

S21215

Rice, John Holt, 1777-1831.

A Sermon on the Duties.

Philadelphia, Woodward, 1810. 29 pp.

MWA copy.

C 7

A

SERMON

ON THE

DUTIES OF A MINISTER OF THE GOSPEL:

PREACHED AT THE OPENING

OF THE

PRESBYTERY OF HANOVER,

AT DEE ESS CHURCH;

OCTOBER 11, 1809.

BY JOHN H. RICE, A. M.

PUBLISHED AT THE REQUEST OF THE PRESBYTERY.

————— The Pulpit (in the sober use
Of its legitimate, peculiar powers)
Must stand acknowledg'd, while the world shall stand,
The most important and effectual guard,
Support and ornament of Virtue's cause.

COWPER.

PHILADELPHIA :

PRINTED BY WILLIAM W. WOODWARD,

No. 52, South Second-street.

1810.

TO THE

REV. CONRAD SPEECE,

THE FOLLOWING DISCOURSE

IS INSCRIBED BY THE

AUTHOR,

AS A MEMORIAL OF A FRIENDSHIP,

COMMENCING IN CHILDHOOD,

MATURED IN MANHOOD,

CONTINUING THROUGH ALL THE VICISSITUDES OF LIFE,

AND TO BE RENEWED, IT IS HOPED, AND PERPETUATED

IN ETERNITY.

A

SERMON

ON THE

DUTIES OF A MINISTER OF THE GOSPEL.



COLOSSIANS IV. 17.

Say to Archippus, Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfil it.

THE probability is, that the person here mentioned, was a minister of the Gospel. This appears from the charge here directed to be given to him : from his being called, in the Epistle to Philemon, Paul's fellow-soldier ; and from the most common usage of the Greek word, rendered ministry. The word is indeed, sometimes used to designate the office of deacon, but more frequently, that of * minister of the Gospel. Such, then, we believe was Archippus. And this, it appears, was the import of the message to him : " Take heed that thou perform, with diligence, fidelity, and zeal, all the duties of the sacred office ; remembering that thou art accountable to the Lord for thy conduct in it ; that thou art encouraged to look for his assistance ; and bound, as much as in you lieth, to promote his glory." [See Scott on the text.]

* The following are instances of this usage. Acts i. 17. 25. vi. 4. xx. 24. Rom. xi. 13. xii. 7. It is not necessary to produce more.

The object of the discourse now about to be delivered, is to state the duties of a minister of the Gospel; and to present to the minds of my reverend brethren, motives to fidelity in that office which we have received of the Lord. As the subject, however, is very copious, many things must be touched very lightly; and many, perhaps, altogether omitted.

The duties of ministers of the Gospel may be arranged under two general heads. 1. Those which arise from their relation to each other as servants of Christ. 2. Those which arise from their relation to the Church in general.

A very few remarks will be made on the duties of the first class.

1. United by many endearing ties, and having many common interests, and trials, and dangers, we are bound to pray with peculiar fervour and importunity, one for another.

2. Having many perplexities and difficulties, of which they alone can have just views, who know them by experience, we are bound to give to each other, counsel and advice: taking care at the same time to avoid all arrogant pretensions to superiority in wisdom or intelligence.

3. As we are men of like passions with others, and of course liable to imperfection and error, it is our duty, on proper occasions, to give and to receive with fraternal affection, admonitions and reproofs: And,

4. It is our duty to rejoice in each others honour and success in the ministry; carefully avoiding all unholy emulation, all jealousy and envy; provoking one another only to love and to good works.

This would be the proper place to treat of the duties of ministers of the Gospel, as members of the judicatories of the Church. These are of a mixed nature, arising both from our relations to each other, and to the Church in general. This is a very interesting topic; but lest this discourse should be

drawn out to an unreasonable length, this point shall be left to some one more able than I am to do justice to it: and we shall proceed to the second class of duties incumbent on ministers of the Gospel, namely, those which result from their relations to the Church in general.

