

BLAMELESS SERVICE

A SERMON – Preached on Sunday Morning June 23rd 1867, by

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AT THE NEW SURREY TABERNACLE, WANSEY STREET

Vol. IX. – No. 449

“The priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless.” Matthew xii. 5

WHEN the Savior asked the disciples who men said that he was, we find that their best opinions all came short of what he really was. One said they thought he was John the Baptist, another that he was Elias, another that he was Jeremias, or one of the prophets; but they all came short. And I am afraid also that most of us come very short in our views of what our covenant God is, especially in his sovereign right to do what he pleases. We do not seem, some of us, led so far even as was the heathen king when he said, “All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing; and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?” Hence it is that many scriptures that we meet with in the Bible, we look at them, we stumble at them, we question them; and our sapient divines shake their heads and tell us we ought not to trouble ourselves with such scriptures. This they will tell us in the face of the declaration that all Scripture is profitable. And if all be profitable, then if we do not profit by it all, it is because we do not understand it all. Now, our text is one of those scriptures at which men stumble.

First, I will notice kindred difficult scriptures. Secondly, I will show in what sense the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath. And thirdly, I will show as far as I can how most gloriously they were blameless.

First, then, just a word upon some of those scriptures that seem to have in them similar difficulties. Irony is a mode of speech which the Scriptures very often use. Walker's Dictionary tells us that “irony is a mode of speech in which the meaning is contrary to the words,” and consequently the words contrary to the meaning. Now apply this to the following cases. First, the 16th chapter of the Second Book of Samuel. There was Ahithophel plotting the death of David, and David prayed that the Lord would turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness. Now how was this prayer answered? Hushai came to Absalom; and when he came he said, “God save the king; God save the king.” Absalom said, “Is this thy kindness to thy friend? Why wentest thou not with thy friend?” “Nay,” said Hushai, “but whom the Lord, and this people, and all the men of Israel choose, his will I be, and with him will I abide. And, again whom should I serve? Should I not serve in the presence of his son? As I have served in thy father's presence, so will I be in thy presence.” Is not all this, the meaning just contrary to words? Ahithophel gave good counsel; that is, speaking as a matter of serpentine policy; Hushai gave other counsel, and by his means God overturned, as you see, the counsel of Ahithophel. Now there was something strategical here, and by this form and mode of speech Hushai wrought the deliverance of David; and this is the way God answered prayer. That is how I understand it. God certainly sanctioned what Hushai did, for it was by that means the Lord answered

prayer. Then, again, if we go on further, to Elijah, we find that Elijah uses both irony and sarcasm. He said, in relation to Baal, "He is a god," meaning that he was not a god. Thus Elijah's words, "He is a god," were literally untrue, but morally true; that is, he meant just the reverse of what he said; for no man knew better than Elijah did that there was no such god as Baal in reality in existence. Then when he had dealt in this piece of irony he commences with the sarcastic; and it is actually said that "he mocked them." "Cry aloud," he saith; "either he is talking,"—meaning he could not talk; "or he is pursuing,"— meaning he could not move; "or he is on a journey,"—meaning at the same time no such thing; "or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awaked." "Cry aloud." And so they cried till noonday, "and prophesied until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice," and cut themselves; so that the ancient protesters were sincere, "they cut themselves after their manner with knives and lancets, till the blood gushed out upon them." And yet Baal never came. There stood Elijah. Thus, then, he uses irony and sarcasm, justifiably so. Why, the matter is clear; what difficulty is there in it? Again, go to the last chapter of the First Book of Kings. Here is Micaiah called to give his judgment in relation to going to Ramoth-gilead. What does Micaiah do? Why, he uses words that he knew to be untrue; but he was right in his meaning. "Shall we go against Ramoth-gilead to battle, or shall we forbear? And Micaiah answered him, Go and prosper;" meaning that they would not prosper; "for the Lord shall deliver it into the hand of the king." Ahab of course would take it to mean himself but Micaiah's manner, the flash of his eye, the movement of his head, and his tone of voice, convinced Ahab that Micaiah was speaking ironically, and that his meaning was contrary to his words. After thus dealing in this irony, Micaiah then comes out clearly, and saith, "The Lord hath put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these thy prophets and the Lord hath spoken evil concerning thee." Then, again, come to the 6th chapter of the Second Book of Kings, you find the bands of the Syrians were sent by the Syrian king into Samaria to take Elisha. And the young man, the servant of Elisha, when he saw these mighty armed hosts, naturally felt very much afraid, and exclaimed, "Alas, my master how shall we do?" Elisha prayed that the eyes of the young man might be opened. "And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw; and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha." And Elisha said, "Fear not; for they that be with us are more than they that he with them." And when the Syrians came: what did Elisha say? "This is not the way," he said, but it was the way "neither is this the city," but it was the city; "follow me, and I will bring you to the man whom ye seek," but he was the man all the time. How will you get over this and maintain the purity of God's word? Why, by regarding it as an irony. Let us read it thus:—This is not the way that the Lord intends you to go this is not the city that he intends you to stop at. Thus by dealing in that irony he hid from the adversary his real meaning. He prayed to the Lord to smite them with blindness, and so the Lord did: he then led them to Samaria; their eyes were opened; they looked like fools; the people gave them some bread and some water, and sent them about their business.

