

Christian Benevolence.

A

SERMON,

DELIVERED AT NEWBURY, VT.

BEFORE THE

Washington Benevolent Society,

AT THE

CELEBRATION OF THE ANNIVERSARY OF THE NATIONAL
INDEPENDENCE, JULY 4, 1812.

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WINDSOR :

PRINTED BY THOMAS M. POMROY.
1812.

ADVERTISEMENT.

THE following **SERMON** was first prepared for, and delivered before the *Caledonia Washington Benevolent Society*, at the celebration of the birth of **WASHINGTON**, in February last. Owing to similarity of circumstances it was delivered likewise, on the Anniversary of Independence.

On the latter occasion however, there were some things added, and others omitted.

It is now submitted for the press, in compliance with a request of the *Washington Benevolent Society*, of Newbury

July, 1812.

CHRISTIAN BENEVOLENCE.

FROM my earliest remembrance, I have been in the habit of pronouncing the word AMERICA, with sensations of peculiar pleasure. My attachment to the country, and my respect for its inhabitants, induced me to emigrate to it, before I had seen a native American, or knew one person on this side of the Atlantic. I have now for nine years eaten its bread; enjoyed its civil and religious liberty, received its grateful hospitality, wherever providence has directed my course, and enjoyed the flattering attention of a large portion of those, with whom I have had regular or occasional intercourse. Dead indeed should I be to all sensibility, did I not feel a lively interest in the welfare of that country, where I have enjoyed so many favors.

Believe me, my hearers, tho' a foreigner by birth, I participate in all the pleasurable sensations of the warmest patriots among you, on this anniversary of your National Independence. I would not wish to be understood as renouncing the country that gave me birth, or as intimating that my attachments to it have ceased to exist. They still remain in full force. The quarrel, therefore, which at this moment exists between the two countries is most, painful to my mind. Figure to yourselves two men at variance. They declare open hostility to one another, and study, on each side, who shall do the other most harm. What think you, would be the feelings of that

woman, who is wife to the one and sister to the other? If you can realize the feelings of a female, so situated, you can realize the feelings of your preacher to day, in reference to the unhappy dispute now begun between Great Britain, and the United States of America.

Although the circumstances in which we meet to day, are not so auspicious as those of past anniversaries yet they are not such as should destroy our love of country, liberty or independence. Let us hope for better days. Let us even hope that this year, which has commenced, with a declaration of hostilities, may terminate, in profound peace.

As the invitation for the present celebration was given by a Society, recently established in this place, it may be expected that some notice should be taken of it. I do not appear before you either as its historian, or its advocate. I may say of it, as I said of another Society, a few days ago, from this pulpit, that I am ignorant of its peculiarities. This much however, I may say, that the unbounded confidence I place, in the integrity and veracity of many of its members, in different parts of the country, places it entirely beyond the reach of my suspicion. I have observed, indeed, in some of the public journals, very unqualified censures bestowed on this Society, but as these were not accompanied, with any thing like proof of the turpitude of the institution, I regarded them as mere calumnies. We live in a day, when very little regard is paid to truth or candor, by many who write for the public eye. Public bodies, private individuals, and official characters, unheard and uncondemned, are freely held up to the scorn and ridicule of mankind. I know not how men of this description satisfy their consciences; but, this I know, that he who taketh up an evil report against his neighbor, is in danger of condemnation.

Averse to the practice of introducing political

discussion into the pulpit, (a subject which I cheerfully resign, on this occasion, to the orator who is to succeed me,) I shall at present attempt the delineation of a christian virtue. The topic of discourse is suggested by the appellation of the Society, at whose request I now address you. It is *Benevolence*. A portion of scripture suited to my design is contained in

GALLATIANS, VI. 10.

“As we have, therefore, opportunity let us do good unto all men.”

When man came from the hand of his Maker, he was not only perfectly holy, but perfectly happy.—Had the human race retained their rectitude, they doubtless would have retained their felicity. But alas! who can calculate the miseries introduced into our world, by the entrance of sin. Look around you and see the miseries, which sin has entailed on man. Here are men enduring the extremities of pain, in consequence of bodily indisposition. There are multitudes groaning under the iron hand of poverty, occasioned, perhaps, by the perfidy and villany of professed friends: and in every place there are those who have tales of distress to relate. Although all are involved in and exposed to misery, yet all do not share in it alike. Hence it is the duty of those, who are for the present exempted from those kinds of adversity, which disenable from acts of beneficence, to do all in their power, for the relief of their fellow-men. This is the duty inculcated in our text.

In treating of this subject, we shall consider the objects of Benevolence—the manner in which it should be exercised—and the motives by which it ought to be governed.

