No. 186. 7

Fruits meet for repentance.

A Fast Day Lesson.

1823.
Matth. 3:8. "Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance."

The spirit of this exhortation is certainly appropriate to the occasion, in which we are assembled. This day is an outward profession of repentance, a day of humiliation and prayer. If this profession has any meaning, it means that we should pause for a while, reflect on our defects and transgressions, lift up our hearts to heaven for a blessing. Now if we would make this any thing more than a vain form under the name of religion, the feeble, superficial service of custom, we must endeavor to unite with some sentiments of duty. We shall give it its moral, of course a pure and efficacious influence in the heart. Without this, all these observances are but the bare fringes of the garment of righteousness, which lose all their value, even as ornaments, unless there be something better. If we in truth have that sorrow for our offenses, and the sincerity of this day suppose, we must bring forth the acts,
which substantial fruits of penitence, & not substitute confession in the place of reformation, nor mistake acknowledgment of sin for departure from sin.

The passage, in which I have selected to guide our thoughts this time, is from the rebuke of J. the Baptist, to the Sadducees, who came to his baptism. These were the two most distinguished sects in philosophy & religion among the Jews at that time. They were not only infected with the errors, but gave rise to most of the errors of their countrymen. Their respective opinions pervaded the community in general, & were the source of much corruption. These men came to John, probably, from very various motives: some out of curiosity, some because they supposed perhaps that John would assume the character of & office of the expected Messiah. Such however were their views & expectations, that John found in them more to reprove than to commend. He rebukes them with a most stern & severe address, which trains them, if they would in sincerity receive his baptism, still for the fruits of repentance, & not to trust in the merits of their ancestors, or to suppose that the righteousness of Abraham could be imputed to them, or given them favour in the sight of God.
But we may now pass to the general truth contained in this admonition, which is equally applicable to all men at all times. If we are penitent, we must bring forth fruits meet for repentance. This is the great principle more to be inculcated: if it is a principle the propriety of justice of which need no proof. You would not value much that tree, which should regularly bear good year and a blossom, but never bear fruit, though its blossoms should cover it with the most profusion, she among the fairest, most beautiful, which want in the gay season of spring. So we should value at a low rate, for certainly God will value at a low rate, that repentance which at stated periods comes out with its confessions of prayers, but never leads the man to be better for the future, never pronounces him to cut off a single unripe prosperity, to sacrifice a single bad passion, to bear a single vice less, or a single virtue more. The tree, that bends with fair, ripe fruit, is the tree that you prize; so the man whose life is better in just the same proportion as he is more penitent, is the man of good account in the sight of God. This truth I find to be one of immense import.
once, with more than half the disput. Our doctrines
insist on; I repeat it, it is a truth what belongs
to the services of this day to impress deeply in our hearts.
On this occasion, thousands throughout the extent of
our commonwealth are engaged in a most edifying
exercise; as one who viewed it in the theory it
might seem an impressive and sublime spectacle: he
might in imagination see the cloud of incense rising
from innumerable altars in our land, hear the voice of
rest supplication within the churches that are scat-
tered thick in our villages and cities; he might imagine
to himself the hearts of a people bowed down in con-
tection and confession, of them humbly rising again
in the prayer for heaven's blessing; or he would suppose
certainly that a day of such solemnities could not be
without effect; could not be a heartless a passing
ceremony, a burden of all good, as if such a day had not
been; surely, he would say, the people, who act apart
time for such meditations of recollections, must be made
better by it; we shall certainly see less vice, more
virtue among them; their publick morality will be
shivered of grosser, their indignation at every of
in something else. The observance of the day is in itself satisfactory, seems like the discharge of a duty. The impression gains strength upon us, that it has no meaning beyond the form, that there is even a virtue in the form. Such is the mind of man, that the very same truths, duties, not if inculcated, expressed upon us as general, palpably obligatory always, might find access to the heart of the soul and hold it, will, if attached to certain days, considered as belonging particularly to them, be received with them, thoughtless, indifferently, while the days themselves are strictly observed. We cannot always command our feelings so as to be penitent or thankful, at this or that particular time, afterwards knowing that the time was the appointed to us to be penitent or thankful, we are apt to neglect the duty altogether. But it is that stated day or season for religious exercises, are so often without effect;—hence that complaint, which is as old as the history of religion, that men are seldom made better by forms of observances, though they may be preserved from evil. The day takes place of the duties of the day. The shadow of the substance, the end of the means. Thus that happy man with whom we might be disposed to indulge, if the good effects in the way of positive improvement, resulting from religious observances, prove so often to be nothing but a
Another reason, why our annual confessions of repentance are so far then, is that it is a publick and general confession: the purpose, that the faults we are called upon to lament and repent of, are not particularly our faults, but do not interest us particularly. A publick moral, an abstract idea in metaphysics: it belongs to no individual, but to the whole in a mass. It surrounds all, without touching any one, so every one is free to confess that oil is in its nature so indefinite and general, that it cannot be fastened upon him. If men are to be much affected, it must be by something brought near to him, something that belongs to him as an individual, not to all the rest of the world. It must be something which addresses him as directly as Nathan did David—Then art thou the man? We are not much disposed to divide the publick sin into its parts, or take the portion which belongs to ourselves. In fact, it is a calculation not easily made. You are lost in the crowd of company, before you can find out how much you have to answer for. The arrows, whose carelessly let fly abroad without aim, will do but little execution: it must be an arrow, that, parts from the bent bow of the strained arm, is directed to one object, that also will answer the archer's purpose. And thus again it rises.
that the fruits meet for repentance are not brought forth. No conviction of transgression is concentrated through to a point, & therefore it is blunt of powers less. Other reasons for the fact, to which I have called your notice might be given; but in urging upon you the duty of bringing forth fruits meet for repentance, I shall have reference principally to those which have been stated.

