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EMPERANCE:

A

SERMON

PREACHED IN

CHRIST CHURCH, ALBANY STREET,

BY

REV. J. W. FESTING, M.A., VICAR,

ON

SUNDAY EVENING, 4th November, 1883.

Printed by Request.

London :

A. MACKAY & Co., 185, ALBANY STREET, N.W.

1883.

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P R E F A C E.



I have been requested to allow this Sermon to be published. I know that it contains nothing new, and that it is but a partial consideration of a great subject. But some who heard it wish to have it in their hands, and so it is printed as it was delivered. It was preached in a Church where for some years there has been an Annual Sermon in connection with the Parochial Branch of the Church of England Temperance Society. The subject was therefore no new one to the congregation. Had it been I should have said more about the Society and the advantage of co-operation in such a work. But co-operation in any wide sense is only possible on the broad lines of the Church of England Temperance Society, which rest, I think, on such principles as I have endeavoured to insist on in this Sermon.

J. W. F.

ROM. xiv. 6.—“He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks.”

SOME of the Christians of St. Paul's time were troubled in their conscience about the matter of food. “One believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs,” so he says in the early part of this 14th chapter, which deals with this matter of eating meat.

If you turn to the I. Corinthians, and look at the 8th and 10th chapters, you will find that there too St. Paul considers the question of eating certain meat. The questions among the Romans and Corinthians were not exactly the same, but in considering both of them St. Paul appealed to the same great principles. If we look at what St. Paul says in both these cases we shall see that the same great reasons weigh with him, we shall find too in him the same earnestness, and the same fullness of dealing with the question, the same wish and power to estimate fairly all the different points in a controversy, to deal rightly with both sides, the same zeal and the same moderation. By considering what he says in these two cases, somewhat alike yet in some ways dissimilar, we get to the great principles which underlie the right treatment of other cases somewhat like these, and yet differing in many points from them.

First let us turn to the Epistle to the Romans. St. Paul is dealing there with this case. There were some Christians who had scruples about eating meat. They thought that the distinctions made by the law of Moses between clean and unclean meats were still binding on Christians, and some of them apparently were so afraid of eating unclean meat in ignorance that they would eat no meat at all. There were other Christians who had no such scruples and doubts, and who believed that they might eat all things.

The whole question here was whether certain meats were unclean, that is, whether God had set them on one side and said men were

not to eat them. There was no dispute about the fact that he had said so to the Jew of old, and that therefore the Jew who ate unclean meat broke God's law. The question was, was this old law still binding. In St. Paul's days the Jewish law still had a certain hold upon the Jewish Christians. St. Paul vindicated the Gentiles' freedom from it. He resisted their being circumcised, but we know that he himself worshipped in the Temple and fulfilled certain requirements of the law. So in the transition state of that time the Jewish law had a certain claim on the consciences of Jewish Christians. St. Paul for himself had no doubt about the lawfulness of eating all meats. "I know and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself." "But," he continues, "to him that esteemeth anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean," *i.e.*, the unclean meat does not of itself mechanically alter a man's spiritual state, but if a man is persuaded that God has declared certain meats to be unclean, then if he eats of those meats he is deliberately setting on one side what he considers God's will, and so he sins against God. The matter then is not one of meat, but of obedience to God, of respect for Him; and so St. Paul in effect says, "Let any man consider the matter in this way, let him take pains to satisfy himself either that God gives him the meat and allows him to eat it, and so he is right in eating it, or that God forbids the meat and so he is wrong in taking it. If men consider the matter thus, then whatever decision they come to they honour God, and this should be the aim and object of all Christians in all that they do." And this result, St. Paul tells them, they must take care to recognize in those who have formed conscientiously an opinion different from their own. The man who was strong in faith and could see that there is nothing unclean in itself, was likely to despise the man full of scruples, who by his scruples caused himself inconvenience and pain, and to think him a weak, poor sort of creature, and to take a delight in setting at naught his prejudices; while the man who had scruples and who thought certain things wrong, would be likely to condemn people who did not do as he did as being careless and indifferent, if not worse. "Let not him that eateth *despise* him that eateth not, and let not him which eateth not *judge* him that eateth." "He that eateth, eateth to the Lord," *i.e.*, he eateth in the full belief that God has given him this liberty in Christ, and has given him all those meats, and so in what he does he honestly and heartily thanks

God for what he takes. While "he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not," he too acts as the servant of Christ, he deems some things forbidden, he holds back from what he considers evil, and thanks God for the knowledge and power which enables him to hold back, thanks God for what he thinks it right to take. Both are alike in this, that both honour God.

