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THE IMPORTANCE OF FEMALE INFLUENCE IN THE  
SUPPORT OF RELIGION.

A

SERMON,

DELIVERED TO A CHARITABLE

*FEMALE ASSOCIATION*

IN

WEST-SPRINGFIELD,

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# SERMON.

## ACTS xvi. 13.

*And on the sabbath we went out of the city by a river-side, where prayer was wont to be made, and we sat down and spake unto the women which resorted thither.*

PAUL and his associates, Silas and Timothy, were now on a mission in Macedonia. Paul had lately been at Troas. While he was there, a vision appeared to him in the night ; “ There stood a man of Macedonia, and prayed him, saying, come over into Macedonia, and help us.” After he had seen the vision, immediately he and his companions endeavoured to go into Macedonia, “ assuredly gathering, that the Lord had called them to preach the gospel there.” Therefore loosing from Troas they went directly to Samothracia, and the next day to Neapolis, and from thence to Philippi, which was the chief city of that part of Macedonia, and a Roman colony. There they continued a number of days, preaching with much success, as we are informed in the following part of this chapter.

On a certain sabbath, while they were there, “ they went out of the city by a river-side, where prayer was wont to be made.”

When we read of the *sabbath* in the New Testament, we are always to understand the *Jewish* sabbath, or the seventh day of the week ; for the *Christian* sabbath is called the *Lord's* day, or the

*first* day of the week. There were Jews in Philippi, as there were in most of the Roman provinces; and they observed the seasons and forms of worship appointed in their law. The apostles, though they observed not the *Jewish* sabbath, as a day instituted by *Christ* for stated worship, yet preached to the assembled *Jews* on that day. Hence we often find them on the sabbath, in the Jewish synagogues. The Jews had synagogues in most places, where large numbers of them resided. In Philippi they had a place of worship by a river a little without the city. Perhaps they were not permitted to build a synagogue within the city. Or they might choose a place retired from the bustle of the town and from the tumult of business; for the citizens, being generally *Gentiles*, would not suspend their business on the sabbath to accommodate the *Jews*, whom they considered as a superstitious people. And probably a place near a river might be thought more convenient, than one in the city, for the ablutions and purifications required by their law.

To this place they resorted on the sabbath, and many christians might attend with them; for as Paul and others had preached for some time in the city, we must suppose, that by this time there were many converts to the gospel from among both *Gentiles* and *Jews*.

The historian observes, that “the *women* resorted thither.” We are not to conclude that the assembly consisted *wholly* of women. Probably some *men* assembled with them. But the women, on this, as on other occasions, were *distinguished* by their exemplary attendance at the stated place of worship. And perhaps, the gospel, which was preached in Philippi, had the greatest success among the female sex. These, of consequence, were most engaged to hear

it. In other places where the apostles preached, the women, who believed and who followed them to hear the word, "were not a few." The women, in many places, manifested a ready disposition to hear and embrace the gospel, and by all means in their power to encourage the preachers of it.

The support of religion depends greatly on the female sex. Men and women are appointed to act in different circles. The great transactions of society chiefly fall within the province of *men*. But *women*, in their more humble sphere, may contribute no less, and perhaps really more than the men, to the maintenance and transmission of religion in the world.

Their tender minds are more easily impressed with the solemn truths of the gospel. The troubles peculiarly incident to their sex render them more susceptible of religious impressions, and more solicitous to enjoy religious comforts. Their condition in life is attended with fewer temptations to irregular manners, and fewer diversions from the duties of piety. It is rare, in a christian land, that you meet with a female infidel—a female scoffer at religion—a female contemner of divine institutions. A profane, intemperate or openly vicious female is viewed as a kind of monster. In most churches, so far as I am acquainted, there is a greater number of female, than of male communicants; and the former are more rarely subjects of discipline.

The religious education of children, especially in its earliest stages, depends principally on the *mother*. She has the most affectionate feelings for them. She is most conversant with them. She can best accommodate her instructions to their capacities. She can, with the most delicate hand, "rear the tender thought, and teach the

young idea how to shoot." Solomon urges good doctrine on the young by reminding them, that "he had been tender and well beloved in the sight of *his mother*." The words of king Lemuel are called "the prophecy which his *mother* taught him." Timothy *from a child* had known the holy scriptures; and the faith which so early dwelt in him, dwelt before in his *grandmother* Lois, and his *mother* Eunice. A curse awaits the son, who despises to obey his *mother*.

