you then cry for pardon and mercy, the Lord will stop His ears; you have not heard Him in health and life, and He will not then hear you. Not at the day of judgment, when you, with the foolish virgins, knock at the gate of heaven and say, "Lord, open and deliver me from these everlasting burnings; save me from these tormentors who are ready to hale me into endless torture." No, Christ will say, "You would not hear Me when I invited, beseeched, and wept

over you; now I will not hear you." Then you will hear nothing but that dreadful sentence, "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire" (Matt. 25:41). If this terrible sentence must be denounced and executed on wretches because they did not feed, clothe, and visit Christ, how much more against those who would not so much as hear Him! "Lord, hear me, or I perish; I sink into the bottomless pit; I will be dragged into outer darkness."

"No, for you would not hear." He will hear no plea, no excuse.

Consider the state of the damned, those who, for neglecting the light, are cast into outer darkness. With what torture and anguish do they look on their neglect of the gospel! Read the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19–31. Lay your ear to hell, and hear those forlorn creatures cry out against this very sin of not hearing the word of God as that which has damned them and sunk their souls into endless miseries. Suppose you heard them say, "Oh, that we had esteemed the gospel! Oh, that we had more regarded the Lord's messengers! Oh, that we had hearkened to the voice of Christ in them! Then we might have escaped the wrath that was once to come but now is on us, but now it is too late. Alas, it is too late; the day of our visitation is shut up in eternal night! But oh, if it were possible that time might be recalled and a revenging God appeased, what would we give to hear the word of reconciliation from the most despised minister!

We would give our estates; our health, our liberty would be thought a small matter to part with for such advantage. Oh, what would we do to hear but the least hope offered in the gospel! We would run from sea to sea, watch night and day, spend time and strength and means on the condition that we might hear one gospel sermon, Christ once more offering peace to us! Oh, what would we suffer to redeem one of those many neglected opportunities! We would endure a thousand years' torments for one hour's time; a thousand years' darkness for one minute of gospel light; a thousand years' burning for one encouraging word from Christ, ten thousand of which we formerly slighted.

But there is no hope for them. Despair is part of their torture. Yet they cannot choose but be astonished at the desperate carelessness of men on earth who will not hear, though this sin has sunk millions into hell: men who will make any excuse, any occasion to be absent when Christ is offering life and reconciliation; who for hope of a little gain hazard the loss of their souls; who for a little ease expose themselves to eternal torments. "It is too cold to hear the word"—but you will find something quite different in hell; that will be hot enough, seven times hotter for you then. A little rain or snow will keep you at home when Christ speaks. But how will you endure that horrible tempest that the Lord will rain on gospel despisers? A flood of brimstone will be poured on you, kindled by the Lord's fiery indignation.

Impediments

There is also an exhortation to this duty of hearing, and hearing well. It is a duty of Christ's enjoining and to His disciples. To further the practice of it, I will first remove impediments that hinder hearing well: ignorance, contempt, distractions, prejudice, obstinance, and bad ends or principles.

Ignorance

The first impediment is ignorance in the mysteries of the gospel, the principles of religion: "It is not good for a soul to be without knowledge" (Prov. 19:2). The seed of the word is only well received into a good and honest heart (Luke 8:15). This is one of the defects in those who receive the seed like the highway. They do not understand it (Matt. 13:19) and therefore are more exposed to the wiles of that wicked one. There are no people so fit a subject for Satan to delude or work on as those who are ignorant.

We are easily deceived in that and deprived of that of which we do not have knowledge. Ignorance is spiritual darkness, and darkness is Satan's element: he is the Prince of Darkness. He has most advantages to act there. Ignorance hinders the operation of the word on conscience, will, affections; it is a thick, gross medium, which either weakens or obstructs the influence of the gospel. *Conscience* not awakened sleeps on; darkness serves the sleepy temper. On the *will*: he will not yield to that which he does not understand, nor admit in

someone whom he does not know. On the *affections*: a blind man is not affected by colors, no matter how rare and lustrous. Set before him the most exquisite pictures, the most curious pieces that art can frame, and they do not move him. In the gospel, Christ, sin, grace and the world are set out in their own colors, but to no effect until the eye is opened and the scales of ignorance removed: "The god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not" (2 Cor. 4:4 KJV). "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Hos. 4:6).