St. Paul then first of all vindicates the law of Christian liberty. He says a Christian has the liberty of taking all those things which God gives him, he takes them because he is persuaded God has given them, he takes them as God's gifts, he uses them therefore as God's gifts, he gives thanks to God for them. And there is a religious *use* implied in this giving of thanks, giving of thanks is not a mere matter of words. St. Paul would not think that that man gave thanks to God who professed to thank God with his lips, and then used these things for an evil purpose. The thankful use of God's gifts implies the use of them within certain limits.

But then St. Paul passes on from the law of Christian liberty to the law of Christian charity. He tells men, the men strong in faith, that they are to think of others. If the weak men and the scrupulous are to abstain from passing judgment on others, the strong are to beware of putting temptation in the way of others, and temptation such as these others count temptation. A man is not to think only of what is a temptation to himself, he is to think of what tempts others. "Let us not therefore judge one another any more : but judge this rather, that no man put a stumbling block or an occasion to fall in his brother's way."

It is this that he presses very strongly upon the Romans. Do not do anything which shall lead another to sin against his conscience. Don't put your enjoyment of food above another's soul's health. "Destroy not him with thy meat for whom Christ died." "For meat destroy not the work of God." In the assertion of thy liberty to eat all meats, because they are God's creation, destroy not the greatest, noblest creation of God—man.*

"All things indeed are pure, but it is evil," or as we may render it, there is evil even in these pure things, "for that man who eateth with offence"; for that man who in eating either gives scandal to

* *Note.*—For this idea as well as many others in the Sermon, I am indebted to the Bishop of Lincoln's Commentary.

another, *i.e.*, makes another fall, or takes scandal, *i.e.*, does something which his own conscience condemns. "It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor anything whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak." That is if the use of our Christian liberty puts temptation in another's way, we are then to restrain ourselves and think of our brother's good.

Now turn to I. Corinthians. There the question was a different one. It was caused not by Jewish law but by heathen customs. Animals were offered in sacrifice to the false gods. He who offered the sacrifice, of course, worshipped these gods, but part of the act of worship was sometimes to eat some of the meat of the sacrifice. He who ate of the meat of a sacrifice ate that which belonged to the god, he was fed by the god to whom he had sacrificed, and derived life and power from him. This was the idea. But the whole of the meat was not consumed at the time of sacrifice. Parts of the animals which had been sacrificed were sold in the shambles, were sold at the butchers' shops to anyone who would pay the price asked. Christians might buy this meat, this meat which came from some animal that had been offered as a sacrifice. What was to be done about such meat? Was it right to eat it? That was a question which agitated the Church at Corinth. There were two extreme parties here. There were some who were inclined to boast of their strong faith and their clear sight of truth. An idol is nothing they said. It is a bit of wood or stone. What if an animal, or part of it is laid on the altar of an idol, how can the flesh of that animal be altered by the fact of part of it having been burnt before a piece of wood or stone? And so clear were they that an idol was nothing, and idol worship was really nothing to one who had this Christian knowledge, that they saw no harm in sitting down to a feast in an idol temple. (I. Cor. viii. 10.)

The more extreme party not only shrank from this, but looked with suspicion on the meat that had been offered to the idol. They were unable to rid themselves of the associations which in their mind belonged to that meat. It was the idol's—to eat it was to acknowledge the false god, to look to him for support and life.

The strong in faith ridiculed and condemned this idea. They said it was wrong, it was a treason to God for it acknowledged other gods. So that it was good and right to eat this meat in order to

show that the idol was nothing and God everything. So that eating such meat "commended" a man to God. (I. Cor. viii. 8.)

St. Paul, in dealing with this question, showed that here as in the case of the Romans he agreed in principle with those strong in faith, though he did not approve of their conduct. He brought out strongly and clearly what the principle was on which action should rest, and then showed what varied duties were involved in acting on the principle.

"We know," he said, "that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one." "The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof." The offering anything to an idol does not alter its character. It is still the Lord's, as it was before. He has given His creatures for the use of man. Nothing—no idol—can take any of these creatures out of that gift, for that would be to withdraw them from His power.

There is the same great principle then that we had before, viz., that meat is God's gift, and is to be taken as such. If it be valued as God's gift, then it must be taken according to God's will. In our use of the gift we are to restrain ourselves by what we know is the will of the Giver.

But, St. Paul says, all have not this clear certainty about this meat. Just as some Jews at Rome could not rid themselves of the ideas they had held from childhood in connection with God's law, so some here at Corinth, whether heathen or Jew originally, could not rid themselves of the ideas they had connected with the meat of the sacrifice. "Some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat it as a thing offered unto an idol." They see an acknowledgment of, and an act of reverence to a false god in taking this meat. They can not take it without sinning against God in their minds. Therefore they ought not to take it. For them it is wrong.