The pious woman has more influence, than is generally supposed, in the maintenance of *family worship*. She encourages and requests it. She disposes her domestic affairs, morning and evening, so as to allow opportunity for it. She calls the attendance of her children. She gives notice that the family is in readiness for the solemnity. Thus she prevents evasions of the duty, and obviates excuses for neglect in her husband. If need be, she reads a portion of scripture as preparatory to prayer. And if, urged by the husband's refusal, she, with modest reluctance, leads in the duty for once, probably a similar necessity will not return.

The female sex contribute much to the support of religion in *society*, and to the *spread* of it in the world.

When the tabernacle of worship was reared, not only the men brought their offerings to the Lord, but *all the women*, who were *wise hearted* contributed by their skilful labors and rich materials to finish and ornament the work.

In times of prevailing irreligion and of threatening judgments, the prophets called on the *women* to arise and assist in a general reformation, and to encourage one another in the work.

In the time of our SAVIOUR'S *ministry*, the faith, charity and zeal of the *women* were so re-

markable, as to be recorded by the sacred historians for the benefit of succeeding ages. We often find *women* among the devout people who attended on his preaching. There were many *women*, who ministered to him of their substance, and whose hospitable dwellings were places of retreat for him and his disciples. There were those, who in the most publick manner testified their affection for his person and veneration of his character, and who industriously spread the fame of his preaching and miracles, and thus induced many of the *other sex* to become his hearers and followers.

When Christ was going to the place of his crucifixion, many *women* dared to express their regard to him by walking near him, and loudly lamenting his unrighteous sufferings. When he was suspended on the cross, though his disciples had forsaken him and fled, yet many *women* had the fortitude to stand by and behold the dreadful scene. When his body was taken down from the cross, and laid in the sepulchre, certain *women* came and observed the place and manner of the burial. They went and prepared ointments and spices, intending, as soon as the sabbath was past, to embalm the precious corpse. On the morning of his resurrection, *women* were the *first* to visit his sepulchre—the *first* to carry tidings to his disciples that he was risen. They were the *first* witnesses and the *first* heralds of that great and glorious event, which is the foundation of our faith and hope and joy.

In the *Apostles'* days, women did much to promote the preaching and strengthen the preachers of the gospel. Paul and his companions, while they were in Philippi, were made welcome at the hospitable house of *Lydia*. Paul speaks in general terms of the women, who labored with him

in the gospel. In his epistles he salutes with much respect several women by name, who bestowed much labor on him and other missionaries, and were their helpers in Christ. *Priscilla*, as well as her husband *Aquila*, had the thanks of all the churches of the Gentiles for her services to the Apostle, and the dangers she incurred on his account.

The members of the church in Philippi distinguished themselves in the missionary cause. Paul says, "ye have done well, that ye did communicate with my afflictions. In the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church communicated with me concerning giving and receiving, but ye only. For even in Thessalonica ye sent once and again to my necessity. This fruit shall abound to your account." And when he was in Corinth, on a mission there, "that which was wanting to him, was supplied by the brethren who came from Macedonia;" or from Philippi a chief city of Macedonia. Now in these contributions the *women* took an active part. Hence the Apostle gives an exhortation to the Phillipian Christians, to "help *those women* in that church, who labored with him in the gospel."

*Phebe* is commended by the Apostle, "because she had been a succourer of many and of himself also."

It appears from Paul's 1st Ep. to Timothy, that in the Apostles' times there were *female associations* formed, not only for the relief of the poor; but also for the instruction of female youths in the principles and virtues of religion. To preside in these schools some elderly and grave *matrons* were selected, who had been well reported of for their knowledge and piety, hospitality and charity. For such institutions there may be

occasion now in populous places ; but there is not all the same occasion among us, where other provision is made for the support of the poor and for the education of children. There is, however, another object, to which the charity of *female associations* may with equal propriety be directed.

