

heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience :’ wiping off your spots, and adorning yourselves in holiness of life, by the glass of the word, Jam. i. 25. ‘ Whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the word,’ &c. The word heard, but not practised, will sink men deeper in damnation ; but heard and practised too, will bring them into eternal salvation. O then be careful to practise what you hear, otherwise it will do you no good.

I shall conclude with an inference or two.

Inf. 1. No wonder most of the hearers of the gospel get no good of it. They are at no pains to prepare for hearing it, wrestle not in prayer for the Lord’s blessing upon it, receive it neither with faith nor love, are not solicitous to lay it up in their hearts, and as little to practise it in their lives. How then can they reap benefit by it, when they use not these commanded means ?

2. Here is the way to get good of the word, however little good is done by it this day. Prepare for hearing it ; pray earnestly for the blessing of God to accompany it : receive it with faith and love ; lay it up in your hearts : and reduce it to practice in your lives.

THE DUTY OF ATTENDING ORDINANCES ENFORCED.

ACTS x. 33.—*Immediately before I sent to thee : and thou hast well done that thou art come. Now therefore are we all here present before God, to hear all things that are commanded thee of God.*

As attendance upon the public ordinances is one of the special means whereby Christ communicates the benefits of redemption to us, I have chosen this text in order to enforce, farther upon you, the duty of a diligent attendance upon them.

Our Lord Jesus, the only King and Head of his church, hath appointed ministers his ambassadors to declare his mind unto his people ; and though he could teach his people without them, yet the ministry is his ordinance, and by the foolishness of preaching he saves them that believe. Here we have,

1. A call to Peter related. The person calling is Cornelius, a soldier. A Gentile he was, yet a proselyte : a good man, but one who as yet knew not the doctrine of Christ crucified. The person called was Peter ; him God honoured to break the ice for the calling of the Gentiles, and to take down the first stone in the partition

wall betwixt Jews and Gentiles. The call itself is in these words, *I sent*. He had sent three men to invite Peter to his house, ver. 7. The reason of the call is thus expressed, *Therefore*, because he had the command of God for that effect. He made quick dispatch in the call; it was done immediately after the mind of God was discovered to him.

2. Peter's compliance with the call commended, *Thou hast well done that thou art come*. It is acceptable to God and to us. Peter had no great inclination to this work; he had his scruples about the lawfulness of it: but God condescends to solve his doubts, and clear his way. It was very offensive to the Christian Jews, which necessitated him to make an apology for his practice, Acts xi. after all it was well done to come, because he came in obedience to the call of God.

3. An address made to Peter when he was come, by Cornelius the caller, in name of himself and those who were with him. In which take notice, (1.) Of a congregation, though small, yet well convened. What the congregation was, see ver. 24. 'his kinsmen and near friends.' These, with his family, and those that came with Peter, made up the assembly. The good man made it his business to get not only his own family, but his friends, to wait on the ordinances. (2.) An acknowledgment of God's presence in a special manner in religious assemblies, *We are all here present before God*. (3.) The great end of their meeting was their soul's edification, *to hear*, that is, to hear and obey. And here is what the minister is to preach and the people to receive; it is *what is commanded of God*. The minister has a commission from God, and he must preach, not what men would have him to preach, but what God commands; and the people are to receive nothing that is beyond his commission. The extent of both is *all things*; the minister is to preach, and the people to receive, *all things commanded of God*.

Obs. 1. When God discovers his mind in any particular to a person or people, it is their duty presently to comply with it without delay. There could be no disputing after the discovery of the Lord's mind, Gal. i. 15,—17. The contrary was the fault of Balaam, and of the Jews in Egypt, Jer. xlv.

2. It is a blessed thing for a people to call that minister to whom God himself directs and inclines them. It is like Cornelius, who did not so much as know Peter by name, Acts x. 5. but he goes to God, and God directs him.

3. It is a commendable thing in a minister of Christ to comply with the call of God and his people, though it should be offensive to some, and not very agreeable to his own inclinations. Ministers are to go, not where they will and others would wish them, but where

God wills. It was Levi's commendation, 'Who said unto his father and to his mother, I have not seen him, neither did he acknowledge his brethren, nor knew his own children: for they have observed thy word, and kept thy covenant.' Deut. xxxiii. 9.

