No. 144.

The true design of a fast.

First Day Sermon

1822.
Zechariah vii. 5. “Speak unto all the people of the land, and to the priests, saying, when ye fasted and mourned in the fifth, seventh, and ninth months, even these seventy years, did ye at all fast unto me, even to me?”

Among the means & ceremonies of religion, which have been more or less used in different periods, fasting holds a distinguished place. As feasting has been considered as an expression of gratitude & joy, so abstaining from food has been regarded as an expression of a sense of penitence & sorrow. These customs seem to have prevailed among nations, whose religion in other respects was very different, (were among the features common to the sacred institutions of the heathens.) But it is in the history of the Jews, that we meet the most express & particular notices of the rites of
fasting, & there its prevalence may be traced in a very marked & distinct manner at successive times, especially when seasons of deep distress were called for mourning & affliction. The principal, if not the only fast enjoined in the law of Moses, was on the great day of expiation, when sacrifices were offered for the sins of the people, & the removal of sin was symbolically set forth by the scape goat sent into the wilderness. The law also institutes this solemnity, saying, "it shall be a statute forever unto you, that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, when the manna shall not be given, nor corn meal at all, neither shall there be one of your own country, or the strangers that sojourneth among you, fast. And besides this solemnity, there were other occasions on which the people fasted, & these were times of public calamity, such as a siege, war in general, pestilence, when the land was infested by locusts, diseases, famine, & the like. When we come down to the time of the prophets, from whom our text is selected, we shall find that these seasons of mourning & humiliation were multiplied. They had then

but just returned from their long & desolate captivity at Babylon, & were still bowed down with their grief. Facts of that desolate judgment, which made its self felt among them after their restoration to the land of their fathers, as the waves of the sea still break against the rocks, after the wind, which had created them, has passed. During their seventy years captivity, the land, being desolate, & their enemies ascendant, they wereTenant, though the first jubilee was observed, four annual fasts, commemorating the decrease of the land, events of that humble pensive nature. The fasts of the fourth month have their sublimation. For, in remembrance of the breaking down of the walls of Jerusalem, when the steps of a great congregation of the people were first trod within the holy city; there were also the destruction of the city's temple, where kings had reigned, & prophets had preached their law, & thence is connected the most affecting associations of intense religious & national feeling. That of the seventieth year, was in memory of the slaying of Gedaliah, upon which occasion the inhabitants of the land, after that of the tenth month, had reference to the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem, recorded in the book of Kings.
There were the facts, as the Jews had ascertained, during their captivity, of their most tender sufferings. They were now employed in re-erecting the temple, not inquired whether they should first take a fast of the fifth month, as they had done in the days of the captivity. Instead of a direct answer to this enquiry, the prophet represented God as approaching with them by diminishing them, that the fasts, had been instituted to keep as days of solemnity, had been little better than mockery. When the fasts commenced in the 5th month, even these seventy years, did yet add to all fasts, even more; even unto me, even unto me! By this was intimated, that the observance of these days had answered no religious purpose, that they had been only outward shows without the humiliation of the heart. This shows that God regarded the form of their fasts, as nothing with while the reality was absent. But the rites in compliance with the customs of their country, would stand on their own feet, might still be found too heavy burdens, not submissive to the government of God.

The laws of institutions of Judaism, having been long

since abrogated, are now not binding on us, nor even as our observances are similar to any of theirs, it shall not be on account of their being from God in general, nor applicable alike to all times or nations. Almost the same

of Judaism was local, peculiar to the people; and if that

ceremonies were multiplied, made as august and solemn as possible, in order to bind this unconverted people to this law of their God, every thing among them indicates the childhood of the human race, that lowest degree on the scale of improvement. The simple

religion should take among such a people, would of

course be adapted to their state, to be influenced by its

more civil forms, solemn days would have a greater

feternity, because the higher importance, them naturally

belonged to them. Means would be esteemd more than

the end, the shadow would be followed, not the subst

ance... Higher state of refinement, a more enlarged

d view of things, would require religious institutions

more spiritual, consisting less of outward shows, would

show more to do with the heart, less with external

discourses, would lead us to set a higher price on the
fruits, then on the leaves of the tree of righteousness.

