

THE RECHABITES

Among the many Scriptures which have been written *“that the man of God may be thoroughly furnished unto all good works,”* there is none more efficacious in a certain way than the account read in our hearing this morning of the interview between Jeremiah and the Rechabites. Let us look at it for a moment. Jeremiah is divinely ordered to send for the Rechabites, and bring them into one of the apartments of the temple and offer them wine. The Rechabites were so called from their ancestor Rechab, whose son Jonadab left various directions for the guidance of their descendants. Under these directions, they lived a pastoral life in tents in the open field. Their being within the walls of Jerusalem at the time of Jeremiah’s message, was due to the presence of Nebuchadnezzar’s army in the country, from whom they naturally sought refuge in the principal fortified city of the land. Among other paternal directions for the regulation of their house was the command to abstain from the use of wine. It was principally with reference to this they were now sent for. Jeremiah having assembled them, produced tankards of wine and cups, and proposed to them to drink. *“Drink ye wine,”* said Jeremiah. *“We will drink no wine,”* said they.

“Jonadab the son of Rechab, our father, commanded us, saying, Ye shall drink no wine, neither ye, nor your sons, for ever . . . Thus have we obeyed the voice of Jonadab the son of Rechab, our father.”

It is with the divine application of this incident that we have to do. Such an incident, publicly transacted in the courts of the temple, would naturally attract notice, and secure attention to the lesson divinely intended. What was the lesson intended? Not abstinence from wine, though that is a good thing, as it is written:

“Who hath woe? Who hath sorrow? Who hath contentions? Who hath babbling? Who hath wounds without cause? Who hath redness of eyes? They that tarry long at the wine: they that go to seek mixed wine. Look not thou upon the wine when it is red, when it giveth its colour in the cup, when it moveth itself aright. At the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder” (Prov. 23: 29-32).

The lesson intended is conveyed in Yahweh’s own words:

*“The words of Jonadab the son of Rechab . . . are performed: for unto this day they drink no wine, but obey their father’s commandment . . . But ye **hearkened not unto me**. I have sent unto you all my servants the prophets, rising up early and sending them, saying, Return ye now every man from his evil way, and amend your doings . . . But ye have not inclined your ear, nor hearkened unto me”* (Jer. 35:14-15).

The words of a man are obeyed; the words of God are disregarded. This is the central argument of the incident. This is God’s complaint to the house of Israel by Jeremiah. And is it not a reasonable complaint? Whose words ought to be obeyed, if not the words of *“the high and lofty One, inhabiting eternity”*? Is it not a complaint that might, with peculiar force, be addressed to this age of the world? The commandments and ordinances of men are submitted to in all the ways of life, but the commandments of God have ceased even to be an intelligible idea, let alone a practical power, in the habitations of men. Yea, it may be said that the spirit of obedience in any direction is more and more on the wane. If man’s commands are obeyed, it is not from the spirit of obedience, but in the spirit of fear of consequences. Human law would soon be a dead letter, if it were not for the handcuffs of the police and the powder and shot of the military. Yet the spirit of obedience is the noblest spirit under the sun. It was the departure from it in the beginning that led to the world’s woes: it is the return to it that will be the salvation of men.

“By one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous (or obedient).”

God manifests His approbation of the one spirit, and His stern disapprobation of the other, in a special manner in the incident before us. He reminds Israel of the means He had adopted to bring them into the path of obedience, and He upbraids them as to the attitude they have shown.

“I have sent unto you,” He says, *“all my servants the prophets, rising up early and sending them.”*

In passing there is something worth notice in the expression, *“rising up early and sending them.”* It frequently occurs throughout the prophets. It illustrates the earnestness of the divine expostulation.

When a man is deeply interested in his work, he gets up early. The prophets were early risers; they aimed at making a distinct impression with the people. Therefore they chose the first part of the day. There is a lesson for us here: give divine matters an early part in your daily programme. Do not wait till your mind is unimpressible through exhaustion. Hear the voice of God in the reading of His word, when the mind, in the freshness of the morning's energy, is more susceptible to impression than after a day's toil and vexation. To have your daily reading in the morning will actually help to make the day less of a toil and a vex. The reading of the word acts like oil on the surface of water, rendering it less liable to disturbance from the passing wind.

See the result of Israel's heedlessness to the divine requirements.

"This people hath not hearkened unto me; therefore thus saith the Lord God of hosts, the God of Israel: Behold, I will bring upon Judah and upon all the inhabitants of Jerusalem all the evil that I have pronounced against them: because I have spoken unto them, but they have not heard; and I have called unto them, but they have not answered."

Look, on the other hand, at the way in which the obedient attitude of the Rechabites was estimated:

"Because ye have obeyed the commandment of Jonadab your father, and kept all his precepts, and done according unto all that he hath commanded you: therefore thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Jonadab the son of Rechab shall not want a man to stand before me for ever."