The doctrine arising from the text is,

Doct. 'It is the duty of a people to attend on the ordinances, to be all present there before God, where pure ordinances are set up among them, to hear all things commanded of God to the minister whom the Lord hath sent them.

In discoursing from this doctrine, I shall,

I. Give reasons why people should attend on and be present at ordinances, where God has set them up among them.

II. Shew in what respects people are before the Lord in public ordinances.

III. Consider the disposition of soul wherewith people should come to them.

IV. Make some practical improvement.

I. I am to give reasons why people should attend on and be present at ordinances, where God has set them up among them.

1. Because God has commanded it, Heb. x. 15. The Lord calls his people to be present there, wherever it is. Thus there was the tabernacle of the congregation in the wilderness, whither the people resorted to the public worship; and afterwards the temple. And for ordinary the synagogues under the Old Testament were the places of public worship, the ruins of which the church complains of, Psal. lxxiv. 8. It was the practice of Christ himself to attend these places, as we find, Luke iv. 16. He sends ministers to preach, and therefore commands people to hear.

2. Because the public assemblies are for the honour of Christ in the world. They are that place where his honour dwells, where his people meet together to profess their subjection to his laws, to receive his orders, to seek his help to pay him the tribute of praise, the calves of their lips. And forasmuch as all are obliged to these things, all are obliged to be present and attend, and to cast in their mite into this treasury. And therefore the people of God look on Christ's standard in the world as fallen, when these assemblies are gone, as Elijah did, 1 Kings xix. 10.

3. Because these assemblies are the ordinary place where Christ makes his conquest of souls, Rom. x. 14. The gospel is Christ's net wherein souls are caught. And it is always good to be in Christ's way. Who knows when that good word may come that may take hold of the man's heart, and make him Christ's prisoner, bound with the cords of love? A great number were caught at the first sermon

preached after Christ's ascension, and cried out, 'What shall we do?' Acts ii. 37. So Lydia hearing the apostle Paul, her heart was opened, Acts xvi. 14. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation. Happy are they that get the deepest wounds in this field. 'For the weapons of *this* warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds, casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ,' 2 Cor. x. 4, 5.

4. They are Christ's trysting-place with his people, the galleries wherein our Lord walks, Exod. xx. 24; the mountains of myrrh, where he will be till the day break. Those that desire communion with God, should seek him there, and wait on him where he has promised to be found. What a disadvantage had Thomas by his absence from one meeting where Christ met with the rest of the disciples!

5. The delights of Christ and his people meet there; for ordinances are the heaven on earth. Christ delights to be there with his people, Psal. lxxxvi. 2. 'The Lord loveth the gates of Zion, more than all the dwellings of Jacob,' Luke xxii. 15. 'With desire,' said our Lord, 'I have desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer.' And they delight to be there with him, and for him. How passionately does David desire the ordinances! Psal. lxxxiv. 1, 2. 'How amiable are thy tabernacles, O Lord of Hosts! My soul longeth, yea even fainteth for the courts of the Lord: my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God.' He prefers a day in God's courts to a thousand: 'I had rather,' says he, 'be a door-keeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness. And again; 'One thing,' says he, 'have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple,' Psal. xxvii. 4. What good news was it to him to hear of an opportunity of waiting on God there! Psal. cxxii. 1. 'I was glad,' says he, 'when they said unto me, Let us go up into the house of the Lord.'

Lastly, The necessities of all that mind for heaven require it. Had the ordinances not been necessary, God would never have appointed them. And sure they are not more necessary for any than those that least see their need of them. These are the blind souls that have need to come to the market of free grace, for that eyesalve that opens the eyes of those that see not. Have not Christ's soldiers need of them to clear their rusty armour? do not dead souls need them to quicken them? sleepy souls, to awaken them? They

are the pools in the way to Zion, which the travellers to Zion have much need of to quench their thirst in their weary journey.

Surely the due consideration of these things may engage us all to make conscience of being all there present, as God gives opportunity.

