

DESPISING THE CHURCH

"What? have ye not houses to eat and to drink in? or despise ye the church of God, and shame them that have not? What shall I say to you? shall I praise you in this? I praise you not." I Corinthians 11:22.

One of the most arresting questions asked in the Bible is the one expressed by the Apostle Paul concerning our attitude toward the church. The attitude that one has toward the church is a matter of great importance in this life. In connection with the Lord's Supper, Paul asked this question concerning the church, "Despise ye the church of God?"

It is tremendously important that we have the right view concerning the two ordinances in the New Testament church -- baptism and the Lord's Supper. We must not take the wrong view of these two ordinances. They are not sacramental, but they are symbolic. They do not have any saving efficacy, but they do portray great facts of infinite moment to the life of mankind. It is a tragic and a sad thing for these two ordinances to be misused, to be perverted, or to be changed from their true meaning.

Baptism is a portrayal of great historic facts -- the death, burial, and resurrection of our Lord. The Lord's Supper, which is to be observed again and again in remembrance of Christ, reminds us of the spiritual help we get from the Lord. Under no circumstances should we ever misuse or pervert these two ordinances. They are not for the obtainment of the forgiveness of our sins. They are for those whose sins are already forgiven and who are saved already through Christ, the infinite Saviour. They are both symbolic. They are not intended to save or to be a part of salvation. They portray great truths touching salvation and our relation to Him Who gives it. These ordinances are only for the true friends of Christ -- for those who have repented of their sins, have personally accepted Christ as their Saviour, and dedicated their lives to Him as their righteous Lord and Master. They are administered by order of the church. These ordinances should have our worthiest attention. Our attitudes toward them should be well pleasing in the sight of God.

Paul saw those early Corinthian Christians perverting the ordinance of the Lord's Supper. They were making of it a feast. To this his righteous soul rose in protest, and he rang out the question, "Despise ye the church of God?" This Supper of the Lord is not for the satisfying of the appetite; it is not to be perverted, debauched, nor misused.

This question, "Despise ye the church of God?" goes beyond the Supper; it can be applied to all our relations in the church. The question, "Despise ye the church of God?" shocks us. Can it be possible that Christians would abuse this sacred institution? The word, "despise," has a far-reaching meaning. There is a tremendous difference between hating and despising. Hating is of the heart. To despise is of the head and mind. Even our Lord Jesus made this distinction Himself. "No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon." Matthew 6:24. Since despising is of the head or mind, it literally means "to look down on" or "subordinate" or to "lightly esteem" or to "hold in contempt." Despise means to undervalue, to neglect. Now we can despise, undervalue, disparage, or neglect it.

What can be said of the church? It is the only institution fashioned and founded by our divine Saviour and Lord. He said, "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it," and through the centuries they have not done so. Many people despise the church. They do not hate it, but they do subordinate it, or look down on it, or undervalue it, or neglect it.

The New Testament church is Public Asset Number One. It is the greatest, grandest, and most important organization in any community. It is an institution which concerns conscience, convictions, character, consecration, conduct, and charity. It is a necessary institution, the best teacher of righteousness which we have, the friend of childhood,

the inspirer of youth, the strengthener of middle life, and the comforter of old age. I like to think of the church as the place where the Word of God is preached, the power of God is felt, the spirit of God is manifested, the love of God is conceived, and the salvation of God is received.

True, the church is not perfect. It could not be because its recruits come from an imperfect source. Beecher said, "The church is not a gallery for eminent Christians, but a school for the education of imperfect ones." The church is the most helpful, most unselfish, most charitable, and most important organization on earth today. It gives me boundless joy to be able to say with justifiable pride, "That is my church. That church is the local headquarters for the biggest business on earth."

A New Testament church has a great origin, a great history, and a great heritage. She has a great constituency, a great mission, and a great future. She is undergirded by the power and promises of God in Christ.

The church is in the greatest business in the world. She has a God-given mission that endows her with a purpose, a place, and a power unheld by, and unknown to, any other organization on earth. In this respect, she is without companion or peer. She is in business for her king. She is in partnership with God in Christ Jesus. Her mission is linked onto the mission of Jesus. Her business is the Father's business. She is the repository of the life-giving gospel of Christ. Her mission is to win the lost to Christ. The world may produce better organizations for entertaining, better establishments for feeding, and better experts in social service; but as a soul-winning, hope-giving, life-building organization, the church has the field to herself.

Let us note some of the ways in which we can "Despise the church."

I. By Our Lax Religious Beliefs And Convictions.

Men and women ought to know what they believe and why they believe it. They ought to have a clear idea as to what is the significance of it all. Why do we believe in the deity, Lordship, and Saviourhood of Jesus Christ? Why do we stake all on Him? Why do we believe that salvation is obtained only through Christ? We ought to be able always and everywhere to give a reason concerning the hope that is in us.