1. *The objects of BENEVOLENCE.*

The principal object of benevolence is the indigent. At a certain time, a woman brought a box of

odoriferous ointment to anoint the person of Jesus. Some of his disciples objected to what they considered an unnecessary waste, and suggested the propriety of disposing of the ointment, for the benefit of the poor. Jesus reprov'd and silenced them, by saying "ye have the poor with you always, and whensoever ye will, ye may do them good, but me ye have not always." "The poor" we again read, "shall never cease out of the land;" and again, "he that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the Lord." I believe there is no country under heaven, in which there are such excellent provisions made for the poor, as that in which providence has cast our lot. To those of us who have seen foreign countries, the contrast, as it respects this particular, is peculiarly pleasing. In every place of public concourse, in every street, and almost at every door, on certain occasions, we see swarms of wretched mendicants, importunately and clamorously, imploring aid from the hand of charity. Here one year passes after another, without our seeing one beggar. Still, however, there are those within our reach who are proper objects of charity; persons who, by sickness, accidents, or perhaps mismanagement, are reduced to straitened, perplexed, circumstances. They have no disposition, and it may be, have no right to throw themselves on the towns where they live. There are many families and individuals, who, whilst in health, suffer no inconveniencies from their hard fare, yet when afflicted by indisposition, for lack of property, cannot command those delicacies and cordials, which we all know to be necessary to a sick bed. These will be sought out, by the benevolent and humane, and will be generously relieved. It is indeed a part of that religion that cometh from above, to visit the fatherless and the widow in their affliction. "Whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, & shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?"

Another class, who may be considered as objects of benevolence, are the ignorant. Man is ushered into the world, without any innate ideas ; consequently whatever knowledge he possesses, is altogether acquired. Multitudes of mankind are entirely beyond the reach of the means of instruction ; and among those who enjoy them, many youth are so grossly inattentive that they derive no benefit from them : hence the deplorable ignorance of many of the human race. Ignorance of the arts and sciences, so far as they conduce to the practical benefit of man, is sincerely to be deplored ; and an attempt at removing it, is clearly the duty of those who are commanded to do good to all men as they have opportunity.

Societies that are formed for political or moral purposes exclusively, calculate on diffusing knowledge respecting these subjects only ; but, occupying the station of a teacher of christianity, you must bear with me whilst I notice another species of ignorance, infinitely more deplorable. I refer to men's ignorance of the method of salvation. Among us, the Scriptures, generally, are believed. If they be true, it follows that as long as men are ignorant of God's righteousness, they are exposed to ceaseless woe. The consequences, therefore, of this species of ignorance, are incomparably deplorable. If men are ignorant of the art of agriculture they cultivate their fields to disadvantage ;—if they are ignorant of the science of casting accounts, they are liable to imposition, in their transactions with unprincipled speculators ;—if they are ill informed in political concerns, they are likely to give their suffrages to that class of men, who are ever apt, by fair speeches and pompous professions, to deceive the unwary :—but if they are ignorant of God and of Jesus Christ, whom he hath sent into the world, they lose their souls. It is a solemn truth that he who believeth not, (and

how can a man believe what he knows not) shall be damned. In the immensely populous territories of Asia and Africa, christianity can hardly be said to be known. Darkness covers the earth, and gross darkness the people, and in the other quarters of the globe, by far the greater part of the population, are either ignorant of the name of Jesus, or of that class who know their Master's will, but do it not. The man of christian philanthropy contemplates these facts with deep regret, and tho' he should deem himself ineligible to the office of a christian teacher, he can contribute of his substance, for the wider diffusion of divine truth, and pray with fervor "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven."

2. *The manner in which Benevolence should be exercised.*

It is difficult to suggest an arranged system on which we should proceed, in doing good to our fellow men. Those who are disposed to obey the command in our text, will easily find a way of doing it. In general, they will caution the unwary and precipitate, they will advise the perplexed, and they will inform the ignorant. I know that many who would be thought very benevolent, deal much in this cheap kind of it, who are nevertheless very sparing of that kind which is more substantial.—Real benevolence implies self-denial, and the man possessed of it, will be ever ready to give up some of his own things, to administer to the comforts of others.

Good may be done to others, by our substance, and by our personal services. The command "honor the Lord with thy substance," not only refers to the service of religion, but to every kind of good work. Property seems to be bestowed on men, not to enable them to be clothed in fine linen, and fare sumptuously every day, but to clothe the naked, feed the hungry, and supply the wants of

the needy. Though now, seemingly, there is no control exercised over them, yet a period is coming, when they will be called to give an account of their stewardship. In the view of this, Christians ought to be ready to communicate, and to be rich in every good work.

