

SERMON VIII.

PUBLIC WORSHIP.

HEB. x. 25.

Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is.

THE first teachers of our holy religion, and the servants of God in every age, appear to have laid peculiar stress upon the duty of "assembling together" for the purpose of public worship. For not only is it in itself a duty of great importance, the neglect of which seems, generally speaking, to imply no little disregard of our religion and of its divine Author, but because neither can doctrines be inculcated, nor other duties enforced with any prospect of success, while this continues to be neglected. For discourses upon subjects of whatever importance, are necessarily lost to those who refuse to come to hear them, who literally "set at naught their instruction, and will none of their reproof." To this duty, therefore, I now wish to draw your serious attention; and in treating of it I shall consider, first, the reasons on which it is founded; and, secondly, the excuses which too many persons are ready to advance to vindicate their neglect of it.

I. First, then; the public service of our Church is instituted, and excellently calculated, for two im-

portant purposes, distinct in their nature, but both tending to the same great end. These are, first, the joining together in public or common prayer and praise to God; and, secondly, attention to the instruction, the exhortation, the admonition, and reproof contained in his holy word.

Let us consider the first of these, the joining in common or public prayer and praise to God, and examine—I will not say in what respects it is superior to—but in what it differs from, prayer addressed to him in private. And here I must request the particular attention of those persons who are in the habit of saying, that they worship God sufficiently at home; that they can serve him in their own houses as well and as effectually as at church. We may remark, then, in the first place, that the holy religion which we profess is a social religion; a religion, the very nature as well as precepts of which, require its sincere professors to have fellowship or communion one with another; and this communion is particularly to be maintained in prayer and other religious offices. Accordingly, we read of its first teachers, the Apostles, that they "all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication,"^a that they "were continually in the temple praising and blessing God;"^b and we are told of their earliest disciples, that "they continued steadfastly in the Apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in common prayers;"^c and that they resorted to the place "where prayer was wont to be made."^d So necessary, indeed, was this duty considered, that in the passage which I have selected for my text, "the forsaking the assembling of themselves together," appears to have been deemed by the Apostles as a sort of apostasy, as a desertion of the faith of Christ.

^a Acts i. 14. ^b Luke xxiv. 53. ^c Acts ii. 42. ^d Acts xvi. 13.

Again. Many of the blessings which we ask from heaven, are blessings of a public nature. "O, pray for the peace of Jerusalem,"^e says the royal Psalmist; the Apostle exhorts that "supplications" and "prayers—be made for all men, for kings and for all that are in authority;"^f and we are to pray for the general welfare and prosperity of the Church and nation to which we belong. And surely it is peculiarly fitting, that supplications for public and common blessings should be offered in common; that we should join together in imploring those mercies, of which, as members of society, we stand in need.

Of the especial blessings promised by our Saviour to the social exercise of religion, you are continually reminded in the prayer at the conclusion of the ordinary Church Service. "Where two or three," says he, "are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."^g Does it not follow, that to forsake the "assembling of ourselves together" for public worship, is to act as if we despised this blessing, as if we set no value upon this immediate presence of our Lord?

Farther yet. We are bound to do all that we can to promote the interests of religion; in other words, to advance the glory of God; we are bound to "let our light so shine before men, that they may see our good works, and glorify our Father which is heaven."^h And doubtless this great end is more advanced by public than by private prayer. It is of the nature of the latter to shun observation; to be known only to God and to ourselves; but by joining in public prayer, we openly profess ourselves to be the servants and worshippers of the only true God, and call upon all around us to wor-

^e Psalm cxxiii. 6.
^g Matt. xviii. 20.

^f 1 Tim. ii. 1, 2.
^h Matt. v. 16.

ship him also, and to "fall low on their knees before his footstool." And where a whole congregation join earnestly and devoutly in offering up their common supplications to their Maker and Redeemer, it is obvious how much this must contribute to the individual edification of its members, and to the nourishment and increase of a devotional feeling.ⁱ

Praise and thanksgiving, even for private and personal mercies, and still more for public blessings, seem peculiarly to demand to be offered up in public. A mind really penetrated with gratitude, is glad and anxious to "show forth" its thankfulness, to celebrate the kindness of him, by whom it has been benefited, and "to make the voice of its praise to be heard." This was the manner in which the man after God's own heart, "the sweet singer of Israel," expressed the feelings of a grateful soul. He rejoiced to give thanks in public. "I will not keep back thy loving-kindness and truth from the great congregation." "I will pay my vows unto the Lord," says he, "in the sight of all his people, even in the courts of the Lord's house, even in the midst of thee, O Jerusalem."^k