II. By Our Failure To Support The Church.

The church is worthy of our greatest support. It commands the highest respect and demands the greatest support. Every member of the church should count it a privilege to support the church. Each church member is either an asset or a liability, a booster or a knocker, a helper or a hindrance, for it or against it, a spiritual slacker or a good soldier of the cross, loyal or disloyal. And remember, "Boosters don't knock, and knockers don't boost. Be a booster!"

If you have a proper conception of the importance of the church and a deep love for it you will support the church in at least three distinct ways:

1. With your presence.

Genuine Christians will not forsake the assembling of themselves together. A person who is physically fit and not providentially hindered, and who neglects church attendance on any given Sunday, tells the church and the world that he or she has no interest at all in the church that day. The empty pew problem is the church's greatest liability, the scandal of Christendom. The non-church-goer is a great liability to and a black spot on any church. Many have their names on church books, but that is all it amounts to. They have a church home but they never come home. And they stay away because they are determined to avoid all responsibility, or they dread to behold their own faces in the gospel mirror, or they have no interest in their spiritual welfare and in the Lord's work.

Many despise the church by non-attendance upon its services. Every one of us should have the most conscientious thought concerning the habit of church attendance. People ought to go to church with the habit marked by conscience and principle. A man misses the way of duty if he neglects the high privilege of habitual attendance upon the services of God's house.

It is a tragedy that many people never darken the doors of a church, unless it be to attend some funeral or wedding held therein. How distressing that people anywhere should neglect habitual attendance upon worship in God's house and how terrible that responsive, impressionable children should be brought up without any attention being paid to the church and its teaching and preaching appointments, which contribute so vitally to the uplift and betterment of humanity. The matter of church attendance ought to be written deeply into the lives of men and women for their own sakes, for the sake of others, and for Christ's sake. Church attendance ought to be one of the great habits fixed resolutely, conscientiously and unwaveringly in men's lives.

We can "despise the church" by failing to make preparation for the worship services. People say that a preacher ought to prepare his messages, and they are eminently correct. He ought to think and pray and delve and study before he seeks to expound the Scriptures and to counsel the people. Even so, the congregation should prepare for public worship in God's house. There is all the difference in the world in congregations. It is like going into a very cold room or into a warm, comfortable room. People who are unsympathetic, prayerless, indifferent, cynical and critical can create a frigid atmosphere. Jesus tells us that we are not only to take heed to what we hear, but also to how we hear, but also to how we hear. You can hear with a sympathetic mind and heart. We ought to go to church with spirits attuned, prepared by prayer and meditation, hoping for a blessing for our own lives, and for the lives of others. Everybody ought to go to church with the prayer that the preacher's subject be divinely appointed and he be God-guided. That is Godly preparation for church worship, and how immeasurably blessed it is. We can "despise the church" by the lack of worthy preparation.

2. With your prayers.

The church was born in prayer and it must be kept alive and growing through prayer. He wants us to pray for the pastor, the officers and the members of the church. It requires more Christianity and a stronger character to pray for them and to support them than it does to criticize them and to find fault with them. And you can be sure of this, when you hear one criticizing and finding fault with them that there is a person who never prays for them. Complaining and praying never go together.

A praying church is a great church. No church can be great and powerful unless it has some great pray-ers among its members.

3. With your purses.

It costs money to run a church although many church members do not know it. Many church members accept the blessings and privileges of their church, but never contribute a cent toward its maintenance. They let others do all the paying and then they talk about what our church failed to give last year. But remember that complaining and paying do not go together either.

III. By Wrong And Inconsistent Lives.

We can "despise the church" by lives that do not tally with the professions we have made. The church is to hold up the standards and ideals and is always to summon people from the lower to the higher sphere of living. "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven."

The best argument for Christianity is some Christian who lives it day by day. We can "despise the church" by unworthy and inconsistent behaviour as professed friends and followers of Christ. Our lives should be lived for Him. Our talents may be limited,

but we can live for Him. Some men went to Gladstone, that great British leader, who went to church every Sunday and said to him, "You know more in an hour than that rector in the pulpit can tell you in a year." Gladstone replied, "I would not agree to that. I would not agree to any of that, for I need the public service of God's house. I would like for all England to know, and for all the British Empire to know, that I count the religion of Christ as the one important matter for man's attention and I want all men to take knowledge that I count the will of Christ and the work of His church supreme in men's lives."

Because the church fulfills man's greatest needs, you need it. You need her Christ, her gospel, her fellowship, and her restraining influences. You have needs that cannot and will not be supplied except through the agency of the church. The church may get along without you, but you cannot get along without her as you should. You and your family need the church. Line up with your church and live for Christ in it. Do not wait until you die for people to learn that you were a member of the church. Through the gospel of its crucified and risen Lord, the church has a message of hope -- hope for lost men, hope for the bereaved, and hope for the great adventure -- hope that is eternal.