An extensive territory is opened in our country for new settlements. Into that territory multitudes have emigrated within a few years. The first settlers must necessarily be much scattered, and many of them in straitened circumstances, or at least destitute of such property as might most easily be applied to the maintenance of the ministry and of schools. Books must be scarce among them, and they cannot be obtained without difficulty. Children are growing up without those literary and religious advantages, which the young generally enjoy among us. To them Christian benevolence will direct its attention.

For the benefit of those new settlements missionary societies have been instituted in various parts of the land, and have evidently been of great utility. In aid of those societies female associations have been formed in many of our towns, and one in this parish. The main object of their liberality is the procurement of useful books to be distributed in families for the benefit of the younger, as well as elder members. These pious and charitable associations are aiding the cause of religion among the young, as really as did the female associations in the primitive times.

Your society, my sisters, has been diminished by removals and by deaths. The late death of your treasurer is a sensible loss to your society and to us all. Her example in all relations is worthy of imitation. May her death impress it



on our minds. The vacancies which have been made, we hope, will be filled. I question not, but there are many, who will come forward and occupy the vacant ground. We now give them an invitation.

The distance of the objects of your charity can be no objection in a benevolent mind. We are to do good to *all*, as we have opportunity—to do good to *strangers* as well as to our next neighbors—to do good to them who are of the household of faith—to be fellow workers to the kingdom of Christ. The sum expected from each member of your association is but small. But even a mite thrown into the treasury of God by a female hand will now, as it did formerly, meet Christ's high approbation. You know not what benefits may result to others, nor what rewards may accrue to you from your small, but pious charities.

Think, how many families there are in our new settlements, destitute of pious books ; yea, even of bibles, and of the preached word. Say ; are you reluctant to impart a little of your substance to their relief ? Suppose yourselves with your families in their situation ; would you not wish for help ?—Suppose your sons or daughters, your brethren or sisters, with young families, thus placed in the wilderness ; would you not think a little charity from your neighbors for their assistance, properly applied ? We are to do for others the same, which, in an exchange of circumstances, we could reasonably desire from them.

Some perhaps will ask, “ Why did those people remove from the places where they might have enjoyed religious and literary privileges ? ” Of this we are not judges. Some might have good reasons ; and some might not. Be this as it may ; they have removed ; they are in the con-

dition described ; they are consequently objects of charity. The population of our new territories is a matter of public importance. The first adventurers, whoever they may be, will for a time suffer the inconveniences natural to new plantations, and ought to be assisted in their religious interests.

“ But are they not indifferent to the gospel ? ” If they are, there is so much the greater reason, why we should send it to them. But they are not universally indifferent. Many solicit aid ; and they thankfully receive it. Like the man in Paul’s vision, they say, “ Come into the wilderness and help us.” Hence we may assuredly gather, that the Lord has called some to preach the gospel among them. However indifferent we may suppose some to be, we must remember, they have *children*. And shall we have no compassion for children growing up under negligent parents ? The gospel was first spread in the world by missions. If it had never been sent to any but those, who previously sought it, how would it have spread at all ? how would it have come to us ? “ How shall men believe in him, of whom they have not heard ? How shall they hear without a preacher ? How will any preach, except they be sent ? ”

Some perhaps will further ask, “ Ought *women* to apply property to such a cause without the consent of their *husbands* ? ”

Besure, neither our charity nor our piety should be so conducted, as to disturb domestic peace. The heads of families should walk together as heirs of the grace of life, and should be fellow helpers to the truth. But who will suspect that our charitable women can meet with any impediment in such a work as this, from the opposition of their husbands ? What man is there among

