

V1_4th_after_Epiphany= The Small Number of Those Who Hear Sermons Properly
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JMJ

U.I.O.G.D.

Ave Maria!

Jesus, Mary, Joseph, we love Thee, save souls

O God come to our assistance. Jesus, Mary, Joseph please make haste to help us!

+ + + Jesus, Mary, Joseph + + +

VOL. I = THE BAD CHRISTIAN

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

The Small Number of Those Who Hear Sermons Properly

*“But the men wondered, saying: Who is this, for the winds, and the sea obey him” Matt.
8: 27*

Such is the wonderful power of the Word of God; such is the wonderful effect and fruit it produces when one willingly obeys it. We have hitherto treated of three different kinds of hearers who derive little or no profit for their souls from the Word of God in sermons, because the seed falls either on the public wayside, or on a hard rock, or amongst thorns. Now we come to the fourth and select class of really good hearers, with whom the seed falls on good ground and brings forth fruit a hundredfold, with whom Christ concludes his parable: “But that on the good ground are they who in a good and very good heart, hearing the Word, keep it, and bring forth fruit in patience” (Luke 8: 15).

How those good hearers of the Word of God may be recognized, and what abundant fruit they derive from sermons; but how small their number.

Who are they that hear the Word of God in sermons with a good, very good heart, and bring forth fruit in patience? We can recognize and distinguish them from other hearers of the Word of God in the same way in which Solomon distinguished natural flowers from artificial. The queen of Saba, wishing to test Solomon’s knowledge, proposed to him different riddles and difficult questions, one of which was to decide which of two bouquets of flowers that she presented to him was natural and which artificial; the artificial one she

had caused to be made with such consummate skill that it could not be distinguished from a natural bouquet by sight, touch or smell. What did Solomon do? He had a number of bees and flies brought into the room, and then looked carefully to see on which bouquet they would settle down; for he knew that the bees would light on the natural flowers, and the flies on the artificial. In the same way, in a congregation of Christians assembled to hear a sermon, there are different hearers of the Word of God; some are earnest and sincere, others are false and hypocritical hearers. Outwardly they resemble each other, and one can hardly distinguish between them. But he who wishes to know to which class he belongs must look carefully at his own heart in order to see whether it retains the wholesome doctrine and the Gospel truths he has heard, which, like bees, settle on it, to suck from it the precious honey of good works, or whether the devil, whose imps, like flies, are continually buzzing about, takes away the Word from the heart, so that it produces no fruit. If he finds the latter to be the case, he can conclude with certainty that he belongs to the number of those false hearers of the Word of God, of whom there are three kinds; if the former, he may congratulate himself on being in the number of the good, sincere and select hearers, who receive the Word of God in a good, very good heart, and bring forth abundant spiritual fruit. But there are still clearer signs by which to distinguish good hearers of the Word of God by their fruit:

I. A good Christian seeks the Word that he may use it for his own correction and amendment;

II. That he may be enlightened with knowledge;

III. That he may be strengthened to practice virtue;

IV. That he may conform to it so as to beautify himself;

V. That he may enjoy it as his consolation.

I. A good hearer of the Word of God seeks and hears it for his own correction and amendment. That is, he comes to the sermon with an honest, sincere desire to discover his hidden faults and failings, and to be moved to repentance for his known faults, and to a lasting amendment of them. Thus he does not, like some, avoid going to those sermons in which he knows by experience that the truth will be told them very plainly in order to induce them to amend their lives; so great is their fear of hearing their faults and secret vices condemned; or who, when they go to sermons and feel their consciences disturbed go away filled with anger and bitterness toward the preacher, and vilify and abuse him, like a dog barking at a person who throws a stone at him. No; quite different are the dispositions of a good Christian desirous of salvation. He is quite anxious and willing to hear his faults; he earnestly desires to amend them, and therefore he listens with pleasure and inward satisfaction to the earnest reproof, the sharp threat, the just anger and displeasure at sin and vice that the preacher gives expression to. Good! He thinks, when going home after the sermon; that suits me exactly; the preacher has certainly told me the plain truth; now I know where I was wrong.

