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THE LAW

OF

CHRISTIAN LIBERALITY:

A SERMON,

PREACHED BY THE

REV. EDWARD DENNETT,

IN

LEWISHAM ROAD CHAPEL, MARCH 8TH, 1863.

Published by Request.

LONDON:
J. HEATON & SON, 21, WARWICK LANE,
PATERNOSTER ROW.

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TO THE

REV. JOSHUA RUSSELL,

MY HONOURED COLLEAGUE IN THE MINISTRY,

I AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBE

This Discourse.

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SERMON.

"Upon the first day of the week, let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come."
1 *Cor.* xvi. 2.

A REQUEST has been made to me to preach upon the subject of systematic benevolence, and I propose to do so, not simply on the ground of the request, but from the conviction that the subject is little understood, and its intrinsic importance very much undervalued; and because, moreover, I fear that the whole system of Church finance proceeds upon a false and vicious principle. Modes of raising and giving money have been adopted and perpetuated which evoke the smiles of the world, and pain the minds of thoughtful and intelligent Christians. The consequence is, as might be expected, the means of the Church are, for the most part, in a straitened condition; evangelistic efforts languish for want of efficient support; and we have often to beg for that which ought to be given as unto the Lord, and not as unto men. To-night, therefore, in the humble hope of at least indicating the path to improvement, we wish to examine the subject by the light of Scripture, inasmuch as we all shall confess that, if the Bible has given any instructions at all in the matter, it is incumbent upon us to follow them out to their fullest extent. And we take this opportunity the more readily, as, being no collection, our arguments will not be weakened by the suspicion of interested or selfish motives. Allow me, then, to tax your attention to a subject which is daily waxing in importance, and forcing itself upon the consideration of all who are concerned for the increasing influence and welfare of the Church of Christ.

I.

First of all, in order to begin at the beginning, we shall try to establish the proposition that it is our duty to consecrate *something*—some part of our income—to the service of God.

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This proposition seems too self-evident to need a single argument. But if this be so, an examination of the grounds on which it rests will render our evasion of the duty the more inexcusable, and our doing of it the easier.

(*a*) It is proved, even by our tenure of this life's goods—of temporal possessions.

All that we have is not our own, but is lent to us by God; for we have nothing that we have not received (1 Cor. iv. 7). Thus Job, in the time of his great privation and calamity, exclaimed: "The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away: blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job i. 21); that is, he finds submission in the thought that, whatever he has lost, has only been resumed by its rightful owner. David, likewise, in making some offering for the temple, or, rather, in making the most lavish and costly preparation for the house of God, humbly confesses: "All things come of Thee, and of Thine own have we given Thee;" and again: "O Lord our God, all this store that we have prepared to build Thee an house for Thine holy name, cometh of Thine hand, and is all Thine own" (1 Chron. xxix. 14–16). Moses, moreover, in anticipating the future prosperity of his people, expressly warns them of the danger of thinking in their hearts: "My power, and the might of mine hand, hath gotten me this wealth" (Deut. viii. 17). But there is no need to cite the opinions or utterances of others on this point; for if we are creatures,—if it is God who hath made us, and not we ourselves,—if in God we live and move and have our being, then it follows that He has a twofold right over us,—the right of ownership and the right of sovereignty. And, furthermore, if He has these rights over us, then we are bound to confess that it is only reasonable that we should express our humble acknowledgments of our relationship to Him, as our Creator and King, by devoting to His service some portion of those worldly goods which He has entrusted to us for our use and blessing. For if my service is due to temporal benefactors and temporal sovereigns, it is much more due to Him, "from whom, and through whom, and to whom, are all things."

(*β*) This conclusion is confirmed by a consideration of the obligations of redemption. In other words, if the duty for which we are contending is plain from God's relation to me as my Sovereign and Creator, it is doubly so when I look

