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SUNDAY READING.

THE  
*EXPLANATION*  
OF THE  
TEN COMMANDMENTS.  
IN THREE PARTS.



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# EXPLANATION, &c.

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**W**E all of us are taught to say the Ten Commandments, but there are few of us I am afraid who rightly understand them, and fewer still who walk by them and try to practice them. I may add that there are none who do not break, more or less, one or other of the ten, and that therefore there is no man living who could bear to be judged by them.

We read in the 20th Chapter of Exodus, (from whence the Commandments are taken) that God spake all these words saying, "I am the Lord thy God which brought thee out of the land of Egypt, and out of the house of Bondage." God was here speaking to the Jews who were of old his favourite people. The Ten Commandments were first given to them, and through them to us. We must not wonder, therefore, if we find a few expressions which suited the Jews better than they will suit us. Let us now proceed to the explanation.

## FIRST COMMANDMENT.

"Thou shalt have no other Gods but me."

This means that we must have, or chuse to ourselves, the one true and only God, of the Scriptures. Now in order to know who this God of the Scriptures is, it is plain that we must read the Scriptures, and especially the New Testament. He was the God who appeared to Moses, at Mount Sinai, and gave him all these Commandments. He was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and all



the Prophets and Holy Men that lived on the earth. He afterwards was still more plainly made known as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, whom he sent into the world to die for our sins, and he now sends his Holy Spirit into the hearts of those who call upon him. It would take too much time to enter here fully into the character of God; let us therefore only repeat shortly a few of the many things which the Scriptures have said concerning him. He is "the High and Lofty One who inhabiteth Eternity," "From everlasting to everlasting he is God." He is the "Almighty;" "His wisdom is infinite;" "the light and the darkness are both alike to Him." "He searcheth the hearts of all the children of men." "By him actions are weighed"—yea, He "judgeth the secrets of men's hearts." "Our God shall bring every work into Judgment, whether it be good or whether it be evil," for He hath appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained;" and "then the wicked shall go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into life eternal." He is at the same time a God of compassion and of tender mercy. What can more strongly prove it than his sending Christ to die for us, and to offer Salvation to us. "God is Love." "Not that we loved him," says the Apostle, "but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be a propitiation for our sins." He described Himself to Moses as being "the Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and of great goodness, keeping mercy for thousands;" yet, at the same time, He will by no means excuse or "clear," the unrepenting and the "guilty." More



over let us remark, that he is the God of nature and providence: He made the world, and He now governs it. "Not a sparrow falls to the ground without his notice." He orders the events of nations and of individuals. He doth all things both in Heaven above and in earth below, "according to the council of his own will," being righteous in all his ways and holy in all his works.

Now, therefore, let us seriously apply this subject to ourselves, and first as to our knowledge of God. Is it then in the God of the Scriptures that we believe, or in some false kind of Supreme Being whose character is more suited to our inclinations, and more indulgent to our sins? Do we believe in a God who will inflict punishment on the disobedient as well as shew mercy to them that love Him and keep his commandments—who on the one hand is ready to pardon and "willeth all men to be saved," and who on the other will surely condemn "the unbelieving," as well as "plentifully reward every wicked doer?" Oh! how do men often mistake the whole character of God; some in one way, and some in another, according to their various tempers, passions, interests, prejudices and conceits.

But having learned to know God aright, do we in the next place also reverence him, and fear him, and trust him, and love him, and serve him? Do we carry about with us at all times a holy reverence and regard to God? And as to our fear of God, I would ask, is it greater in us than our fear of man? When men require or expect us to do a thing which God hath commanded us not to do, whom do we obey, God or man? that is the question, In vain do we flatter ourselves that we keep



the first commandment if the fear of man is greater in us than of God. Do we trust him also? Do we trust him, for instance, both in our prosperity and in our adversity, and whatever befalls us do we say that it is the Lord who hath done it, looking forward at the same time to his help in all the future circumstances of our lives; or are we trusting in ourselves and in an arm of flesh?

And here, above all, let us examine whether we love God. Do we love him? As our Saviour in speaking of this commandment expressly says that we ought to do. I mean, do we love him "with all our heart, and soul, and strength?" Do we love him more than we love our wealth, our pleasure, our interests, or earthly friends, or any worldly things whatever? "Whom have I in Heaven but thee," said the pious Psalmist, "and there is none upon earth that I desire in comparison of thee." Do our hearts cleave to God as our best and most desirable portion? Is his favor all in all with us, and do we therefore seek it earnestly by prayer and by all the means through which the Scriptures teach us that it is to be obtained? And to crown all, do we obey Him and diligently serve Him? "If ye love me," said Christ, "keep my commandments." When we say that we love a person, and yet refuse to do the things he desires us, it is loving him in word only, not in deed, or in truth. Nor is it one Commandment only that we must obey. If a man "keepeth the Commandments of God, and yet offendeth in one point, he is guilty of all;" for the same God that saith, "thou shalt not commit adultery," said also, "thou shalt not steal." No-



thing more plainly proves men to be hollow and insincere in their whole religion than their professing to serve God indeed in some things, but refusing to do it in others. Such men do not truly serve God at all.