II. A good Christian seeks the Word of God that he may be enlightened with knowledge. How rare the knowledge of divine things is amongst the greater number of men! In spite of its usefulness and necessity, there are few who trouble themselves about it. There are many, indeed, who have a sort of speculative knowledge of these things; but in practice, in their lives and actions, they show that they understand little or nothing about them. Heaven should be preferred to earth, eternal things to temporal and transitory, the precious soul to the corruptible body, the divine law to the usages and maxims of the vain world, and God to every one and everything. That they all know and make open profession of; but meanwhile they live in such forgetfulness of God, neglect of their souls, disregard of heaven amid heavenly things, as if they were to live on this earth forever. They transgress daily the divine commands and heap up sin on sin with as little concern as if the Almighty God, who is present everywhere and sees even our most secret thoughts, were a mere poetic fiction, a fable! St. Augustine says in his “Confessions”: “Unhappy the man who knows all created things, but does not know God; and happy he who is ignorant of all the rest, as long as he knows God.”

It is for the sake of this knowledge, and to make a practical use of it, that a Christian who is really desirous of salvation hears the Word of God in sermons constantly and with attention. He knows well that this is not the work of one or two days, of one or two instructions such as are given in sermons, and therefore he comes to this divine school as regularly and frequently as possible, so as not to miss a single lesson. He is far different from those who come only now and then, and who are like truant schoolboys that go to school one day and stay at home four, and who know nothing at the end of the year. No; he who is desirous of saving his soul will come constantly to sermons. For it is thus that he can learn what he has to value and what to despise, what to hate and avoid, what to seek and to love. Thus he will learn to prize heavenly and eternal things and to despise the perishable things of earth; to fear and hate sin alone above every other evil; to love and honor God alone above every other good; to avoid and shun the least shadow of an occasion of sin; to desire and seek his eternal salvation with the greatest care. Thus his memory and understanding will be deeply impressed with oft-repeated exhortations to fear God on account of his strict justice, to love him for his infinite goodness and mercy, to adore him with the greatest reverence on account of his omnipresence, to serve him with all possible zeal and fidelity on account of his infinite power, to have a childlike confidence in him and the greatest resignation to his will under all circumstances, on account of the wonderful and all-wise arrangements of his Providence. “Happy he who is ignorant of all the rest, as long as he knows God!”

III. A good Christian seeks the Word of God that he may be strengthened to practice virtue. No matter what supernatural and divine light a man receives, no matter how great his knowledge of heavenly things and how strong his resolution to avoid even the least sin, he is still liable to experience the effects of the weakness and inconstancy he has inherited from our forefather Adam, on account of which he is always in need of something to renew his courage and strength. Self-love is liable to get fatigued and disgusted with the difficulties that are to be met with in the way of virtue, and consequently to oppose the

good resolutions that are made by the will; the evil inclinations and desires of the flesh rise up in violent rebellion against reason amid the knowledge of the understanding; the devil is unceasingly at work with his evil suggestions and temptations; the world, with its false maxims, with its flatteries and its ridicule, is capable of perverting even the most pious man, and leading him away from the path of virtue. Now, the constant and attentive hearing of the Word of God in sermons is the very thing that gives to the heart that strength which enables one who is desirous of salvation to persevere in the way of virtue and in his good resolutions, in spite of his natural weakness and inconstancy, and the attacks and wiles of all the enemies of virtue.

IV. A good Christian seeks the Word of God in order to conform to it so as to beautify his soul. A good man who sincerely desires to serve God is not at all satisfied with merely avoiding all mortal sin, which completely destroys the bond of friendship between the soul and God, but he cannot bear the least fault or defect that is displeasing to God, whom he loves above all things. Nor is he satisfied with being free from all deliberate venial sin; he endeavors as far as possible to become like to Jesus Christ, by imitating his life. A twofold beauty is caused in the soul by the Word of God, when it is heard with a good heart. "Now you are clean by reason of the Word which I have spoken to you" (John 15: 3). That is to say, he who constantly hears the Word of God in sermons, with sincere desire to profit by it, acquires, as a general rule, in virtue of such oft-repeated exhortations and graces, such a horror, disgust and fear of offending God, that he would almost be as unwilling to commit a deliberate venial sin as a careless Christian or a worldling would to forfeit the friendship of God by a mortal sin.