The book of Psalms, indeed, contains the fittest expression of every branch of devotion; and the religious feelings of David ought to be the feelings of every one of us. Let me beg of you to consider, how highly he valued the privilege of taking part in the public worship of God, and how deeply

ⁱ Greatly would it tend to promote the high purposes for which public worship was instituted, if the whole congregation would join audibly in those parts of the service in which they are directed to join—for instance, in the General Confession, the Lord's Prayer, the alternate verses in the Psalms and Hymns, in the Creeds, and the Responses in general. Whenever the clerk's voice is heard, the voice of the whole congregation should be heard also.

^k Psalm cxvi.

he lamented the temporary privation of it. "O how amiable," says he, in the 84th Psalm, "are thy dwellings, thou Lord of hosts! My soul hath a desire and a longing to enter into the courts of the Lord." "Blessed are they that dwell in thy house: they will be always praising thee;" "for one day in thy courts is better than a thousand. I had rather be a door-keeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of ungodliness." The 42d Psalm appears to be a pathetic lamentation of his being for a season deprived of that public exercise of devotion in the Lord's house, in which his soul delighted. "Like as the hart desireth the water brooks, so longeth my soul after thee, O God. My soul is athirst for God, yea, even for the living God: when shall I come to appear before the presence of God?" "Now when I think thereupon, I pour out my heart by myself, for I went with the multitude, and brought them forth into the house of God."¹

O, my friends, why have we not more of this feeling? why are not we, like him, "glad when they say unto us, We will go into the house of the Lord!" if we are not, is it not a symptom that we are sadly wanting in spiritual mindedness and religious affections? that we have great reason, earnestly to implore God by his grace to soften our hearts, and to fill them with the genuine spirit of piety and devotion?

Such, then, my friends, are some of the reasons, upon which I conceive this duty of public prayer to be founded; and you will observe, that all that I have hitherto urged, applies as much to divine service when there is *no sermon*, as when there is *one*. We are required "not to forsake the assembling ourselves together" for the purpose of pub-

¹ Psalm xlii.

lic worship, by the whole spirit of our holy religion: it is our duty to take part in this worship, because of its tendency to advance the glory of God, and to promote Christian edification; because it is peculiarly calculated to draw down public blessings; because it is the fittest expression of our thankfulness; because it is recommended to us by the example of David, and of all the faithful servants of God.

But the service of the Church was instituted not only for the purpose of common prayer; it provides also for the instruction and edification of her members, by "reading the word of God," and by "preaching."

The word of God, we know, is able to make us wise unto salvation,^m and, in order to this, "is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness." And which of us is there who does not stand in need of some, or of all of these? The word of God "is profitable for doctrine and instruction in righteousness." Man by nature "is like a wild ass's colt,"ⁿ and greatly ignorant of those things which belong to his soul's health. There are too many persons who, though living in a Christian country, yet continue sunk in this ignorance, and in danger of perishing with those who know not God. To rescue them from this state of darkness and of the shadow of death, the ministry of the word was appointed by the Son of God; for both faith and saving knowledge "come by hearing, and hearing by the word of God;" but "how shall they," for whose benefit this word was intended, "how shall they hear without a preacher?" Jesus Christ himself came, as it was foretold of him by the prophets, to preach the Gospel to the poor; and we read that they to

^m 2 Tim. iii. 15, 16.

ⁿ Job. xi. 12.

whom he preached in person, "heard him gladly:" and with good reason heard they him, for he had the words of eternal life. But does he not still speak to us in the words of his Apostles and Evangelists? Does he not still address to us the words of eternal life, in those Scriptures which are indeed able to make us wise unto salvation? If this be so, what must be said of those men who are guilty of wilfully refusing to come to hear God's word in God's house? Do they not act as if they loved darkness rather than light? as if they valued not the Gospel of salvation? as if they despised and set at naught both the ministers and the word of the Son of God? If they continue ignorant, *their* ignorance is wilful; if they "are destroyed through lack of knowledge,"^o their destruction is of themselves.