Such is the first Commandment. It says, "thou shalt have none other Gods but me;" that is, thou shalt set up no God in opposition to me, neither thy lusts nor thy passions, neither the world nor the flesh, nor yet any of the false Gods whom men's own imaginations have formed to themselves, nor whom the heathen fall down and worship.

## SECOND COMMANDMENT.

"Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image, nor the likeness of any thing that is in the heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or in the waters under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down to them, nor worship them, for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, and visit the sins of the fathers upon the children, unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me: and shew mercy unto thousands in them that love me, and keep my Commandments."

This Commandment was directed more particularly to the Jews. God had separated them from the surrounding nations, who were idolatrous, and had made a covenant with them, that they should not make to themselves gods, such as their neighbours worshipped, but that He should be their God, and they should be His people. He says in this Commandment, that He is a jealous God, that is, jealous of His honour. It is said in another place, "My glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images," He will have no rivals



in any respect. The declaration, that He would visit the sins of the fathers upon the children even to the third and fourth generation, is to be understood as a part of that national covenant which God made with the Jews. If the fathers worshipped and served Him, then the children also would continue to have Him in like manner for their God; but if the fathers went astray, and did as the heathen, then also the children for generation after generation were to be involved in the consequences. Somewhat in like manner indeed it oftens happens now, that children suffer through the crimes of their parents, which should be an argument with all parents, both to avoid sinning themselves, and to take care lest they draw their children into sin and misery also.

Let us then abhor this sin of idolatry. It was one into which the Jews were continually falling; and let it be our prayer, as well as our endeavour, that all nations of the earth who are now sunk in idolatry may be recovered out of it: for it is a sin highly offensive to God.

Let us ourselves keep at the greatest distance from this sin, and for this purpose it seems prudent not even to adorn our churches with images, lest any of the people who see them there, forgetting that God, is a spirit, should pay undue honour to the representation.

### THIRD COMMANDMENT.

“Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who taketh his name in vain.”



To take the name of God in vain is, in the strongest and worst sense of the words, to call on God to witness a thing that is false, or in other words, to take a false oath. In many cases men are required by law to make oath of the truth of what they say. Now what solemnity and fear of God should there be in our minds on such occasions! The judge and the jury indeed may possibly not find us out, but "the Lord our God will not hold us guiltless if we thus dreadfully take his name in vain."

We may here remark by the way, that it is this fear of God therefore, which is the chief security of the lives and properties of people in society. Now I think it cannot be too strongly insisted on, that it is a very solemn thing to call on God to witness any thing we are about to utter, and that, therefore, all carelessness and inconsideration in taking oaths, even though the oaths should not be false, are very sinful. There are some who take custom-house oaths in a very solvenly manner, and who say, "O it is only a custom-house oath." Others take oaths of office just as lightly, and I believe there are some who now and then take oaths of a grave and solemn nature in their pastimes and in mere sport. But let all such weigh well those awful words. "The Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain."

The next practice we shall speak of is that of common swearing, a sin which has not the excuse which most other sins have, of some present pleasure or profit having tempted the person to it. That awful name which Angels reverence and adore, and which all good men cannot hear without a peculiar emotion, is trifled with, and in that sense,



( 9 )

taken in vain by a great part of our fellow-creatures almost every hour of the day. Some add cursing to this profane mention of the name of God, and often of the most horrid, kind, and, perhaps, when they curse and swear do not know that they are doing it, which they think is an excuse, but which ought rather to be considered as a proof to what an awful pass the habit has gone. Others equally without knowing it, use the name of God to express their surprise, or to make their conversation, as they think, more entertaining. Ah! how dreadful will it be for such persons to have all these words brought against them, as so many unexpected sins, on the day of judgment.

