

Obedience to Human Law considered in the Light of Divine Truth.

A

DISCOURSE .

DELIVERED

IN THE FIRST BAPTIST MEETING HOUSE,

LAWRENCE, MASS.

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NOTE.

The author of this Discourse has been induced to put it to the press for the Truth's sake. It is a pleasure to him to afford an opportunity to the people of his charge to review the sentiments to which they have once listened, and to deposite in the hands of the public an humble testimony in defence of the principles of righteousness.

DISCOURSE.



THIS is the Lord's Day. "It is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it." We embrace it as the occasion in which is celebrated the triumphs of Jesus over the tomb, in which was completed the work of Redemption on earth, the sign of the blessings of the Gospel to sinful men. But this day is not only the Christian Sabbath, it is likewise by the date of this year a National Sabbath-day. It is the Fourth of July, in the seventy-sixth year of the Independence of the United States of America, the birth day of our country, the day loved by every American heart. Though it is in the popular phrase "the glorious fourth," I have no oration to pronounce, I have no speech portraying the glories of our Republic. I come not to you under the sound of the booming cannon, I take not the platform where I am to be greeted with cheers from an excited multitude. I have no cheers to receive, I ask for none, but I solicit listening ears, serious countenances, devotional hearts and thoughtful minds. I would preach the gospel this day, and being the anniversary of our Independence, I am moved to proclaim the gospel in one aspect of its relation to the interests of this nation.

A few thoughts I propose to utter on the duties of the

American Christian. The suggestions to be expressed are derived from two clauses in the First Epistle of Peter, Chapter II. Verse 17.

FEAR GOD. HONOR THE KING.

In these two injunctions the complex duty of the christian is enjoined. First, that God should be revered, his law obeyed. Second, that the king, or civil government, should be honored, a submission to its requirements, should be practiced by the disciple of Jesus. If in this land we have no king, civil authority should be none the less respected.

Concerning the obligations of the christian to obey Him who speaks from heaven, none need to err. The word spoken by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, tells us why God should be obeyed, how he should be obeyed, with all the explicitness which language in precept can enforce, and example can illustrate.

The word of God also makes it as plain as terms can define, that there should be subjection to civil law, that human authority has the seal of God. "Render unto Cæsar, the things that are Cæsar's, and unto God, the things that are God's. Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers, for there is no power but of God, the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God, and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation." The clearest instruction of the gospel directs the christian to pay deference to human authority, to be submissive to the existing government where he dwells. It becomes us to honor the power which protects us, a power that is essential to the existence and best interests of society ; and is it not an appropriate time,

on this sabbath of the church, this jubilee of the nation, for the American christian to consider his moral relation to the civil authority of our Republic. We have a magistracy that we should honor. Fear God, and honor the magistrate who beareth a sway to the security of quietness and good order. Those clothed in the functions of civil office, executing so many statutes of equity, we should esteem, for their works sake. They fulfil the will of God. On this glad day we would thank our Father in Heaven, we would inspire our hearts with a stronger devotion, not to the perverted, but to the true genius of our government. To those to whom our Constitutions do grant freedom, it is freedom indeed. Excepting the colored citizen there is provided a liberty, and if this exception, so unjust, does not make the import of the statement impossible, it is a liberty which is the offspring of christian sentiment, the fruit of a civilization, moulded and purified by the principles of the Gospel. If there is a community of saints on earth who should be earnest in their submission to some of the best laws men have enacted, and careful to maintain a respect to those empowered with civil rule, God's people in this nation, are that people. We have codes of laws which are the guardian agents of the institutions of religion, of education, and of humanity. They are the fostering angel of the noblest enterprises human hearts have espoused. The Fourth of July summons in the christian a lively patriotism, and brings the fundamental doctrines of our State and Federative Government to that range in which they should receive honor.

There are, however, some features in our governmental affairs distinct from legislative enactments which cannot be commended. The partizan feeling, not the warfare be-

tween actual political sentiments, but the battle of mere parties, sustained by manœuvring and crafty policy is to be deplored. The party spirit of the day, the cunning of political men, does sometimes grind the innocent with cruelty, exclude the most worthy from posts of responsibility. But though partyism be the abuse, or the necessary nuisance of a Republican Government, yet, if we must suffer one of the two evils, the evil of party strife or the evil of an absolute power which holds a crushed people under the sceptre of a monarch, give us the evil of parties, guarded as we are by constitution^s. We would endure the demagogues among American politicians, rather than the absolutists who seize the purse and the sword to trample on the rights of the masses.