1. It is true, that particular days do not or cannot always bring with them the feelings, & those days are intended to excite. Another time may find me spontaneously engaging in these important exercises of the heart & affections, with earnestness; it may be, with effect. There are times of curiosity in life, when the heart & all the powers of freshness, of good influences & virtuous emotions, if these seasons are doubted more auspicious to our moral progress, they the dull solemnity of heartless observances. There are moments of happy thought & deep feeling, in which the recollection, & which we will, & the custom, strikes us together within the same walls for religious purposes. May our hearts be estranged, in an infinite variety of ways from all good meditations. All this is true, & yet it is likewise true, that we may do much to discipline our minds to other contemplation & a serious sense of duty.
at any time, if we will but use the proper means. The
trains of thought and feeling are much more in our power, than
we in the sluggishness of moral indolence are apt to sup-
pose. This therefore is not the point. Much more we must
The main essential thing is, not to feel penitent on
this of that particular day, but to have it to act at all
times under the conviction, that our penitence is necessary
for anything but just in proportion, as it brings forth
the meet of proper fruits. This persuasion deeply fixed in the
heart of thoroughly acted upon, is worth more than all the
fevered emotions or self-abasing feelings, that can be
get up at special seasons. The return of this day may
not, it is true, bring with it any peculiarly wide
sentiments of contrition or penitence; but still it may,
if it will not have been spent in vain if its does, bring
home to your minds more closely that great truth,
that you must bring forth fruits meet for repentance.
Fix it establish this, as one of the rules of your life, give
ask your heart to its own: if you will keep an accept-
able fast to the beard... It has been well observed, that
all intentions of future amendment, must be necessary,
inconce, because they always imply a preference of your
eat habits and indulgencies. He who entangles himself with
confessing, lamenting his faults, and his miseries: the present is shut off to some future time. The task of reforming them, may be sure, that he is practicing deception upon himself. He is not sorry for his sins, though he may seem to be so. He may be sorry for their consequences, as doubtless every sinner is; but if he did not at heart love the vicious habits themselves, he would not have renounced them immediately, but ask a respite before he parted from them. If we are penitent, sincerely penitent, we will reform; if we reform, we must begin now; there is no time but now. Delay has the same withering effect on the heart, that cold winters have upon the vegetable world. The tardy fruit, that comes not forward till the blasts of winter began to sweep the plain, would soon shrivel and perish; so the retardation of amendment, which puts off their operation to a distant period, will scarce produce anything but weakness and half-formed efforts which will die away, like the tender graces as before, or worse than before. Let the truth of my text, then, may fix it in your minds; take this occasion to make it a subject of thought. Ilay it away among your settled principles of action. Then,
though you may not have these emotions of penitence, that
lesson for sin, the day of humiliation and sorrow, you
will have gained a great important principle, one ah
of carried through life, will be always ringing in your
ears that most valuable lesson, that all agents professions
of sorrow for sin are done in value, till you have heard
this sincerity by reformatory goodness of life.