And he rebukes very strongly those who would lead such into doing that which involved in them a sin against God. "Through thy knowledge," he says, "shall the weak brother perish for whom Christ died?"

But though he thus protects the weak brother, he is careful to assert the principle of Christian liberty. "If any man say unto you, this is offered in sacrifice unto idols, eat not for his sake that shewed it and for conscience sake . . . Conscience, I say, not thine own, but of the other : for why is my liberty judged of another man's conscience?"

That is to say, another person thinking it wrong does not necessarily make it wrong for me. My liberty is settled by my own conscience, not by that of another. If this other person cannot eat this meat without reverencing the idol and so being false to God, it is wrong for him to eat it—but it is not therefore wrong for me. “The earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof.” I can take it as God’s gift and give God thanks and honour and reverence Him, and the idol is nothing with me. But then I have to think of the effect of my action upon this brother at my side. I have to think of *his* conscience, of his difficulties and dangers. His presence makes that inexpedient for me for the time which is yet lawful for me. “All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not.” “Let no man seek his own, but every man another’s wealth.”

“Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.” This is the great fundamental principle, use all that God gives you in a way which is befitting, so that the glory of the Giver may be set forth. But also do not give offence to, do not put a stumbling block in the way of anyone, be he Jew, or Gentile, or Christian. (I. Cor. x. 32.)

And so here in this Epistle to the Corinthians we have precisely the same great points that we have in the Epistle to the Romans.

There is the great principle of taking God’s gifts as God’s gifts, of honouring God in all things that we do; there is the great principle of Christian liberty; there is the great principle of not enforcing our rights, but of caring first for the spiritual welfare of others.

The connection of all that I have been saying with the subject which is specially before us this evening, the subject of Temperance, is, I think, evident. I do not mean to say that the subject might not be treated more directly; but I think that our consideration of St. Paul’s words bring before us many points which ought not to be lost sight of in considering the subject.

Of the sin of drunkenness no one ought to speak or think lightly; I wish I could say no one *can* speak or think lightly. It is a sin which in a very marked way carries its curse with it, and brings many evils with it. And when we hear, or when perhaps we see what its effects have been in some family and home, how not only the individual has been degraded to such a miserable condition, but how

terribly others have suffered, then with all this misery and degradation before us, and the thought "What should I feel if my fortunes in life, my fair name, my happiness were thus shipwrecked by another through this sin?" we can sympathize with the very bitter cry of anguish we sometimes hear, we can understand the fierce hatred of drunkenness becoming in some a fanaticism.

It is easy to talk of moderation when we have not suffered; yet while we feel for the sufferer, and excuse his bitterness, while we see the need of speaking in no doubtful language about such an evil, let us also remember the wisdom, the moderation which St. Paul's words show to be a duty. There is a sobriety of speech which is not to be sacrificed in the excitement of moved feelings. Sin is to be spoken of—to be thought of as sin against God, and not merely as a sin against society, the family, the individual. We are to see sin as sin and dread it, even when its evil results are very small. "Be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess"; it is the excess, the want of self-control, the not ruling our life by God's laws, the misuse of God's gifts, which constitutes the sin. Intemperance is not the only sin, is not the most deadly sin of the flesh. There are other sins, secret sins, doing a worse work than even drunkenness. But remember why intemperance is a sin: not because of its bad effects, but because it is an abuse of God's gifts, because it is the taking a gift of God and using it against God's wish, using it to destroy God's work, using it against God. Wine is a gift of God. It is spoken of thus in the Bible. It is merely playing with truth to say that because it is not produced by nature as we have it therefore it is not God's gift. Bread is not produced just as we use it. Bread is as much the result of man's ingenuity, as much the result of chemical change in natural substances, as wine; yet no one denies that bread is God's gift. The fact is, whatever the earth gives up to us through man's ingenuity and toil is still God's gift. Do not let us damage a good cause by bad arguments. And equally is it playing with reason to say that the wine that we now have is different from the wine that we read of in the Bible, or that the wine then had no alcohol in it. No substance is wicked in itself; alcohol is not wickedness; the wickedness of drunkenness is the being drunk; the wine of the Bible could and did make men drunk; it is that which is the *sin*, not the taking alcohol. These things are God's gifts; but remember St. Paul's teaching, God's gifts are to be taken as His gifts, taken