Every time the birth-day of the nation is celebrated, at every return of demonstrations of public joy, the christian will have thanksgiving. He will have the incitements of love to his country blended with fear, with the highest solicitude for the purity, the prosperity, the destiny of his own land. Never will he whose mind is imbued with the temper of the Gospel be more disposed to cherish the injunction of the text, Fear God, Honor the power which a free people under God have established.

But we have remarked that the text imposes a complex duty: obedience to God, submission to the law of man. If at any time the statutes of men and the commandments of God conflict, what is the course the christian should follow? This is a question for the American christian. It is a question for him on the anniversary of his nation's freedom. At this period, when the considerations which are hopeful, when elements which are fearful are made the theme of public discourse, when liberty is huzzaed and the great principles of a

nation, a Republic's prosperity, dwell on the lips of men, women and children, it is a question with a christian citizen what ought to be his action when "the powers that be," by their enactments require of him a service contrary to the law of his God. On this Fourth day of July, on this day given us by Him who is our King in the heavens, on this day when God and our country are combined subjects, let us give our thoughts to the duty of the christian when the civil law forbids him to observe the Divine rule. This is a question of great moment, on its decision immediate consequences issue, and results that are stupendous.

As plainly as the Bible commands obedience to God, as plainly as it insists upon obedience to rulers, so plainly does it reveal to us whether we should in any instance disobey civil authority, and when we should do it. The scriptures have made provision for obedience to man and with equal clearness they make provision for disobedience to man. It is as easy to know when we should disobey the magistrate, as to know when we should obey him. If the statutes of the land direct the christian to perform a work which breaks the commands in the decalogue, or infringes upon the spirit of a plain precept in the gospel, that statute is not to be honored nor its requirements fulfilled. Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, and Daniel, those eminent servants of the Lord, set at naught the enactments of government. They were commanded to violate the first and second law in the table, by practising idolatry, a service they would not do. The Apostles were told by the authority of their times to preach no more the Gospel of Jesus; they were forbidden to follow a definite injunction of the gospel, to discharge their duty to their fellow men, to communicate blessings to their neigh-

bor. They were prohibited to obey the second great commandment, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," in the form of making known to men the truth of salvation; yet they gave no heed to these mandates. "Peter and the other Apostles answered and said, we ought to obey God rather than men." While the powers that be are a terror to evil-doers, they are the ordinance of God; but when they become a terror to the doers of righteousness, the agents to trample on Divine law, they are not the ordinance of God. He has for them no seal, no apology. Had not the prophets, had not the apostles, had not the reformers John Knox, John Wickliffe, Roger Williams, had not the missionaries of the cross at every corner of the earth, broken civil law, defied its claims, to execute their work, the Gospel would not have been preached. By disobedience to human government for the Lord's sake, we have the outspreading triumphs of the church, we have the great achievements gained in the nineteenth century for personal liberty. By the rejection of human law, because of the authority of God, we have our glorious Republic, we have seventy-six jubilee days of our nation. Obedience to God in conflict with the opposing edicts of men, is a component principle in the instrumentality which has extended the religion of heaven, and redeemed men from ignorance and bondage.

On the statute book of our Federal Government there is a law, to obey which is a sin. To honor, to fulfil the requisitions of the Fugitive Slave Law, is a violation of the precepts of christianity. It requires us to withhold bread from the hungry, to plunder the poor, to rob our fellow of those rights God has given him. Christ says, "give to him that asketh," which means in spirit, give to any man of what-

