



SEVEN RULES

TO BE OBSERVED,

IN PREPARING TO HEAR

THE WORD OF GOD,

TAKEN FROM

“THE KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE,”

OF

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SEVEN RULES,

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RULE THE FIRST.

Lay aside (as much as possibly thou canst) all worldly thoughts, cares, and businesses, that thy mind may be free for God, and the impressions of his Word and holy Spirit.

On Saturday night, shut up the gates of thy heart against the world, as Nehemiah did the gates of Jerusalem, on the evening of their sabbath (Nehem. xiii. 19, 20.). If any merchants come, any worldly thoughts or businesses, let them stay without till the sabbath be over. The work of men's callings is not only in their hands, but in their minds and heads. A minister may have a great congregation and yet but a few hearers, if their minds be stuffed with the world before they come; if they bring their trades, their bargains, their plough, their worldly business along with them. As therefore we read of Abraham in Gen. xxii. 5, That when he went up to

the Mount to offer sacrifice, he left his servants, and the ass in the valley behind him; so should we our worldly cares and businesses, when we go to worship God, and to hear his word.

RULE THE SECOND.

Consider and meditate on the great Concernment and Importance of the Word.

It is the ordinary means God hath appointed for the working that great work of conversion, without which no salvation, and for the edifying and building up those that are already savingly wrought upon (James i. 18.), “Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth.” I Cor. iv. 15, “I have begotten you in Christ Jesus (saith Paul), through the gospel.” Rom. x. 17, “Faith cometh by hearing.” Indeed sin, and consequently death, came by hearing at the first, to wit, by our first parents listening to, and believing a tempting spirit. But now faith, and consequently life, comes by hearing, through the operation of the blessed Spirit of God in the word. Rom. i. 16, “The gospel, it is the power of God unto salvation.”

Labour therefore to have an high value and esteem of the preaching of the gospel. God hath appointed his ordinances, not in sovereignty only, but in mercy to us. As our Saviour said of the sabbath (Mark ii. 27.) “The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath:” so may I say of all the ordinances of God, they were ordained for man, for man’s benefit, and not man made for them. And therefore the great benefit that (with God’s blessing) may be expected from them (if we duly attend upon them) should make us highly value them.

Indeed it is one of the devil's stratagems in this age, to urge the efficacy of the Spirit, as a plea for the neglect of means. Whereas God's Spirit doth usually work in and by the means, and rarely, if ever, when the ordinary means are slighted. It is true, God himself is not tied to means, nor to any of his own ordinances, yet he ties us to make use of them, when we may have them. That soul cannot expect to be instructed by God's Spirit, who is a slighter and neglecter of God's ordinary means of salvation.

Further consider, the intent of the Word is not only to regenerate, but to nourish, increase, and perfect the graces of the saints (Ephes. iv. 11, 12.). Our knowledge is imperfect. Those that know most, may learn more: we need new enforcement of duty: our affections are dull, and need a new excitement. None so wise, so knowing a Christian, but he may receive some benefit from a different handling of what he himself knew before.

Therefore, seeing the preaching of the word was ordained for so great and signal benefits to mankind, it is just with God, that they that have slight thoughts of it, should be barren under it.

RULE THE THIRD.

When thou art going to hear, consider whether thou art going.

Thou art going to meet the great God of heaven and earth: a God that is not to be dallied with (Lev. x. 3.), *tr* "I will be sanctified in them that come nigh me." When the people went to hear the law (Exod. xix. 10.), The Lord said to Moses, "Sanctify the people, and let them wash their clothes." What doth this speak to us? that

Christians should only wash their hands and faces, and put on their best apparel, when they come to hear the word? No, the apostle James (Jam. i. 21.), says, “Lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the ingrafted word, that is able to save your souls.” If thou findest thy spirit flighty and wandering, to fix it, and make it serious, think with thyself, and imagine how it was with the Israelites, going to receive the law of God: when the mount was all on a flame of fire, the trumpet sounding louder and louder, the people trembling and sore afraid. This is to beat the devil with his own weapon, for he often prevails upon us, by casting in sinful imaginations. Let us labour therefore to defeat his malice by introducing into our minds good and profitable thoughts and cogitations. Consider therefore how the Lord is present in an especial manner where his word is preached. “Surely the Lord is in this place,” as Jacob said of Bethel (Gen. xxviii. 16.). The apprehension of God’s presence in the assemblies of his people, will preserve in thee an awful and reverent disposition of soul.

RULE THE FOURTH.

Before thou goest, fail not to pour forth earnest and fervent prayers unto the Lord, and that in behalf—

I. OF THE MINISTER.

II. OF THYSELF.

I. In behalf of the minister; that the Lord would teach him what he should teach the people, and direct and “enable him to declare the mind of God, and to preach such

truths as may tend to the benefit," and salvation of thine and others' souls. Certainly, if people did more seriously and more frequently pray for their minister, that the Lord would bless and prosper his labours, and direct him to divide the word aright, to give to every one their portion, to feed his people with knowledge and understanding; he might expect a greater blessing and assistance in his studies, and they more benefit by his endeavours. How earnestly does Paul beg prayers? (Rom. xv. 30.), "Now, I beseech you (brethren), for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me, in your prayers to God for me." And Ephes. vi. 18, "Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, for all saints." Verse 19, "And for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel." Verse 20, "That therein I may speak boldly as I ought to speak." Col. iv. 3, "Withal praying for us, that God would open to us a door of utterance to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in bonds." Verse 4, "That I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak."

