

**The Spirit Proper to
the Times A Sermon
preached in King's
Chapel, Boston,
Sunday, May 12,
1861**

Walker, James

The Spirit Proper to the Times.

A SERMON

PREACHED IN KING'S CHAPEL, BOSTON,

SUNDAY, MAY 12, 1861.

BY

JAMES WALKER, D.D.

PRINTED AT THE REQUEST OF THE WARDENS OF THE SOCIETY.

BOSTON:
PRESS OF GEO. C. RAND & AVERY,
No. 3 Cornhill.
1861.

SERMON.

"With such sacrifices God is well pleased."—*Hebrews* xiii. 16.

I am to speak of public spirit, as manifested in a willingness to make sacrifices for the public good.

The necessity for making sacrifices would seem to be founded in this: as we cannot have every thing, we must be willing to sacrifice some things in order to obtain or secure others. Wicked men recognize and act upon this principle. Can you not recall more than one person in your own circle of acquaintances who is sacrificing his health, his good name, his domestic comfort, to vicious indulgences? Worldly people recognize and act upon this principle. Look at that miser: he is hoarding up his thousands and his tens of thousands, but in order to do so, is he not sacrificing every thing which makes life worth having? It is a mistake to suppose that religion, or morality, or the public necessities, ever call upon us to make greater sacrifices than those which men are continually making to sin and the world, to fashion and fame, to "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life."

In times of ease, and abundance, and tranquillity, the public takes care of itself. There are few sacrifices on the part of individuals for the public good, because there are few occasions for such sacrifices. They are not made because not called for, because not needed. Moreover, private benevolence is apt at such times to become less active, and, for the same reason, that is to say, because less of it is required.

This state of things is seized upon by those who are eager to put the worst possible construction on human nature and human conduct, as evidence of extreme degeneracy. How often are we to be told that our present troubles are sent upon us in order to lift the whole community out of the mire of money-getting propensities, where every thing like public spirit was in danger of being swallowed up and lost? I protest against this wholesale abuse of what has been,—at best, a gross exaggeration. The whole truth in this matter is told in a few words. By constitution, by habit, by circumstances, our people are intensely active; and this activity, for want of other objects, has been turned into the channels of material prosperity. If, therefore, you merely affirm their excessive eagerness in acquisition, I grant it; but if, not content with this, you go on to charge them with being niggards in expending what they have acquired, I deny it, emphatically, utterly. Read the history of what has been done in this commonwealth, in this city, during the last twenty-five years for humanity, for education, for science and the arts, for every form of public use or human need, and then say, if you can, that public spirit has been dying out. Our people have never been otherwise than public spirited, and hence the promptness and unanimity of their response to this new call to public duty. Hence also our confidence in it,—not as an excitement merely, which a day has made, and a day may unmake, but as an expression of character.

Let us, however, be just to the excitement itself, considered as the sudden and spontaneous uprising of a whole community to sustain the government. We need demonstrations of this kind, from time to time, to reassure us that all men have souls. It is worth a great deal merely as an experiment, on a large scale, to prove that the moral and social instincts are as much a part of human nature as the selfish instincts. But he must be a superficial observer who can see nothing in this vast movement but the play of instincts. It is a great moral force.

Not a little of what passes for loyalty or patriotism in other countries is blind impulse, growing out of mere attachment to the soil, or the power of custom, or a helpless feeling of dependence on things as they are. "If my father in his grave could hear of this war," said a Spanish peasant, "his bones would not rest." Yet what earthly interest, what intelligible concern had Spanish peasants in the rivalships and struggles of princes who thought of nothing but their own or their family aggrandizement. Of such loyalty, of such patriotism, there never has been much in this country, and there never will be. The loyal and patriotic States have risen up as one man to maintain the government, because the government represents the great ideas of order and liberty. It is not an excitement of irritation merely, or of wounded vanity, or of a selfish and discomfited ambition. It is, as I have said, a great moral force, a reverence for order and liberty; an excitement, if you will have it so, but an excitement resting on solid and intelligible principle, and one, therefore, which trial and sacrifice will be likely to convert into earnest and solemn purpose.