ever nation, class, or color, who needs the blessings which you enjoy. But the United States Government says, thou shalt not give to him who is escaping from the lash and the iron-hearted oppressor. Thou shalt not give to him bread, lodging or money, who prays thee to help him beyond the reach of the slave-hunter. Fines and imprisonment shall come upon thee when thou doest these benevolent deeds to the panting bondman.* Christ, by the mouth of his servants, says, "Do good unto all men," "Let the oppressed go free," "Thou shalt not deliver unto his master the servant which is escaped from his master unto thee. He shall dwell with thee, even among you in that place which he shall choose, in one of thy gates where it liketh him best. Thou shalt not oppress him." But the United States Government says to you christian, yes to you christian citizen, if the fugitive shall leap from the grasp of the pursuer, in thy presence, thou shalt at the bidding of legal agents lay thy hands upon the flying man and bring him back to the power of the man-stealer. This Government commands you to serve the tyrant when he pleases, in replacing the chains and fetters upon your brother, and his victim.† Can it be that this is a law of our country, a law of the American Republic! O, my God, has delusion and perverseness come over this nation? What does it become us to do in relation to this law? We are to disclaim against it. We are to dishonor it. We are to break it according to the provisions of our christian faith. The Gospel directs us how we shall treat the law. It does not command us to raise rebellion against the Statute by force of arms, it does not lead

* Fugitive Slave Law, Section 7. † Fugitive Slave Law, Section 5th.

us to a riotous demonstration against its execution ; but we are to disregard its demands. We should cry out against its cruelty. We should feed the fugitive, give him a hiding place, furnish him with money to escape to the land of the free. Should it be asked, if this procedure will not endanger the peace of the nation, conspire to the dissolution of our Federative system. Let me inquire, brethren, which is of the most importance, that the word of the Blessed Redeemer, the law of the Holy God who sits upon a throne forever and ever, should be obeyed, or the American Union continued. I can prove to a demonstration that obedience to God is the hope of a free people, the hope of humanity, the hope of the world ; but that the existence of the American Union is the hope of the human race is only a conjecture. Who can make it appear that God needs this Federal Government to exalt his children on earth. The permanency of this Republic seems to be of the greatest necessity, and yet this is an opinion of the short sighted, and may be erroneous. I believe in patriotism. Love of country is a flame I would fan in every heart ; but it is a love sanctified by the religion of Christ, a christian patriotism. When we set up our Republic, to the dethronement of Divine authority, to the disannulling of a higher law ; make a Moloch of the Union to which we fall down and worship, we abandon patriotism, for the base sin of idolatry. The public press may assert the execution of the law for the rendition of slaves is essential to the preservation of the Union, and statesmen may declare the operation of the statute will avert the direst revolution, save us from anarchy, and will continue to us liberties we can have in no other course. This train of testimony we conceive to be delusive, manufactured

by the wily, who have succeeded in blind-folding the American mind. Considering the nature of our federal relations, the dependence, in fact, which slave communities have on free communities, and resting our country on those principles God has fixed for national progress, the Fugitive Slave Law is of as much service in holding this Union together as is a cob-web in holding the beams of an edifice on which it happens to span. Now there may be a disbanding of this Federation of States, by a failure to execute this law, though we have no fears of that, but to say the American people will suffer loss, be hurled into a pit of social ruin, because the Fugitive Slave Law is annulled by christian action, is a libel on the genius of our institutions, a libel on that love of liberty which burns in the heart of true-hearted citizens, a libel on the principles of God's word. It is the practical working of the Fugitive Slave Law that threatens our nation, endangers our rights. It is the most fearful instrumentality to prevent the American Republic performing its mission among the kingdoms of the world. The maintenance of this law darkens the prospects of this country. By it consciences are hardened, and vengeance will come. Where, christian friends, is my authority for thus speaking? What are my arguments? The defenders of the cruel law take their ideas from their reasoning; my opinion is not of my own device, but from the Eternal Reasoner. Hear now the proof I adduce for my assertions, and decide ye lovers of the truth if what I have spoken is false. "Wo unto them which decree unrighteous decrees, and that write grievousness which they have prescribed, to turn aside the needy from judgment and to take away the right from the poor of my people. That widows may be their prey and that they

may rob the fatherless. And what will ye do in the day of visitation, and in the desolation which shall come from far, to whom will ye flee for help and where will ye leave your glory.”

The doctrine of a higher-law is the doctrine that will stand ; it is the doctrine for the christian, revealed in the pages of God’s word. It should be remembered the supremacy of Divine law to human law has been incorporated in the instruction of those who have been trained in religious truth, disseminated in our communities. The attempt to dispossess the mind of the principle of higher law, is a reversion of our education, an overthrow of the lessons we have received at the fire-side, in the school-room, in the Bible Class, and around the pulpit. Those who have urged obedience to the law of slave-catching, have committed glaring inconsistencies, and have been recreant to the sentiments which have long been inculcated in the mind, sentiments that have given to our people their exalted character.

