

## **"Behaviour Appropriate to God's House"**

by  
**James Richards**

***"Keep your foot when you go to the house of God,  
and be more ready to hear than to give the sacrifice of fools. "***  
**Ecclesiastes 5:1**

It is our privilege, my brethren, to live near the house of God and often to meet within its sacred walls. We have no such distance to travel to pay our public devotions as had the ancient church of Israel, or even as many have now in our own land. The tabernacles of the Lord are easy of access to us, and the doors of his sanctuary may be said to stand open night and day. It is not only from sabbath to sabbath, but at seasons more frequent that we are permitted to send up our prayers and thanksgivings to God from this place, and that God vouchsafes here to address us by those who minister in his name.

Why is it then that so many of the Lord's people are ready to cry out amidst this profusion of means and advantages, "O my leanness and my barrenness?" Why is it that so many others go and come to this sacred place from month to month and year to year without perceiving any important change in their tempers, without acquiring the spirit of Jehovah's worshippers, or being fitted for the pure and sublime devotion paid him by his saints and angels in the courts above? Is there no reason to fear that we have too often overlooked the salutary caution given us in the words of the text, "Keep your foot when you go to the house of God, and be more ready to hear than to give the sacrifice of fools"?

I am constrained to say, my brethren, that if our approaches to God had not been attended with some marked and criminal defect, we should have experienced far greater blessings from the ordinances of his house than we have recently done. We should have found a day in God's courts better than a thousand. Our souls would have been satisfied with marrow and fatness, and we should have been able continually to praise God with joyful lips. It would have been seen by others and felt more strongly by ourselves, that "they who are planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God."

My design, on the present occasion, is to consider the manner in which we ought to attend upon the duties of the sanctuary and to urge a serious regard to this subject. We shall naturally be led to this by the words before us: "Keep your foot when you go to the house of God, and be more ready to hear than to give or offer the sacrifice of fools."

The first part of this precept may be considered as a solemn caution against those imperfections which are wont to attend our public devotions. "Keep your foot when you go to the house of God." That is, in general terms, do not step heedlessly or carelessly, but ponder well your path. Remember that it is to the house of God that you are going; that it is to sacrifice to Him who is perfectly acquainted with all your ways, and whose greatness and glory demand the entire, the unequivocal homage of your heart. Apprised of the temptations which lie in wait for you, exercise a watchful and jealous care over your

thoughts, your words and actions, that you may avoid whatever would be offensive to God or injurious to yourself or others in the duties of the sanctuary.

This, in few words, is what is meant by "keeping our foot when we go to the house of God." But the duty here enjoined is of such high importance that it deserves to be considered more at length. There are various particulars concerning which the most jealous caution and circumspection should be exercised, if we would enter into the spirit of this precept.

1. In the first place, we should beware of entering upon the duties of the sanctuary in a thoughtless or inconsiderate manner, without preparation and without an object.

Many hurry away to the house of God when the appointed hour of public service arrives without considering at all with themselves what object they have in view. They go because others go, and because they themselves have often been without reflecting upon the duties to be performed, or the deep and solemn interest which they have in those duties. There are others who, possessed of more principle, attend the public devotions of the sanctuary from a conviction of duty, but who attend them without any solemn preparation. They stop not to consider whose altars they approach, what sacrifices are required of them, and whether these sacrifices are offered with clean or unclean hands. They rush into God's presence as the horse rushes to the battle, without that self-collection and awe which are indispensable to acceptable worshippers.

We should beware of such inconsideration, my brethren, if we would keep our foot when we go to the house of God. And instead of coming into his presence in this careless and irreverent manner, we should, as much as possible, contemplate beforehand the solemn business we have to transact with him, and earnestly implore the gracious aids of his blessed Spirit. We should say with the pious David, *"O send out thy light and thy truth; let them lead me; let them bring me unto thy holy hill, and to thy tabernacles; then will I go unto the altar of God, unto God, my exceeding joy."*

2. But, if we should beware of coming to the house of God in a careless and inconsiderate manner, and as it were without any specific object, we should be no less solicitous to avoid coming with improper motives.

We should never enter the sanctuary to pass away an idle hour which otherwise might hang heavily upon our hands. We should never approach this sacred place merely for the purpose of entertainment, as men visit the theatre or the ballroom--while our thoughts and desires are far away from the great objects for which divine service was appointed. We should never come hither with the empty design of seeing or being seen, and much less for the purpose of making arrangements for business or pleasure the remainder of the week. Far nobler objects should possess our hearts in such a place and on such an occasion. We should come to worship the King eternal, to pay him homage as our Creator and Lord. We should come to hear what God the Lord will say unto us by his messengers, or by his Spirit; to learn more of his character and of our duty, and to have our hearts inflamed with love to him and to one another. We should come, in a word, to prepare for death and eternity; to get our minds abstracted from the world, our affections deadened

towards it; and our thoughts, our desires, our hopes supremely placed on Heaven.