But it is necessary to be still more plain and particular on this head, for the very persons who are most guilty of this sin oftentimes cannot, or will not understand that what is said is addressed personally to them. To prove the justice of what we are about to add, I would here first call to my reader's recollection what our Saviour himself has observed on the subject of this Commandment. "Ye have heard," said he, "how it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths: but I say unto you, swear not at all, neither by Heaven, for it is God's throne, nor by the earth, for it is his foot-stool." To say by Heavens, or good Heavens (the very expression which some people use now) is thus expressly forbid by our Saviour. But not only this one phrase, which happened to be the one in common use in Christ's time, but all others of a like kind are of course by the same precept forbidden. It is painful to mention the various ways of being profane, which irreligious men from time to time



have invented; but for the sake of being understood, it seems necessary here in some degree to do so.—I would observe therefore, that such phrases as the following; “ Bless me,” meaning Lord bless me; “ Mercy on me,” meaning Lord have mercy on me; “ By Jove,” meaning by the heathen God Jove or Jupiter; “ Upon my soul;”—“ Faith:” and a variety of others appear all to be forbidden. “ Let your communications,” says Christ, “ be yea, yea, nay, nay;” that is, let your assertions be plain and simple, and not profane or violent. Let them consist as much as possible in a simple yes and no; “ for whatsoever is more than this cometh of evil.” Sin begins whenever we depart from this simplicity and purity of speech, and it seems even to be declared, that all those profane expressions which our Saviour alludes to, come from the wicked one.

We will close this subject with two remarks the first is, beware of all violence and passion. Men swear often through passion. To cure men’s passion is therefore to take away one cause of their swearing; nay, remember also that even all violent affirmations, all appeals to God or to religion which are needless, are offences against our Saviour’s rule. It is a rule which calls us to peculiar simplicity and self-command in our conversation. Be calm, therefore; be not loud and boisterous, but mild and gentle in your speech, and in order to keep your tongue, learn also to keep your heart. Learn therefore, in short, those doctrines of the Gospel which go to the correction of the heart.

My last observation is, Be serious. The world is full of people, who in one way or other are taking God’s name in vain, and who do it, as was observed before, without thinking of it, and the rea-



son of it is, they are not serious. They have no awe of the Divine Majesty, or of the Divine Presence. They have not felt the power of religion in their hearts. They have no reverence for God and Divine things, and hence it is that they speak so slightly of them. In vain do we multiply directions, not to use this or the other word, because it is profane: a profane mind will be ever coining new words instead of the old ones which are forbidden, and will betray a person into profaneness a hundred times a day, without his being once aware of it.

#### FOURTH COMMANDMENT.

“Remember that thou keep holy the Sabbath-day. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all that thou hast to do. But the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God; in it thou shalt do no manner of work, thou nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy man-servant, thy maid-servant, nor thy cattle, nor the stranger that is within thy gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day, wherefore the Lord blessed the seventh day, and hallowed it.”

In the New Testament we find our Saviour observing that “the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath;” that is the Sabbath was made to be a benefit to man, and not a burden to him. We who are Christians should peculiarly rejoice in it as a benefit. What a blessing is it, in particular to the poor of this country, that there is one day in seven on which they may rest from their work, and pass the day with their families in worshipping and praising God, and in considering over all his mercies, as well as in examining into the



manner in which they have been performing their own weekly duties. The very brutes, in part, share in the benefit, for this Commandment mercifully provides a day of rest for the ox and the ass also.

It is proper here to remark, that some alteration has taken place in respect to the Sabbath, since this Commandment was given. The day has been changed, for we keep now not the seventh day of the week, which is Saturday, but the first which is Sunday, because our Lord rose from the dead on the Sunday, and the name of the "Lord's Day" has for that reason been given to it. We therefore unite two purposes together, for we both rest every seventh day, as the Jews did, in imitation of God, who made the world in six days, and then rested or ceased from his works on the seventh, and we also commemorate the glorious Resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who, as on this day was raised from the dead, after having died for our sins and obtained eternal Redemption for us.

Besides the difference in the day it is natural that there should now arise some circumstances of difference in the *manner* of keeping Sunday. The Jews, who often indeed misinterpreted their own law, thought it wrong to pluck so much as an ear of corn, or to heal a person of his disease on the Sabbath-day, and in many other points they were extremely strict. But we have been taught by our Saviour, that this Commandment ought not to be construed so severely by us, and it is now generally agreed among the most serious Christians, that both works of mercy and also works of necessity are perfectly lawful on the Sabbath day.

But let us next endeavour to explain distinctly in what manner it seems to us that a Christian Sab-



bath ought under our present circumstances to be kept.

And first it should be considered by us as a day of rest from our common labor. The very laws of the land require this, by forbidding shops to be opened, and common employments to be followed on the Lord's day, and all magistrates are obliged by their oath, to see the laws of their country executed in this respect. Every individual therefore is bound to abstain from the open violation of the Sabbath provided he reverences the laws or the public Religion of his country, even supposing that he is not a Christian himself.