The mind is not opened but by the key of knowledge (Luke 11:52). Be sensible of it, bewail it, and use all means to get knowledge, such as reading and holy conversation; dig for it as for hidden treasures, above all for the knowledge of Christ, like Paul (Phil. 3:8).

Contempt

A second impediment is contempt of the gospel. That which we despise we do not heed. If we think it is not worth hearing, we will not take heed how we hear. Do not say you are innocent; the best are prone to it: in 2 Samuel 12:9, Nathan says to David, "Why have you despised the commandment of the LORD, to do evil in His sight?" Not hearing is doing evil, either initially or causally; that is, it is the beginning, or cause, or the same with evil.

Contempt is the natural offspring of pride, and pride is the enemy of hearing: "Hear and...do not be

proud" (Jer. 13:15). "These have altogether broken the yoke and burst the bonds" (5:5). We must deny our own excellencies and understandings, and in the apprehension of the glory of the gospel and the glory of that God who delivers it, lie low and tremble: "Tremble at the commandment of our God" (Ezra 10:3); and, "Everyone...trembled at the words of the God of Israel" (9:4). In Isaiah 66:2 we find a sweet promise:

On this one will I look:
On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit,
And who trembles at My word.

Even though heaven is His throne, the Lord will look on the one who hears His word. Again, "hear the word of the LORD, you who tremble at His word" (v. 5). Others will not.

Nor is this just a state of mind under the law, for we see it in the age of the gospel, too. The Corinthians received Titus with fear and trembling (2 Cor. 7:15)—not Christ or Paul, but Titus, an inferior teacher. And the Corinthians did it out of an awe-filled understanding of God, having high thoughts of the gospel (2 Corinthians 3). The gospel is the most glorious manifestation that ever was granted, which the angels desire to pry into (1 Peter 1:12). Principalities and powers do not think it below them to be taught by the gospel (Eph. 3:10). You must then look on it as the gospel of peace, the word of reconciliation, of life, and believe that there is nothing but death without it. See it as salvation

to those who would otherwise perish; of glory, to those who would otherwise have hell. What low condescension of God in the gospel! What high exaltation of man, promises, privileges, and relations.

Distractions

Third, distractions impede hearing well: wanderings; roving of mind, will, affections, senses caused by the cares of the world and lusts of the flesh. Carefulness of other things makes hearers careless of the word. It is hard to hit a moving object, like a bird in flight; and, to as much purpose, it is as hard to sow the waves in a tempest or cast seed on branches tossed with the wind as it is to preach to a distracted, wandering hearer. Nothing fixes, sinks, abides; his soul is like a highway, and every man or beast has free passage. What encouragement has the farmer to sow there? It is impossible while it is crowded; and even if clear, since it is accessible to all, it would be soon trodden down.

Fix your whole soul on God. Let there be no thoughts, projects, inclinations, affections except what is suitable to or raised by the word. Summon the whole soul to wait, to attend to God. Watch, that you are not surprised; if any intrude, cast them out, drive them away: "Keep your heart with all diligence" (Prov. 4:23). What an affront it would be to turn your back on a king or to discourse with others while he is speaking to you! The postures and impulses of your souls are as visible to God just as your outward ones are to others. Deal with

wandering thoughts, extravagant inclinations, as Abraham did with the birds that came down on his sacrifice (Gen. 15:11); he drove them away. Wandering thoughts, like these birds, would spoil our sacrifices; they are a progeny of devils. Satan has that name in the parable (Matt. 13:4, 19); birds are his emissaries. Bid them as Christ did: "Get behind Me. You are an offense to Me" (see Matt. 16:23). Drive these birds away. We must serve God with our whole heart, not allow it to be divided or distracted, especially in the act of worship: "My heart is steadfast," says David (Ps. 108:1). "With my whole heart I have sought You" (119:10). "Unite my heart to fear Your name" (86:11).

Prejudice

Fourth, prejudice, or a poor conception and misguided notion of the gospel, is an impediment to hearing well. This could be prejudice of the subject matter itself; or the plain and simple manner of gospel preaching; or of ministers, their persons, conversation, office, or their execution of it.