3. If we will keep our foot when we go to the house of God, we must not only attend to the motives which carry us there, but to the whole of our deportment while we are before the Lord.

We must see to it that our external carriage be such as becomes the worshippers of Jehovah--not light and frivolous as though we were in a playhouse, not morose and gloomy as though our God delighted in austere and cruel rites, but serene and solemn as those who worship a Being of infinite perfection and who ardently desire to secure his friendship. Our eye must not wander over the assembly of our fellow worshippers as if it were our chief business to observe their dress or demeanor. Nor must we recline in the posture of indolence as if we took no interest in the duties of God's appointment and were only anxious for the tedious service to close. The whole of our external demeanor should be marked with gravity and devotion, for God is to be worshipped with our bodies as well as with our spirits.

A far more important article, however, is that our inward man should be duly regulated; that the thoughts and feelings of our hearts should be such as a holy and omniscient God will approve. It is the heart which God chiefly looks at in our devotions. Should we bow before him with the apparent reverence of adoring seraphim, it would be vain unless our hearts were right with him. God cannot be deceived, and he will not be mocked. We should be careful to avoid all vain and unseasonable thoughts on such occasions, and to have our minds exclusively fixed on the great business to be transacted between God and our souls.

This is often a work of difficulty. Our hearts are naturally unstable as water, continually changing the objects of their attention, wandering sometimes like the fool's eyes in the ends of the earth, instead of being absorbed in the duty in which we are professedly engaged. We have need to bring a solemn and earnest spirit with us to the place of our devotions if we would counteract the temptation which arises to us from this quarter. We must verily believe that there is a God, that this is the house of God, that these are his worshippers, and this his service--a service in which we are deeply and eternally interested--before we can say with the devout psalmist, *"O God my heart is fixed, my heart is fixed, I will sing and give praise even with my glory."*

But it is not enough that we keep our foot when we go to the house of God. We must be "more ready to hear than to give the sacrifice of fools." We must indulge a spirit of solemn and devout inquiry. We must feel a disposition to know and practice the will of God. But as this part of the exhortation relates to a specific and important duty, too often performed in a very unprofitable manner, we beg you to give it a serious and prayerful consideration. "Be more ready to hear," says the voice of inspiration, "than to give the sacrifice of fools"--as though we were in danger of playing the part of fools in the house of God instead of humbly and earnestly listening to his voice. There are many occasions when we actually do this, when we are nothing the better but probably the worse for our attendance upon the services of the sanctuary; when instead of being brought near to God

in the prayers which are offered or in the truths which are delivered, we go away with our thoughts dissipated and our hearts hardened. We have seen nothing of God, nothing of ourselves, no good purpose has been formed in us, no grace awakened, no virtue strengthened, no sinful passion mortified.

To avoid this unprofitable attendance upon the house of God, the wise man exhorts us to be more ready to hear than to give the sacrifice of fools. But how should we hear if we would come up to the spirit of this precept?

1. We should hear with attention, in opposition to a careless or distracted frame of mind.

It is but an act of decency to be seriously attentive to what is uttered in God's name. Besides, of what consequence will it be that the preacher addresses us on subjects deeply interesting to our eternal destiny if our minds are occupied with other things? Can we expect to be instructed or edified if, instead of distinctly marking the several parts of his discourse and weighing each sentiment as it passes from his lips, our imaginations are wandering over our farms, or transacting the business of our families, or secretly taken up with the advantages or disadvantages of a bargain? But in hearing the word of God attentively, it is important to remark that our attention should be directed more to the truth itself than to the manner in which it is communicated. It is the truth which instructs and edifies. "Sanctify them through thy truth," said our Lord, "thy word is truth." It is by manifestation of the truth to every man's conscience in the sight of God that the great object of preaching and hearing the gospel is attained. Believers therefore are considered not only as having purified their souls by obeying the truth, but as being begotten by the word of truth; as born again, not of corruptible but of incorruptible seed by the word of God, which lives and abides forever.

Whatever has not truth for its basis, however much it may gratify our taste or delight our imaginations, is like a gilded cloud which passes pleasantly before the eye for a moment, but presently disappears and leaves no trace of its form or beauty behind. We want something to fix our principles, and to operate as a constant and powerful spring to our actions. Nothing but the truths of God's word carried home to our consciences will do this. To these, therefore, should our attention be principally directed when the servants of the Lord address us in his name.

2. We observe that if we would be more ready to hear than to give the sacrifice of fools, we must listen to the word with reverence.