Now we come to this chapter:—"David did eat the shew-bread, which was not lawful for him to eat, neither for them which were with him, but only for the priests." Now distinctly understand that God extended to David the right of eating the shew-bread. Here, therefore, is an extension of Levitical right. None but the priests were legally entitled to eat that bread; but here is David in necessity, and God (unless you like to enter into judgment with him, and declare he had no right to do so—that he who instituted that ordinance had no right to alter it, and of course could have no right to abolish it)—God extended the Levitical right to David, so that David did no wrong in taking the shew-bread. And David told Ahimelech that the king's business required haste; here is irony again—if not irony, something approaching to mental reserve. What king? Not king Saul, but the King of heaven and earth, in whose confidence David was. Allow, then, the advantage or privilege of irony, and I think then you get over all these difficulties,—at least, I do; bringing in the sovereignty of God, and remembering he can do as he pleases. You will see in all this, then, one main point, one main thing, and that is the Lord's care of his children, his interposition circumstantially as well as in eternal things for his children. We are all creatures of circumstance, and it is

circumstances that so puzzle and perplex us. We are turning and twisting about, owing to adverse and crooked and different circumstances, all our life. And we know how much there is wrapped up in a circumstance; we know sometimes what a little circumstance will give a turn to a man or woman's whole life; so that we cannot make light even of circumstances. As death arises every day from unexpected causes, so does a turn in our life very often arise from very simple, apparently at the first, circumstances. Thus,—

"What dire events from trivial causes spring"

When the Pharisees found fault with the disciples for plucking the ears of corn on the Sabbath day, what was the object of the Savior in speaking as he did but to defend them, to interpose for them, protect them, and stand by them, and that at all risks? It was a matter of no consideration with the Savior what reproach he brought upon himself by defending his disciples; he despised the shame, and held it in infinite contempt, while he knew he was doing that that was right in the sight of God.

We go back to Rahab, and let us take her words as an irony; I shall do so this morning—at least, just a moment. Last week, knowing I was coming to this subject this morning, I read my defense through, and I almost wish it had not been my own, so that I could have said what I thought about it. If I were to preach a thousand defenses I would not wish to preach a better. And if in the Rahab sermon there were two or three expressions which the spider-like mind might turn into poison, that defense sets everything straight; and the man that is not convinced of my innocence of purpose by reading that defense, would not be persuaded though one rose from the dead. God is my witness; to set an example of lying, or anything of the kind, is what I should shudder at to the last degree. Now take the words of Rahab as an irony; thus were her words literally untrue, but morally true. "There came men unto me; I know not whence they were," meaning that I do know; the words contrary to the meaning, and the meaning contrary to the words. "And it came to pass, about the time of shutting of the gate, when it was dark, that the men went out," meaning they did not go out. "Pursue after them quickly, for ye shall overtake them," meaning they would not overtake them. I take the words simply as an irony. And that was the glorious part of her conduct.