I suppose some are full of concern as to the effect which trial and sacrifice will really have on this new outbreak of public spirit. They fear that suffering for our principles will abate our confidence in them, or at least our interest in them, and so the ardor will die away. So doubtless, it will in some cases, for every community has its representatives of "the seed that was sown on stony ground"; but it will be the exception and not the rule. Human nature, if it has fair play, will never lead a single individual to think less of a privilege or blessing, merely because it has cost more. When has religion interested men the most, and the most generally? Precisely at those times when men were religious at the greatest sacrifices. Indeed, it is on this principle that we explain the decay of a proper love of country among us for the last twenty or thirty years; it is because we have had so little to do for our country. A foreign war, even a famine or a pestilence, if it had been sufficiently severe, would have saved us from our present trouble and humiliation. So long as the people think and feel together, they hold each other up, and the sacrifices in which they express their public spirit, instead of wearing it out, will purify it and keep it alive.

And this is not all. From the language sometimes used in speaking of sacrifices for the public good, it might almost be supposed that the making of them is simply painful, simply distressing. But is it so? Of course both instinct and duty impel us to look out for ourselves; but is it not equally true that both instinct and duty impel us to help one another, and provide for the common weal? A generous and noble deed,—simply painful, simply distressing! I will not deny that a long life of selfishness, meanness, and servility may bring here and there one to look on things in this light, but not until he is, in the language of Scripture, "without natural affection." "Public spirit," so an eminent jurist has defined it, "is the whole body of those affections which unite men's hearts to the commonwealth." What I insist upon is, that these are real and natural affections, and that, in acting them out, we find a real and natural satisfaction. Who will say that the happiest moments of his existence have not been those in which he was conscious of living for others, and not for himself? There are many things in the present aspect of our public affairs to fill us with regret and anxiety, but a gleam of light shines through the cloud. Every man and woman and child will be moved to act more unselfishly, more nobly; life will cost more, but it will also be worth more.

It is extremely difficult to do justice to this human nature of ours,—capable at once of such mean and little things, of such noble and great things. There is, however, one distinction which all, I suppose, will accord to it: I mean its tendency to

rise up and meet great emergencies. In every soul that lives there is an untold amount of latent energy and public spirit which only waits for the occasion to call it forth. Read the history of the Netherlands,—a people made up, for the most part, of merchants and manufacturers, of traders and artisans, growing rich and apparently thinking of little else. A blow is struck at the free institutions which they had inherited from their ancestors; immediately a new spirit reveals itself, and all Europe rings with the story of their heroic daring and suffering.

The sacrifices which the country asks for in time of war are those of *property, labor, and life*; and she does not ask in vain.

We are continually reminded that this rebellion has taken place at a moment of great national prosperity, to blast it all. The sacrifices of *property*, in a thousand ways, must be immense; every man, however, from his diminished fortune, is "ready to distribute," and "not grudgingly or of necessity." His public spirit makes him love to give. I doubt whether it is common for rich men to think any better of themselves merely because they are rich; but if they can make their riches, and their financial skill, available to save the State, they will think better of themselves, and they will have a right to do so. There is a natural jealousy of wealth, especially when it takes the form of a passion for accumulation, which demagogues and fanatics know how to use for bad ends. One of the incidental benefits resulting from a great national struggle is, that all these social misunderstandings and heart-burnings are suspended, are healed. The people see and feel and acknowledge that a real title to nobility is found, not in wealth itself, but in wealth generously and nobly bestowed.

Others are manifesting their public spirit by sacrifices of *time* and *labor*. And here I wish I could find fit terms in which to acknowledge the services and sufferings of women. You have heard of the Spartan mother equipping her son for battle, and giving him, last of all, the shield, with the brief and stern farewell, "With it or on it." We expect no such stoicism now, but we expect what is better. We expect that Christian mothers, with hearts bleeding for their country, and bleeding for their children, will say, "It is the will of God that they should go," and, furthermore, that they will go, having always been taught at home that there are many things worse than death. And then how many fingers are busily at work in all classes, rich and poor alike, to provide for the comfort of those who go? They even ask for the privilege of tending the sick and wounded. How many, brought up in ease and affluence, would follow in the steps of her whose tender voice, the very rustle of whose dress by the bedside of the dying soldier was as a glimpse of heaven. I have heard men call this "romance." But is it well, or right, or tolerable, in times like these, to look round for side motives, when the motive avowed is reasonable and probable? I believe, as I believe I live, that many who never knew what it is to work before, are ready to thank God for the chance they now have to live to some purpose.