In a small periodical, Merry’s Museum, a work published for children, recommended by some of our statesmen who defend the Fugitive Slave Law and plead against the higher law ; in this work, thirty or forty copies of which are circulated among the most intelligent families in Lawrence, is an article in which the casting of tea into Boston harbor, a rebellious act against a known civil law, is declared to be the origin of our Revolution and glorious Independence.* Children, in the day when the great men are advocating submission to a diabolical law, are taught by that reading which these great men recommend, that our fore-fathers, trampling

* Merry’s Museum, February No. 1851.

on a legislative enactment, a law of mere taxation, displayed their noble spirit, their love of justice and their glory. Near that month of 1850, in which the Constitutional Convention was assembled in Faneuil Hall to urge submission to the Fugitive Slave Law and discountenance the doctrine of the higher law, addressed by the Curtises, the Halletts, the Choates and the Henshaws, I was sitting in one of the school rooms of this town listening to a class who were reading a section which inculcated the sentiment that God's law should be obeyed and man's disobeyed when the latter required a conduct contrary to the former. The subject of the narrative was a Roman christian, commended because he would not violate the laws of his Master, Jesus Christ, to practice obedience to a law of his country. The text book from which this class were reading is in extensive use in the schools of this Commonwealth.* Why do not the conductors of Faneuil Hall meeting raise a crusade against the instruction of the children in Massachusetts. If all the principles promulgated in the convention are truthful, the books which our children read should be expelled from their schools. The religious ideas, the sentiments of the Bible that have worked in our educational system ought, according to the wisdom of those who plead for submission to an iniquitous law, to be expurgated from every page on which the youth of our land cast their eye. Do these men know what they are doing? They are the deserters of the system of truth which has given our most enlightened communities their religion, their morals and intellectual discipline. They are traacherous to that which is vital and noble and

* Russell's American Class Book, Lesson CIV.

righteous. A number of months since, a good man laboring among the poor in Boston, touched me on the shoulder as I was entering a house of worship in that city, with these words in substance whispered in my ear: Are you all asleep in Lawrence? I have great interest in your line of direction; I have sent seventy fugitive slaves through your place or near it, and have kept them by you or beyond you, till they have gone to Canada; I have found them where they have been secreted, and with food and fare have posted them off to safety. This man is helped by the most prominent citizens in his work of benevolence, for those religiously and bodily destitute; even by those we suppose, who pretend to urge obedience to that law of robbery and Satanic oppression. Who, we ask, has been performing the service of God, that servant of mercy to the poor, disregarding the requisition of the Fugitive Slave Law, or those orators who called upon citizens of the North, to give back human bodies and souls to men-stealers? With the Gospel open before us, who has followed the will of God? Who has adhered to the principles which have given us knowledge, social elevation and freedom of conscience. The doctrine of the higher law should be endeared to every christian. We ought to be jealous of its authority. It is a branch of the Gospel. A rule that has sent the Saints of God from triumph to triumph, in the world. We will tell those men who have derided the higher law, who have strove to weaken its force, they have engaged in a task in which their strength will fail. Christ is against them; the example of the holiest men is against them; the true reformers of the race and missionaries of the cross scatter to the wind their sophistry.

The efforts that are making to grind the colored man to the dust, to suppress a discussion of his rights, are saddening and sickening. Not only must we hurl bleeding men and women back to bondage, but we must close all agitation of the subject of slavery. What have the two great parties of this nation declared by their representatives. When I speak of the political parties of the country, I take their moral aspects. I look at them through the Word of God. I have no political sentiments to express ; politics I preach not ; but I am to shew forth God's spoken will ; I am to speak to the sinner and of the sinner, whether he is in his individual capacity, or is found in associations and parties. The resolutions passed by the Democratic and Whig National Conventions the present year, referring to slavery, concern every minister of Christ, they concern every christian. If those resolutions have a meaning, the spirit of them would remove me from this pulpit, they would shut my mouth in its feeble pleading for the rights of our fellows. What ! are we to stop praying for the slave, to cease talking and preaching for the bondmen ? Are we to remember no longer, those in bonds as bound with them ? Believe me, brethren, in the cause of righteousness I would not fight with weapons that are carnal ; I would have holy boldness in a tender spirit, but as a minister of Christ, as an American citizen, as an American minister, on this Sabbath, the gift of the Saviour, on this Fourth Day of July, the Seventy-Sixth of the Independence of this Republic, I challenge the Democratic and Whig Conventions of 1852, on the execution of their resolutions touching the agitation of slavery. One pulpit shall not wear the shackles they would impose, one preacher shall be free. If the passage of these resolu-

tions was effected in sincerity, they are an abomination. If they were adopted for a mere ruse, a scheme of policy, they express a work of hypocrisy.