God so placed Rehab; she was led by the Holy Ghost to avail herself of that form of speech. Satan was deceived; the spies were taken care of; her life, and the life of her father, and of her mother, and of her Sisters and of her brothers—every one saved through what people call her lies. If I take her words, then, as an irony, I can see then, as I have seen before, that the main object was first the defense of the spies, then the saving of Rehab, and of them that were in that were in the house. Leave out that part that men find fault with, and all the other would have been a mere farce, a mere presence. To hide me and then betray me; to say: "Be quiet there till the men are gone," and then point me out; to say, "Make yourself happy, I will stand by you," and as soon as the murderers come at the murderous kings command, betray me that instant! Dastardly hypocrites that would so do. Is it any wonder that all through the Holy Scriptures not a sentence is uttered against Rehab? If I believed her words had any sin in them, and that they were lies in the faulty and criminal sense, I would be second to no man in expressing my option and disapprobation of the same. But I have yet to learn that there was any fault. God doth not find any; and I cannot see so clearly as he does, and therefore I still abide by my namesake. That is the only reason why I am glad my name is James, because it is an apostolic name; and my namesake James says (almost as though he foresaw me), "Was not Rahab justified by works"—that is, evidentially justified—"when she had received the messengers"—not when she had sent them out, James, because she had said something wrong then; no, she had when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way?" And he compares Rahab there to Abraham. Abraham was "Justified by works, when he had offered Isaac

his son upon the altar." "Likewise" Rahab, after the same manner. Thus, then, it appears to me in all these cases there are those forms of speech that are allowable, that are sinless, that are faultless; and that the Lord does not deny his people the use of those forms of speech; for he will interpose for his people, he will find a way for them. It is true the Lord could have delivered the spies in a thousand other ways; that we have nothing to do with. We have not to do with what he could do; we have to do with what he does do. I do not know that I shall have to refer to Rahab again this morning; but then this is the month of June, and it is two years ago, 18th of this month, that the Rahab sermon was preached, therefore one is apt, somehow or another, instinctively to come round to visit the old spot again, and to have a little anniversary of me and my friend Rahab.

Now after these few remarks I will come to the second part of our subject, namely, in what sense the priests in the temple profaned the Sabbath. I think all the senses in which the word "profane" must be understood may be summed up in two. First, it means that profligate, revolting conduct that is pursued by the openly unclean and wicked wretch, that has not common decorum about him; those that would turn the world into a very hell if they could have their own way. The word "profane," I say, is thus applied to the worst of practices and the worst of crimes. But then that meaning of the word has no place whatever in our text. The word "profane" does not always mean that, as you know, which is sinful; it is sometimes used simply to denote that that is not consecrated to God, or that is not divinely inspired. Hence when we speak of history written by our learned men we say "profane history." We do not mean by that wicked history; we do not mean by that anything that is sinful. And therefore an explanation would stand thus: — take away the word "profane" from our text, and use another word; then you get the meaning. "The priests in the temple commonize the Sabbath;" that is, they make the Sabbath common with the other six days. Let us get a clear view of this before I go on to their blamelessness wherein it lay. Now they profaned the Sabbath according to the letter of the law; for the letter of the law was that "in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor the stranger that is within thy gates. The priests had to work hard on the Sabbath day, and this working on the Sabbath day in the temple was according to the letter of the law, thus profaning the Sabbath. The Sabbath standing as declarative of the completeness of the first creation, God sanctified that day, set it apart; he set apart a seventh portion of time, to be observed down to the end of time. Hence the Jewish Sabbath continued till Christ came, and then the day was changed, but there is still every seventh day. And the Christian Sabbath should be regarded, not, indeed, as the Jews would teach us to regard a Sabbath, but as the Lord himself would teach us. Hence it is almost one of the worst features of Catholicism, and that is one reason why I should as much dread its ascendancy in our country as almost any other—that it so desecrates the Sabbath. Hence the Catholics tell us that they think nothing of the Jewish Sabbath; so that after the people have gone through a little formality in the morning, they may then spend the day in the most abominable manner. You all know what a Continental Sabbath is. Those of you that have spent a Sabbath in France have no doubt had enough of it, and have blessed the Lord for the ascendancy of Protestantism, and the decorum and reverence for the Lord's Day in your own beloved and favored land. So that myself, I am still an advocate for a proper observation of the Sabbath,—I mean the Christian Sabbath, and the Lord hath in a great many instances shown his disapprobation of the contrary. Therefore presumptuous, willful sabbath-breaking is no light crime, even under the Christian dispensation. I say so much, lest any weak minded person should suppose I am loose and careless about the Sabbath literally because there is a Sabbath spiritually no, the Sabbath day was set apart, then; God sanctified it. It was the day on which he was specially to be worshipped; the day which was to be specially devoted to him. Now what did the priests do? According to the letter of the law, "Thou shalt do no work on the sabbath day," they profaned the Sabbath. But I will not linger here; I will go on to the other part, which will throw a light upon this.