The duty which shall be first mentioned here is that of *preaching the word*. But because this has been the subject of a discourse, heretofore delivered at the opening of this Presbytery, * I shall make only a few remarks upon it.

The Scriptures, although not written in systematic order, contain a harmonious system of divine truth, in which due weight is allowed to every doctrine, and the proper place assigned to every duty. Now, our teaching ought to be conformed to the Scriptures, both in doctrine and manner. Nothing is to be judged unimportant, which the wisdom of God has revealed. We ought, therefore, to attempt to give *whole*, and *connected* views of divine truth for the edification of our hearers. Otherwise, very imperfect notions of evangelical doctrines may be formed by those who attend on our ministrations. To illustrate what has been said, by an example. The necessity of the influence of the Holy Spirit, and the absolute dependance of man upon the grace of God, in the whole work of salvation, are very clearly taught in Scripture. But should a preacher exclusively insist upon these doctrines, incessantly repeating, "You can do nothing, absolutely nothing," is there not reason to apprehend, that they would be seized upon as excuses for the negligence and carelessness of the unbeliever, and the lukewarmness of the Christian? When Paul teaches that "It is God who worketh in us both to will and to do;" he also enjoins it on us, to "Work out our salvation with fear and trembling." So also, when we teach the dependance of man upon God, we ought to urge the ne-

* By the Rev. Matthew Lyle.

cessity of diligence and activity in the use of the means appointed by God for the attainment of his blessing. Again, nothing is more certain than that external performances, without the heart, are mere mockery in the sight of God. But should we, deeply impressed with this truth, insist only upon what has been termed *inward* religion, as distinguished from *practical*, might not our hearers learn to substitute *feelings* and *frames*, in place of all the duties of religion? And, instead of cultivating the active benevolence, and practising the sublime virtues of Christianity, would they not use every effort to excite those feelings which they had been taught to consider essential to salvation. These instances may exemplify the remarks which have been made, and show the necessity of exhibiting to our hearers the whole system of truth contained in the Gospel. The partial, and exclusive method of preaching here censured, may not only give perverted views of religion, and thus injure the Church; but by inducing a suspicion of poverty of intellect, and scantiness of information in us, may lessen our dignity, and thus hinder our usefulness among *those that are without*. “Let no man despise thee,” said the Apostle Paul to a young preacher ordained by himself. But while we endeavour to avoid that contempt which intellectual poverty produces; let us not, (a common error with men of more genius than piety) affect the characters of fine, philosophical preachers: they are often little better than baptized deists—but let us, “not in words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but “in demonstration of the Spirit, and with power,” preach the whole truths of the word of God.

2. Another duty appertaining to the pastoral office, is the enacting of laws for the government of the Church of Christ *. Some may, perhaps, be startled at this assertion. Many indeed, receive it as a

* It is not meant that this power is committed exclusively to pastors. In our Confession of Faith, the people, by their representatives, are associated with the ministers, in this important business

maxim that Christ has, either by himself, or his apostles, established every rule necessary for the government of the Church; and of course, that it is the height of presumption, to think of legislating for this purpose. The great Head of the church certainly did every thing expedient in the circumstances then existing. In the government of such a society as the Christian Church, spread over half the globe, and placed in an undefinable variety of circumstances, it would be impossible, in such a volume as the New Testament, to comprise rules to suit every case which might occur. All, therefore, that could be done, was to prescribe a sufficient number of general rules, the application of which to particular cases, must be directed by other rules less general; arising out of the circumstances, the habits, and manners of the people; or at least, modified by them. And whatever objections have been raised against Confessions of Faith, and Constitutions or forms of Church Government, there has never been a church without them, either written, or established by usage, and handed down by tradition from one age to another. Now the power of enacting these laws, is, in part at least, entrusted to the bishops of the Church. But the utmost caution is necessary, lest we transcend the powers committed to us. The claim to the vicegerency of Christ upon earth, is one of those assumptions, from which it is hoped that the world is now freed for ever. But power, whether ecclesiastical or civil, is always assuming. We ought then, carefully to study the general maxims given by the Lord Jesus, for the regulation and controul of the officers of his church.

