

FAST DAY SERMONS:

OR

THE PULPIT

OR

THE STATE OF THE COUNTRY.

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THE CHRISTIAN'S BEST MOTIVE FOR PATRIOTISM.

A SERMON PREACHED IN THE COLLEGE CHURCH, HAMPDEN SIDNEY, VA.,
ON A GENERAL FAST DAY, NOVEMBER 1, 1860.

BY ROBERT L. DABNEY, D. D.

“Because of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek thy good.”—
Psalms cxxii : 9.

The true Christian feels the claims of patriotism as sensibly as any other man, though he holds them subject to the limitations of justice and charity to others. Thus, King David resolves that he will seek the peace of Jerusalem, the capital city of the Hebrew Commonwealth ; not only as a patriotic king, but from an additional religious motive. So the Christian has a motive for patriotism far stronger and holier than those of all other men. Additional to theirs, he has this reason to pray for the peace of Jerusalem ; for his brethren and companions' sakes, and because of the house of the Lord his God which is in it. The kingdom of Jesus Christ — that blessed kingdom whose sceptre is peace, righteousness, meekness and truth ; in whose prosperity the hopes of a suffering race are all involved, which alone can arrest the flood of sins and woes which now sweeps generation after generation into ruin — is committed by its Divine Head to human hands, and is partially dependent on the course of human events. This spiritual

commonwealth among us, as is proper, has no legal ties to the secular, and no other relations than those of mutual good will and courtesy. But still, inasmuch as Christ is pleased to leave to second causes their natural influence over his Church, it is largely dependent on our secular governments. Now there are few things which can affect the interests of Zion so disastrously as political convulsions and war. Let the Christian weigh their influences.

First: We are taught, even by experience of customary party excitements, that a season of political agitation is most unfavorable to spiritual prosperity. Few experienced pastors expect revivals during excited presidential canvasses. The mind is absorbed by agitating secular topics, angry and unchristian emotions are provoked, and the tender dew of heavenly-mindedness is speedily evaporated by the hot and dusty turmoil of the popular meeting and the hustings. Few men who traffic habitually in such scenes exhibit much grace. We suspect that the Christian, returning from a day of such excitement, is little inclined to the place of secret prayer. But how much must all these evil influences be exasperated when the subjects of political strife assume a violent and convulsive aspect? When every mind is filled by eager, secular concerns — when angry passions rage in every heart, dividing brother against brother in Zion — when unscrupulous haste precipitates multitudes into words and acts of injustice and wrong, agitating and defiling their own consciences, and provoking the hot tumults of resentment on either side — what room is there for the quiet and sacred voice of the Holy Spirit? It has been remarked by wise historians,

that a time of political convulsions is a time of giant growth for all forms of vice. And just to that degree it is a time of barrenness for the Christian graces.

But when political strife proceeds to actual war, then indeed do "the ways of Zion mourn." War is the grand and favorite device of him who was a liar and murderer from the beginning, to obstruct all spiritual good, and to barbarize mankind. To all the above agitations, distractions and evil passions, raised now to actual phrenzy, must be added the interruptions of Sabbath rest and of public worship, while the sacred hours are profaned with the tumult of preparations, marchings, or actual combats. Domestic life, that most fruitful source of all wholesome restraints, is broken up by danger, fear, waste of property and separations. The youth hurry from that peaceful domain of humanizing and pious influences into the rude noise and gross corruptions of camps, whence they return, if they return at all, depraved by military license, unused to peaceful industry, and hardened to all evil, to poison society at home. Colleges and schools are scattered, the voice of science is silenced, the hopes of peaceful industry are violently destroyed, till recklessness and resentment turn the very husbandman into a bandit. And, above all, Death holds his cruel carnival, and not only by the sword, but yet more by destitution, by vice, by pestilence, hurries his myriads unprepared, from scenes of guilty woe on earth, into everlasting despair below. Need we wonder that the Heavenly Dove should spread its gentle wings, and fly far from such abhorrent scenes?