This was the ruin of both Jews and Gentiles and hindered them from hearing or made the hearing ineffectual, though preached by Christ Himself or the apostles extraordinarily assisted. The gospel, and the prime subject of it, Christ, was "to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness" (1 Cor. 1:23). The gospel was thus prejudiced when preached by extraordinary agents

and when confirmed by miracles. How much more now! The Jews were prejudiced against Christ's *person*. He did not meet their expectations. They looked for a glorious monarch, not one in the form of a servant. They despised His *calling*, treating Him as not being sent by God, as though He were an impostor, deceiver, and blasphemer. They questioned His *country*: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). They considered His *doctrine* to be too plain, too severe, taxing abuses. Likewise, Paul was a babbler to the Athenians.

To remove this obstacle, consider there is no reason and no room for prejudice against the gospel; those who despise it never saw its glory or tasted its sweetness: "If our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing" (2 Cor. 4:3). Should we think worse of the sun because a blind man speaks against it or because an owl cannot behold it? And for ministers, however ordinary, there is glory enough in the gospel to gild them. To neglect the gospel for the weakness or infirmity of its ministers is to refuse to take up manna because it falls on the ground. If there is any fault in them, they must bear it—but it will be no excuse to you. Those who would not hear Judas were no less guilty than those who would not hear the other disciples. Christ makes no distinction either in His commission or sanction: those were equally threatened who did not receive Him like the rest.

Prejudice of ministers, when there is some ground for it, does not excuse neglecting the gospel. But for the most part it is groundless. I am apt to think that where there is a call from God to ministry, there can be no ground of prejudice; therefore, if there be any ground of prejudice, it must be something that may make the calling questionable. Those things from which we generally raise prejudice are not sufficient to make a minister's calling questionable, for Christ or the apostles themselves are liable to those objections that are ordinarily made use of to this end:

- ✦ Meanness or despicableness of the person: Christ was a carpenter's son, there was no beauty in Him, and the apostles were fishermen.
- ✦ Ambition, affectation of superiority: Christ's disciples argue over who will be greatest.
- ✦ Hypocrisy, covetousness: These were in Judas, yet he was called.
- ✦ Weakness: The disciples had no acquired skills. Their education would not allow it. They were ignorant of many truths.
- ✦ Difference in judgment and affections: The stumbling block in these times, yet visible in Peter and Paul (Gal. 2:11) and Barnabas and Paul, whose contention was so sharp that they parted asunder (Acts 15:39).

- ✦ Carnality: The disciples were looking for a temporal kingdom.
- ✦ Fear of suffering: They all forsook Christ.
- ✦ Intemperate zeal: They call for fire from heaven.

Obstinance

A fifth impediment is obstinance, or hardness of heart. "Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts" (Heb. 3:7–8). Pharaoh did not hear Moses, for his heart was hardened. We sow on rocks with no hope of fruit since there is neither root nor moisture. The preached word should be an "implanted word" (James 1:21). Can one implant on stone? It should "dwell in [us] richly" (Col. 3:16).

The heart is hardened by sinning against light. When the gospel reveals this to be sin and that a duty and we have no regard to practice this or to avoid that, the first brings the first degree; and after more neglect and more hardness, the conscience grows senseless and, as it were, is cauterized. For this sin the Lord hardens in judgment, withdraws softening influence, and exposes us to occasions that harden. Take heed of sinning against light and of disobeying the gospel. Do not be disobedient to the heavenly vision. Urge the covenant whereby God is engaged to take away the heart of stone (Ezek. 36:26). Break up the fallow ground (Jer. 4:3, Hos. 10:12). Make use of both law and gospel—the law

to break, the gospel to melt. The heart must be softened, then broken, then melted that it may be cast into the mold of the word.

The image of Christ is stamped on the word. It must leave impressions of Christ on us; therefore, we must be cast into, delivered into it (Romans 6). Hereby it transforms, and we can obey from the heart (v. 17). Observe what considerations affect your heart the quickest—judgment or mercy, promise or threatening—and make use of what is most effectual. Look on hardness as the greatest judgment, more fearful than any temporal sickness, poverty, blindness, or sword. It is a sign of reprobation, an earnest of hell. Desire, with all importunity, a tender, melting, bleeding heart—trembling, yielding to every stroke, receiving every impression, running into the mold, complying, and obeying.

Bad Ends

Finally, bad ends, principles, motives, or reasons inducing to hear make every act good or bad. Take heed to these. We do not take heed how we hear when we hear for the following reasons:

Out of custom, because others do it, because it is the fashion of the nation, and he who does not run with the stream hazards his reputation. He hears but thus will never take heed how he hears. Yet what is lamentable is that this is the ground on which the greatest part found both their religion and the exercises of it. Why are most Protestants,

Protestant? Their parents, their magistrates, the majority are so—not weight of reason, but number of professors. So this is their reason for religious exercises, hearing, praying, singing; not for any necessity, excellency, or spiritual advantage but because others do it. And this is the cause of inconstancy in religion and negligence and formality in the duties of it. He who will be religious and “hear” the word only because most do so will receive the reward that most do.