One of the most important of these maxims is contained in the declaration of our Lord when he stood before Pilate: "My kingdom is not of this world." What incalculable mischief would have been prevented, had the import of this single declaration been always duly regarded! The religion of the meek and benevolent Saviour, was not designed

to be an engine of state ; an instrument of erecting a despotism to controul the consciences of men ; to crush every manly independent feeling of the soul, and extinguish every spark of liberty. I know, brethren, that I speak the sentiments, both of you who are present, and of our Church in general. We want no blending of Church and State ; no establishments ; no grand dignitaries of the hierarchy, clothed in the pomp and splendour of the world.

Another maxim in ecclesiastical jurisprudence, though not expressly mentioned, yet clearly resulting from the one just considered is, that the censures of the Church shall create no temporal disabilities. In many countries, *called Christian*, excommunication has deprived the citizen of his most valuable rights. But this is not a doctrine of our Church. We are not a society of Jesuits : we have no secret articles of faith, to be executed, when some deep, subtil contrivance shall have enabled us to procure an establishment of presbyterianism. These are the dreams of the weak, or the malicious suggestions of the designing. We claim no power but that which is claimed, and exercised by every society in existence ; namely, the power of admonishing and reproving disorderly members ; and, in cases of obstinacy, of declaring that we will no longer hold communion with the offender. In other words, we claim the power of declaring on what terms we will consider any man a member of our voluntary association. It is one of our fundamental maxims, that authority is not given for destruction, but for edification. Discipline is, therefore, to be exercised with caution and tenderness. An excommunicated person is not to be deemed an outlaw, or treated as an enemy ; but to be admonished as a brother.

Permit me here to remark, that in addition to these limitations, our constitution has placed a guard against the encroachments of ecclesiastical power, by associating laymen with the clergy, in the government of the church. It would be very inconve-

nient, and in many cases quite unsuitable for the whole Church to take cognizance of a case of discipline. Lay-elders are, therefore, chosen to represent the people, and manage their affairs. Now, according to our Constitution, in all the higher judicatures of the Church, there may be as many lay-elders as clergymen; and in the church session, where most processes are instituted, and finally decided, laymen always constitute the majority. It will not be improper to remark that this form of ecclesiastical polity, very happily corresponds with the form of civil government under which we live; and is well calculated to inspire men with a predilection for republican institutions. *—The motive for introducing these remarks, it is hoped, will be duly appreciated.

3. A third part of ministerial duty may be expressed in the charge of Paul to one of his disciples. “That which thou hast received, commit unto faithful men, able also to teach others.” This is a matter of the utmost importance. The good of the state, and the prosperity of the Church, require us to be faithful in the discharge of this duty.—But what idea are we to form of a faithful and able preacher of the Gospel? Let us in few words attempt to delineate the character: A faithful minister of Christ, then, is one who, with a full belief of the word of God, and deeply impressed with its important truths; with a heart glowing with love to God and benevolence to man, and animated by the very Spirit of Jesus, declares the whole counsel of God; a man who “fearing God, and knowing no other fear,” reproveth and rebuketh, with all authority, the rich as well as the poor sinner; the high as well as the low; but whose chief delight is to administer to the humble and contrite, the consolations of the Gospel, and “in terms as sweet as angels use,” to whisper peace to the despairing sinner. A faithful minister will,

* Hume, in one of his Essays, makes a remark to this effect, that a prince would never choose Presbyterianism to be the established religion of his country.