But civil feud has ever been known as the most bitter of all. "A brother offended is harder to be won than

a strong city : and their contentions are like the bars of a castle." The very tenderness of brothers' love makes them more tender to the injury. The strength of the mutual obligations, which should have bound them to kindness, enhances the hot indignation at mutual outrage. When the twin lands which now lie so intimately side by side, parted by a line so long, so faint, so invisible, that it does not separate, begin to strike each other, the very nearness and intimacy make each more naked to the other's blows. How dire, then, would be the conflagration of battle which would rage along this narrow line across the whole breadth of a continent? How deadly the struggle, when the republican hardihood and chivalry, the young, giant strength, and teeming wealth, which begin to make the mightiest despots respectful, are turned against each other. Some seem to delight in placing the relative prowess of the North and South in odious comparison. Should we not, my brethren, rather weep tears of blood at the wretched and wicked thought, that the common prowess with which the North and South have so often side by side carried dismay and rout into the ranks of common enemies — that terrible prowess which, in North and South alike, withstood the force of the British Lion while we were yet in the gristle of our youth, and which ever since has overthrown and broken every enemy, with the lion's force and the eagle's swiftness combined — should hereafter be expended in fratricidal blows? And, then, this vast frontier must be fortified and guarded. This hostile neighborhood, so dangerous because so intimate, must be watched on either hand by armies; and these armies become, as among the unhap-

py and suspicious nations of Europe, as much the machines of internal oppression as of outward defence. Our future growth of men and wealth would be swallowed up by the devouring maw of strife. These teeming fields, whose increase fills the granaries of the famishing nations, and makes their owners' bosoms to overflow with wealth, must go to feed the barren waste of warlike preparation and labor. The source of half the missionary activities which now gladden the waste places of the earth would be dried up. Farewell to the benign career of imperial *Peace*, by which we had hoped the Empire Republic would teach the angry nations nobler triumphs than those of war. A long farewell to that dream we had indulged—dream not unworthy surely to have been inspired by the *Prince of Peace*—that here a nation was to grow up on this soil, which God had kept till "the fullness of time was come," wrapped in the mysteries of pathless seas, and untainted by the steps of civilized despots, or organized crime; a nation composed of the strong, the free, the bold, the oppressed of every people, and, like the Corinthian brass, more precious than any that composed it; which should come, by the righteous arts of peace, to a greatness such as at last to shame and frighten war away from the family of kingdoms; which should work out the great experiment of equal laws and a free conscience, for the first time, for the imitation of the world; and from whose bosom a free Church, unstained by the guilt of persecution, and unburdened by the leaden protection of the State, should send forth her light and salvation to the ends of the earth to bring the millennial morning. This cunning machine of law, which now

regulates our rights, would be wrecked amidst the storms of revolution. The stern exigencies of danger, would compel both the rivals, perhaps, to substitute the strong, but harsh will of the soldier, for the mild protection of constitutions. And the oppressors of soul and body, from every stronghold of absolutism throughout the earth, would utter their jubilant and scornful triumph: "Lo! the vain experiment of man's self-government has drowned itself in its own blood and ruin!" The movement of the world's redemption might be put back for ages, and the enthroning of the Prince of Peace over his promised dominion, so long ravaged by sin and woe, would be postponed, while eternal death preyed upon yet more of the teeming generations.

Now, in view of this tremendous picture of possible crime and misery, would to God that I could reach the ear of every professed servant of Jesus Christ in the whole land! I would cry to them: Christians of America—Brothers—Shall all this be? Shall this Church of thirty thousand evangelical ministers, and four millions of Christian adults—this Church, so boastful of its influence and power; so respected and revered by nearly all; so crowned with the honors of literature, of station, of secular office, of riches; this Church, which moulds the thought of three-fourths of our educated men through her schools, and of all, by her pulpit and her press, this Church; which glories in having just received a fresh baptism of the Spirit of Heaven in a national revival—permit the tremendous picture to become reality? Nay, shall they aid in precipitating the dreaded consummation, by traitorously in-

