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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. 4 - THE CHRISTIAN'S STATE OF LIFE
TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

How We Should Hear Sermons

“Two men went up into the temple to pray.” — St. Luke 18: 10.

Two men went to the same place, the temple of God; they went with the same intention, to pray; but how differently they carried it out! The one was a Pharisee, who was looked upon as a pattern of piety; the other a Publican, a public sinner, whose wicked life was known to all. The one was full of secret pride, the other of humility and contrition. The one went to extol himself in his prayer, and to raise himself above others; the other to repent of his sins, and to beg the mercy of God. What wonder is it that they both left the temple in very different states? A picture of many Christians who go into the same church, at the usual time, to hear the same sermon; but all of them do not return home in the same state. If there are ten of them who derive great profit for their souls, there are fifty who derive much less, and a hundred who have no profit at all. One sinner is touched and moved to penance, another remains as hardened as he was before. One just man is made more zealous in the service of God, the other remains as he was. Whence arises this difference amongst men of the same nature, who hear the same Word of God, preached at the same time, and in the same place? The fault lies with themselves: they do not come to the sermon in the same way and with the same dispositions. To remedy this great defect I will tell you, in to-day's instruction, how you must go to a sermon in order to profit by it. One should go to sermons

I. *With a heart well-prepared;*

II. *With speedy steps.*

I. 1. He who sows seed must first carefully prepare the soil; for the seed will bring forth little or much fruit, or no fruit at all, according as the ground is ill or well prepared, or altogether unprepared. “The seed is the Word of God” (St. Luke 11: 8). This is sown by sermons; not the ears, but, the hearts of the hearers are the ground in which it is sown, in order to bring forth abundant fruit of eternal life for souls. But, no matter how powerful and impressive this Word may be, the whole profit and advantage of it depends mostly on the preparation and disposition of the heart that is to receive it. Not the preacher, but God, is the sower, who speaks by the mouth of his preacher and distributes his graces to hearts. There is no doubt about it. It is neither I, nor any one else, who does the good. God must do it: “Neither he who planteth is anything, nor he who watereth, but God who giveth the increase.” Sermons may be as polished, as well conceived, as impressive as you wish, but if the Spirit of God does not enlighten the hearers with supernatural light, those sermons will be as incapable of producing an effect as ice-cold water is of making a fire burn brighter. The voice of the preacher goes no farther than the ears of his hearers; it has then done its duty, and it comes back again, while the voice of God forces its way into the depths of the heart. We may cry out and shout, and make a great noise, in exhorting you to good, St. Augustine says:

“If there is no one to teach inwardly, all the noise we make is of no use.” There are always two preaching together: besides him whom you see in the pulpit, there is another Preacher in heaven, who with one hand directs the tongue of him who is preaching, while with the other he moves the hearts of his audience. “He who teaches hearts has his seat in the heavens” (Ps. 49: 2).

2. In what does that preparation consist? In this, that you must cleanse your hearts, like ground that you prepare for seed, from the stones that would prevent the Word from fructifying, and from the thorns that would choke it; that is to say, you must lay aside all other cares, evil desires, and thoughts, and willful attachments to sin, and you must go to the sermon with no other wish, no other intention, but a true and earnest desire to understand the will of God, to learn the truths taught, and to act according to them. If you are in the state of sin, your first wish must be to understand the deformity of sin, so that you may be moved to true sorrow and penance, and avoid evil in future. If you are in the state of grace, your only object must be to be incited more and more to the love of God, and to his service, to the esteem of virtue, and to the desire and longing for heavenly things. “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear” (St. Luke 8: 8). What is the meaning of that? Have not all got ears who come to hear sermons? They are not deaf, or they would remain at home. It is true that all have ears, but all have not ears to hear. They who hear must have such ears that they can profit by what they hear and obey the divine will, when they understand it.

Do you bring such ears with you when you come to a sermon? Are your hearts thus prepared, your minds ready, your intentions pure, your desires earnest and sincere? Would to God that it were so! If I might ask each and every one particularly what induced them to come to the sermon, and expect from all a true answer, how different would be the causes they would assign, and not one of them conformable to the true object of a sermon! Some could not even assign a cause; they go to the sermon, and they hardly know how or why they went; they had simply the desire of following the crowd, of keeping up a custom, of pleasing their fathers, mothers, masters, or mistresses, who ordered them to come and who watch them to see that they do so. There are many simple, good souls, who could give no other reason for their coming except that they wished to hear a sermon, thinking that when they have done that they have performed a good, holy, and meritorious work; so that it is all the same to them whom they hear, what they hear, and how they hear; nor do they trouble themselves about the subject, for their only object is to hear a sermon, and of course every subject is good. That may be all very true, but the good work does not consist therein. If you have no other intention but that, I would not give you anything for all you could gain, even if you heard ten sermons in the one day. The hearing of sermons in itself is not a holy or meritorious work; it is only a means of learning holy things, so as to do something holy and good afterwards; and that is the intention which makes it good and meritorious to hear sermons.