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upon Him as my Redeemer. "Ye are not your own," is the emphatic testimony of the apostle Paul. "Ye are not your own, for ye are bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's" (1 Cor. vi. 19, 20); and again: "I beseech you, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice," &c. (Rom. xii. 1). "Go," said the Saviour also to the young man; "go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come and follow me" (Matt. xix. 21). Now, these injunctions can only be understood when we remember that in redemption God claims a right over us of the most absolute character; that the very condition of our salvation is that we make a complete surrender of ourselves to God, place ourselves and all that we possess under His guidance and at His disposal. To say, therefore, that we are bound to give something to God, is a very feeble conclusion to draw from this consideration, since it is evident that, if God chose to demand our all from us, we could not lawfully demur. To this sentiment, we shall all, without hesitancy or difficulty, assent; but the question, brethren, is, do we embody it in our practice? There is nothing more easy than to talk about the duty of giving ourselves to God; and there is nothing harder than to perform it. Thus there is always a vast chasm between our profession and practice, which some of us do not even attempt to cross. But whatever we profess, or whatever we do, there is nothing more certain than this, that, if we do not consecrate any part of our income to the service of God, we have never yet made that self-renunciation which ought always to be the accompaniment, and is always one of the truest signs, of repentance towards God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. For "Skin for skin, yea, all that a man hath, will he give for his life;" and hence, if we still grasp the lesser, it is not very likely that we have surrendered the greater.

(γ) Our argument is still strengthened, if that is possible, by express enactments. "Honour the Lord with thy substance, and with the firstfruits of all thine increase" (Prov. iii. 9), is the distinct annunciation of the Old Testament, and one which simply embodies repeated commands of the Mosaic economy. And, though it may be alien from the spirit of the Gospel to *enforce* commands of this kind, yet

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the spirit of them is everywhere fostered and commended, especially by the Saviour and His apostles. It will suffice, for the present,—as we shall have to refer to them more specifically as we proceed,—to recall to your minds portions of the sermon on the Mount; the parable of the unjust steward; the Saviour's eulogium upon charity in His sublime representation of the proceedings of the judgment-day; the widow casting her two mites into the treasury, and the commendation she received; and the fervent charity of the Church at Jerusalem. To these may be added the exhortation of our text, with the similar injunctions which appear in almost all the Epistles.

We are, then, justified on any one of the grounds we have advanced, and much more upon all in combination, in concluding that our proposition has the full and unequivocal support of the Word of God; and, therefore, that it is our bounden duty to render to God a tribute of all that we receive or possess.

II.

We proceed a step further, and say that it is the duty of all to devote *at least* a tenth of their incomes to the service of God.

(*a*) Under the patriarchal dispensation a tenth was considered holy to the Lord. Thus we read that Abraham, after his battle with the kings, gave to Melchizedek "tithes of all" (Gen. xiv. 20).* Jacob, too, after that memorable night in which God had appeared to him in vision, thus records his vow: "Of all that Thou shalt give me, I will surely give the tenth unto Thee" (Gen. xxviii. 22). This would seem to be an indication that God had himself established the institution of "the tenth;" and that, therefore, Jacob, in making this vow, simply expressed his determination to act, henceforward, in obedience to the Divine command.

That the patriarchs, then, held themselves bound to give the tenth unto God, is sufficiently clear from the practice of Abraham and Jacob. But this by no means makes up their

* The argument is not affected by the ambiguity of this statement in the original. The conclusion is the same whether Abraham gave "tithes of all" to Melchizedek or Melchizedek to Abraham.

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actual expenditure in this direction. For the sacrifices and burnt-offerings they offered, in the course of a year, must have added considerably to this amount; so that we are quite within the limits when we say that they consecrated to the Lord a tenth of their increase.

(β) Coming on to the Mosaic dispensation, we have still plainer intimations respecting our duty in this matter. In the first place, all the Jews were commanded to give a tenth for the support of the Levites. "And behold I have given the children of Levi all the tenth in Israel for an inheritance, for their service which they serve, even the service of the tabernacle of the congregation" (Numbers xviii. 21). In addition to this, a second tenth had to be spent in feasting before the Lord. "Thou shalt truly tithe all the increase of thy seed, that the field bringeth forth year by year. And thou shalt eat before the Lord thy God, in the place which He shall choose to place His name there, the tithe of thy corn, of thy wine, and of thine oil, and the firstlings of thy herds and of thy flocks," &c. (Deut. xiv. 22, 23); and, furthermore, it would seem that once in three years (verses 28, 29) another tenth had to be bestowed upon the poor and needy.