Whether the frequent fruits of the Gnostics be considered as having been of any practical value, or whether the many of their acts were mere figments of the agitations of their minds, must be determined by a reference to the circumstances of the case. At any rate, it does not recognize their obligation. The aim of the Gospel is higher, more exalted. It comes with a code of laws for the regulation of the heart of the conduct of the life, not for the arrangement of days, seasons, observances. Jesus taught his followers to fast in many due to their own sins, as such. He therefore says, when you fast, be not as the hypocrites, if a sin, he says, designating this face, that they may appear unto men to fast: verily I say unto you, they have their reward. But when thou fastest, anoint thine head, wash thy face (i.e., think not much of the outward forms of humiliation), that then appears not unto men the fast, but unto thy Father in secret. For I say unto you, in secret, shall reward thee openly. Our Lord treated this, as he does all the ceremonies of religion, making them

while value to consist in the practical effect of what they may have. Hence we learn what judgment we are to form of the duty of fasting. We are not to suppose that there is any merit or efficacy merely in abstaining from food. It is the humility, humiliation, con
tention of the soul, that constitute that the exercise of the heart where we may call a fast. A man may with
out much effort restrain himself from the indulgence in food for a day, as to any as many hard passions, as
many unattractive desires, as little as to restrain him, as
he has feasted on food. Humbly and prayerfully all the day
long. If by this species of self-denial, any one can
find assistance to his spiritual meditations, if by deny
ing his natural appetite he can think more perfectly
deeply on these subjects, if he put at such a time to occupy his mind, let him by all means make use
of what he finds to be an aid to penitence, humiliation;
but let him not imagine that there is any
virtue in the abstinence itself. I can easily suppose that
cases may occur in which the mere acts of bodily fasting
may be found to yield valuable aid to the soul.
mankind too easily fall into the habit of supposing that there is some magical charm in the thing itself, as will answer every purpose, without the necessity of repentance, or prayer for the Saviour. As such, it is administered to this people the stern reproof in the text, "peach unto all the people of the land of the priests, saying, 'If ye fasted one month, even three years, did yet at all fast unto me, even to me'. Were not your fancies fasts odoriferous; more religious odours? Was there anything like a token of your thoughts, tarrying many witnesses, more than any tears shed from the heart, for your transgressions, any from purges of repentance, a new obedience? And in another occasion, when it is introduced with this solemn exhortation, 'is it such a fast as I have chosen? is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? will then call this a fast, an acceptable day to the Lord? Do not this rather the fasts that I have chosen, take the burden of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, that ye break every yoke? is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that then bring this poor that are cast out to thy house, when then shall thy voice against the heavens? that then cover him, that then hide not thyself from them once flesh? In these words is a fine description of the quality of that service which God requires of men. Holy, just, or true, has it been taught, that lack of goodness, practical evidence of benevolence, of the spirit of active kindness will render a man more acceptable in the sight of heaven, than bowing his head like a bulrush or spreading sackcloth and ashes under him, than all the outward manifestations of self-denial & so on. Such then was the manner in which the Unity in ancient times regarded the days of solemn fasting observed by the Jews. In the sight of God they were of no value, any farther than they answered a religious purpose: as if the heart was humbled, as the soul and body, then was fast, acknowledged, purchased, recompensed, produced a better life, then it was a true acceptable fast; if not, however bad might be the contrariety, however rigid the abstinence from food, it was but as idle then, with it however the evidences of the soul is sick, might be satisfied? God could never be pleased.