Yahweh regarded with such favour the fidelity of the Rechabites to the paternal traditions of their house, that He decrees the continuance of their posterity amid all the circumstances tending to their obliteration. There is little to be known accurately of the state of the tribes and families in the east, but, doubtless, if we could know matters as they are known to God, we should discover the descendants of Rechab, intact somewhere among the peoples of the east. They will, doubtless, be revealed in their ancestral identity in the great day of manifestation that comes with Christ, and will as doubtless occupy an honourable place in the mortal arrangements of the Kingdom of God. But, however this may be, we cannot mistake the emphasis of the divine endorsement in the case of a virtue which is little to be found in our day in these countries of the west; a virtue, not only of obedience, but of obedience to parents. This is a very unpopular virtue in our day. It had become so in the days of Jesus, who condemned the Rabbinical traditions by which a man was absolved from all obligations towards his parents on the payment of a sum to the temple. It remains the fact (however men may disregard, or may have forgotten the fact), that to the Lord God of Israel, who is the Creator, Upholder, and Proprietor of all things, it is well pleasing, and a matter of command from Him to us, that, *"children obey their parents,"* and honour the hoar head, and be respectful and merciful to the aged and infirm.

But the entire Rechabite incident is capable of a much closer application to our case, which it is appropriate and profitable to make on this, the occasion of our weekly surrounding of the table of the Lord. The Rechabites are, of course, a mere accessory to the main purpose of the prophet's message. They are introduced as a lever to the argument. The object was to force home on the consciousness of Israel the absurdity and heinousness of their disobedience of the commandments of God, and to influence them by exhibiting the consequences of their course. The application lies here: For a time God has departed from Israel and has turned to the Gentiles with an invitation to such as are disposed among the Gentiles to become His people. In response to that invitation we are here this morning, in fulfilment of our part as obedient children. The point for us to consider is: Shall we fare any better than Israel after the flesh if, like them, we are disregarding of the commandments delivered to us? Paul's answer to this is very explicit:

"If God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee . . . Continue in his goodness, otherwise thou also shalt be cut off" (Rom. 11:21).

We have not received the same commandments: but we stand related to the same God, who changeth not from age to age. We do not stand in the law delivered from Horeb's summit *"amidst blackness, and darkness, and tempest."* We are justified by a faith made perfect in love-prompted works. Nevertheless, the dispensation of faith is from the same God, who is a consuming fire, and into whose hands it is a terrible thing to fall (Heb. 12:29; 10:31). If there is any difference in the stringency of the two systems, Paul makes the difference in favour of the dispensation of faith. His words are:

*“He that despised Moses’ law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: of how much **sorer punishment**, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God?”*

And again:

*“If the word spoken by angels was stedfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward, **how shall we escape**, if we neglect so great salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord?”*

Consequently, we do well to realise the solemn obligations of our position, while thanking God for its great privileges. Like Israel, we also have received commandments to observe; and if, like Israel, we refuse to obey, like Israel we shall be cast away in anger to destruction. We have not been commanded to circumcise: we have not been commanded to offer our first-born to the Lord, with sacrifice of lamb or turtledove; we have not been commanded to observe Sabbaths, and feasts, and times, and seasons, and to repair to the priest in Yahweh’s sanctuary in the confession of our sins with the blood of bulls and goats. These appertained to the first covenant, and were done away in Christ. But we have received commandments for all that; and it will be time well spent just to glance at a few of them, by way of bringing them to remembrance, having in full view the declaration of the Lord Jesus, that, except our righteousness exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, we shall in no case enter the Kingdom; and his still more emphatic saying that, Not every one that saith, Lord, Lord, shall enter the Kingdom, but he that doeth the will of our Father in heaven. Such, and such only, he says, will he own as his brethren (Matt. 5:20; 7:21; 12:50).

What, then, are his commandments? They are various, and there are such as are first, and such as are next in order. On the first, Jesus has expressly placed his finger, saying,

“This is the first and the great commandment.”

What is it?

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind and with all thy strength.”

How is it with us, brethren, on this point? It is for each man to examine himself. Of one thing we may be certain: it is not possible to go too far in the cultivation of the love of God: for what is left when a man has given all his heart, and soul, and strength? And who can refuse this reasonable service? A man has only to realise God as He is displayed to us in the Scriptures—historically, illustratively, incidentally, declaratively, prophetically, doctrinally, preceptively—every way, to have his highest adoration enkindled, if his heart be not a piece of stony barrenness. The love of God is the first characteristic of the family of God. It comes as all love comes—by acquaintance; and this acquaintance is only possible in our day in the reading of the Scriptures. Therefore we are on the right road to render the required obedience of the first commandment, in performing the wisdom of a daily reading of the Scriptures.