II. IN BEHALF OF THYSELF.

1. That the Lord would fix thy mind, and make it serious. When the mind is serious, truths are apt to make impression.

2. That he would enlighten thy mind, and open thy heart, as he did the heart of Lydia (Acts xvi. 14.), that thou mayest have a clear, and right understanding of those truths that concern thy salvation.

3. That he would give thee a heart to believe, and embrace the truth in the love of it; that truth may not only

float in thy phantasie, but sink down into thy heart (Rom. x. 10.), "With the heart man believeth unto righteousness." There is a faith of the head, and a faith of the heart: devils and wicked men have the faith of the head; but they have no such belief as affects the heart, and makes it close with truth, and love it, and embrace it.

4. That the Spirit of God would set in with the preaching of the word, and make it effectual for the beating down of thy corruptions. It is a remarkable expression, that in Isai. viii. 11, "The Lord spake to me with a strong hand;" not with a mere voice, but a strong hand. Pray therefore thus, Lord, speak to my lusts and corruptions this day with a strong hand; let them feel thy power, and the strength of thine arm, that so they may be effectually destroyed in me.

RULE THE FIFTH.

Labour to come with a teachable, and tractable frame of spirit.

"Receive with meekness the ingrafted word." James i. Christ was "anointed to preach glad tidings to the meek." Isa. lxi. 1.

There are three sorts of spirits far from this temper.

I. The cavilling spirit, that is forward to cavil at the word, and to frame objections against it.

II. The wrathful spirit, that is fierce, and ready to rise up in arms against the just reproofs of the word. When such are admonished or warned, they revile: conviction that should humble, provokes them. There is a great deal of difference between those two places and expressions (Acts ii. 37.), "Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter, and the

rest of the apostles, men and brethren, what shall we do?" And Acts vii. 54, "When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth." Here is a great deal of difference between being pricked at the heart, and feeling compunction for sin in their consciences, as it was with the true converts in the former place; and being cut to the heart, and vexed when they heard their sins reprov'd, as it was with the malicious and obstinate Jews in the latter.

A guilty conscience thinks the minister aims at him in particular, and intends to disgrace him; he thinks he commits a trespass by treading upon his ground, and coming so close to his conscience. It stuck in Herod's stomach, when John touched him about his Herodias: but, observe it, those that most storm at reproof, are usually those that most deserve it.

III. The earthly obdurate spirit. Let the minister say what he will, he is sermon-proof: he is resolved to hold his own: indeed, his sins may well be called his own. It is a sad word that is spoken of the Pharisees and lawyers (Luke vii. 30), "They rejected the counsel of God against themselves." And that of the Jews (Acts xiii. 46), "Ye put it from you" (namely, the word of salvation), "and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life; lo, we turn to the Gentiles."

But now, a meek spirit is a teachable and tractable spirit: a tender heart is apt to receive impressions, as you may observe in persons whose hearts are softened by afflictions: how do sermons work on such? Labour therefore to come with such a frame of spirit to hear the word as those did in Acts x. 33, "We are all here present before the Lord, to hear the things that are commanded thee of God."

RULE THE SIXTH.

Come with an appetite, with a longing desire to profit by the word.

Nothing makes wholesome food more savoury and sweet than appetite. Some people come to the congregation, as sickly people do to a feast; they sit down for company, though they have no stomach. It is in vain to come to a sermon without a spiritual appetite. "Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." It is our Saviour's own promise (Mat. v. 6.). O that people were such to their ministers, as those Job speaks of (ch. xxix. 23.). Who "waited for him as for rain; gasping after the word, as the chapped earth for showers! O that there were some such divine affections in us, as were in holy David! That we could truly say, "My soul is athirst for God, even for the living God." My soul pants after Christ, after his pardoning mercy, and sanctifying grace, "as the hart panteth after the water-brooks!" We should then see sermons work other effects than now we do. But when people come either with no appetite, no desire and love to the word (but sit down in the congregation merely for fashion or company's sake), or when they come with distempered palates, with prejudices and prepossessions against the simplicity of the gospel; the most evangelical truths are to them but as a banquet of sweetmeats unto swine, they had rather have husks. They can relish, may be, some witty jingling discourse; but the preaching of Christ, and him crucified, which Paul thought so highly of, is too stale a doctrine, and too flat a note for their ears.

RULE THE SEVENTH.

Having sought to the Lord, and taken pains to bring thy heart into a right frame, come with expectation to profit.

It is often said in the gospel, “Be it unto thee according to thy faith.” And truly, usually people profit by sermons according to their expectations. But take here this caution. Do not ground thy expectation on the parts or gifts of the minister, but on God’s promise; looking for his blessing to accompany his own ordinance. Usually people speed according to their aim and expectation. They that come to hear man’s voice, do hear it. It is said of Paul’s companions (Acts ix. 7), “That they heard a voice;” and (Acts xxii. 9), it is said, “they that were with him, heard not the voice.” They heard a sound, but heard it not distinctly, as Christ’s voice. Some only hear an outward sound, the voice of man, but not the voice of God in the word.

THE END.