Thirdly, then, I will show how most gloriously they were blameless. Now what the priests did they did by the authority of the Most High; and the Lord himself declares that he is the Lord of the Sabbath. The question you have to ask, then, is, did the priests bring the Sabbath day down to a level with the other six days, or did they bring the other six days up to a level with the Sabbath? That is the question; and my answer is, that the priests were so blameless, and so praiseworthy, and did such a glorious service, that they brought the six days up to a level with the Sabbath, and did not bring the Sabbath down to a level with the six days. I will prove this. What did they do every day? They offered a lamb in the morning and a lamb in the evening. And now you ask this question,—which is the more glorious of the two,—the sacrifice of Christ or the literal Sabbath? The service they brought in pointed to the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ; and pointing to the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ, they hereby stood upon higher ground than the literal Sabbath - they hereby stood upon most holy ground. They hereby stood upon higher service; for what saith the Scripture? "The law hath no glory by reason of the glory which excelleth." So, then by bringing in the sacrifice every day, they turned every day into a Sabbath. The Sabbath was consecrated to God, and the priests turned every day into a day of consecration to God. The Sabbath was a day of consecration to God; they by sacrifice were, in a higher than the sabbatical sense, consecrated to God. Hereby, then, the Sabbath was honored. So that they were blameless, first, because what they did was by divine authority; and secondly because of the superior order of their service. What was the life of the Lord Jesus Christ? Did not the Savior turn every day into a Sabbath? Was not his whole life one continued unbroken Sabbath? I think so, Keeping up the idea that the Sabbath was consecrated to God, was not Jesus Christ in his whole life, from first to last, consecrated to God? Was it not one unbroken Sabbath? Did he not consecrate himself to God every day? Did he not serve God every day? Was it not an unbroken consecration to God from first to last, unbroken devotion, unbroken obedience? He nowhere came into collision with God's law, but was always in perfect harmony to it. What—I ask the question,—what is the literal Sabbath in value in comparison of the everlasting righteousness that Christ brought in? What is the literal Sabbath in value to man in comparison of the eternal atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ? If he had not kept an unbroken Sabbath here below, there would not have been an unbroken rest for us to enter into. If he had not been unexceptionably and in perfection devoted to God while he was in this world, there would have been no perfection for us to enter into. See, then, the priests; that they honored the Sabbath by setting forth by their spotless sacrifices the eternal perfection of the Lord Jesus Christ; and to say that these priests were blamable,—why, that would make out that it was wrong to bring Christ in; that would make out that the atonement of Christ was not so good as the Sabbath, and that the righteousness of Jesus Christ was not of so much value as the Sabbath; whereas the literal Sabbath was but a passing shadow, but the righteousness and salvation of God are forever, and not to be abolished. Thus, then, the literal Sabbath was appointed for a temporal purpose; but Christ's work, his constant devotion to God while here below, was intended for an eternal purpose,—to deliver us from the slavery of sin, from the curse of the law, from the bitterness of death, and give us everlasting rest; to deliver us from all creature work, and to have sounded in our ears, and to receive into our souls, and to rejoice in the Infinitely blessed truth, "Now to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly." There were therefore two reasons why the priests were blameless, first, because what they did was by the authority of God; and second, because what they brought in was infinitely superior to the Sabbath. The Lord approved these priests in what they did; God has approved what Christ has done; that is the way you must handle it; and what Jesus Christ has done he has done for the people. And God approves it, not only on Christ's account, but he approves it on the people's account. You that are brought to receive Jesus Christ, why, you are blameless as Christ is blameless. Upon his sabbatical work, his devotion to God, there is divine approbation; he was blameless, and the man who receives him stands blameless before God. The hard-working Jew felt that the Sabbath was a mercy; it gave him rest, and he had on that day to be joyful. It was a day in which he was to be released from the taskmaster, and to have rest, - a day of blessing. Now this is the way in which the Sabbath day is a type of Christ. The Lord Jesus