In works of liberality, men are extremely prone to deal with too sparing a hand. When the direct or indirect claims of the objects of charity, are made on many, not in a state of indigence, love of money, that fruitful source of evil, suggests excuses and reasons, by which the demand is lessened, or perhaps totally evaded. Nay, what is grudgingly bestowed, is magnified much beyond its proper limits. A dollar given to a poor man, an afflicted family, the education of a poor boy, a charitable institution, or a religious purpose, seems as much in the eye of the donor, as ten times the sum when wasted on mere pleasure. Now the Lord, who requireth of men, according to what they have, and not according to what they have not, loveth a cheerful giver, and commended the poor widow who cast in her two mites, more than the affluent, who of their riches cast in abundance. Were men to take the Scriptures for their rule and example, they would reverse the common order of things—instead of wasting their substance in luxurious entertainments for their neighbors, who are able to pay them in kind, when they would make a feast, they would invite the poor the maimed, the lame, and the blind.

Much good may be done, by individuals, to the afflicted in their vicinity. Much good may be done by females, placed in easy circumstances, by imparting of their delicacies to the sick, the infirm and the aged. But I believe good can be done, on a still more extensive scale, by associations of men, formed for the purpose of ameliorating the condition of the proper objects of benevolence. When a man

acts alone, unless his resources be very ample, the benefits resulting from his exertions must, necessarily, be very limited; but when many unite their scattered powers, the effect must be great. It would be easy to amplify this remark, by introducing to view many of the Benevolent Societies which exist in the world.

If we would do good to all men as we have opportunity, we must not only bestow our goods, but we must yield our personal labors. No man ever could urge the injunction in our text, with a better grace, or more consistency, than he who wrote it. It was Paul. In younger years he had great worldly prospects. Possessed of a fine understanding, cultivated by much learning, he might command most eligible situations. But what things were gain to him, he counted loss for Christ. Receiving commandment from God to preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, he relinquished all his prospects, and spent his whole life in doing good to every man as he had opportunity, and tho' he received the grossest usage from men, he persevered till he could say "I have finished my course."

As we are this day celebrating the anniversary of the independence of this happy country, we may illustrate the case before us, by an allusion to its celebrated chief. No man, probably, ever did display more real benevolence, in a temporal point of view, than he, in yielding his gratuitous services to his country. During a long period, he encountered a multitude of adverse dispensations of providence, but he persevered, and probably it is owing to his firmness and intrepidity, that the tributary provinces were rescued from bondage, and obtained independence. As a statesman and warrior, I consider him as the first of men, as it respects the principle of benevolence. He seems literally to have done good to his countrymen at least, not only consulting

the benefit of the men of his own day, but those of succeeding generations. And probably, we enjoy at this day, the fruits of his benevolence, that sprung from the services of his body and of his mind. One of the most remarkable traits of his character, is his steady refusal of pecuniary reward. I have read of many generals who fought the battles of their country, but, in modern times at least, George Washington is the only one who resisted every offer of remuneration. His conduct, therefore, affords a proper illustration of the principle of Benevolence; for all those services which have reward for their object, are the fruits of a selfish and ungenerous disposition.

3. *The motives that ought to govern men in the practice of Benevolence.*—In doing good to our fellow-men, nothing is of so much consequence, as the motive. When an act of apparent generosity proceeds from a sinister motive— even when it does real good to the man who receives it, it is of no avail to him who performs it. To constitute a good work, in a strictly religious point of view, it is necessary that it be done from a right principle, performed by a right rule, and directed to a right end. Our concern at present is with the principle, which is the love of God. The great commandment of the law is, “thou shalt love the Lord thy God.” Whatever work is done from any other principle, however applauded by men, it is not acceptable in the sight of him who searches the heart, for by him principles as well as actions are weighed. That *quantity* will never supply the deficiency of *motive*. in doing good to our fellow-men, is manifest from the declaration of Paul. “Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and tho’ I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.” 1. Cor. XIII. 3. The same Apostle, who thus clearly sets aside the works of them who have not the love of God in them, declares as explicitly the motives that influenced his

own conduct, and that of other Christians, "the love of Christ constraineth us." This motive in believers, is greatly strengthened, by the astonishing example of Jehovah himself. Small, indeed, is the expression of good will of a sinful man to his fellow worm, when compared with the love of God which passeth knowledge. "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Infinite as this example is, it is proposed as the pattern of our imitation. "Be ye followers (or imitators) of God, as dear children," and again; "forgiving one another, as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you." Here let us pause a moment, and ponder! How astonishing the subject before us! God sends his Son into the world to suffer—to die—that rebels who believe on him, might be honorably reinstated in the divine favor! Can you look at such an overwhelming display of love, and at the same time hate, even an enemy? No, you must love them that hate you, and do good to them who despitefully use you and persecute you.