And every fast, such is the true idea of a fast, with me
at the present day should impress on our minds. Yet there is never has been, a tendency country grandchild to make too much of days of solemn, as much to attribute to them an efficacy which belongs only to vital religion. It is one of the points in which it is disapproved the distinction to substitute observance for the obedience of the heart. Look into the history of the church, I am sure, all will be astonishment to see how this disposition hasmanifested itself in the invention of forms of method by which God's men could never look with approbation. It would be, as it were, surprising, that the more thoughtful the mind is, the more they made the more absurd the acts of which they perform. In the more observance of the prescribed acts, they peculiarly they would advance on the path to heaven; and this, without the heart of obedience to the rule of the heart, or character of the soul. This disposition to have the rule of religion, done of an act, to be an act, has always infected mankind. So, though at the present time, there is for her tendency to give an undue value to formal days, yet as the scripture seems to beone, it is a manu-
In order, then, that this solemnity may not degenerate from its true purpose, let us ever keep in view, that it consists not in a bad countenance, or worse disposition, but in cherishing all appropriate religious sentiments. On the day of fasting, it is our duty to call to mind Divinity as individuals, as a people; to cultivate a deep sense of our unworthiness, to humble ourselves before him. All the exercises of penitence, devotion, thus the soul is to be employed with hearts prepar'd to receive what we seek for.

Such being the duty of the day, I would before closing give some hint at a few of these sins, in an account of their prevalence & nature may be called. Such as, as our sins, quite therefore especially in this day may be considered, as

1. The first one I would mention as preposterously to have tried on this time is Sabbath breaking; yet is one not called for core of spreading idolatry, the veneration of the sabbath, of God is among the first marks of the decay of the church among a people, when that day is not dedicated to this worship as parents, have every reason to suffer that the worship itself is despised. God said, to the first

old, "verify my sabbaths ye shall keep for it is a sign between me & you through the ages to come, that ye may know that I am the Lord, that with penalty ye certainly the ten sabbaths were designed, as a means of religion. I am no advocate for a special & ideal observance of the Sabbath, which should command with its no doings or solemnities, etc., on the contrary, I would have it a cheerful, pleasant, happy day, for I believe it to be of great importance to have religious associations in the mind with other observances is delightful & amicable, that is, everything is united to it equal to a kind of love... In some houses, probably, the Sabbath is in many cases observed with a very injurious

of women & children, especially were made that a day nor they should live by this than any other day in the week. But we have too often gone to the opposite extreme, & because our fathers have excess & excesses in one way, we seem determined to err in another, so that we will about on earth, the very life of the Church is after all a decent degree of religioun's regard due to a day, or

also throughout the year in the genius of the assembly of people, deeply ground in the minds of different ages, from our sources are at the same time mingling their flights to the
there of heaven. On such a day, the mind should be cheerful, but at the same time serious, thoughtful. It is
defined to meditate on religion. But instead of this, we
but too often see a waste of time on worldly pleasures, a
pity for the sabbath. I cannot talk about you. By
those born on Sunday and with thoughts of pleasure as
amusement we are familiar with the sins of foolishness, but
this sacred day is invaded by the common laments
of pleasures of other days. How many spend it in deeper
intemperance, or idle sauntering from place to place &
they tell me, with this & that, breaking the motions of
the mind, or in an occasion like this present, we should
acknowledge, honest, decent, of a God. If I say it again,
you give us the beast, to be sensible of our

2. Another sin, in which we should not be reminded, for
we are foolishness. You need not be told to me, my
sirs, how it falls with yourselves, that nothing is
more common than to hear the name of God blasphemed,
and religion expressing used in the most sacrilegious
speeches. God has declared that he will not let
him sinners, who take his name in vain, get
there is nothing so soft, nothing so wicked, nothing so
immoral, with one will not do the holy name.
as if they believe it to be only a word of
or to give more honour to heaven, a threat. Nay, we
believe that there is a being, whose very name gives us
life, whose very name is death. We shall not be
introduced to that being, if we may be, in the midst
of us, or in the tempest of passion. There is a name
shall the host of heaven reverence, adore, cry, holy,
and holy, holy. Nay, shall we use that name to babble
like idling discourse to give an aim to our, a strength to
end our importance come to a day? Are the accents of
injury of wickedness the fit place to appear, to
improvisation, 