like the good shepherd, feed the flock ; deal gently with the weak, encourage the timid, and reclaim the wanderer ; he will comfort the afflicted, instruct the ignorant, and assist the poor and needy. He will, like an angel of peace, enter the abodes of want and sorrow, pouring the “oil and wine” of consolation into the wounded heart of the widow, and drying up the tears of the orphan : in a word, he is ready to make any sacrifice, to forego any worldly pleasure, to endure any labour, and to expose himself to any danger, for the good of man, and the glory of his Saviour*.—But he must be able to teach others, as well as be faithful. An able teacher of religion has such acquaintance with ancient languages, history, laws and customs, that he can justly interpret the volume from which he draws his instructions ; he has a comprehensive view of the doctrines of the Bible, and has experienced their efficacy ; he is acquainted with the enemies of the Church, their forms of attack, and the most successful method of repelling their assaults. In a word, he is a man of extensive knowledge, yet not vain : a man of taste, yet not fastidious : a man of study, yet not a recluse : a man of deep thought, yet plain and simple in his mode of teaching. Thus, furnished for every good work, with zeal tempered by knowledge ; and knowledge, sanctified to the noblest purposes, the faithful and able teacher of the New Testament, exhibits to his hearers the perfections of God, the nature of his government, the sanctions of his law, the promises of his mercy, and all the awful, and all the affecting truths of the Gospel. Time and its vanities ; eternity and its important reality ; the joys of heaven and the horrors of hell ; the astonishing love of God to man, and the duty of man to his God, are the themes on which he dwells with peculiar earnestness, and with affectionate vehemence, presses on the atten-

* Here again the author refers his readers to a sermon on ministerial fidelity, preached at the opening of the Presbytery, by the Rev. Conrad Speece.

tion of his hearers.—But let us proceed to the consideration of the position a little while ago laid down—that the *good of the state, and the prosperity of the church* require us to “commit that which we have received, to faithful men, able also to teach others.”

In every state there will be, and there must be religion. Without it, human society cannot exist. The wise men among the heathen maintained this doctrine *. Indeed, man by the very constitution of his nature, is a religious creature. His weakness, and his wants make religion absolutely necessary, and no efforts have been able to expel from the human heart all regard to the Deity. The experiments upon human nature, which have been made in our own age, are sufficient to convince us that religion is the great bond of human society ; the law of attraction in the moral world. And, as in the material universe, should an act of almighty power annihilate that law of attraction which alike binds together atoms and worlds, all would be

A dark
Illimitable ocean, without bound,
Without dimension, where length, breadth, and height
And time and place are lost ;

an “ eternal anarchy ; a universal hubbub wild ;” so, should religion be destroyed, all would be desolation, and misery, and ruin in the moral world. Even hope, “ the last comfort of the wretched” would forsake the earth ; the gloom of everlasting despair would envelope the human race, and the deepest colouring of eternal darkness would overspread the face of nature. Religion is necessary : and the only question is, Shall we have the true religion or a false one ?—the religion which teaches man all that he ought to perform in all the relations of life ; or that, which takes away in a great degree, the sanctions of virtue ; and satisfies the conscience by the performance

* Let one speak for all. “ Pietate adversus Deas sublata, fides etiam, et societas humani generis, et excellentissima virtus justitia tollitur.

of some eternal ceremony, or the endurance of some useless penance? These questions admit of no discussion: nor does it now require any proof, that unadulterated christianity is the religion that is suited to the nature, and adapted to the wants of man. But we know that even Christianity has been perverted to the most wretched purposes. We know too, that the character of, at least a majority of professors, is determined very much by that of their teachers; that the very feelings and sentiments of the people are moulded and directed by their spiritual guides. Clearly then, it is important that ministers of the Gospel should be faithful men, able also to teach others. Examples, which the recollection of this audience renders it unnecessary for me to produce, are not wanting in the history of the Church and the world, to prove the truth of these remarks. But let us, from this general view of the subject, descend to one or two particulars, to show the usefulness of faithful and able preachers to society.