That is to say, we must hear it as the word of God, not as the word of man. We must not consider the preacher as coming to play a part before us for an hour, while we have nothing to do but to judge of the success with which that part is played. We must consider him as an ambassador of the Lord of Hosts, charged with a solemn message to our souls. We must regard him as actually coming in God's name and in effect speaking the words of God. So far as he speaks according to the sacred oracles, this is the fact--and it is a fact which should be distinctly recognized by us. Too often is God overlooked in the administration of his word. What is heard is not regarded as the authoritative voice of

Jehovah, though it may be uttered in language which he himself has dictated, but as the simple unauthorized effort of human talents and skill. It is not surprising in these circumstances that the word of the Lord should produce so little effect, that it should so seldom come to us in the demonstration of the Spirit and with power. Confining our attention to the mere instrument, we lose sight of our relations to God and of those tremendous sanctions of divine authority which make the words of truth enter into the soul. We may be greatly interested and even fascinated with the power of the speaker, while our hearts are in no degree edified by the truth he delivers. We may go from the walls of God's sanctuary admiring and praising the gifts of those who minister to us in his name, while the Lord has sent leanness into our soul. Then only shall we profit by the labours of his servants when God's voice is heard in their voice; when we reverence their message as the message of the Lord of Hosts, and honor them chiefly for their Master's sake.

I speak more freely on this subject because I believe it to be a fault among Christians of the present day (a fault chargeable in a greater or less degree to every one of us), that God is so much left out of the account in the administration of his word; that this part of divine service is considered rather as a matter of entertainment than as a solemn institution of Heaven designed for our benefit. I tremble to think how this must appear in the eyes of the great God, who is jealous for his name and who will not see his ordinances perverted without testifying his displeasure. I blush to think how it must be regarded by the holy Angels, who are the witnesses of our devotions and who know with what solemnity we ought to hear that word which shall judge us in the great and last day. And I doubt not that we shall all be astonished at our own guilt and folly in this particular when we see more distinctly our relations to another world, when eternity and not time shall become the principal object of our attention.

3. But I hasten to observe that if we hear the word of God as we ought to do, we must hear it with a humble and teachable disposition, in opposition to a proud and captious spirit.

This our Lord inculcated upon his disciples when he said, "*Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, shall in no case enter therein.*" And the apostle Peter<sup>1</sup> had the same thing in view when he exhorted believers to "*receive with meekness the engrafted word of truth, which was able to save their souls.*" It is the meek whom God has promised to "guide in judgment, the meek whom he will teach his way." They who dispense the word are required to do it with a spirit of meekness and humility; and they who hear must have the same spirit. There cannot be a readiness to hear where a humble childlike spirit is wanting [lacking]. There may be a disposition to inquire, or rather to speculate, and build systems of our own, but there can be no disposition to receive the great and soul humbling truths of the gospel till we are in some measure humbled ourselves. Our pride must be laid in the dust before we shall be willing to take the account which God has given us of his character or of our own. We shall then only be willing to hear and learn of the Father when we are willing to place God on the throne

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<sup>1</sup> He may have meant James, as this verse is found in James 1:21: "Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls."

and ourselves at his footstool. Mary at the feet of Jesus, listening with joy to the gracious words which fell from his lips, is an example of that humble and teachable spirit which ought to inspire our bosoms when we attend upon the instructions of the sanctuary.

4. Let us add to this as an important circumstance: that we should hear the word of God with close and pointed application to ourselves.

Many a judicious sermon has been lost for want of being personally applied by the hearers. What does it avail that the character of individuals is drawn with great particularity, that their sins and dangers are pointed out with a bold and faithful hand, if these individuals never bring the subject home to themselves; if, after being told everything but "thou art the man," they are still looking on the right hand or on the left to discover the person to whom the observation or reproof applies

Alas! my dear brethren, what is more deceitful than the human heart; and where does its deceitfulness more often appear than in the artifice employed to hide from its own views the unsightly image of itself frequently and faithfully presented in the glass of God's word? How ardently should we pray, "Search me, God, and know me, try my reins and my heart. Let the light of divine truth penetrate the dark recesses of my soul. Let thy word, quick and powerful, and sharper than a two-edged sword, pierce to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and become a discernor of the thoughts and intents of my heart."

5. I remark, that we shall but offer the sacrifice of fools unless we hear the word of God with faith and love, and especially with a desire to obey.

Founded on the veracity of Jehovah, it demands the full and unwavering assent of our hearts. Containing a glorious system of truth and duty, it ought to be sincerely loved by us, and strictly and conscientiously obeyed. To obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. It is chiefly for the purpose of bringing our hearts to the obedience of the truth, that the truth is proclaimed in our ears. This is constantly held up as the great end of all the instructions, warnings and reproofs of the scripture; and the very perfection of scripture itself is characterized by this circumstance--"that it is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, and for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be thoroughly furnished unto every good work."