Add to this the burnt-offerings and sacrifices which the Mosaic economy enjoined, and it follows that a Jew was required to spend nearly a fourth of his yearly income in religious services.*

(γ) Under the Gospel dispensation we have no such express enactments as to prevent differences of opinion upon this subject. It may just happen, therefore, that some will immediately join issue with us at this point, and maintain that, since the law has passed away, we are not bound by its enforcements and obligations. The answer to this objection is twofold. First, the tithe, as we have seen, is not peculiar to the old dispensation; and, secondly, granting that the letter of the law has been abolished, yet this has been done only to admit of the freer working and more energetic influence of its spirit. "Think not," said the Saviour, "that I am come to destroy the law or the

* See "The Duty of Giving away a Stated Proportion of our Income," by the Rev. W. Arthur, A.M., p. 29.

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prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil" (Matt. v. 18). Moreover, as it has been strikingly put by a well-known advocate of systematic benevolence, if under the Gospel we are not expected to give as much to the service of God as those under the law, then a Christian may be more selfish than a Jew; and, furthermore, if liberality be a virtue, a Christian may lower the standard of a virtue.

But although we have not defined injunctions in the New Testament, yet we have directions only less plain because they provide for the utmost expansion of the principle of Christian charity or benevolence. Thus, in the sermon on the Mount, the Saviour deprecates the collection of riches here on earth, and exhorts us to lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven (Matt. vi. 19, 20),—an exhortation which plainly points to spending our temporal wealth in such a way as to secure for us a rich harvest in the eternal world. Or, if this inference be disputed, in the parable of the unjust steward (Luke xvi.) He distinctly says: "Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations,"—the meaning of which passage is strikingly and beautifully set forth in a tract by Mrs. Beecher Stowe, entitled, "The Mammon of Unrighteousness." When Mary, moreover, poured the costly ointment upon the head of her Lord, and the disciples murmured at what they chose to term the waste, He interposed, and, shielding her from their rebukes, highly commended her for her deed, adding: "Verily I say unto you, Wheresoever this Gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, this also that she hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her" (Mark xiv. 9). So, also, with the poor widow who cast her two mites into the treasury of God's house. Read also the eighth and ninth chapters of 2 Cor., and any doubts you may still entertain will at once be dispelled. There the apostle tells the Corinthians that the *deep poverty* of the Macedonian Churches had abounded unto *the riches of their liberality*. The whole two chapters, indeed, are a glowing panegyric upon the exercise of Christian liberality, combined with a forcible statement of the motives by which we ought, in this matter, to be actuated.

It is, therefore, placed beyond a doubt that the Christian ought, at least, to equal the liberality of the Jew. The only difference, in fact, between the two cases is this, that the

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Christian must do spontaneously, from the heart, what the Jew did in obedience to an external law.

The tenth, consequently, is to be considered as the minimum point—the point below which we cannot go without a palpable dereliction of duty. More we may, and, in many cases, ought to give; for a tenth from one who has £1,000 per annum is a trifle compared with the same proportion from one who has but £50.

The question, however, meets us, Are the poor expected to give so much as a tenth?

Each man must decide this question for himself. If he cannot, he is thereby exempted from the discharge of the duty. But we do find that the widow's two mites were acceptable to God. And why should the poor be debarred from, or deprive themselves of, one of the most inestimable privileges of the Christian life?

To give to God is to get from God; for there is no man that hath left house, &c., for the kingdom of God's sake, who shall not receive manifold more in this present time, &c.*

It is a striking fact that the poor, as a rule, give far more in proportion than those who are in better circumstances. Take one of many instances which we might adduce. A humble Christian, whose income did not certainly exceed £20, gave, to my knowledge, last year, thirty shillings to the single object of missions, besides several other gifts in other directions. Another may be added. In collecting contributions for the Lancashire distress, I received, proportionably, a far larger sum from a poor man with a large family than from any one else.

Now, from a worldly point of view, it was excessively imprudent on the part of these poor people to give so much; but they, with the eye of faith, saw and remembered the promise, "He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully."†

To put money in the savings bank is, no doubt, a most commendable act; but it is never so safe, and it never bears so high a rate of interest, as when in humble faith we lend it unto the Lord.

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* Luke xviii. 29, 30. † 2 Cor. ix. 6.