There is a “second” commandment of which Jesus speaks: but there is another to be mentioned before the second, coming between the first and second, strange as it may appear. It is a commandment that is involved in the first, in so far as Christ is involved in God. There is a love of Christ that forms part of the love of God. No man can love God acceptably who does not love Christ. Christ is the way to God. He is the Father’s voice to us. We are to love and honour Christ even as we love and honour the Father who sent him, and who was in him and with him. This, Christ commands, and Paul illustrates, saying:

*“The love of Christ **constraineth me**.”*

He makes the attainment of the love of Christ the measure of sainthood. His words are beautiful words, forcible words. He prays for the Ephesians,

*“That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded **in love**, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the **love of Christ, which passeth knowledge**.”*

Labour to know much of this, brethren. While it is beyond human faculty as a matter of understanding, it is a glorious fact to be acquainted with, and received, and contemplated. The faith of it will warm and ennoble the mental man, and strengthen, as with a cordial, the drooping heart of the pilgrim, as he threads his way through the chill and darkness of this probation. Beware of suffering yourselves to be robbed of the great consolation. Too much hair-splitting jargon about the nature of Christ is liable to dissipate his noble idea from your mind, and leave you to wonder in your bitterness

how so sweet a matter should generate such a bootless war of abstractions. Be content with the testimony, and leave philosophy and vain deceit to the dogs which delight to gnaw the bones. Be sure that ye let Christ dwell in your hearts by faith; be sure that ye know the love of Christ that passeth knowledge, otherwise ye fail of a commandment which is part of *"the first and great commandment,"* the oversight of which will be found serious in the day of account.

The "second" commandment is like unto it:

"Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."

This is the root of all true courtesy and good manners. A consideration for your neighbour's comfort and well-being, at least equal to what you entertain for your own, will lead to those acts of kindness which differ as much from the well-bred mannerisms of polite society as the genuine sovereign does from the brass counterfeit. But the commandment gives us higher ground than the attractiveness of a gracious deportment. A disciple of Christ will shine in this matter, not because it is "the thing," or because it is of advantage in society, but **because it is a matter of command.**

"This I command you, that ye love one another."

Recognising this, a man will be able to persevere amid all the mortifications of the degraded society surrounding us. He will, for Christ's sake, do what Christ has commanded, knowing that it is only for a brief season that we are asked to act a gracious part amid all ungraciousness and evil.

And this leads to another class of commandment, at which there is only time to glance. The commands to love God, and Christ, and our neighbour, are commands that are comparatively easy to obey; but there are other commandments that are not easy to obey, our obedience to which is the test whether we really obey those already mentioned. Concerning this, Jesus says,

"If ye love me, keep my commandments"; and again, *"he that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me."*

Now, it is surely unnecessary to say that when Jesus thus speaks of his commandments, he speaks of them all. He does not mean that we may keep some and neglect others. His charge to the apostles, concerning the nations they were about to go forth and enlighten, was,

"Teach them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you."

Some of these we have observed. We have believed; we have been baptised; we meet for the celebration of the Lord's death; we read the Scriptures; we love the Lord; we love the brethren. What lack we yet? Perhaps we do not lack: but perhaps we do. There are other commandments.

"Love your enemies; pray for them that spitefully use you and afflict you."

"Resist not evil."

"Avenge not yourselves."

"Do good to the unthankful and the evil."

"If a man wrongfully sue you at the law, and take away your cloak, (instead of bringing a cross-action), let him have your coat also."

These are commandments not easy to obey. They go contrary to nature. Because of this, we are liable to give them the go-by in practice. But they are commandments of Christ for all that: commandments that have been delivered for and to the house of Christ. And for what were they given? Evidently for obedience. For no other purpose could they have been intended. They are not commandments that could have been given for their own sakes. It is not according to His declared purpose, that the evil should have the upper hand—that wrong should have a free course—that righteous men should be trampled under foot of the wicked, always. It is only for a season these things are permitted. It is only for a season they are commanded: and being commanded, it is for the proof of our obedience, and for self-exercise and discipline in submission to the divine will. When God required of Abraham the sacrifice of Isaac, it was not that God had delight in seeing Abraham put his beloved son to death: it was that He might prove him. When God asks us to submit to evil, it is not that He has delight in the triumph of evil: it is that we may be chastened and proved under His mighty hand.

"Wherefore," says Peter, *"humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time."*

Affliction is only for a moment: weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning. It was for the comfort of all his brethren, in every generation during his absence, that the Lord said to the company of his disciples in Galilee:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit

the earth. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. Blessed are the peace-makers: for they shall be called the children of God. Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye when men shall revile you and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you."

(Taken from: - "Seasons of Comfort" Vol. 1 Pages 533-539)