in the law of heaven, that the breath of man should be
spent in blaspheming him, and in first breath, when is
the breath of life, without a man it would instantly
cease? But the lips ask God, how should he be
should be employed in the utterance of blasphemy? If
there be any, even the most faint, shrinking personage,
whose mind, if there be in our hearts always

of feeling that is not ever forget, feeling to an in
ance with our Maker, if the whole ask God himself
first lighted up an our souls in purity he not utterly
exulted, if in that we have not forgotten that we are in such relation one stand to them who hath
created them who hath redeemed us then surely we
cannot but look upon the habit of sinfully, as a
most, genuine, habit of sinfully, towards 24 of
decency to our man. And it is a vice, which of late, years
has increased in a most alarming degree among us, and
deeply goes with the burden of this sin. In the days
of sinfulness, not only this be forgotten among the
things, but it would make us humble and holy before God.

3. Another vice, which in this occasion we are called to
mourn is intemperance, a vice, which may emphatically
be called the great destroyer. It swamps with its dreadful
flood through the community, humiliating the
happiness of health, virtue, heart before it. The man, who
loves his country, has no such reason to mourn over it, as
the time for it, using the vitals of national strength
preserving rights of that happiness of mind, body,
which it is one for all the duties of a good citizen, as
well as for the highest, most important duties of a
candidate for eternity. It requires a strong heart to
maintain even the detail of the sin, in this vice.

...spread it, to reckon the number of its victims, as they fall in our succession, a prey to itself.

...appeal to any man's moral feeling, ask, whether it be not something, when a
day of sinfulness, at least, we should lament, in which
it is greatly crying its thousands, tens of thousands, that
so much money, so much wealth, so much happiness, should be sacrificed to the one momentary gratification of a
inging appetite... Mark the cause of the intemperate
man, if he tell one, if he intemperance be not a great
cure... With respect to his body, the fresh breath of the
world, even an organ of the hand, that holds the filled
cup, trembles while it holds it. The heart in vain
...complains there, such compassion, his heart, damsel has been stirred there, he becomes faint, feeble in the midst of his day...
old age finds its work done long before it arrives. With respect to his mind, the scene is far more. I dont exaggerate when I say, that if you see intemperance taking possession of a man, you may expect without fear of disappointment to see a thousand dark forms of vice stealing along after it, seeming upon his soul like active hungry for their prey. His heart becomes dead to all moral and religious interests. He plunges on from one scene of iniquity to another, reckless, hopeless, enduring. He converts the domestic circle, that place on which should ever be the holiest sanctuary of peace and good will, the last place, to do anything aloud, any thing immoral, should be allowed to enter, even that, he converts into a scene of angry contention, of sneering and scorn. His spirit, his dispositions, are perhaps, the bitterest and most intense of this intemperate spirit abroad. Now when we consider that all these evil effects take place not in innocent cases only, but in many, very many instances, that it is not merely once in our lives that we are called upon to witness them, but that every week, every month, every year from infancy...
to strive to the utmost for the extension of vice as far as our power reaches. Given they cannot do everything, but certainly may be done; there is a solemn responsibility of doing it. It seems not here we can answer for it to our consciences, if we stand by with indifference, or see profanity, intemperance, & drunkenness going on with the same of destruction. But it is in our power to be in any degree the means. And besides it should be remembered, that they who harbour the moral corruption of the community, are made a part of the same. As those who are victims, are torn by the same. If once good to this nation, then those who oppose it, are enemies of the battle of justice. Let it be our prayer, that our cities may be virtuous, as well as free, that they may abstain from licentiousness, as strictly as they do slavery ofoppressing for it, might be said to our country; \\

"Arise, shine for thy light shall break forth as the morning, thy truth shall spring forth quickly, thy righteous shall go before thee, the glory of the Lord shall be thy salvation."

March, 1822.