II. I come to shew, in what respects people are before the Lord at public ordinances. The Lord is every where present; we can be no where but he is there, Psal. cxxxix. 7. But we are before him in a special manner in the public assemblies. He holds the stars in his right hand, and walks in the midst of the golden candlesticks. Our Lord has a special concern there; the main part of his business on earth lies there; and must he not be about his Father's business! This consideration should engage us to be there. Satan will not miss to be there: where Christ has a church, the devil will endeavour to have a chapel. The fowls will be where there is seed sowing. So some understand that, 1 Cor. xi. 10. 'For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head, because of the angels.' Now Christ is in the assemblies of his people,

1. Representatively. He has his agents there, his ministers, who are the Lord's proxies to court a wife for their Master's Son, 2 Cor. xi. 2. his ambassadors to negotiate a peace betwixt God and sinners, 2 Cor. v. 20. Matth. x. 40. Christ's ministers are but as John was 'the voice of one crying in the wilderness.' The Speaker is in heaven. Hence the Lord is said to speak in or by the prophets. It is the Lord's goodness that the treasure is lodged in earthen, not in heavenly vessels, lest their splendour should darken his glory in men's eyes, and so dazzle their eyes. And for the now glorified, God 'holdeth back the face of his throne, and spreadeth his cloud upon it,' Job xxvi. 9.

2. Efficaciously. His power is there, he works there, *et nihil agit in distans*, Psal. lxxv. 1. 'For that thy name is near,' says the Psalmist, 'thy wondrous works declare.' The word of the Lord is a powerful word. The ministers of Christ drive not an empty chariot, Psal. xlv. 4. 'In thy majesty ride prosperously.' Christ is there giving life to some, strength to others, and death's wounds to others, Mic. ii. 7. Psal. xlv. 5. Hos. vi. 5. The Lord's word returns not empty; it does always something. Every preaching will either harden or soften you; it will drive you a step nearer heaven or hell. Now, are we before him in his ordinances,

1. As our witness. They had need to carry warily that have many eyes on them. While we are at ordinances, men's eyes and the devils' eyes are upon us; but what should affect us most is, that God's eye is on us in a special manner, noticing how we behave, with what tenderness we handle holy things: and though our out-

ward carriage be never so promising, God is witness to the heart-wanderings, Ezek. xxxiii. 31.

2. As our Judge. God has a tribunal as well as a throne in the public ordinances, to reward or punish his worshippers according to their works. This has made the blood of some to be mingled with their sacrifices, as in the case of Nadab and Abihu, Lev. x. 3. God is jealous of his honour. A curious look into the ark cost the Bethshemites dear; and a wrong touch of it cost Uzzah his life. And we would make the same use of that which David did, 1 Chron. xv. 12, 13. 'Sanctify yourselves, both ye and your brethren, that you may bring up the ark of the Lord God of Israel, unto the place that I have appointed for it. For because ye did it not at first, the Lord our God made a breach upon us, for that we sought him not after the due order.' It is true the gospel-dispensation is more spiritual; and therefore spiritual plagues are more usual now: but these ordinances cure the worst of plagues.

(3.) As our Lawgiver, Isa. xxxiii. 22. We are his creatures, and therefore his will must be our law. We are his upon many accounts; we know not our duty. He has set up the ministry in his church to declare to people what is their duty, Mal. ii. 7. But, alas! many, by their despising the messengers of the Lord and their message, say, as Psal. xii. 4. 'Who is lord over us?' But God will lord it over such in spite of their hearts, Hos. xiii. 10. 'I will be thy King.' But the heralds must proclaim the subjects' duty, whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear.

(4.) As the Lord and master of the family, who has provided liberally for all of his house. Ministers are the stewards of the house; but he is the Master, that has made the provision in the gospel, Isa. xxv. 6. He sends out his servants, saying, 'Come, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine which I have mingled,' Prov. ix. 5. Look then how obedient children will stand and wait for supply of their necessities from an affectionate parent; so ought we to stand and wait on in ordinances for the supply of our spiritual wants from our heavenly Father.

(5.) *Lastly*, As our God, which should strike us with reverence, Psal. lxxxix. 7. 'God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints; and to be had in reverence of all them that are about him.' Psal. xcv. 6. 'O come let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the Lord our Maker.' And this challenges the most serious disposition of our hearts to worship him.

III. I proceed to consider the disposition of soul wherewith people should come to the public ordinances. It is with a spirit ready to

hear all things commanded ministers of God. It implies the following things.