V. Finally, a good Christian seeks the Word of God that he may enjoy it as his consolation. Nothing is sweeter or more agreeable to one who loves than to converse with the object of his affection, and the longer this lasts, and the oftener it takes place, the better is he pleased. In the same way, he who has experienced how sweet the Lord is, finds special comfort and consolation in speaking with God, and in frequently hearing his Word, so that he is never tired of hearing it. The sermon never seems too long, but nearly always too short for them. They go to hear it with far greater desire than the vain children of the world have for their balls and parties. In fact, they almost live on the Word of God, according to what our Lord says: "Not in bread alone doth man live, but in every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4: 4). This was the better part that Magdalen chose when she left all household cares to seat herself at the feet of Jesus, her divine Teacher, and to hear what he had to say to her. This is that heavenly sweetness in comparison with which all the joys and pleasures of the world are but bitterness, and of which David says: "How sweet are thy words to my palate, more than honey to my mouth" (Ps. 118: 103). This is the good soil which produces fruit a hundredfold from the seed of the Word of God; these are the good hearers, who in a good and very good heart, hearing the word, keep it.

1. Let us now reflect a little on what we have hitherto learned of this subject. The first thought that occurs to me is this: if we take out of the whole congregation those alone who are regular in hearing the Word of God in the sermons, how many would there be? Certainly a very small number in comparison to the remaining parishioners. Now, if we divide this latter and smaller number into four parts, we shall find that only one part will hear the Word of God in a good heart, so as to derive spiritual profit from it; but the remaining three parts will not profit by it at all, because the seed will fall either by the wayside, where it will be trodden under foot or be eaten by the birds; or on a rock, where it will dry up for want of moisture; or among thorns, which will choke it. Is not that true? Yes, and we have the infallible word of Jesus Christ to confirm it. Therefore, if they who are of God hear his Word, and if they alone who hear it with profit to their souls can be counted among the sheep of the fold of Christ who hear his voice, then all the others must be among the reprobate, since the devil takes the Word out of their hearts, “lest, believing, they should be saved.” Alas, what a terrible consequence follows! For “Many are called, but few are chosen” (Matt. 20: 16).

2. The second thought that occurs to me is: if among the small number of those who hear the Word of God regularly three-fourths derive no profit from it, what spiritual profit can one expect those tepid Christians to make who seldom or never come to sermons, although they have time and opportunity enough to do so? And what will become of those who avoid the sermons solely that they may be able to continue in sin without having their consciences disturbed? And what of those who are not satisfied with losing the Word of God themselves, but try to keep others also from hearing it? What of those parents who hinder their sons and daughters from often hearing the Word of God, although they are anxious to hear it and that with the hellish intention of preventing their children from being too pious? I would not willingly take the place of those people at the judgment-seat and answer for them! At all events, if you are determined not to learn good yourselves, nor to do it, nor to go to heaven, you should not close the way to others who wish to save their souls.

3. The third and last inference each one of you must draw for yourselves. You must ask yourselves: To what class do I belong? Am I of the number of those who seldom or never hear the Word of God? Alas, if that is the case, you are not among the chosen sheep of Jesus Christ, who hear his voice and obey it; and the terrible words of Christ are applicable to you: “Therefore, you hear them not, because you are not of God” (John 8: 47). You must, then, amend your conduct in this respect, and from this day forward hear the Word of God as regularly as your circumstances will allow. If you belong to one of the three classes of men who indeed hear sermons regularly, but derive no profit from them, because the seed falls by the wayside, or on the hard rock, or among thorns, and therefore cannot produce fruit, you have just as little reason to expect that things will go well with you, for you shall have to render to God a strict account of the graces and inspirations that you have neglected and of the many times that you knowingly disobeyed the divine will; therefore you must do better in future; you must hear the Word of God with eagerness and attention, and always make a practical use of the truths that you shall learn. Do you belong

to the fourth class, to the number of those who hear the Word of God in sermons with a good and very good heart? Can you say with truth that you have hitherto heard sermons regularly, with an earnest desire to learn something good from them, and that, having learned it, you have tried to practice it? If that is the case, you can rejoice with all your heart, and comfort yourself with the thought that you have one of the surest proofs of being elected to eternal happiness, according to the words of Jesus Christ: “Blessed are they who hear the Word of God and keep it.” Amen.

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