flaming the animosities which they should have allayed, and thus leave the work of their Master to do the Devil's? Then, how burning the sarcasm, which this result will contain upon your Christianity in the eyes of posterity! Why, they will say, was there not enough of the majesty of moral weight in these four millions of Christians, to say to the angry waves, "Peace: be still?" Why did not these four millions rise, with a LOVE so Christ-like, so beautiful, so strong, that strife should be paralyzed by it into reverential admiration? Why did they not speak for their country, and for the House of the Lord their God which was in it, with a wisdom before whose firm moderation, righteousness, and clear light, passion and folly should scatter like the mist? Were not all these strong enough to throw the arms of their loving mediation around their fellow citizens, and keep down the weapons that sought each other's hearts; or rather to receive them into their own bosoms than permit our mother-country to be slain? Did this mighty Church stand idly by, and see phrensy immolate so many of the dearest hopes of man, and of the rights of the Redeemer, on her hellish altar? And this Church knew too, that the fiend had borrowed the torch of discord from the altar of Christianity, and that therefore Christians were bound, by a peculiar tie, to arrest her insane hand, before the precious sacrifice was wrapped in flames. Then, shame on the boasted Christianity of America, and of the nineteenth century! With all its parade of evangelism, power, and light, wherein has it been less impotent and spurious than the effete religion of declining Rome, which betrayed Christendom into the dark ages; or than the baptized superstitions which,

in those ages, sanctioned the Crusades and the Inquisition? In the sight of Heaven's righteous Judge, I believe that if the Christianity of America now betrays the interest of man and God to the criminal hands which threaten them, its guilt will be second only to that of the apostate Church which betrayed the Saviour of the world; and its judgment will be rendered in calamities second only to those which avenged the Divine blood invoked by Jerusalem on herself and her children.

How, then, shall Christians seek the good of their country, for the Church's sake? This raises the more practical question of present duty, and introduces the more practical part of my discourse.

And first—Christians should everywhere begin to pray for their country. “Because of the house of the Lord our God, let us seek its good.” The guilty Churches of all our land should humble themselves before a holy God, for their Christian backslidings, and our national sins. “Blow the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly: Gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children, and those that suck the breasts; let the bridegroom go forth of his chamber, and the bride out of her closet. Let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep between the porch and the altar; and let them say, Spare thy people, O LORD, and give not thy heritage to reproach.”

And along with this should go humble confessions of our sins, individual and social. And here, let me distinctly warn you, that I am not about to point your attention to sins of fellow-citizens of another quarter of

the Confederacy, from whose faults some may suppose the present fear arises. Whether they have committed faults, or how great, it is not my present concern to say. Our business is to-day with our own sins. It will do our hearts no good to confess to God the sins of our fellow-men: He already knows them, and estimates them more fairly than perhaps our prejudice will permit us to do. It is for our own sins alone that we are responsible to God. It is our own sins alone that we have the means of reforming, by the help of His grace. Let each man then consider, and forsake his personal transgressions; for as your persons help to swell the aggregate of this great people, so your individual sins have gone to form that black cloud of guilt, which threatens to hide from us the favorable light of our Heavenly Father's face. But let us remember, and confess also, our social sins; that general worldliness, which hath set up the high-places of its covetous idolatries all over the good land God hath given us; that selfish profusion and luxury, which have squandered on the pride of life so much of the goods of our stewardship; that Heaven-daring profanity and blasphemy by reason of which the land mourneth. And let me not forget faithfully to protest, on such a day as this, against that peculiar sin of the Southern country, the passion for bloody retaliation of personal wrong, which has been so often professed and indulged among us, unwhipped of justice. You have allowed too often the man of violence, the duellist, professing his pretended "code of honor" — most hateful and deceitful pretence of that Father of Lies, who was a murderer from the beginning — to stalk through the land with wrongs upon his angry

tongue, and blood upon his hand, while his crime was winked at by justice, and almost applauded by a corrupt public opinion. "So ye have polluted the land wherein ye are; for blood, it defileth the land, and the land cannot be cleansed of the blood that is shed therein, but by the blood of him that shed it." Let us remember also, that our innocence or rightfulness in the particular point of present differences and anticipated collisions, gives no assurance that God may not chastise us for our sins by those very events. Often has His manifold, wise and righteous providence permitted an unjust aggressor to make himself the instrument, wherewith to lash His sinning people, even when he afterwards punished the invader himself.