To carp, cavil, ensnare, take advantages. For this reason the Pharisees listened to Christ. Make a man an offender for a word. It is the practice of the devil; he hears only that he may accuse, disquiet, and ensnare. To pervert it in such a horrid way makes you worse than the devil. The word was never intended for his advantage.

To please the fancy, perfect intellectuals; to get notions; to satisfy itching ears. When neat expressions, apt similes, and quaint notions please us more than wholesome words, it is to abase the gospel, bringing down to the lowest ends what was appointed for the highest.

To satisfy conscience, if convinced it is a duty enjoined under penalty. Or to pacify conscience; to expiate a week’s worth of sin with one act of service.

Get right principles. Propound the best, the highest motives. Act on spiritual grounds. Be armed by spiritual

reasons. First is *God's glory* (Jer. 13:16). Hearing brings glory to God, acknowledges many of His attributes, authority, truth, mercy, and our subjection to Him. It is an act of worship naturally engaging. A second spiritual reason is *our good* and our necessity of it as newborn babes. Come like the Israelites to gather manna. It is the bread of life. It is the water of life, so come like to the pool. Third, consider the *excellence of it*. Hear the word out of love and delight: "I love Your commandments more than gold" (Ps. 119:127). "Oh, how I love Your law!" (v. 97). If the psalmist loved the law, much more should we love the gospel. It is "sweeter also than honey" (Ps. 19:10). Psalm 42:1-2 expresses this yearning:

As the deer pants for the water brooks,
So pants my soul for You, O God....
When shall I come and appear before God?

And Psalm 84:10 says, "A day in Your courts is better than a thousand."

Consider the spiritual advantages of it: light, life, strength, growth, comfort, peace, glory. It is an inestimable treasure and mine, a universal remedy, the choicest dainties, an all-sufficient storehouse, an infallible message.

CHAPTER 10

Directions for Hearing Well

Having addressed the several impediments, let me now prescribe means to facilitate and direct hearing well.

Know Your Spiritual Condition

Get a precise knowledge of the state of your souls in reference to God. Every man is either in a state of nature or of grace, either regenerate or unregenerate, either in the faith or in his sins. Before you can hear rightly, you should know in which of these states you are. The reason is this: we must take heed how we hear that we may hear fruitfully that the word may be profitable. It is most profitable when it is seasonable. It cannot be seasonable to you (whatever it is in itself) unless you are acquainted with your soul's condition. It is seasonable in itself when it is suitable to a hearer's condition, but it is not seasonable to him unless he knows it to be suitable, which he cannot do unless he knows what his condition is. "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver" (Prov. 25:11). It is precious, lovely,

excellent, profitable, adorning, and enriching. It requires the tongue of the learned to speak seasonably (Isa. 50:4). It requires a learned heart to hear seasonably. Indeed, this is requisite to every spiritual service—whether we pray, read, or receive—or we offer the sacrifice of fools.

Paul spoke in another sense: “If the trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will prepare for battle?” (1 Cor. 14:8). The trumpet is uncertain when it is not known whom or what it is for. The sound of the gospel is uncertain when hearers do not know whom it concerns, whether it is for them or not. Ministers speak in the air, to no purpose. And verse 11 says, “If I do not know the meaning of the language...he who speaks will be a foreigner to me.” It is dangerous. If a man who does not know his temper and constitution comes into a pharmacy, where there are medications of all sorts, he might, through ignorance of his condition, take what would be poison to him, though healthful to another. The word offers what is proper for every condition. What is not proper is destructive. If you do not know your condition, you may undo your souls, apply promises for threatenings, persuade yourselves of God’s love when you are actually in a state of enmity, conclude yours is heaven when actually an heir of wrath. As you love your souls, follow the apostle’s advice: “Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves.” The duty is enforced with a reason: “Do you not know yourselves,

that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you are disqualified” (2 Cor. 13:5).