1. They are useful in promoting a sound and sober morality. They neither detail a system, patched up of worn out scraps of heathen ethics, and shreds of Gospel precepts, nor do they make all religion to consist in high flights of feeling; but while they teach the faith of Christ, they show its inseparable connexion with good works, and urge their hearers to "let their conversation be as becometh the Gospel." The effect of this kind of preaching, (it has been ascertained by experience) is to make the people just, sober, temperate, charitable, public spirited, and obedient to the laws of the land.

2. They are useful in enlightening the minds of the people. The discussions into which they enter, on the foundation of morals, the distinction between right and wrong, the various duties incumbent on men, and other topics of this kind, serve as so many lectures on the most important philosophy in the world. And it is not possible that the people should attend to these lectures without gaining improve-

ment much more valuable than any to be acquired in the schools of Philosophy. The cheapest and the easiest way in the world to make men good citizens of a state, like ours, where the best interests of the people depend upon their knowledge, is to furnish them with pastors of enlarged minds, of extensive views of religious truth, and of understandings imbued with the spirit of the Gospel of Christ Jesus.

3. They are useful in refining the taste, and purifying the feelings of man. The Scriptures are full of grandeur and sublimity ; of lively imagery, of impressive narrative, of affecting sentiment. Let me here introduce the testimony of the justly celebrated Sir William Jones, on this subject. “ I have carefully and regularly perused these holy Scriptures ; and am of opinion that the volume, independently of its divine origin, contains more sublimity, purer morality, more important history, and finer strains of eloquence than can be collected from all other books, in whatever language they may have been written * !” The truths of Scripture exhibited in their native simplicity and dignity, are wonderfully calculated to seize upon the affections, to elevate the soul, to soften the rugged temper of man, to give a fine cast to his feelings, to raise us above the meanness of sensual indulgences, and prepare us for an intercourse of benevolence and pleasure with our fellow men. Thus the religion of Jesus Christ, the best gift of God to man, while it prepares us for heaven, of all things best fits us for the present state of existence. How important to society is it, that we commit the precious trust that we have received to able and faithful men ! But let it be understood that these remarks are made solely for the regulation of ministers of the Gospel in the discharge of a very important duty. We want no legislative prescription of ministerial qualifications. Let not the civil powers interfere with the rights of conscience. Only let the people duly appreciate the value of faithful and able

* Vide his Life, by Lord Teignmouth, page 374. See also page 375.

preachers, and let them disrelish every thing in religion that is destitute of sound reasoning, and sober sense.

But it was said that, not only the good of the state, but the prosperity of the Church required of us diligence and care in the discharge of the duty under consideration. Let us consider this matter a little.

The Church is prosperous, when its members live worthy of the vocation wherewith they are called; when numbers are added to it of such as shall be saved; and when it is guarded against error, and protected from enemies. It is acknowledged that the prosperity, and even the existence, of the Church, depends upon the grace of God. But the use of means is according to the appointment of Heaven; and surely the means should be adapted to the end which is to be attained. With this remark, we proceed to the consideration of the particulars in which the prosperity of the Church has been said to consist.

1. The Church is prosperous, when its members live worthy of the vocation wherewith they are called. Now, that they may do this, it is necessary that they understand the doctrine of Christ. We know that we are sanctified by the knowledge of the truth. But men, occupied for the most part in the busy concerns of life, and having but little time for reading and reflection, cannot, by their own exertions, acquire that knowledge of the truth which is necessary: hence the reason of the establishment of a Gospel ministry; and hence, very clearly, the necessity of faithful, and able preachers of the Gospel.

We may arrive at the same conclusion in another way. The apostle, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, carefully prescribed the qualifications of * bishops of the Church. They must be “apt to teach, †” “not novices ‡;” they must give attendance to reading, and to meditation; they must be able to con-

* Every Minister of the Gospel is a bishop.

† 1 Tim. iii. 4.

‡ 1 Tim. iii. 6.