But will our men *fight*? There is no denying that this word sounds disagreeably in a Christian discourse; still, I have no misgivings in respect to it,—no extravagances to take back; not the beginning of a doubt but that there are wars which, on one side at least, are necessary, and just, and holy. The Bible contains no express and unqualified prohibition of war; neither can such prohibition be said to be intimated or implied in any text or in the general tenor of Scripture, without making it subversive, at the same time, of civil government. Besides, I remember that the first person not a Jew, in whose favor our Lord wrought a miracle, was a Roman centurion; and that the first person not a Jew admitted into the Christian church, was also a Roman centurion; and not a syllable is said against their calling, neither is there a shadow of evidence that they ever changed it. Undoubtedly it is the legitimate and certain tendency of the spirit of the gospel, as it is more and more diffused in the world, to introduce universal peace; but the spirit of the gospel acts from within outwardly, and not from without inwardly. Thus the stop to be put to war is to be expected, not so much by chaining down those irrepressible instincts which lead men to resist wrong, as by eradicating the disposition to do wrong. Wars will cease when all men are Christians, and perfect Christians; but this will not be to-day nor to-morrow.

Accordingly, I am not surprised that the call to arms has been responded to with such enthusiasm,—or that it is sustained by the whole moral and religious sentiment of the community. Men are ready to offer up not only their money and their labor, but also their lives. Are you afraid that your sons and brothers will be cowards merely because they are not duelists? because they have never been engaged in a street-fight? because prayers were made at their departure? or because they have carried their bibles with them? Did Cromwell's soldiers flee before the cavaliers because they were sober and God-fearing men? Our people have no love for fighting, as a pastime; let it, however, become a serious business, and they will show that their veins are full of the blood that flowed so freely in other days.

These are some of the ways in which a people may manifest their public spirit, and in which our people are manifesting it now. "With such sacrifices God is well pleased." I have given a definition of public spirit from the jurists, but I like still better the Bible definition. In the words of the prophet, "They helped every one his neighbor, and every one said to his brother, Be of good courage."

In looking back on what has been said, I find I have not spoken against anybody, not even against our enemies. Perhaps we have had enough of invective; at any rate the pulpit may spare it. God is my witness, I feel no vindictive resentment, no bitter hostility against those who have been swept away by this terrible delusion. Moreover, I confess to being greatly moved by the circumstance that in some respects what is true of us is true also of them. They seem to be of one mind;

their religious men appeal with confidence to the righteous Judge; their women are working day and night to help forward the cause. If it were a mere question of interest, or passion, or prejudice between us and them, it might be said that one side is as likely to be self-deceived as the other. But it is not. By striking at the principles of all constitutional and free government, and this too avowedly for the purpose of founding society on the servitude of an inferior race, on whose toil the more favored races are to live, they have put themselves in opposition to the settled convictions and the moral sense of good men all over the world.

To the student of history it is no new thing that a whole community should be given over "to believe a lie,"—not the less mad, because all mad together. The process by which this state of things is brought about is always substantially the same. Egotism, vanity, disappointed ambition, sectional jealousies, a real or supposed interest or expediency induce them to *wish* that a wrong course were the right one. They try to convince themselves that it is so, and all such efforts to sophisticate the conscience, if persisted in, are *punished by entire success*. The spectacle does not inspire me with hate; it fills me with wonder and profound melancholy. Do these men think that by altering their opinion of right they can alter the nature of things, or make wrong come out right in the great and solemn issues which are before us? We stand where their own great men stood in the best days of the republic. As regards the leading rights and interests at stake, our consciences are but the echo of the conscience of the Christian world. The fathers of the Revolution, one and all, are looking down with sorrow and indignation on this attempt to break up and destroy their work.

Nevertheless, it can do no good to begin by overvaluing ourselves, or undervaluing our enemies. We know that the behests of a righteous Providence will be accomplished, but we do not know in what way. It is more than probable that in the troubles and distractions which have come upon the country we ourselves have something to answer for. For this reason reverses and humiliations may be in store for us, before we are accounted worthy to carry out the Divine judgments. But there can be no doubt as to the end. A struggle has been forced upon us by a doomed people, if the laws of nature do not fail, if there is any meaning in the moral sentiments of mankind, or any justice in heaven.