with thanksgiving, taken within the limits which He allows, taken all of them with sobriety and moderation. And remember St. Paul's teaching about our responsibility, remember how indignantly he puts the value of another's righteousness above that of our bodily pleasures. "*Destroy* not him with thy meat for whom Christ died." "Through thy knowledge shall thy weak brother *perish* for whom Christ died?" "Destroy"—"perish"—what can be stronger words? They describe the dangers which accompanied the temptations which came to the Romans and Corinthians in connection with eating meat. He bade those who were strong in faith remember the tremendous character of the issues of those temptations from which they were free, but from which others were not free. He bade them think of the weak—yet he did not deny their liberty. He did not say such dangers as these—(and can anything stronger be said now-a-days of drunkenness?)—such dangers as these are the dangers which are about the path of your weaker brethren. Therefore lest you should bring such dangers on them you must eat no meat at all. He did not forbid them to eat meat at all times, but he did forbid them to eat when their eating would bring temptation upon another. So I believe he would say now, he would tell us that whether it be eating or drinking or anything else, while our liberty to take God's gifts is undoubted, it is our duty to abstain from putting temptation in another's way in our use of our liberty. It may be my duty to abstain from meat or drink at certain times, and in certain places, and in the company of certain people, for the sake of others. I plead—it seems strange, but it is necessary to do so with some—I plead for Christian liberty: "Let not him that eateth not judge him that eateth"; "he that eateth to the Lord he eateth and giveth God thanks." The same principle holds true of drink as of meat. But then I bid you all observe what this liberty is; it is not a liberty to exceed; it is not a liberty to gratify natural tastes and passions to the full, because they are natural. It is liberty to take the good things the earth provides, but to take them with thanks to God, to take them so as to promote the glory of God.

Take care how you use your liberty. Take care how you use it when by yourself, when no one else can be influenced by your example. Whether you are alone or with others, that which is the great question for you is always at stake, Are you serving God or not? Are you temperate because you are living to God and not to yourself?

Take care too how your use of your liberty affects others. There is evil for you in those things which are pure if scandal is caused to others. If you are with one who may be sorely tempted by seeing you take that which has no danger for you, walk charitably, put no temptation in his way, sacrifice your liberty to that other's welfare, go without what you might otherwise take, or do.

And very, very strongly do I plead with you all to take care how you speak of drunkenness. Many a one who lives soberly speaks at times too lightly of drunkenness, speaks very lightly and scoffingly of the attempts of others to combat this sin. There are many books in which the ludicrous side of drunkenness is so brought out that the sinfulness of it disappears. Some of our great novelists at times have erred in this. To speak slightly of a sin, or to diminish its sinfulness must be a snare to the consciences of the young and the weak. Take care how you speak of sin. Remember always how God speaks of it. The ludicrous side of drunkenness does not shield the drunkard from the wrath of God.

And so take care lest you put a stumbling block in the way of others by speaking slightly of the efforts which are made to promote the cause of temperance. I have heard some speak slightly and scoffingly of temperance societies and so forth in the presence of those who needed to be encouraged to be abstinent and to practice self-restraint, who needed not to be driven by fear of ridicule into the slavery of drunkenness.

The evil of drunkenness is a great one, the temptation to it in many cases a terrible one; there are tremendous issues at stake, the salvation of souls, the honour and glory of God. Can we wonder if men differ among themselves as to the means which are to be used? Even if we think some men carried away by an excess of zeal, cannot we honour their zeal and their self-denial? Cannot we sympathize with their ultimate object, even if we think it necessary to assert our Christian liberty? I cannot see the matter as some advocates of temperance do; I think them extravagantly wild in their assertions. But while I say this I must also say that I am sure that total abstinence from strong drinks is a necessity in some cases, and that it is a great safety for some men under the peculiar circumstances of their work, such a safety indeed as to be a duty. I believe too that abstinence may be a wise and prudent thing for many who can

practice it, especially for children. Some restraint, some rule of life in using these things, is a necessity for all.

I honour (it is impossible surely to do otherwise) the zeal and self-denial of those who abstain because they think they can thus help their weak brethren, though I am not always convinced by their arguments.

Let us remember St. Paul's words. Let not those who think themselves strong "despise" the weak; let not those who abstain "judge" those who do not abstain. He taught men to honour convictions which they could not always share.

But, in conclusion, let us all remember that this question of temperance in drink is only part of a great question. There are other deadly sins—there are other sins of the body. Temperance in the use of anything lawful should be one of the Christian's laws. Abstinence from all evil should be another. The Christian should in word and in deed always be found on God's side. He should always abhor that which is evil, and cleave to that which is good. He should always think of others and study their spiritual welfare, and take heed lest he put a stumbling block in the way of any.

It is the light of God's law that enables him so to judge; it is the grace of God that enables him so to act. This light and this grace make men saints. God offers them to us. Let us accept and use them. Without them we cannot be found in that great multitude of which All Saints Day has so lately told us, and in telling us has so persuasively bidden us "follow that blessed company in all virtuous and godly living."