Second: We would say, with all the earnestness and emphasis which the most solemn feeling can inspire, let each individual Christian in our land, whether he sits in our halls of legislature, or rules as a magistrate, or guides public opinion through the press, or merely fills the station of the private citizen, consider his own personal concern in this matter. We would affectionately individualize each man, and say to him, my brother, "Thou art the man. Consider what would God have *you* to do?" Every Christian man, whether law-maker or law-executor or voter, should carry his Christian conscience, enlightened by God's word, into his political duty, in another manner than we have been accustomed to do. We must ask less, what party caucuses and leaders dictate, and more, what duty dictates. For the day is at hand, when we shall be brought to an awful judgment for the thoughtless manner in which we exercise our civic function. My brethren, the Christians of

this land are able to control the selection of reckless and wicked men for places of trust, if they please, and will do their duty. Here are four millions of men and women, chiefly adults, among a people of twenty-six millions of men, women, children and slaves — four millions who profess to be supremely ruled by principles of righteousness, peace and love, and to be united to each other in the brotherhood of a heavenly birth. If even the voters among these would go together to the polls, to uphold the cause of peace, they would turn the scale of every election. Where is the community in all our land, where the male citizens who are professors of Christianity would not give the victory to that party to which they gave their united support? But alas! how often have we gone on Monday to the hustings, after having appeared on Sabbath as the servants of the Prince of Peace, and brethren of all his servants, and in our political heats speedily forgotten that we were Christians? Let each Christian citizen have his independent political predilections, and support them with decision, if you please. Let them, if need be, render that enlightened and moderate allegiance to the party of their choice, which is supposed to be essential in free governments. But when their party demands of them that they shall sustain men of corrupt private morals or reckless passions, because of their supposed party orthodoxy, let all Christians say: "Nay, verily, we would fain yield all reasonable party fidelity; but we are also partisans in the commonwealth of King Jesus, and our allegiance to Him transcends all others. Unless you will present us a man who to party orthodoxy unites private virtues, we cannot sustain him." Then would

their reasonable demand be potential in every party, and the abuse would be crushed. And this stand, if taken by Christian citizens, we affirm, would infringe no personal or associated rights. For, is there any party who would admit that it had not a single member respectable, virtuous and sober enough to deserve the suffrages of Christian men? If there is, surely it is time it should slink away from the arena of political competition, and hide itself in oblivion! Here, then, is a prominent duty, if we would save our country, that we shall carry our citizenship in the kingdom of Heaven everywhere, and make it dominate over every public act. We must obey the law of God rather than the unrighteous behests of party, to "choose out of all the people *able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness, and place such over them to be rulers,*" or God will assuredly avenge himself for our violated allegiance to him. The Christians of this country must sternly claim that wicked or reckless men shall no longer hold the helm of State; that political orthodoxy shall no longer atone for that worst offence against citizenship, a wicked life. And along with rulers, I would include the directors of the public press, as being of the general class of "leaders of the people." Even while you boast of the potency of this engine of the nineteenth century, you have allowed it to fall in many cases into most incompetent and dangerous hands. See who have held this responsible lever in our land in these latter days! Some are honorable and patriotic; but more are unreliable; some mere half-educated youths, without any stake of family, estate, or reputation in the commu-

nity ; some fiery denouncers, some touching the springs of public affairs with a drunken hand, and many the open advocates and practitioners of the duellist's murderous code — these men you have permitted and even upheld and salaried, in your easy thoughtlessness, to misrepresent, misdirect and inflame the public sentiment of the nation !

There are many reasons which demand of every God-fearing citizen that he shall sustain, directly or indirectly, none but honest and prudent men in places of influence. When you elevate a bad man, you give to him a hundred-fold more power of example to corrupt your sons, and your neighbors' sons, by his evil acts. Those acts are a hundred-fold more conspicuous and more weighty to attract notice and imitation, than if you had left him in his deserved obscurity. When you delegate your money, influence, or civic power, to a bad man, you make his wicked official acts and influence your own ; he is your chosen agent, and acts for you, and be assured a jealous God will not forget to visit the people for the guilt thus contracted.

But especially should you remember, at such a period as this, the boundless mischief wrought by the habit of reckless vituperation, and the political violence, in which bad and foolish or inexperienced men indulge, to further political ends. It is this which chiefly has created our present unhappy dangers, by misrepresenting each section to the other. You have heard descriptions of the *reign of terror* in the first French Revolution, and perhaps as you saw the frightful and murderous violence of political factions there displayed, you have

exclaimed: "Were these men or devils?" They were men, my brethren; "men of like passions with us." Read the narrative of the philosophic *Thiers*, and you will learn the source of these rivers of blood. Unscrupulous leaders of parties and presses, in order to carry their favorite projects and overpower political rivals, resorted to the *trick* of imputing odious and malignant motives to all adversaries; democrats denouncing Girondists and royalists as traitorous plotters of foreign invasion, and national sack; royalists denouncing democrats as agrarians and robbers, till by dint of bandying the outrageous charges backwards and forwards, all minds were gradually embittered and prepared to believe the worst. Hence the bloody political proscriptions; hence the frightful butcheries of the *Septembriseurs*; because misguided men were taught to believe that no less trenchant remedy would anticipate the treason designed against the country.