Open Your Hearts

Before you hear, endeavor to get your souls into a capacity of hearing fruitfully, to get spiritual advantage by hearing. Take pains with your hearts in private before you come: make them tender, fit to receive impressions. Set them open, that Christ may come in. Make room, empty them of sin and vanity, that the Spirit may work freely. Get them melted in prayer and raised by meditation. If you seek the Lord there, He will find you here. If you meet Him in private, He will come along and continue with you. You expect no increase from seed if it is cast into the ground before it is plowed and broken up. You must get the fallow ground of your hearts broken up before you come to receive the seed of the word:

Sow for yourselves righteousness;
Reap in mercy;
Break up your fallow ground,
For it is time to seek the LORD,
Till He comes and rains righteousness on you.
(Hos. 10:12)

If you would sow rightly and reap in mercy, you must break up and prepare your heart. How do you do this? Seek the Lord by heartbreaking, heart-melting prayer. Then He will rain righteousness, peace, and holiness—not in drops but in showers (Jeremiah 4).

Do not sow among thorns; pluck them up and cast out cares, pleasures, lusts. Otherwise, there will be no room for the good seed; they will choke it. Say to them, like Abraham to his young men going to sacrifice in Genesis 22:5, "Stay here with the donkey; the lad and I will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you," if lawful.

Do not let your hearts be like the highway; the seed that fell there did not prosper. Enclose your hearts with holy thoughts and awe-filled understanding of God. He is a jealous God and will be sanctified. Common hearts are profane hearts. There must be a separation; you must fence your hearts against the inroads of the world. Do not let your hearts continue rocky. If they are, even though the seed may abide there, it cannot take root. Get them softened and melted, that they may receive impressions from the mold of the word. By conversing in the world, we contract hardness and pollution. Although it makes us not altogether incapable of fruitful and familiar converse with God in ordinances, it many times leaves only a remote capacity for such things. To remove this requires extraordinary attention and care. Green wood will not quickly or easily take fire if we want to kindle it suddenly; it must be dry. We must get our hearts warmed in private so that we may be kindled in public, so that our hearts may burn within us when He speaks to us. Those who have experience of the Lord's presence and workings find there is a vast difference in

the efficacy of the word when they come either negligently or preparedly. When they step immediately out of the world into God's presence, their interviews are not as delightful, as advantageous; the word not as powerful, melting, inflaming as when they have endeavored to dispose their hearts for so great a work.

Make It Personal

Receive the word, and every part of it, as concerning you in particular. Set yourself as in God's presence and persuade yourself that He speaks to you; hear it, as believing that God designed it and cut it out for you. See that God aims at you and puts His message into the mouth of His messenger on purpose for you. It is Satan's policy to persuade the opposite, that he may render the word ineffectual, so that you think, "The word belongs to others, not to me." It is certain there is no truth delivered, no sin threatened, no duty commanded, no state discovered but it concerns everyone, and therefore you in particular, and God sends it on purpose to you. For if a sparrow does not fall to the ground but by God's appointment, surely there is no word that proceeds from the mouth of God but out of design. If providence reaches less things, much more does it reach greater things. If you must give an account for every word you hear, it is sure that every word concerns you, for God is not imprudent or unjust. Hear it then as spoken to you, as sent to you.

The word is never effectual unless it is particularly applied. When your soul is opened to receive it as Lydia's was, or when your heart is pricked like Peter's hearers, it will be effectual. Ministers in public assemblies can speak only generally; they must not name men and say, like Nathan to David, "You are the man!" Though it is their duty, and they endeavor to speak precisely to every man's condition, yet what is most particular from them is only a general notion to you if you do not apply it or receive it as spoken to you. If there is not a receptive faculty in every particular soul, in every member of the mystical body, as there is in every part of the natural body, this spiritual food will never nourish. A surgeon bids apply a salve to a sore hand, and the hand casts it off as fitter for the head. Is there any hope of a cure? A physician prescribes medicine to a sick man; he refuses to take it and says his neighbor stands in more need of it. So if you, when threatenings are denounced, say that such a man indeed is a great sinner and this may belong to him, but you thank God that you are not as bad, that you are not like other men—this is a dangerous stratagem of Satan to make the word unprofitable. The word, whenever it does good, enters into the heart (see Acts 16:14). "Your law is within my heart" (Ps. 40:8). "Your word I have hidden in my heart" (119:11). "I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts" (Jer. 31:33).