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The fact is, brethren, many of us are so poor because we have not recognised God's claims, because we have been unfaithful stewards; and thus showing our unfaithfulness in small things, God has not permitted us to be unfaithful in much. If it be true that we ought to give a tenth to God, then we cannot keep it back without fraud, and thus cannot have His blessing resting on the works of our hands.

What saith the prophet Malachi? "Will a man *rob* God? yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed Thee? In TITHES and offerings." *

III.

Having arrived thus far, we may be allowed to point out some hindrances to the operation of this principle of systematic benevolence.

They may be classified under two heads—personal and church hindrances.

(*a*) First of all, our social expenditure was never so extravagant as now, and thus our resources for benevolence have been drained. We fully concede the fact that the liberality of the nation was never so great as at the present time, and that special calls have ever been promptly and generously answered. But we also know that the nation has never been so rich as now, and that, great as has been our charity, our expenditure in this direction has by no means kept pace with the increase of our personal expenses. Whether we look at our sumptuary tendencies, the adorning of ourselves or our homes, we cannot fail to see that we are fast falling, not simply into the evil of worshipping appearances, but into the snare of luxuriance and profusion. One class is not to blame for this, perhaps, more than another, for the evil is lighting upon us all, like some deadly blight, consuming the promise and beauty of our lives. There was a time, when ornaments of gold were reserved for those who are considered as the upper classes; but now, it is felt to be a privation, by both sexes, if they cannot wear them, or at least the semblance of them. "A gold ring" and "gay clothing" would scarcely now entitle a man to that extra attention in the house of God which the apostle deprecated, for the simple reason, that they are so common.

* Mal. iii. 8.

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Such things may (though I doubt it) increase our consideration in certain circles of society, or, at any rate, in our own eyes; but they do not with good men, and much more, they do not in the sight of God. The effect is, that most of us live up to, and, perhaps, beyond our income; and then we excuse ourselves from recognising God's claims on the ground that "we must be just before we are generous." That is, in plain words—we must be just to ourselves and unjust to God. For if the tithe *be* God's, where is the justice or right of our appropriation of that to our own use and enjoyment? If we persist in this direction, there is little doubt that the standard of piety will be lowered, and our greatness as a nation undermined; for the first symptom, both of religious declension and national decay, has ever been social luxury.

Another stalwart hindrance, is the prevalence of an undue desire to amass money. These two tendencies, seemingly contradictory, always exist side by side, and are among the most potent influences which are moulding our present social life. The first is bad, and the second is no better. This desire for wealth — covetousness is its proper name — is cherished either to increase our own importance or to enrich our families after our decease. Have we forgotten the declarations of Holy Writ? "They that will be rich, fall into a temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. *For the love of money is the root of all evil:* which, while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierce themselves through with many sorrows."* And again: "There is that withholdeth more than is meet, but it tendeth to poverty."† And yet another, as a foil to these: "Cast thy bread upon the waters; for thou shalt find it after many days."‡ Let it, then, be noted well that God's blessing will never rest upon the man who has the greed for wealth. It is the liberal hand that maketh rich; and hence the foundation of all true prosperity lies in faithfully and cheerfully rendering unto God the things that are God's. For the principle holds true, even in regard to temporal things: "Whosoever will save his life shall lose it; and whosoever will lose his life, for my sake, shall find it."§

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* 1 Tim. vi. 9, 10.
† Prov. xi. 24.
‡ Eccl. xi. 1.
§ Matt. xvi. 25.

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(β) Hindrances are found, likewise, in the Church. Some little time ago, a friend kindly placed a tract in my hand, entitled: "Twenty Plain Questions to Believers." On looking through it, I found that it was addressed especially to Christians in dissenting Churches. Nineteen out of these twenty questions were the weakest imaginable—such, indeed, as might be imagined proceeding from a sect which, with some few excellent qualities, combines others of a most unpleasant kind, viz.: great spiritual pride, fervent zeal in proselytizing, and an incessant railing against all who dare to hold opinions which are not in its creeds. But, there was one question which could not so easily be disposed of, and that concerned our modes of raising money. Let it be said, then, at once, that having popular ministers in order to raise money is not in accordance with the apostolic plan. Paul expressly directs that these weekly offerings should be made: "*that there be no gatherings when I come.*" But if the apostle were here now, he would be besieged with applications for a sermon, in order that there *might be* gatherings when he came; and, perhaps, in addition to that, there would be a charge for admission to hear the celebrated man, that the proceeds of the day might be increased.