Now I say to you in all faithfulness, that the reckless and incapable men whom you have weakly trusted with power or influence, have already led us far on towards similar calamities. They have bandied violent words, those cheap weapons of petulant feebleness; they have justified aggression; they have misrepresented our tempers and principles — answered, alas, by equal misrepresentations and violence in other quarters — until multitudes of honest men, who sincerely suppose themselves as patriotic as you think yourselves, are really persuaded that in resisting your claims, they are but rearing a necessary bulwark against lawless and arrogant aggressions. Four years ago, an instance of unjust

and wicked insolence was avenged, on the floor of the Senate of the United States, by an act of violence most unrighteous and ill-judged. And now, not so much that rash and sinful act of retaliation, but the insane, wicked, and insulting justification of it generally made by Southern secular prints, directed by reckless boys, or professed duellists, a justification abhorred and condemned by almost all decent men in our section, is this day carrying myriads of votes, (of men who, if not thus outraged, might have remained calm and just towards us,) for the cause whose triumph you deprecate. Thus the miserable game goes on ; until at last, blood breaks out, and the exhausted combatants are taught in the end, by mutually inflicted miseries, to pause and consider, that they are contending mainly for a misunderstanding of each other.

Now I well know, my brethren and fellow-citizens, that if I should speak to you in private, you would all concur in my honest reprobation of this folly and injustice : I know that I have but expressed the common sentiments of all good men among us. Yet, in your dislike to be troubled, in your easy good nature, you let things take their course, under the wretched mismanagement of the hands into which they have fallen ; you even permit your money and your influence to go indirectly, in support of these agents of mischief and misrule, who thus misrepresent your characters, and aims, and rights. If the public interests cannot arouse you from this good natured sin, let me see if I cannot touch you more nearly. Whereunto can all this mutual violence grow ? Do not the increasing anger and preju-

dice, which seems so fast ripening on both sides for a fatal collision, tell you too plainly? And when these rash representatives of yours in our halls of legislation and our newspapers, shall have sown the wind, who will reap the whirlwind? When they have scattered the dragon's teeth, who must meet that horrent crop which they will produce? Not they alone; but you, your sons, your friends and their sons. So that these misleaders of the people, while you so weakly connive at their indiscretions, may be indirectly preparing the weapon which is to pierce the bosom of your fair-haired boy; and summoning the birds of prey, which are to pick out those eyes whose joy is now the light of your happy homes, as he lies stark on some lost battle-field. For God's sake, then — for your own sakes, for your children's sake, arise — declare that from this day, no money, no vote, no influence of yours, shall go to the maintenance of any other counsels than those of moderation, righteousness, and manly forbearance.

Last: Every Christian must study the things which make for peace. All must resolve that they will demand of others nothing more than their necessary rights, and that, in the tone of moderation and forbearance. Yea, that they will generously forego all except what duty forbids them to forego, rather than have strife with brethren. We must all be magnanimous enough to forbear the language of threatening and reproach, (language which evinces no courage,) to acknowledge the excesses of ourselves and our friends, and to make reparation for it, whether such reparation be offered on the other side or not. Instead of complain-

ing in vindictive and bitter spirit of the extravagances of misguided men on the opposite side, each man should enquire whether there are not sinful extravagances on his own side ; and when it is necessary to remonstrate, do it in the tone of wounded love, rather than of insane threatening. In one word ; let each one resolve to grant all that is right, and ask nothing else ; “ and lo, there will be a great calm.”

[The reader of this sermon will notice that its date, before the late Presidential election, accounts in part for its topics and also for its omissions. He is also requested to bear in mind that the professed attitude of the people to whom it was preached,—that of penitents before the Most High, rendered allusions to their own sins alone appropriate at that time ; and hence the sermon contains no implication that they are the only, or the chief offenders, in those particulars.—R. L. D.]