1. That ministers are to preach nothing to the people but what is the mind and will of God. Lawyers must not speak without authority of the law; and ministers must not speak but with a *Thus saith the Lord*; otherwise they go beyond their commission. The scriptures contain what is to be believed and practised by us. To coin new articles of faith is the work of Antichrist, not of the ministers of Christ. To impose and teach significant rites and ceremonies in the worship of God, is a piece of Popish dregs in the church of England; concerning which our Lord says, 'In vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men,' Matth. xv. 9.

2. That it is the duty of ministers to labour to know the mind of God, as to particular messages which they are to carry to their people. Ministers are not to preach hand over head, whatever truths they can get to say to spend a half-hour in a sermon to the people. A word in season is very precious, Prov. xxv. 11; and xv. 23. And ministers had need of the tongue of the learned.

3. Whatever message the Lord gives them to a people, they are to deliver it impartially, *All things commanded them*. It was Paul's comfort that he had done so, Acts xx. 20. 'I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you,' says he to the elders of Ephesus.

4. *Lastly*, People ought to receive these messages from ministers as from the mouth of the Lord, and comply with them; for it is not bare hearing, but hearing with obedience, that is the hearing pointed at in the text. And with this disposition of soul should people come to ordinances.

Now, this hearing of the word has these properties.

(1.) We should hear reverentially. God speaks by ministers' mouths; and seeing God speaks at all, we must hear so, Psal. lxxxix. 7; forecited. See how Eglon behaved, when he was accosted by Ehud, Judg. iii. 20, 21. 'I have a message from God unto thee,' said Ehud. It is added, 'And he [Eglon] arose out of his seat;' denoting the reverence with which he was to receive the message. And so should we.

(2.) Diligently and attentively, Isa. lv. 2. 'Hearken diligently unto me,' says the Lord. God sends no message to us but what is of great concernment for us to hear; he does not take up our time with trifles; and when God speaks, it becomes us to be attentive.

(3.) Understandingly, so as to know the mind of God in what is preached, Matth. xiii. 11. We must endeavour to see heavenly things in their divine lustre, and to understand the things as well as

the words. We should 'look into the perfect law of liberty, and continue therein, being not forgetful hearers, but doers of the word.' And were this the way of hearing, ministers would get more soul-cases to resolve than they do.

(4.) Believingly, John ix. 27. He that hears as out of the mouth of God must needs believe what is said. If the word be not believed, it is all one as if it were not heard, Heb. iv. 2. The soul rightly disposed to hear, is ready to yield itself the captive of divine revelation, and receive the kingdom of God as a little child to hear with application. The Lord's word is compared to rain, Amos vii. 16; and the soul should be as the dry and gaping ground, ready to drink it in, Psal. cxliii. 6; though, alas! most are like the rock, upon which the rain makes no impression. Ministers make the plaister, but faith of application makes it stick.

5. *Lastly*, So as to practise what we hear. Though the ear hear, if the feet be not set on God's way, it is not acceptable to God, Jam. i. 22. That hearing that fills the head with knowledge, but not the heart with holiness, will serve only to let people see the way to hell more clearly.

I come now to the improvement of this doctrine.

USE I. For reproof. It reproveth,

1. Those who absent themselves from ordinances, and will not come to hear what is commanded us of God. A very small matter will prevail with many to sit at home, and loiter away the Lord's day in many places. When ministers are at pains to seek something that might edify their souls, they will not be at the pains to hear. O what contempt is poured on the gospel at this day by the pride of some, and the laziness of others! Whatever temptations any of you may have this way, I advise such, when they meet any thing that may seem to hinder them from the public ordinances, that they do in the first place, weigh the matter before the Lord, and see if it will bear weight there. If it do, they may look to God for the upmaking of their loss; if not, they cannot. For it is a most deceitful principle of some, that they can spend the Sabbath-day as well at home. It reflects on the wisdom of God in appointing public ordinances, and is most unlike the practice of the saints, to whom it was a great burden to be deprived of them. As for those who separate from our communion, I wish they would consider that Christ keeps communion with us, as many of the children of God can testify; and then say, as Zech. viii. 23. 'We will go with you; for we have heard that God is with you.'