But Christians are called upon to keep the Sabbath holy in a much higher sense. The word holy means separate or set apart from other days, in order to a religious use. We should therefore consider the sabbath as a different day from other days, and should carry that feeling habitually about with us through all the hours of it. Even if necessity should oblige us to do some things which make a part of our common work, yet even then we should endeavour to bear in our minds all the while that it is the Sabbath. I urge this bearing in mind that it is the Sabbath, because I know that if this sentiment is in the heart, needless work will be generally avoided, but that without this a man will not easily be kept from breaking the Sabbath in one way or other.

Remember then that all common work, which can as well be shifted to the Saturday or the Monday becomes sinful if done on the Sunday. Cleanliness must no doubt be attended to on the Sunday; but this is to be done by the preparation of Saturday. Our food must be got ready; but this may



be managed with very little trouble even in the largest families, if there is but a disposition to spare all kinds of labor on the Sabbath-Day. There are many houses, I grant, which must not be left quite empty during Divine Service; but it is in general enough if one person is left at home, who may take turns with others, so that the same individual need not always be hindered from attending Public Worship. There should be an universal agreement among masters and servants, and among servants also with one another, each not only to observe the Sabbath himself, but to promote the observation of it among those around him.

But now to speak of what is still more material, It is of little use to abstain from bodily work, if the frame of mind is quite inconsistent with a due attention to the Sabbath. This would be a formal and Jewish Sabbath indeed. To comply with the form, but to neglect the spirit, is no true keeping of the Christian Sabbath. It should even be remembered that if Jewish forms are in some respect left off, it becomes us to be more careful to attend to the substance; for we are now placed under a dispensation, in which all is expected to be "Spirit and Life."

The Sabbath, as we observed before, was made for man. It was made for his good, and more especially for his spiritual good. Whatever therefore tends to our spiritual benefit is fit employment for the Sabbath. Public worship has been appointed on this principle, in all Christian countries. But it is necessary that we should not only be seen attending in our places, but that our minds also should be engaged in the service. In prayer we should feel our need of the mercies we implore;



in the confession of sin, we should be affected with a sense of our unworthiness, and in offering up our thanksgivings to God we should pour out our whole hearts before him. And when we hear the Scriptures read, and the Gosple of Jesus Christ preached to us, we should listen with an attentive ear, and receive the truth into an honest and good heart, When we are returning from the service we should not discourse as many are apt to do, about light and trifling things; but we should call up the subject which we may have been hearing of at church. We should betake ourselves also at home to the instruction of our children, to the reading of the Scriptures, to family prayers, and to conversation that may have something useful in it, or if we take our walk abroad, it should be in order to indulge in meditation on Divine Things, and in order also to call perhaps on our more pious friends and kindred, whose conversation is likely to turn on topics suitable to the day, or visit the sick, to comfort one that is afflicted, to do an act of kindness and charity, or to persue some plan of usefulness proper for the Sabbath, and in which we may be then regularly employed.

Such are the occupations which become a Christian on the Sunday, and uniting, as they naturally do, with the exercise of the social affections, they may well employ the whole of this sacred season; for that is a poor motley inconsistent Sabbath indeed of which one little part only is spent at church, "in building ourselves up in our most holy faith," while the rest is given up to such employment as tend to pull down what we have been building up, and to promote forgetfulness of all that we have been hearing. It is the prayer before we go to



worship, and the reflection after: it is the weekly self-examination which we at this time practise; it is the secret desires of the heart after the favour of God: it is the humble and holy contemplation of the life, death, and resurrection, and ascension of our Saviour; it is, in short, the heavenly mind exercising itself on spiritual objects, and shutting out those things that are worldly, which constitutes the true keeping of the Sabbath. It is thus that we acquire a "hope full of immortality."—"All sorrows mitigated, all cares suspended, all fears repressed, every angry emotion softened, every envious, revengeful, or malignant passion expelled;" we become on that day partakers, in some measure, of the heavenly happiness, and learn to look forward to that never-ending Sabbath to that season of eternal "rest which remaineth for the people of God."

And now what a privilege is the Sabbath! It is often so spoken of in the Old Testament. "I gave you my Sabbaths," says God to the Israelites, and then He proceeds to found a claim upon that nation for peculiar gratitude and obedience. Let us be grateful to God that he hath by his good Providence, preserved to us this blessed day, while, in many countries in Europe, it has been grievously profaned, and in some entirely overthrown. Let us rejoice that in Great Britain the law of the land still in some measure maintains it, though many of the people are learning to confound it more and more with the other days of the week, and are thus impiously casting off all concern for this commandment.