Christ, as the end of the law, is the end of works; he has brought in everlasting blessings. Let us then, look at the blessings which Jesus Christ has brought in, as typified by the literal sacrifices and by the blessings. You find in the fifty-eighth of Isaiah an account of the blessings which Jesus Christ brought in by his devotion to God. He has thereby brought in the blessings. All the conditions named in that chapter devolved upon him, and the promises are to him, and to his people by him. All this is suggested to me by the priests being blameless; then, of course we transfer the idea to the great High Priest of our profession—that Jesus Christ is blameless, put away sin, honored the law in all its parts, and brought in the blessings. "Is not this the fast that I have chosen, to lose the bands of wickedness?" Now the Pharisees of old had wickedly bound the people by their traditions; and did not the Savior loose those bands? Did he not declare them null and void, and did he not deliver his disciples there-from? He thus loosed those bonds with which men, by human tradition, had wickedly bound the soul. "To undo the heavy burdens;" Did not the Savior do so? Did he not bear our burdens, and has he not borne them away? And if a poor burdened sinner is now brought to him, doth he not take that burden away? "And to let the oppressed go free." Did he not then, and doth not the gospel now, heal all that are oppressed of the devil, that feel there is something that keeps them away from God, and that are crying out for the Lord's mercy? Both not Jesus step in, and put Satan down under their feet? "And that ye break every yoke." Has not the Savior done so? Has he left one yoke to be endured by the saints of God? Not one. "Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry?" Does he not do so? This is the true Sabbath; all this is meant by the priests' service and by their blamelessness. Doth he not deal his bread to the hungry? Doth he not say, "Blessed are they that hunger, for they shall be filled"? "And that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house." And when a sinner is convinced of what he is, he is then an outcast from the world; he feels now that he is friendless and refuge less and doth not Jesus bring such a one to himself, even to that house that is not made with hands, eternal in the heavens? When thou see the naked, that thou cover him? And doth not Jesus, when he sees a poor sinner, if you will allow the phrase, in rags and tatters, like Joshua standing before the angel of the Lord, does he not step in and say, "The Lord rebuke thee, O Satan; even the Lord that hath chosen Jerusalem, rebuke thee; is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?" And was not Joshua's sin taken away, and was he not clothed with change of raiment? Now mark the promise to Christ; this is the Sabbath, this is the consequence of the service of our great High Priest, whose life was one unbroken keeping of the Sabbath, one unbroken scene of devotion to God, to lead us up to the blessing. "Then shall thy light break forth as the morning." And did it not? Did not Christ rise in the light of the resurrection? "And thine health"—that is, the health he shall minister to sinners—"shall spring forth speedily." Has it not done so? does it not still continue to spring forth? "And thy righteousness shall go before thee." Oh, how true this is! Did not Jesus' righteousness go before him? did he not send it to heaven before he went there himself? If he had not sent that first, he could not, consistently as mediator, have entered. But on the cross he said, "It is finished;" therefore it is that he sent his righteousness before him. "Thy righteousness shall go before thee, the glory of the Lord shall be thy reward;" that is, shall follow after. And did not Christ enter into glory? Did not the Holy Spirit descend? We're not immortal souls brought into everlasting glory? Is this, then, the priest? Jesus Christ, according to the letter of the law, profaned the Sabbath day in the estimation of the Jews. "This man," said they, "is not of God, because he keepeth not the Sabbath day." But he kept the Sabbath day in the highest and best sense of the word. The Sabbath day is a day of mercy, and every day was a day of mercy with the Savior; hence his answer to his enemies, "If ye had known what this meaneth, I will have mercy and not sacrifice, ye would not have condemned the guiltless." Now it says, "If thou draw out thy soul to the hungry." Did he not do so? Does he not do so now? Did he not, even literally, feed the multitude twice? "And satisfy the afflicted soul." Were there not afflicted souls that he satisfied? and does he not sometimes bring home a word now to us in our affliction, and satisfy us? "Then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noonday." How true is this! When he stood before Pilate's bar, when he was on the cross, how obscure and dark everything was! His death was the thickest darkness ever known, and his glorification is the brightest of all glory.