What is the advantage in agitating the subject of slavery, asks the objector? There is a gain; the down-trodden are twenty-five years nearer their freedom than when agitation commenced. Twenty years did Clarkson and Wilberforce labor to achieve the abolition of the African Slave Trade; and though it is ten-fold more difficult to remove American Slavery, and may require ten times as long a period; shall there be agitation two hundred years to gain the freedom of the oppressed? Yes, agitate! agitate! agitate! Does it become us to terminate agitation for those groaning in a prison-house of injustice? Then let us be consistent and bring to an end agitation of every form for the moral and religious good of mankind. Let the American Tract Society, which has sent its colporteurs to every corner of the land, and its documents which are incendiary pages to the heart, in every city, town and hamlet in the country, finish its agitation for the deliverance of our fellows from the fetters of of infidelity, intemperance and unbelief. Let the American Missionary Union instruct Oncken, their missionary, to agitate no longer for liberty of conscience in Germany. Let the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, order Dr. King to desist and agitate no more for the privileges and doctrines of the Gospel in Greece. The powers at Rome, the French, the Austrian, the German, the Russian authorities, exclaim to those who struggle for the justice of the people, agitate no more for the freedom of the bodies and souls of men, and the echo is heard on this Western Continent, in this land of the free, from the lips of

statesmen and professing christians, agitate no more for those held in chains forged by their brother man. We would ask every one to consider the history of true christianity in in the world. The followers of Jesus have agitated more than eighteen hundred years. Every soul, every tribe, every people won to the kingdom of Christ have been secured by agitation. We should act for the liberation of the slave by a similar instrumentality with which we strive to reclaim the drunkard and seek the conversion of the unbelieving. Christian friends, we have thoughts to cherish on this subject. As those imbued with the spirit of the Saviour, we have words to speak, actions to perform, duties to fulfil. It is a service of good-will to the slave holder, of mercy to the enslaved ; a work for the best interests of the nation, and for the furtherance of the Gospel.

O, Brethren, have we no words, no acts for outraged humanity, when our brother and sister have reposed in the forests of our neighborhood, caught a morsel at a farm-house, and escaped with souls of anguish, by the darkness of night, hastened in the steps of sorrow and desolation to a strange land that they may no longer be a prey to those who strip them of all that is dear to the heart. The air which we breathe so generous and so free, begets in their heart the palpitation of fear ; the soil on which we tread is like burning coals to their feet ; the landscape on which we refresh our eyes, is blight and dreariness to their sight ; because they are hunted by the cruel, and are clenched by the iron hand of a nation's injustice. Have we nothing to do for them ? Can we meet them in the judgment of the great day ? Do we not hear the voice from that hour of accounts, " Inasmuch as ye have not done it unto one of the least of these my brethren ye

have not done it unto me." What means this caution in speaking of the woes of the oppressed. This care and slowness in discoursing in our religious associations on the principles of christianity applied to the slave. Brethren, I would not speak with suspicion ; God grant to me the spirit of my Master ; yet is the sound of shackles in our midst nothing but imagination ? Are there chains upon *our* bodies, fetters on *our* feet, and locks on our lips. O, ye disciples of Christ, are *ye* freemen ?

On this day, when our country is viewed through the Gospel, and our obligations to those whom the civil powers afflict with an inhuman law, let our thoughts be fixed on the Bible in this desk. It is the statute book of the christian, it is the oracle from the counsels of the Almighty, to which we are ever to adhere. No oracle is above it. Let us direct the eye of our mind to the beautiful spire of our temple of worship. Its line of direction is not towards capitol, not to senate chambers, not to folios of legislative enactments ; but it points to heaven, to the Throne of the Eternal God. To-day it is an index to us, and we will look up to Him whose word liveth and abideth forever.