By those means the word is kept out. Some truths are more seasonable than others, yet all are seasonable in some respect. That is seasonable which is suitable to our condition. Our condition is past, present, future, or possible. That is most seasonable which concerns the present state, and the others as they have an influence on it.

Present: If in the state of nature, it is seasonable to show the misery of it and the necessity of a change.

Past: This may be useful to one who is regenerate to make him thankful, fearful of relapsing into former sins, pitiful to others, affectionate to Christ.

Future: I am now in health and prosperity; but sickness and persecution will come, and it will be seasonable now to prepare for them.

Possible: You hear some grievous sin threatened. You are not guilty of it, but it is possible you may be. The seeds of that sin are in you. Therefore, it is useful to make you watchful and dependent on Christ and sad for the sinfulness of your nature.

Get knowledge of your greatest wants, weakest graces, strongest lusts, worst disorders, coldest affections, and most difficult troubles so that you may know how to apply the word. All must be applied, but especially those that are most seasonable. There is prudence required to discern “what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Rom. 12:2). If you don’t apply it, the word will be as profitable as meat not eaten.

Seek God's Presence

Do not be satisfied with anything in hearing except the presence of God. That special presence, when operative, makes the word effectual to the ends appointed. The presence of the Lord—His glory—filled the tabernacle under the law, and His presence is as abundant and glorious under the gospel. Now He fills the tabernacle with His presence when the glorious effects of His presence are sensible in the hearts of the hearers—convincing, enlightening, terrifying, humbling, melting, inflaming, comforting, strengthening, quickening. These are the signs of this glorious presence. It is a greater glory than the other, though not visible; it is more like the glory of heaven and more suitable to the spiritual and elevated estate of gospel spirits.

The efficacy of all the means of grace, and of hearing the word in particular, depends on God's cooperating presence, which is their light, life, power, and sweetness. There is no healing virtue in these waters unless the angel of God's presence descends and troubles the waters; whoever steps in after the troubling is made whole of whatever disease he has (see John 5:4). It is a popish delusion to expect anything *ex opere operato* (from the work done), without respect to the manner of doing. It is a great provocation to expect *ex opere operantis* (from the preparation of the hearer or endeavors of the speaker) without looking higher. All that we have to depend on or expect from is *opus co-operantis* (the

concurrence of God). If an angel from heaven should preach, or a man with the tongue of men and angels, it would be ineffectual without cooperation. If Christ Himself should again exercise His prophetic office on earth and preach the gospel, it would have no better success than on the Jews without divine concurrence.

The word, though light in itself, is darkness to you unless the glorious presence of God scatters the clouds that benight the faculty, clears the medium, and discovers the object. The word, though spirit and life in itself, will be a dead letter to you unless His Spirit and presence quicken it. It is like a body without a soul; it is His presence that informs, acts, enlivens. It is quick and powerful in itself, but it does not move the soul, conscience, will, or affections; these weapons are mighty through God. The affections are like the wheels in Ezekiel's vision, God's presence like the spirit of those living creatures: "Wherever the spirit wanted to go, they went, because there the spirit went; and the wheels were lifted together with them, for the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels. When those went, these went; when those stood, these stood; and when those were lifted up from the earth, the wheels were lifted up together with them" (Ezek. 1:20-21).

What is the reason that a truth sometimes breaks in with rays of light and evidence when there was always darkness before, though that truth was oftentimes before set forth? What is the reason a passage

sometimes affects, moves, inflames, while at other times, though pressed with as much power, moves not at all? God's presence. The heart is sometimes like brass, sometimes like oil. Seek God's presence above all. Avoid what hinders. Mourn and lament after Him. Pray, "If You do not go with us, we will not go!" (see Ex. 33:15). Cry after Him, "Oh, that You would rend the heavens! That You would come down!" (Isa. 64:1).

Nourish Heavenly Impulses

Take heed of suppressing any good impulses raised by the word. Constant hearers have experience of some convictions of sin, sensing a resolve to leave the sin and care for the soul. Nourish these inclinations! Take heed of smothering them. They are the blessed children of heaven. Will you stifle, murder them in the conception, make them like an untimely birth? They are buds springing from the immortal seed. Will you nip them? They are sprigs planted by the hand of Christ, which would grow into a tree of life. Will you pluck them up by the roots, expose them to the frosts, break them while young and tender? They are sparks kindled by the breath of God, heavenly fire. Will you quench it? They are the Spirit's breathings, His struggles, and He will not always strive. They are Christ's knocking, and you do not know how long He will stand at the door. Will you send Him away without admission? They are the Bridegroom's wooing. Will you repulse Him and cause

Him to give no more inclinations? They are Christ's messengers. He sends these for trial; prepare the way before Him. What became of those who stoned and killed the messengers? See Matthew 21:35, 41–43.