Of all the glories that will shine to eternity, there is none brighter than the death of Christ. "Thy darkness -thy death-"shall be as the noonday." Bless his dear name! That which appeared to be obscure is now perfect in illumination, and that that was dark is now as the noonday. Now he shines forth to all eternity, brighter than ten thousand suns. This is the blameless One that, in the estimation of men, profaned the Sabbath day. "And the Lord shall guide thee continually." So Jesus Christ was guided by the Lord continually. You and I are upon the whole, but we guide ourselves sometimes-no question about that. "We have turned everyone to his own way;" and it is a mercy that these words follow, "and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all." He was guided continually by the Lord. "And satisfy thy soul in drought." So Jesus Christ was always satisfied. We cannot say that; but we bless God that our great High Priest was blameless; there is our refuge, there is our hope; he was always satisfied. "And make fat thy bones." And so it was; he could not grow old, could not decay, could not see corruption. Why were his bones made fat? Because there was no sin in them. Ah, the fire of sin burns in your bones as a hearth, and your bones are getting drier and drier, and you will be an old man by and by, if you step over a straw almost, so feeble will you become. Not so the Savior; he could not grow old, he could not see corruption, he retained his freshness; he was the Holy One of God. "And thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not." Ah, says the Christian, I know that Jesus is a garden of delights; I know that he is a garden of wells of water; I know the waters of life can never, never fail. "And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places." What was your soul, Christian, but an old waste place, waste ever since the fall of man took place? And those that were of Christ his apostles-they built up poor sinners. These were the old waste places. So that we were old waste places, destitute of life, holiness, righteousness, or anything else; but we are to be waste no more. "Thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations;" that is, the glorious truths of the gospel; they were cast down and thrown aside; but the apostles raised them up, held them up, preached them up, preached the devil down, preached sinners into liberty, and brought them into rest. "And thou shalt be called, the repairer of the breach." And did he not repair it? We know he did. You may bring your rubbish, your creature works, and creature goodness, and try to fill up the breach, but it will be all in vain. But the Savior threw his life, and death, and wondrous sacrifice, into the mighty chasm; the breach is made up, God and man become eternally one. "The restorer of paths to dwell in." The path that Christ trod was not at all pleasant; but his mediatorial work, and the promises of God by him, what pleasant paths are these to dwell in! "If thou turn away thy foot from the Sabbath "-now comes the Savior's work,-"from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord, honorable; and shalt honor him, not doing thine own way, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words." Now, then, the Lord Jesus Christ, mind, friends; was heir-apparent to the throne of Judah, and he might have had an earthly throne, been an earthly king, and have been ten times greater than Solomon was, even as an earthly king. But Christ set all this aside; and he therefore would not, in the matter of his earthly kingdom, do his own ways, nor find his own pleasure, nor speak his own words; he set the whole aside, and became poor, that we through his poverty might be made rich. Thus the priests in the temple did, according to the letter of the law, profane the Sabbath; but according to the spirit of the law they did not profane the Sabbath; so they were literally wrong, but morally and spiritually right, and blessings in endless succession flow to ruined man.