2. It reproveth those who come to ordinances, but hear not the

word as becomes those who are to hear what is commanded of God. Such are,

(1.) Irreverent hearers. Many behave so as it appears there is no fear of God before their eyes. Some are sleeping, others gazing hither and thither, altogether careless and inattentive, to whom the word is as the seed presently picked up by the fowls. Their bodies are present, but their hearts are gone; they are the idols that have eyes, but see not; that have ears, but hear not.

(2.) Supercilious nice hearers, who sit as Judges of the word, and not as they that are to be judged by it. Hence such will be ready to commend the preacher, not to loath themselves; or else to reproach the preacher, and endeavour to expose him: like the riddle that lets through the good grain, and keeps the chaff; or like flies that fasten on festering sores.

(3.) Ignorant and stupid hearers, who hear the word, but neither know nor endeavour to know God's mind in it. A good voice and good word please them. These are not concerned to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God.

(4.) Unbelieving hearers, Isa. liii. 1. Unbelief is a defence against the power of the word, Matth. xiii. 58; and an unbelieving heart is a proud heart, ready to sterm at the word, like Ahab. And if the word hit them, their passion ariseth, the minister meant them, and wanted to expose them, and so they are filled with prejudice.

5. *Lastly*, Such as make no application of the word to themselves, but are ready to give it away to others. It is the weakness of godly souls, sometimes to give ear to nothing but what may tend to their discouragement; and it is the neckbreak of others to give away threats from themselves.

3. It reproves those who do not set themselves to hear what God commands ministers to preach, but will command ministers to preach so and so. Thus bands have been laid on the gospel in our land in the late persecuting times, when the exercise of the ministry was allowed by the magistrate with limitations, which could neither be imposed nor accepted without sin. And as little power have the people to limit them, or give orders concerning what we should preach: but every faithful minister will say as Micaiah, 1 Kings xxii. 14. 'As the Lord liveth, what the Lord saith unto me, that will I speak.'

USE II. Of exhortation. Attend on ordinances, and come with a design reverently, diligently, attentively, understandingly, believingly, and so to practise, to hear what is commanded us of God. We desire you to take nothing as matter of faith on our authority, but to do as the Bereans, who searched the scriptures daily, whether

these things were so, Acts xvii. 11. I offer the following motives to press this exhortation.

1. Consider the way how the word came to the world. It was by the Mediator, John i. 18. When Adam fell, death stared him in the face; and he ran away from God, till the word of reconciliation came forth, Gen. iii. 15; which disappointed the expectation of devils, surprised angels, and revived the self-murdering creature.

2. Consider, it is the word of life, Deut. xxxii. 46, 47. Nothing concerns us so nearly as this. If ye do not prize the word, and hear what is commanded us of God, there can be no comfort on a death-bed. It will make us table complaints against you before the Lord; and we will have a sad meeting at the great day. But if ye will hear, ye will be our joy and crown; your souls shall be saved in the day of the Lord, and we will bless the day that ever we met. Come to ordinances with a keen appetite after the bread of life; and pray for us, that the Lord may deal kindly with us, and furnish us with proper nourishment for your souls.

A CAVEAT AGAINST RECEIVING THE GOSPEL IN VAIN.

2 COR. vi. 1.—*We then, as workers together with him, beseech you also, that ye receive not the grace of God in vain.*

I HAVE been calling you to a diligent attendance upon the ordinances, and now I come to beseech you not to receive the grace of God in vain: for if you should attend the means of grace ever so carefully, yet if you receive the grace of God in vain, all your labour is lost, and ye must perish in your sins at last.

The words I have read are a pathetic exhortation, in which,

1. The party exhorting is the apostle, in his own name, and that of all faithful ministers, who are called *workers together with God*. Compare 1 Cor. iii. 9. In the purchase of salvation Christ had none with him; but in the application of it he makes use of gospel-ministers, working with him, as instrumental causes, in exhorting, &c. and bringing the word to the ears of people.

2. The manner of the exhortation, *beseeching*; which denotes mildness and gentleness in dealing with souls, and withal earnestness and fervency of address.

3. The matter of it. *The grace of God* here denotes the gospel, as it is expressly called, Tit. ii. 11. It is so denominated, (1.) In respect of its rise, which was mere grace. (2.) Of its subject, being