And you others, why do you come now and then to sermons? Is it that you may pass away an hour or so, on Sundays or holy-days, which you would otherwise find too long, as you have nowhere else to spend your time? Or is it to satisfy an idle curiosity to hear how the preacher acquits himself of his task, that you may criticize him afterwards? They say, like those people of whom Ezechiel writes: “Come, let us go and hear what he has to say,” what sort of ideas and thoughts he has; as if they were going to see a play! Poor, blind wretches! Who only try to satisfy their curiosity, and seek merely for pleasure and enjoyment, where they might find their eternal salvation, and whose only object is to glut their ears, where they might feed their souls and learn what their obligations are and how to fulfill them. I will say nothing of other still more culpable, nay, even wicked motives, that induce many to come, who have not the least idea of amending their lives; but come with the deliberate intention of opposing holy inspirations, and driving them out of their minds. What sort of profit can all those people hope to have? No one is forced to receive grace against his will; he must seek it, desire and long for it.

Bring, then, with you, longing and devout hearts to the sermon! The greater your appetite, when you sit down to table, the better flavor has your food, and the more good it does the stomach. The purer your intention, the greater your desire to be instructed and moved by the Word of God, the more profit will you bring home with you. So that, first of all, before you go to a sermon, or while you are in the church before

it commences, you must raise your heart to God. Think to yourself: God is now about to speak to my heart. Sigh and pray in the words of the prophet Samuel: "Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth."

II. And what is the meaning of that, you ask, to come with speedy steps? The meaning is that you must come in time to the sermon. What prevents a great many from deriving the proper fruit is their sloth and laziness; for some make it almost a habit not to come until the sermon is begun, or even half over. What a great irreverence this is to the Word of God, what advantages it deprives them of, and what harm it does their souls, they can hardly imagine.

1. With regard to the irreverence, tell me: Do you think the master should wait for his servant? Or should not the servant rather wait for his master? If the prince sent you word last night to be in his presence this morning at eight o'clock precisely (for he will await you at that hour, as he wishes to say something particular to you), would you neglect being there at the appointed time? Would you think: there is no hurry yet; I can sleep a quarter of an hour longer; I have still something to do at home; there will be time enough for me to get ready at eight o'clock; the prince can wait a little until I come, or he can talk with his other attendants meanwhile? You would never dream of such things, nor let a word to that effect fall from your lips, for fear some one would hear it. Your anxiety not to come too late would drive you out of bed at four o'clock, so that you might be dressed in time, and wait half an hour in the audience chamber before the appointed hour. But if you knew, moreover, that he sent for you to grant you a favor at the appointed time, how early and speedily you would get ready! Would you allow yourself to be delayed by any other business, no matter how short a time it might occupy? I think not; for, you would say, if I lose this favor now, I may never have such an opportunity again.

I have often told you before that you do not come to church merely to hear the preacher whom you see in the pulpit; otherwise I should have spoken far too audaciously when I brought forward the comparison of the master and servant, and it would certainly make little matter whether you came late or early; there is no use in your expecting any grace from me, I can give you none. It is God, who wishes to speak in and to your hearts by the voice of his instrument; it is he who calls you half an hour beforehand, by the sound of the bell, to his audience chamber; he is there at the hour that is fixed and known to all, and he waits for his servants, to give them gratuitously certain graces, that is, either to impel them to a certain good, or to restrain them from a certain evil; and if the appointed time is neglected, these graces may never be offered again.

Only think of it for a moment seriously. How many populous cities and countries there are, in the four quarters of the globe, in which God seldom or never speaks to hearts or makes known his truths in this manner? How many millions of men there are who hear nothing of the mysteries of our faith? Have we merited more than they? And we think so little of these graces that it is no great matter to us whether we come too late or too early to hear them. We can easily imagine what they who come late to the sermon would say if they gave utterance to their thoughts: let God wait a while and speak with those who are there with him; there is time enough for me; I will come presently; he can wait, and distribute his graces to others meanwhile; whatever he may have over will be good enough for me. What irreverence, what discourtesy and ingratitude to so great and good a Lord! You might make a great many excuses to an earthly prince to explain the delay, in case you came too late; but could you hope to do anything of the kind with the Almighty God, who knows the secrets of your heart, and understands the reasons of your delay?