Christians are, moreover, influenced in doing good, by the example of Jesus. To a believer, the love of Christ is the most astonishing subject that can possibly occur. From his intercessory prayer, it appears he had glory with the Father, before the world had existence. At his incarnation, he veiled his glory. He tabernacled on earth as a man. He suffered the contradiction of sinners against himself. He who thought it no robbery to be equal with God, yea, who was Jehovah's fellow, humbled himself unto death, even the death of the cross. The death of Jesus is the most tender scene, in his whole history, and consequently gives the richest display of his unparalleled love. Passing over his previous indignities, only consider the manner of his death. He arrives at Calvary, wearing a crown of thorns, exhausted with

the anguish of his scourging, and the weight of his cross, besmeared with the horrid compound of blood and spittle. The appointed soldiers dig the hole in which the cross was to be erected. The cords, the nails and the hammers are ready. The cross is placed on the ground. Rude hands seize the prince of life, and lay him down on the bed of sorrows—they nail him to it—they erect it—his nerves crack—his blood distills—he hangs upon his wounds, naked, a spectacle to heaven and to earth!—

We fearlessly challenge the whole world to produce such an example of benevolence as this. Jesus endured it, that he might bear our sins in his own body on the tree, and make us heirs of eternal life. Truly might Paul say, that God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. And we may add, that when a disciple of Jesus has a realizing sense of the love of his divine Master, he is ready to the utmost of his power—yea, beyond his power, to do good to all men as he has opportunity.

Inferences. 1. The vanity of allowing our benevolence to terminate in mere expressions of good will. Were you to judge of many men by their talk, you would conclude them to be possessed of a large share of generosity, who, nevertheless, do nothing but talk about doing good. The apostle James describes strikingly the class of men to whom I allude. “If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled: notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body, what doth it profit?” ch. ii. 15, 16. Tell a man of this description a case of distress, he listens to it—he wonders that the neighbors do not assist.—Why does not such an one, who is able, step forward to offer his assistance?—he wishes it were in his power to relieve it—he will try what he can do—if others

only would do their part, he will do his—and after much vamping to the same purpose he dismisses it from his mind to think of it no more. Does such a man possess religion? Truly his religion is vain. He deceives himself and the truth is not in him. — My brethren, let us not love in word only, let us love in deed and in truth. Did men only calculate on avoiding the opprobrium and ridicule which necessarily attach to vain talkers, the words of their mouths should, invariably, be the indexes of their minds. Let people who express sympathy which they do not feel, realize an exchange of circumstances with the afflicted, and they will surely feel the force of the commandment of our Lord. “Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.”

2. The excellency of the Christian religion.—The precept we have been considering, is a Christian precept. The discourses of Christ that are left on record, and the epistles of his apostles, abound with exhortations similar to the words of our text. Indeed, the gospel, like its divine author, is altogether love. No system of fabulous theology can compare with that religion that comes from above. To return love for love, is a maxim even among pagans; but to practise benevolence on the principles we have stated, and that to enemies, is a characteristic peculiar to Christianity. It is freely admitted that infidels may appear to do good to others, but it must proceed from some other motive than love to God. In order to this, it is necessary to know God and Jesus Christ, whom he hath sent.

A few remarks to the members of the *Washington Benevolent Society*, will close the present discourse.

The designation of your Society is very promising, and much is expected from it. Your fellow citizens, you are aware, will look for acts of benevolence from you, not only in your social capacity, but

as individuals. You have excited expectations, beware that you do not disappoint them. The indigent and the wretched, I trust, will never look to you in vain.

I have no disposition to question your motives in associating together. You are not, I presume, conscious of any sinister design. Yet such is the depravity of our minds, such is our lack of self-knowledge, that when our ways are pure in our own eyes, they may not meet the approbation of our sovereign Judge. This should lead you to self-examination, respecting your social and personal conduct. Your actions of all kinds, will eventually be weighed in the balances of the sanctuary, and if wanting, the consequences will be inexpressible.

As the subjects of the United States of America, allow me to put you in mind, to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates, to be ready to every good work—to speak evil of no man—to be no brawlers, but gentle, showing all meekness to all men. Perhaps you do not altogether approve of the acts of the administration. Be it so. Select the most noxious of them, and compare it with what is recorded of the government of Nero, and then listen to the injunction addressed to the Roman Christians who lived under him. “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.” Rom. xiii. 1, 2. This does not interpose a barrier between you and the removal of wicked rulers. Let fair, candid, and constitutional means only be used, and in the mean time, be ye subject, not for wrath, but for conscience sake.