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Surrey Tabernacle Pulpit.

A GOOD COMMANDMENT.

A SERMON

PREACHED ON SUNDAY MORNING, 3RD JANUARY, 1869,

By MR. JAMES WELLS,

AT THE NEW SURREY TABERNACLE, WANSEY STREET.

"Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."—Matthew vi. 33.

It is one part of my business to study the feelings and the desires of the church and congregation with which I have had the honour to be so many years, and trust I shall to the last. And in so doing I felt that it would be in entire accordance with such feelings and desires to have a few words at the beginning of this year upon the heavenly counsel contained in our text. The question seemed to arise,—What is the desire of the people? what is their united feeling? and what is their petition to the throne of grace? Is it not that they may have grace whereby they may indeed increasingly seek eternal things, and in and by the realization of eternal things have the sweet assurance that if the Lord gave the greater, he will not withhold the lesser; that if he spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, shall he not also with him freely give us all things, I do hope and trust that our spiritual life will be increased in liveliness. I am sure there are some hundreds of our friends that will look back with pleasure to our service on New Year's Eve. To see here at midnight one thousand persons listening to the blessed truths of the everlasting gospel, as though it was eleven o'clock in the morning instead of twelve at night, certainly was a good sign. I must say I found it good to be here, and I think many others did too. I think no one will regret it. Indeed, it was enough to encourage the heart of any minister, and also of the deacons, members, and people; for every right-minded man and woman loves to see the cause of God prosper generally; therefore it is that their souls pray for the prosperity of Zion; not only the prosperity of those that are united as a church and congregation, but also for the ingathering of others; for there is nothing so desirable as the saving progress of the everlasting gospel. Although, therefore, the subject contained in our text is almost the same as the latter part of our subject on New Year's Eve, yet I felt the counsel contained in the text was very suitable to enter upon the new year with. I felt a great deal of earnestness in my soul; for we all well know that unless the Lord is pleased to give us grace to receive his counsel, we shall not follow that

counsel; but if we do receive that counsel, God will write that as a pledge that he himself will by and by come unto us in a more triumphant way than ever; for Jesus hath said that he came, not only that we might have life, but that we might have it more abundantly.

Our text divides itself into three parts. First, *the object to be sought*;—"the kingdom of God." Secondly, *the order indicated*,—"and his righteousness." Thirdly, "the promise all these things shall be added unto you."

First, *the object to be sought*;—"the kingdom of God." In this part of my discourse I shall try to describe what it is rightly to seek the kingdom of God, to seek eternal things; for the kingdom of God, being an everlasting kingdom, stands in contrast to everything temporal. I will give you three examples of seeking the kingdom of God, and if we possess the same spirit, we shall meet with the same success. And what a happy people that is to whom the Saviour's words belong, "Fear not, little flock; it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." First, then, seek ye the kingdom of God as the believing Israelite did. The Israelite, when in Egypt, sought deliverance by the promises of God. There was a promise in the 15th of Genesis that the Lord would bring them out, deliver them with great substance. And then Moses came, and brought from the burning bush another promise, a promise that the Lord himself would come and deliver them, and bring them into a land flowing with milk and honey; and that he had seen their afflictions, that he had heard their cry, that he knew their sorrows. Now, in order to bring this home to ourselves, observe that the promise is to him that seeketh. If a thought should arise in your heart, that is all very well, but then that promise was to the literal Israelite;—well, there are such persons as spiritual Israelites, Jews spiritually. Now one mark of distinction of the spiritual Israelite is that he is a seeker; and there is a promise that those that seek the Lord shall find him. Indeed, the Bible, I was going to say, is adorned with promises to the seeker. Now the term "wait" is a kindred term to that of seek; and Isaiah saith upon this,—“Since the beginning of the world men have not heard, nor perceived by the ear, neither hath the eye seen, O God, beside thee, what he hath prepared for him that waiteth for him.” How is it with us? We know that eternal life is promised to them that believingly seek it; that an everlasting kingdom is promised to them that believingly seek it; we do know that God will be with such, according to the language of our text on New Year's Eve,—“For thou, Lord, hast not forsaken them that seek thee.” We have thus God's own word to authorise us to look for his mercy and grace. That is one step, then, in which the true Israelite sought the kingdom of God; that is, sought to be brought under the government of God's mercy and grace, under that dispensation wherein he showed his regard and care for them. Then the next step to which this promise leads is that of the paschal lamb. When they arrived at the paschal lamb, they then arrived at divine sovereignty. They were to seek escape by the paschal lamb. What was the paschal lamb for? Simply and entirely to exempt the people from judgment; expressive of the way in which the Lord would deal with them. That lamb was a beautiful type, as you well know, of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the 11th of Exodus, when the Lord was about to command Moses to direct the people to receive this spotless lamb, and how it was to be slain, roasted, and eaten, how the blood was to be sprinkled, and the bitter herbs, the unleavened bread, and everything pertaining to it, the Lord saith, “Against any of the children of Israel shall not a dog move his tongue, against man or beast: that ye may know how that the Lord doth put a difference between the Egyptians and Israel.” Ah, to be a believer in Christ makes an infinite and everlasting difference between such an one and the man that is not a believer in Christ; and the difference