Nourish and encourage these impulses. Do not overwhelm them with worldly employments; do not choke them with cares; do not quench them with pleasures. Do not drown the voice, like the Israelites drowned the noise of the sacrificed children. Or, like Cain, do not run to build cities, busy yourselves in the world, and stop your ears until God's voice is heard and accomplished. Do not go from this place into worldly company. Go to a private place and blow up the sparks into a flame with prayer.

Obey without Reservation

Come with resolution to do whatever you will hear, to comply with the whole will of God without reservations. There must be no more respect of truths than respect of persons. You must not deal with duties like Nebuchadnezzar with his subjects (Dan. 5:19)—which you will set up, and which you will pull down. This is to exalt yourselves above God. There is a series of truths and duties; if you take one link out of the golden chain, you break the whole (James 2:10). Obedience is the sweetest harmony the Lord can hear on earth, and the perfection of it is a consonance to the divine will; if every string is not tuned, every action not tightened up, there can be no concert. There will be nothing but discord, which

is harsh and displeasing in His ear. You must present yourselves before the Lord like Cornelius and his company: "We are all present before God, to hear all things that are commanded you by God" (Acts 10:33); like them, we are to hear all things commanded, and to do all things we hear. You must believe every truth revealed, avoid every sin forbidden, practice every duty commanded without exceptions; you must not pick and choose. Every fruitful hearer has a good and honest heart, and this is a heart after God's own heart. We have the character of such a heart in David; he fulfilled "all My will" (Acts 13:22).

Resolve to do what the people promised the prophet in Jeremiah 42:5-6: "The LORD be a true and faithful witness between us, if we do not do according to everything which the LORD your God sends us by you. Whether it is pleasing or displeasing, we will obey the voice of the LORD our God"; whether it seems good or bad to us, great or little, difficult or easy, pleasing or harsh; though it crosses carnal reason, lusts, interests, let us obey the Lord.

Do not say, "Is it not a minor command? The Lord will make an exception; He is not as strict as the minister." There is nothing little that the great God commands. His pure eye sees atoms; the least sin will damn. "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone

were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matt. 18:6).

Do not think anything is too difficult—to avoid all sin and the occasions of those sins, to exercise every grace, to keep a constant watch over heart and ways. Is anything too hard for God? He is engaged in the work Himself: "Those who wait on the LORD shall renew their strength" (Isa. 40:31). The more difficulty, the more honor. Abraham was ready to obey in that which was grievous. Did not Christ suffer more grievous things than you can? Is not the penalty more intolerable than the precept? Would the damned think anything too hard?

What if it seems to contradict reason? Do not say like the Jews, "This is a hard saying; who can understand it?" (John 6:60). Paul did not consult with flesh and blood. "O man, who are you to reply against God?" (Rom. 9:20). Are you wiser than He? Is not infinite understanding the rule of His will? Captivate reason; bend the understanding to His mind.

What if obedience means the end of your pet sins or calls for you to pluck out your right eye? Is it not better, "more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell?" (Matt. 5:29). An honest heart counts that word most pleasant which wounds his lusts:

Let the righteous strike me;
It shall be a kindness.
And let him rebuke me;
It shall be as an excellent oil;
Let my head not refuse it. (Ps. 141:5)

He says to the word, to the minister preventing sin, like David to Abigail, "Blessed is the LORD God of Israel, who sent you this day to meet me! And blessed is your advice and blessed are you, because you have kept me this day from coming to bloodshed" (1 Sam. 25: 32–33). Lay your conscience bare; say, "Speak, Lord; strike, Lord, with a deadly wound Your enemies that would not have You to rule."

What if it doesn't agree with your interests, profit, pleasure, credit? Is any interest dearer than your soul's? Is it not better to deny yourself than that Christ should deny you? What did Zacchaeus lose by restitution? Ask him now in heaven. What did Moses lose by choosing afflictions rather than the pleasures of sin? What did the apostles lose by exposing themselves to contempt? They were "the filth of the world" (1 Cor. 4:13). They are so far from repenting that if they were on earth again, they would say with David, "I will be even more undignified than this" (2 Sam. 6:22). If you make exceptions against any command, God will except you when He dispenses eternal rewards.