We cannot be said to hear the word of God in the highest and best sense of the expression unless we obey, for in the language of scripture it is often one and the same thing. *"Hear my people,"* says God, *"and I will testify unto thee, O Israel, if you will hearken unto me; there shall no strange God be within thee; neither shalt thou worship any strange god. But my people would not hearken to my voice, and Israel would none of me."* That is, they would not obey. *"Thus says the Lord, thy Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, I am the Lord thy God, which teaches thee to profit, which leads thee by the way that thou should go. O that thou had hearkened to my commandments! Then had thy peace been as a river, and thy righteousness as the waves of the sea!"* O that thou had hearkened to my commandments!--that is, that you had kept them. *"Put your burnt offerings unto your sacrifices*

*(says the Lord of Hosts,) and eat flesh. For I spake not unto your fathers, nor commanded them, in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices; but this thing commanded I them, saying, obey my voice and I will be your God and ye shall be my people. But they hearkened not, nor inclined their ear"--that is, they did not obey--"but walked in the counsels and in the imagination of their evil heart, and went backward, and not forward."*

These scriptures, while they teach us that to hear and obey God is often identical, suggest to us also the immense importance of obedience. They teach us that all our sacrifices and oblations will be vain without this; that it will be to no purpose that we appear in the house of God and join in hearing his word and offering our prayers and praises to him unless it issue in a spirit of obedience to his will.

I close this discourse, my brethren, by urging a serious attention to the subject now laid before you, "Keep your foot when you go to the house of God, and be more ready to hear than to give the sacrifice of fools."

This is the voice of Jehovah himself directing his own worshippers. Shall not we regard it as such? Shall we not set a double watch over our hearts, nay over the whole of our demeanor when we come into his sanctuary? Yes. Let us say, "God is to be feared in the assembly of his saints, to be had in reverence of all them that are round about him." While we would not be rash or hasty to utter anything in his presence, let us not trifle with anything uttered in his name. Remembering that God is in Heaven and we upon earth, let us approach him with reverence, let us hear him with submission, and let the whole of our services begin and end in him.

Again, we urge this not only because God commanded it, but because it is in itself reasonable. Such a service is due to the great God of the universe, who gave us our being and all our powers. Anything short of this is reproachful to his honour, and unworthy of the relation we bear to him. The worship of his people on earth should bear a resemblance to the worship paid him in Heaven. The service of the lower sanctuary should, in all its parts, be celebrated not only with reference to the sanctuary above but in the same spirit, and be only a joyful anticipation of that exalted service which shall employ our enlarged and sanctified powers throughout the ages of eternity.

O what preaching, what hearing, what praying should we have, could our eyes be fixed on the temple above, and our devotions kindled from the fire of those altars which burn with increasing brightness before the throne of God forever.

But I ask, my dear friends, what will it profit us to appear in the house of God unless we attend upon its services in the manner which God has prescribed? Shall we enjoy him in his ordinances? Shall we find the temple of God a "*bethel*," and be made to say with Jacob, "*Surely this is none other than the house of God, and the very gate of Heaven?*" Shall we find our souls penetrated with the light of divine truth, humbled under a sense of our sins, consoled with the hopes of pardon, animated to run in the way of God's commandments, and, in a word, made meet for the service and bliss of the heavenly

world? No, my dear friends, none of these blessings will attend us unless we keep our foot when we go to the house of God. So far from it, our sacrifices will be unavailing as the sacrifice of fools. Nay, it will be an abomination unto the Lord. Privileges abused have a natural tendency to harden the heart and to blind the mind. They often provoke God to give men up as incorrigible, or to remove from them the advantages they have enjoyed.

Certain it is that if we are not brought to wait upon God here on earth in the spirit of true worshippers, we shall never be fitted for his temple above. Nay, all the means we have enjoyed in the sanctuary below--the sermons we have heard, the prayers and thanksgivings in which we have joined--will sink us to deeper despair in the world of woe. Yes, if we do not learn to keep our foot when we go to the house of God and be more ready to hear than to give the sacrifice of fools, we shall finally curse the day and the place of our birth. We shall wish that we had been born among the savage tribes of the wilderness--where no temples of God are to be seen, no voice of mercy is heard--rather than in places near the doors of the sanctuary, where from our infancy the public worship of God has been celebrated and the oracles of divine truth explained.

Let it be our constant and fervent prayer to God that his Spirit may be poured out upon us, and our hearts so trained to his service here on earth that we may enjoy the comfort of his presence in this world, and finally be made pillars in that temple of Glory where we shall go no more out.

Sermon VII, "Behaviour Appropriate to God's House," by James Richards in William B. Sprague, *Sermons by the Late Rev. James Richards* (Albany: Erastus H. Pease & Co., 1849). Note: The text has not been modified, except that punctuation and KJV-era pronouns and verb forms have been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.