But possibly some persons will plead that *they* are *not* ignorant; or that, even if they are, they have the means of instruction in their own hands; that they are able to read; and that from the Bible and other books they can learn their duty, and how to please God sufficiently at their own homes, without having recourse to the public instructions of the Church. Allowing all this to be true; admitting that they are already equal to a "scribe instructed unto the kingdom of heaven,"^p or that they may without difficulty become so; still these persons are not exempted from the duty of joining in the "public prayers" of the Church, even supposing that they need not her instructions; for the obligation to take part in public worship is, as I before observed, distinct from that of coming for religious information, and is equally incumbent upon *all*; upon the wise and the unwise, upon the learned no less than the unlearned. But, farther; the word

^o Hosea iv. 6.

^p Matt. xiii. 52.

of God is not only profitable for doctrine and instruction, it is also profitable for *exhortation*, for *correction*, and *reproof*. Superior learning and knowledge are not always attended with corresponding holiness of life. Even those who are well instructed stand sometimes in need of being exhorted to greater fervency of spirit, to greater zeal in their Christian warfare; they sometimes may even require admonition and reproof. Admonition and reproof, it is true, are displeasing to the pride of our corrupted nature; and it may be, that there are some men so devoid of all Christian lowliness of mind, and so ill able to brook admonition, as for this very reason to absent themselves from the house of God; men who, though their minister is bound at the peril of his own soul to warn them,^q are yet offended with him for so doing, and who withdraw themselves from his ministry lest the evil of their ways should be plainly set before them. All pride, however, and spiritual pride more especially, is most dangerous; and no light vengeance may be feared by those who refuse to be corrected by the book, or by the ministers of God, and cast "God's word behind them."

The service of the Church, then, was instituted, first, for public or common prayer; and, secondly, for public instruction, exhortation, and admonition from the word of God. Upon each of these accounts it is the duty of all Christians to resort to it. It is also our duty, as it is a principal part of the observance which we owe to the Sabbath or Lord's day. The obligation to keep holy one day in seven, and to dedicate it to the service of the Most High, we all acknowledge; and we all, I trust, are sensible, that one great reason of the institution of the Sabbath was, to preserve the knowledge of God

^q Ezekiel iii. 17.

and of his ways, and regularly to call off our thoughts from the world, and things of the world, and for a time at least to fix them on those unseen things that relate to eternity. Doubtless, then, to neglect the public service of the Church, is to act contrary to this obligation, is to profane the Lord's day, and in no slight degree to frustrate and render vain the gracious purposes for which it was appointed.

I am now, as I proposed, in the next place, to consider some of the excuses which men usually advance to vindicate their neglect of public worship. That there may be sufficient excuse for absence from the house of God, I am ever ready to allow. Sickness, for instance, or reasonable fear of sickness; attendance upon the sick; or the care of infant children, are of this description. And when a house stands remote from others, or contains many things of value, it may perhaps be inexpedient to leave it entirely empty and unguarded. The pleas, however, which are frequently advanced, are miserably weak, and too clearly show, from their very nature, that they proceed from a disregard for religion, a disinclination to the service of God. Some persons, for instance, endeavour to excuse themselves, because they are prevented by some worldly business, by some household cares and occupations. Since the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath, works of necessity and of charity are on that day permitted to us; and if they can at no other time be performed, may perhaps even excuse our absence from church. But are the cares and the business which these persons plead to be classed with either of these? Oftentimes they are works which might have been transacted in the preceding week, or deferred till some day following; and oftentimes the Lord's holy day is purposely set apart for some worldly occupation,

such as the settlement of accounts, such as journeys of amusement or of business; sometimes such as the cleansing of their dwelling and of their apparel. Even during those six days in which men ought to work, it is very possible to have our hearts and minds so far engaged in the affairs of this world, as to risk the loss of the one thing needful; if they are suffered to induce us to neglect the care of our souls, and the service of God on God's own day, they become most dangerous, and we have reason to fear that we are the servants of Mammon, not the servants of the living God. And we are not ignorant that those men in the parable, "who all with one consent began to make excuse,"^r for neglecting the invitation of their Lord, on account of some worldly hindrance, were not so excused, but counted unworthy of the heavenly feast, and left to perish in outer darkness.

Others again will, perhaps, plead that they are ashamed to appear at church on account of the pooriness of their clothes. If the meanness of your raiment is the consequence of your own neglect, you may indeed take shame to yourselves; but this is no excuse for neglecting your duty to God. If it is the effect of unavoidable poverty, it is no reproach to you; and if any one mocks or makes sport of you for it, that man will have much to answer for at the last day; for he that despiseth the poor, as well as "he that oppreseth" him, "reproacheth his Maker."^s In all such cases recollect that God does not look to the apparel and outward appearance, but to the inward thoughts and dispositions of the heart.