Is it enough to promise God half of the kingdom? Halting obedience will never come to heaven. It is all

or nothing. Do not say, "The Lord will be merciful to me in this." The Lord will never be merciful to any who allowed disobedience: "If anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy"—from the words expressing God's will—"God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city" (Rev. 22:19).

Mix It with Faith

"The word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it" (Heb. 4:2). Faith is a necessary ingredient to all spiritual services. Without faith it is impossible to please God, and what does not please Him cannot profit us. Get faith and exercise it. Believe (1) that God speaks; (2) to you; (3) that which is true; and (4) that which is good. Of the first and second, I spoke formerly.

Believe the truth and goodness of what you hear: true in itself and good to you. There are two acts of faith: assent and consent. The former is in the mind; the latter is in the will. The object of the mind is truth; the object of the will is goodness. Both are necessary. Faith is ineffectual and insufficient without this. Be assured of the truth and goodness of the word. All truth is excellent, but this is transcendent, of a higher descent; it is the dear child of God, divine, and derives its origin from God. God's truth comprises all other truths and adds of its own nature unspeakable excellence to them. It is not only logical or moral but divine, consisting in a

conformity not only with the mind of men and angels but of the mind of God. It is divine intellect, infinite understanding. So is its goodness in consonance to the divine will; it is desirable to God, so convenient and agreeable to His will, as it is called directly the will of God. It has all degrees of goodness:

- ✦ Holy and just, and perfectly so: the rule of all holiness and justice in the world; the first and most perfect in each kind; the measure of the rest.
- ✦ Sweet: honey, manna, bread of life, water of life. It is to the soul as these would be to one dying, ready to expire for hunger or thirst.
- ✦ Profitable: to make perfect, happy. Both these are applicable to assertions, commandments, promises, threatenings. The truth no one but an atheist can deny. The goodness is unquestionable, especially if what seems most doubtful can be proved to be certain; namely, that the threatenings are good. That is clear in the life of Hezekiah, who says to Isaiah, "The word of the LORD which you have spoken is good!" (2 Kings 20:19). Notwithstanding, we may take up the prophet's complaint, "Who has believed our report?" (Isa. 53:1). If we did believe "the wages of sin is death"; "unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God"; "unless [we] repent, [we] will all likewise perish"; he who is not in Christ is a reprobate (Rom. 6:23; John 3:3;

Luke 13:3, respectively; see 2 Cor. 13:5 KJV), we would follow Jehoshaphat's advice: "Believe in the LORD your God, and you shall be established; believe His prophets, and you shall prosper" (2 Chron. 20:20). Let it dwell in your hearts by faith.

Love the Truth

Receive the truth in the love of it: 2 Thessalonians 2:10, "Because they did not receive the love of the truth [i.e., truth in love], that they might be saved." He who would hear savingly must hear it with love—not out of fear; not out of custom; not for a hidden agenda; not for credit, profit, or preferment. He who would hear savingly must love the naked truth for its own native loveliness, without extra consideration. He must love it since the truth is in Jesus: of Him and from Him.

If you are moved by base ends, when these are removed, the word will be rejected. But if you are moved by the intrinsic excellence of the word—since this excellence is eternal—your acting for and affections to the word will be constant.

This was the cause of the inconstancy—the apostasy—of the stony ground: they believed, received the word with joy while it was fashionable and while they might do it with safety, applause, and outward advantage; but when persecution arose, they fell away.

It is love that gives the word roots. Love would have made the rock open, not being content to receive it on

the surface. It unites the word to us, us to it. It is a unity of affection (Ps. 119:31). It incorporates it, transforms us into its likeness, and assimilates us to it.

Some truths require a special love—evangelical or spiritual truths that are above those that we share in common with unbelievers. These are truths that discover our happiness or misery, that reveal our moral virtues, that show the excellence of Christ, the necessity of Him, the way to Him, and the privileges won by Him. The truths we love are practical, not merely notional. They are the kind that may awaken sin, nourish grace, and teach us to order our conversation. These are searching truths, such as discover our condition, pierce our conscience, unmask the soul, detect hypocrisy, and offer to our view the more refined and less visible stains of the spirit: pride, selfishness, earthliness, and other secret and little-known evils. Indeed, such truths demand a special love. Therefore, love the truth.