widens as you go on. There is a great difference between the man that is a Christian and the man that is not a Christian in this life, though the natural man sees not the difference, but the spiritual man does. And there is a greater difference still between the two in a dying hour. In the one case it is, "He that is filthy, let him be filthy still; and he that is unjust, let him be unjust still." In the other case it is, "He that is holy, let him be holy still; he that is righteous, let him be righteous still." And there is a greater difference still between the two at the day of judgment: the one on the Saviour's left hand, the other on his right. There is a greater difference still after the sentence is uttered—the one sunk to remediless woe, the other raised to inherit a throne of glory,—“That ye may know that I the Lord do put a difference.” Now, my hearer, is not what God hath promised well worth seeking for? and has he not provided a way that defies and altogether overcomes despair? How dare we to despair, I was going to say? Why, it is Emanuel's blood that wrought our redemption; it is the righteousness of Jehovah that brings us up with acceptance before God. The blood of Jesus Christ—it matters not whether a Manasseh, a Magdalene, a thief on the cross, a Saul of Tarsus—the blood of Jesus Christ, God's dear Son, cleanseth from all sin. Thus we are to seek God by the promise to the seekers, and by the Lord Jesus Christ. I have sometimes been encouraged in a little way, for I get sometimes little revivings and little encouragements; and those words upon this subject of seeking him have sometimes encouraged and helped me,—“Fear not ye, for I know that ye seek Jesus.” This is what the Pharisee did not seek, but it is what the Publican did seek, it is what the eunuch did seek, and therefore Philip was sent to him to open to him what he did seek. “Fear not, for I know that ye seek Jesus.” You are seeking after a Saviour; you are seeking after that sacrifice for sin which alone could swallow up sin, cast your sins behind Jehovah's back, cast them as into the depths of the sea, and give you the victory, give you the kingdom. Thirdly, the true Israelites would seek the Lord also by that wonderful victory, which he blessed them with when they came out of Egypt. See the 15th of Revelation upon this. So, my hearer, those fearful sins that you cannot conquer, the Lord Jesus Christ has conquered them; those infidelities, that unbelief, and that rebellion which you feel from time to time in your nature against many circumstances, and perhaps sometimes against God in some of the displays of the sovereignty of his dealings—Jesus Christ has conquered them. There is not a sin belonging to the Christian that has any legal life in it; Christ took away the legal life of sin; sin has lost its right to live, and therefore must by and by die. Just as with the ceremonial sacrifices, Jesus Christ took their legal life away; they had no right to be offered after he died, he being the one antitypical sacrifice; so he has taken away the life of sin, and has thereby taken away the sting of death. He has virtually taken away the very being of sin; so that by and by,—

“Our inbred foes shall all be slain,
Nor Satan break our peace again.”

One more point I name here, and that is this, that the believing Israelite did cleave unto the Lord all the wilderness through. You may imagine the right-minded Israelite standing and saying, There is a solemn scene! here are three-and-twenty thousand cut down by pestilence;—it has not touched me. Presently here is a number slain by fiery, flying serpents, others writhing in agony;—it has not touched me. Again, the plague begins, and thousands fall; Aaron comes in between the living and the dead, and the plague is stayed;—it has not touched me. Here is a scorching desert;—it has not hurt me. Here are scorpions, but they have not touched me. Here are the Amalekites and the Amorites, but they have not touched me; I am safe amidst it all. Ah, how is that?