us, who would restrain his wife from using her own discretion in the exercise of so small a charity for so pious and laudable a purpose? Does not every man leave it with his wife to give a meal to a hungry stranger, or a morsel of bread, or a rag of cloathing to a poor neighbor? And will he be displeased, if she does as much for *Christ*? What she does for his brethren—what she does in promoting his gospel among the poor, she does for *him*. True yokefellowes will help those women, who labour in the Lord. Is beneficence incompatible with the condition of married women? Will none of this class be found among those, to whom Christ will say, “Come ye blessed of my Father, for I was hungry, and ye gave me meat; naked, and ye cloathed me?” How did the wise women in Israel bring their offerings to the tabernacle; how did the wife of Herod’s steward and many other women minister to the Lord of their substance; if they were in such bondage under rigorous husbands, that they had no property—no substance at the disposal of their charity? We will not imagine, that there is less liberality in a *Christian* husband, than there was in an ancient *Jew*, or in *Herod’s steward*. How did Solomon’s virtuous woman reach forth her hands to the needy, if her husband permitted her to take nothing in her hands, but her spindle and distaff? We will not suppose such penuriousness in husbands. It is placing them in too low a grade—in too unchristian an attitude.

Let all things be done decently and in order. Religion has no tendency to introduce contention or confusion into families—to set a man at variance against his wife, or a woman against her husband. If it ever has this effect, there is the want of prudence, and probably the want of pie-

ty in one or both of them. Let them walk as heirs together of the grace of life ; and then neither their prayers nor their charities will be hindered.

*Paul spake unto the women*, who resorted to the place, where prayer was wont to be made. What he spake we are not particularly informed. But what it was in substance we may learn by attending to that, which he charged *other* preachers to speak to them. He inculcated on them the duties of religion in all the relations of life. He exhorted them to guide their households, instruct their children, relieve the afflicted, help the saints, be modest in their apparel, obedient to their husbands, peaceable among their neighbors, sober in their manners, discreet and inoffensive in their language, and in all things to maintain a behavior agreeable to their profession of godliness, that so the word of God might not be blasphemed, and no adversary might find occasion to speak reproachfully of it.

A charitable zeal for the promotion of religion abroad, is highly commendable. But in order to its having the best effect, it must also be employed near home. You must maintain religion in your hearts ; exhibit it in your daily conversation ; attend to the education of your children ; shew kindness to the afflicted ; diligently follow every good work.

The preaching of the gospel is among the instituted means of religion. Your exemplary attendance on this, while it aids the piety of your own hearts, will have a happy influence on your families and neighbors. The pious women in Philippi resorted to the place, where prayer was wont to be made. But that was not the *only* place where they could pray. Doubtless they endeavored to render *their own houses* places of

prayer. Most certainly their *closets* were such places.

You, my female friends and hearers, will give yourselves much to prayer. You will pray for your children, and teach them to pray for themselves. You will pray for our minister, and for the church and society, of which you are members. You will pray for the effusion of God's spirit, to awaken, convince and convert sinners here, and elsewhere. You will pray that God's work may be revived among us, and that success may attend the labors of love abroad.

God loves a *cheerful* giver. It is not expected that you will give largely ; but you ought to give freely. 'This is the Apostle's advice ; " He who giveth, let him do it with simplicity. He who sheweth mercy, let him do it with cheerfulness."

It is a prominent feature in Solomon's portrait of the virtuous woman, that " she stretcheth forth her hand to the poor ; she reacheth forth her hands to the needy ; she openeth her mouth with wisdom, and in her tongue is the law of kindness." At the same time, " she looketh well to her household ; her children rise up and call her blessed ; her husband also, and he praiseth her. Strength and honor are her cloathing, and she rejoiceth in time to come."

A similar description the Psalmist gives of the righteous and good *man*. " He sheweth favor and lendeth ; and, that the means of liberality may increase, " he ordereth his affairs with discretion. He hath dispersed and given to the poor. His name shall be exalted with honor. Though the wicked may see it and be grieved, yet they shall melt away. The desire of the wicked shall perish."

Whatever you give in the cause of religion, you lend to the Lord. He will repay it in the communications of his grace to your souls, in his blessings on your substance, in his smiles on your families, and in the rewards of a future life.

“There is that giveth, and yet increaseth ; there is that withholdeth more than is meet, but it tendeth to poverty. The liberal soul shall be made fat ; and he that watereth, shall be watered also himself.”

May God make all grace abound toward you, that ye may abound in every good work, being enriched in every thing unto all bountifulness, which will cause through you the thanksgivings of many unto God.

*FINIS.*