If you only had a greater love of God and of his Word you would certainly come earlier! How quickly Magdalen ran to the door when she heard the words: "The Master is here and calls thee." Hardly had St. Peter heard the words: "It is the Lord," as he was sitting in the boat and saw Christ coming along the water, than he leaped overboard immediately, in order to come to him at once. And if you, too, knew that any one whom you love very dearly was at home waiting for you, love would add wings to your footsteps that you might be there as soon as possible. And see, whenever there is a sermon, your Lord and God is

waiting for you, and you delay! And you come a quarter or half an hour too late, while he is in the middle of his discourse! Is that a sign that you have a love and esteem for God and his Word?

And what sort of advantage do you expect to draw from such bits of sermons? None. Well, then, in addition to the irreverence, discourtesy, ingratitude, and want of love toward God, there is also a loss occasioned to your soul by your coming late. Because, first of all, you are not present at the opening prayer, by which the whole congregation asks and receives the light of the Holy Ghost from heaven—a thing that you need most of all. And in the second place, you are not able to understand the sermon, so that it cannot give you any impulse to good. Imagine that you see two people quarrelling and fighting in the street; the dispute has been going on for some time, and at last you run up and hear how the two are shouting at and abusing each other. They speak distinctly, and you know the meaning of all the words they use, but you do not know the cause and subject of their quarrel, and so you ask one of the bystanders: What is the matter with these two men? But the only answer you get is: Why were you not here sooner, and you might have known all about it? And so you go away just as wise as you came, knowing nothing about the matter, except that two men had a quarrel. In the same way, if you come into the church during the sermon, you see some one standing in the pulpit; he is speaking of all sorts of things, according as his subject requires; he makes use of different comparisons; awakens different affections; sometimes raises his voice with a sigh to heaven, sometimes speaks directly to his audience in tones of pity and wonder; at one time he threatens, at another entreats. And meanwhile you stand there gaping and wondering what it is all about. What is he preaching about? you think; you dare not ask any one, for fear of distracting him, and if he could tell you the subject in one word you would still be ignorant of what has gone before, so that all your gaping and listening is of very little or no use to you.

Again, no matter how good a sermon may be, either in form, or in the instruction it gives, or in the eloquence with which it is delivered, if it is to produce any fruit the understanding must be convinced, by clear proofs and reasons, of time truth preached, so that the hearer may acknowledge it, and say to himself, yes, that is true, it is right to do this, or to avoid that; and then the will must be moved and excited, by appealing to the affections, in order that it may fulfill the truth; thus, one depends on the other, like the links of a chain. But if you come too late you hear only one part; the chain is broken, the order disturbed; and so how can the truth make the proper impression on you?

Finally, you do not come prepared—that is, with a real desire and longing to hear the Word of God. What would you think of him who, being invited to table, would delay, without cause, until the first and best dishes were removed? You would say there is something wrong with that man; either he has no appetite, or he is utterly indifferent to eating and drinking. Certainly, if he were hungry, he would not require to be asked a second time, nor would he wait for the signal of the bell; his stomach would give him sufficient warning, and the cook must look out if his meal is not ready at the proper time. Is there any reason, then, to think that he has a true desire to hear the Word of God, which is the food of the soul, who, as a matter of habit, without any necessity, through sheer sloth, or because he fritters away his time in useless things, comes too late to the sermon? Oh, certainly not! The whole matter depends on getting up half an hour earlier in the morning.

We see now how you ought to come to sermons: you must come with your hearts well prepared and full of desire to understand and fulfill the will of God; you must come with speedy steps, at the proper time, so as not to lose anything of what is said. When you hear the first sound of the bell, remember what the three holy kings said when they saw the star: “That is the sign of a great King;” come, quickly, let us go to him; God is calling us by that signal; I will go at once and hear what the Lord has to say to my heart. Oh, if every one was always thus prepared and disposed, what good might be done by a single sermon! What great treasures of grace the divine generosity would lavish on souls! How sinners would be filled with sorrow and repentance, the just with the love of God, the needy and distressed with spiritual consolation, the tepid with zeal, the ignorant with light, and all with devotion!

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