2. We must speak of the other source of the inefficacy of
these exercises of sin, that are intended to excite remi-
tance: I mean the idea, that the sins, in which we acknowledge
on such an occasion as this, are the public sins of the
community, that therefore we have no particular con-
cern in them. This is a great mistake, to one, who partakes
of in great degree any efficiency that might attend the
religious exercises of the occasion. We practice upon ourselves
so slight deception on this subject, by speak of the vices
of the people, the errors that prevail in the community,
as if the sins of the nation were any thing different
from the sins of the individuals who compose the na-
tion. The whole, we imagine, have done wrong, but each
individual is quite innocent. But the virtues, those
of people are certainly the virtues of the general
harts of which the people are made up. So that we cannot
longer find a refuge by dealing in cold of barren generalities, but must acknowledge that we have a nearer and easier way to the confession of transgression, than we had formerly. I once lived to made to appear... We as individuals contribute, each one something, if it be but a mere part to the character of the community, of the nation. Of course, we as individuals have some share in public opinion. It is true, there may be fashionable follies and vices, that receive no countenance from certain members of the community; there are even openly condemned. Such may wash their hands of the sin of participation... But these follies and vices are generally incidental, rather than deep settled; dwelling on the surface, not pervading the mass grain of character. In what constitutes the permanently good qualities of a community, each individual is after all personally concerned. People of the same nature are constantly imitating or receiving influences among each other; if it may be said of them, as is said of water, that particles are ever in motion, though the mass appears to be still. The question therefore with each one should be, what sins has the community committed? If this is only a decent way of putting the thing wholly out of sight, but, of what
ings have I been guilty? How shall I appear as a constituent part of that great mass called the public? This is not occasion to consider what we have done individually in the station we bear to the community. For in the way of encouragement, example, influence we are continually acting on the community, as well as the community on us. Every man should examine himself. How has my station in society been filled? How have I used whatever degree of influence may have fallen to my portion in this world? Have I preached or taught others to respect the eternal principles of justice, integrity, good order? Or, have I countenanced the acts of expedients, which called wisdom by the world, but are in truth nothing better than fraud? Have I protected the friendless & distressed, taken the them from the pinnacles of wretchedness, & arrayed in smiles the countenance that was downcast with woe? Or, have I oppressed the poor, the widow, & the fatherless, closed myself up in hardness of heart, grasping all & imparting nothing? It may be, others look to me for direction & shape their principles by mine. Have I managed this my power? Have I given it to the cause of virtue or of vice? Have I discomfited & formed upon corrupt practices? Have I encouraged such practices in order to make gain of them? Have I given the
sanctum of my heart. I have been able to the cause of religion: have I preserved it, or indulge others to preserve its ordinances, its institutions, its commands? Or, have I, in my own self, taught others to respect its forms and duties? Have I allowed my children to learn, at its expense, to please others, to think others, or to acquire the reputation of worthy holiness? Have I failed in the exercise of my duties in the course of public service? Have I allowed myself to be governed by the dictates of my own conscience, nor have I been led by the influence of public characters? Have I failed in the exercise of public offices? Have I been mindful of my duty to the community of society? Have I endeavored to correct the viciousness of brutal passions, or have I, on all occasions, labored for peace and harmony? Have I been willing to sacrifice something to the cause of justice and good will? In short, what does conscience testify?
Is it the sweet voice of approbation, or is it the stern voice of reproof and condemnation? Such are a few of the questions which it becomes each individual to try himself. Are questions which relate to his connexion with the circle in which he moves, or with the community at large. And so, as each one, when put upon this trial impartially finds himself a transgressor, thus far let him remember he is solemnly called upon to repent; not only so, but taking with fruits meet for repentance. And I believe, there is no one of us, who can honestly go over the catalogue of enquiries, made on this occasion, and ought to make, then say is feel, that he has no need of contrition. With regard to our station a connexion in society, it is certain that in many things we all offend. Bound together, we are by so many ties, of which we cannot, if we would break, meeting each other at so many points, crossing each other's paths in so many directions, we must inevitably together in duties as well as interests, in influences as well as acts; as principles of their acts become the principles of ours; theories become ours; opportunities are mutually taken, some for the exercise of many virtues, others for the exercise of many vices; each to spread in a thousand ways. Now in such a condition of being, can
licit to various, it cannot be that beings like us do not have much to regret of. Let it then be the lesson of this religious anniversary, that you be watchful over your sins as members of the community, as citizens of the state, that you continue your hearts without fear or shrinking. Do something more than breathe contempt in empty sighs. Remember, that the man who cherishes the spirit of peace and good fellowship, who exhibits in his own life the virtues of the true character, strives to diffuse these virtues among others. He discountenances vice in all its forms, in forms upon land, craft, and base cunning, who gives all the weight of his character to the side of religion, venerating it as the best bulwark of all that makes us most dear and valuable. That this man, pray, is the true patriot, the true friend to his country, no matter what his political opinions may be; if it is upon qualities like those alone, that our national security and honor can permanently rest. If our country is to remain for untold ages the brightest the annals of time, if she then may men can bear to be free and happy, the foundation of her endurance must lie in the virtues of her citizens, in good principles and good habits, spread like a healing Creeping Lime, through the mass of the people.
you country, my sir. You see how you can best show your love... The appeal should be especially made to those who are gifted with influence, who draw around them a circle to receive impulses of direction. There is scarcely a more sacred obligation than that which devolves upon the man who has power and standing in society, to use them well. Such men may do much good; they may do much hurt. Let them see to this responsibility; as还记得, we are as much accountable for what we do by our inferences, as for what we do personally.

We have considered some parts of the duty of bringing forth fruits meet for repentance, as the occasion of the day might suggest. My sir, we look forward to futurity with the hope of the blessing of God. But no blessing waits for us, except in the ways of virtue. The government of God is administered for the happiness of those of these alone, who are qualified to be happy, by goodness. In this day, then let each one call to mind what obstacles there may be in his own heart to the enjoyment of such felicity; i.e. to say, let each one call to mind his sins of this failures, a sin of the world, which marketh death, but that which shall end in the joy of virtue. Being forth therefore
fruits meet for repentance"; then shall God bless you; you will render to your country of service, and become at least a freeman of "that city, foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

March

At home, Thursday April 30, 1823 - forenoon.
At Mr. Ripley's - afternoon of the same day.