This practice, we repeat, cannot be defended. It savours too much of worldly policy. On the same principle, pew-rents (as such), bazaars, and all similar methods of getting money, must be condemned. For, the only giving which is acceptable in the sight of God, is that which proceeds from the heart, and is done as a religious act, as an expression of thanks to God for all the mercies of redeeming love. Money offered or obtained in any other way, is only a clog to Christian effort. The silver and gold are the Lord's, and hence, when His people want means, let them carry their needs to His footstool, and even in this they shall find the promise good: "What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them."*

Let me then urge the importance of removing these hindrances out of the way. For as long as we resort to unlawful expedients to increase the income of our churches, the true principle of giving will be obscured, and the people will be never taught their duty. Society has changed much

* Mark xi. 24.

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since the apostolic days, but the directions of the Bible are adapted to all forms of society, and when once we prefer human to Divine wisdom, what wonder if we fall upon evil days! Let us, then, teach all to lay by them in store, on the first day of the week, as God hath prospered them—and then the treasury of God's house will be filled with the grateful offerings of a grateful people.

IV.

A word or two may be allowed upon the best mode of reducing the principle of the tenth to practice. If we adopt the conclusion that we are bound to give a tenth of our income to God, it will be a question with us how we shall best do this.

(*a*) The first thing to be attended to is the introduction of system into our givings. That is, we must not leave it to inclination or chance, but we must carefully "lay by" our proportion, so that having a separate "charitable fund," the only thing left for us to do will be to decide upon the claims that may be presented to us. The advantage to the giver, if this system were adopted, would not be less than it would be to the cause of God. If any of you have undertaken to collect money for any benevolent object, at any time, you have probably found that, for the most part (for there are noble exceptions), you have been, in that character, an unwelcome visitor; that you have had to plead again and again for the smallest contribution; and that, oftentimes, when you have succeeded, you have had some such remark as this addressed to you: "I cannot afford it, but still I suppose I must give a trifle;" or, "There are so many claims, that one is always giving." Now, no one ought to give what he cannot afford, and it would certainly be better, if all such offered contributions were courteously declined, on the ground that you ought not to take for God what cannot be afforded. But, if the system we advocate were accepted, all would know at once whether they could afford to give; and they simply would have to decide whether the object presented demanded the exercise of Christian benevolence. Acting thus, we should become, what so many of us are not, those whom God loves—cheerful givers.

(*β*) The apostle here specifies the time when we should consecrate the proportion of our income to God. "Upon

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the first day of the week," he says, "let every one of you lay by him in store as God hath prospered him."

Now, it is not to be imagined for a moment that the time is to be observed by all, except in similar cases. The best time to tithe our property for God is the time we receive our income. If we have it weekly, then we ought to do it weekly, and so, if monthly or quarterly. The case before us is a special one in connection with the poor saints at Jerusalem. The first day of the week is thus probably named here, because, since the church assembled on that day, it was the most convenient time for receiving their united subscriptions. What, therefore, the apostle urged these Corinthian Christians to do was this—that Sunday after Sunday they should cast into a common fund their offerings, for the benefit of the saints at Jerusalem. Hence, if we generalize the apostle's directions, it follows, that in all that concerns our united liberality as a Church, our offerings shall be made in the same way. Then, as we have said before, giving would become an act of worship. The effect of a solemn sermon would not be destroyed by unseemly appeals to the pockets of the audience, and we should be relieved from the unpleasant feeling of hearing announcements of collections, or seeing plates held at the doors.

Allow me, now, to leave the subject to your thoughtful consideration, asking you only to carry out the suggestions we have made, if you find them in accordance with God's Word; to reject them unhesitatingly if at variance with it. I cannot but, however, before closing, commend to you the example of the Macedonian Churches, as pointed out in 2 Cor. viii. 5: "Who," says the apostle, "first gave their own selves unto the Lord." There was the secret of their spontaneous liberality and their spiritual strength. Without this surrender we can do nothing acceptably to God; with it, our feet will be swift to run in the way of His commandments; and our cry will be: Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do? Without this surrender, we are without hope and without God in the world; with it, we have God as our Father, Christ our Elder Brother, and Heaven our Home.

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