But not to occupy more of your time in examining these and the like excuses; let each person, who is inclined to advance them, seriously ask his

^r Luke xiv. 18.^s Prov. xiv. 31.

own heart, and let him ask it as in the immediate presence of God, whether he really wishes to join in the prayers of the congregation, and is really grieved when unavoidably prevented; let him ask himself whether his excuse for absence from church is such as ought in reason to be admitted; whether in fine it is such as he could venture to plead before the judgment-seat of Christ. There are indeed, I fear, some men who neglect public worship, without even pretending to make any excuse for their conduct. They absent themselves from church from a mere spirit of indolence and carelessness. They think it of no consequence whether they go thither or not, and had rather spend the time in sleep, or in amusement; by their fire-sides, or in idle empty talk with thoughtless men like-minded with themselves. And what can we say to such persons as these? Alas! if they would reflect seriously but for a single moment, surely they would be sensible that they are destitute of genuine religion; that instead of being possessed of that fervency of spirit which is recommended by the Apostle, they are sunk in a deadly slumber, in a fatal spiritual lethargy, which, unless they are roused from it by some alarming dispensation of Providence, and the influences of God's good Spirit, will terminate in the everlasting destruction of body and soul in hell.*

* I believe it sometimes happens that men absent themselves from church from a dislike to their minister. Now, in the first place, it is probable that this dislike is entirely groundless, occasioned it may be by their minister's faithful execution of his office. But even supposing it to be well-founded, yet what a weak pretext is this for neglecting a known duty? Those who go to church, go thither not to please their minister, but to please their God. For a man to stay away, to neglect the service of God, and the care of his own salvation, because he dislikes his minister, is an instance of folly unworthy a reasonable being.

And now, by way of conclusion, permit me to repeat the substance of what I have advanced.

It is your duty to resort regularly to divine service—and this both when there is no sermon, and when there is one—because it is your duty to take part in common prayer, on account of its peculiar tendency to promote the glory of God, and the edification of man; on account of the especial blessing and presence of our Saviour promised to it, and because it is recommended by the precepts and example of the faithful servants of God. It is also your duty to come to church for the sake of the *instruction*, the *exhortation*, the *admonition* there addressed to the congregation by God's minister. And, farther, it is your duty, because it is an important part of the observance due to the Lord's day. The truth of what I have said on this subject, you are yourselves, I am persuaded, all ready to allow. Let me entreat you, then, seriously to reflect, that every time that you deliberately forsake “the assembling of yourselves together as the manner of some is;” every time that you wilfully absent yourselves from church, without a really good and weighty reason, you are guilty of sinning against God with your eyes open, are guilty of leaving undone what you know and acknowledge you ought to do. Of the danger of such wilful disobedience you cannot be ignorant. But surely, my friends, you will not act so foolishly; you will not be such enemies to your own souls. Let me rather hope that you will make the “Sabbath of the Lord,” as in other respects, so especially in this, “a delight, the holy of the Lord, and honourable:”^u that so far from neglecting, you will be anxious to take part in his public worship, and, like David, be sincerely

^u Isaiah lviii. 13.

grieved when you are unavoidably prevented; that you will really take pleasure in the public exercise of devotion, and will rejoice to resort to the house of God "with the voice of praise and "thanksgiving, with the multitude that keep holy "day."

SERMON IX.

BAPTISMAL VOW.

DEUT. iv. 23.

Take heed unto yourselves, lest ye forget the covenant of the Lord your God.

ALTHOUGH God the eternal Spirit is to be worshipped with a spiritual worship, yet the devotion of the mind may be assisted by sensible objects. It has accordingly pleased the divine Author of our religion to appoint certain significant rites to be the means of conveying to us God's grace, while at the same time they have in themselves a natural tendency to excite and strengthen a religious frame and temper of soul. Such rites are the two sacraments: for by the word sacrament, you know, is meant "an outward and visible sign"—a sign that may be seen—"of an inward and spiritual grace "given unto us;" which sign must have been "ordained" or appointed "by Christ himself, as a "means whereby we receive such grace, and as a "pledge" or token "to assure us" that we do receive it. The only two sacraments thus appointed by Christ, are Baptism and the Lord's Supper; both of which are declared by our Church to be "generally necessary to salvation," necessary to the salvation of all those who have it in their power to partake of them.