Why, according to the Lord's word,—“He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.” “No plague shall come nigh thy dwelling.” Thousands fell by their side, and ten thousands at their right hand, but no evil befell them; and Joshua turned around, and looked to those that had thus sought the kingdom, and cleaved to the Lord their God, and he saith, “Not one good thing hath failed; all hath come to pass;” that is, with the believer. So these promises, this atonement, and this victory, are to travel on; this glorious gospel is to go majestically on through time, and shall gather up, east, west, north, and south, God's elect, and present them in all the triumphs of the perfection of Christ, and the victory he hath wrought; so that the very last saying shall bear upon this—it is now done *de jure*, but then it shall be done *de facto*,—“Then shall be brought to pass the saying, O death, where is thy sting; O grave, where is thy victory? Thanks be to God, that giveth us the victory, by our Lord Jesus Christ.” Thus the true Israelite sought the kingdom by faith in, and decision for, the promise; by faith in, and decision for, the paschal lamb; by faith in, and decision for, the victory wrought in bringing them up out of the seas, and by cleaving unto the covenant of God, rejecting all false gods, and so shall such take the kingdom, and possess the same for ever.

Secondly, we are to seek the kingdom of God as David did, when he brought in the ark of the covenant. That ark is called the ark of God, pointing to the new covenant; it is called the ark of his testimony, because it represents his sworn promise; it is called the ark of his strength, because all the strength of God is thrown into the great matter of eternal salvation. “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth.” David, in seeking the kingdom, saith, “Surely I will not come into the tabernacle of my house, nor go up into my bed; I will not give sleep to mine eyes, or slumber to mine eyelids, until I find out a place for the Lord, an habitation for the mighty God of Jacob;”—it shall be the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—a God of decision, of immutability, of sworn promise. And so they heard where the ark was. “Lo, we heard of it at Ephratah; we found it in the fields of the wood.” And now the ark is come, the mercy-seat is come, God is come, Christ is come; now “we will go into his tabernacles; we will worship at his footstool.” John, in the last verse of the 11th of Revelation, is very beautiful upon this bringing in of the ark. He views the New Testament church as a temple, or rather the church of God at large as a temple, which you know is not at all unusual in the Scriptures;—a temple, the Lord's dwelling place. This temple, the true church, had been closed, by men taking away the key of knowledge; but when John the Baptist came, it began to be re-opened; and when the Saviour came it was opened. And so John says, “The temple of God was opened in heaven,” that is, the heavenly dispensation; “and there was seen in his temple the ark of his Testament.” If I go into any place of worship and hear a minister, if the ark of the new covenant be not there, I do not care to stop; there is not much good to be got if that is not there. Everything God has given to his people is given by the covenant; there is nothing out of the covenant. David knew that all his salvation was in the covenant, and Isaiah well knew that all the mercies of God were in the covenant;—“an everlasting covenant, even the sure mercies of David.” The ark of the covenant has been seen in the Surrey Tabernacle, and God grant it may be as long as the walls shall stand. It is a dear thing, a sweet thing; and the more we understand it, the more we shall love the Lord our God. There is not anything can carry out our affections more to God than a clear revelation to us of his immutably undertaking everything that pertains to body and soul, to life and death, to time and to eternity, and will never leave us while he himself exists; for he hath sworn by himself, as he could swear by no greater. And this glorious

covenant, when it is brought in, has a power in it. John says, "And there were lightnings;"—yes, it is a living, active gospel, is the gospel of the new covenant; it stirs us up, quickens us, warms us, strikes our infidelity, our hardness of heart, dead—strikes our doubts and fears sometimes dead, and we hope they may never live again. "There were lightnings;" and those lightnings dart, by the power of God, into the mind of the dead sinner, and take up their abode in the sinner's soul, and he feels that he is a sinner, and begins to cry to God. "And there were voices;" yes, many voices, crying out, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" it is a good sign in any church, and any congregation where there are these voices. When the people come sighing, hungering, longing, thirsting, fearing, trembling, to the house of God, that is the state in which the heart is prepared to receive most advantageously the blessed truths of the gospel. "And there were thunders." What are these thunders but the solemn testimonies of the great God? Hence some of the apostles were called "sons of thunder." And there was "an earthquake," a revolution that swallows up all your Pharisaism. I look back at the time of this earthquake! I know what it is as well as I know what my existence is. God took me in hand, and broke up the fountains of the great deep within me; away went my holiness, righteousness, wisdom, and strength, and I made sure I was going too; so my prayer was, "Lord, let not the pit shut her mouth upon me." I did not know the Lord was then saying, No, I do not mean the pit to shut her mouth upon you, but I mean the pit to shut her mouth upon your supposed holiness, righteousness, and wisdom; and I mean to bring you into a state of complete destitution, and I will make you fly for refuge as they fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah. "And great hail." A very nice storm that was—great hail,—sure to be connected with this covenant. Ah, the devil says, I will pay you for that,—I will pay out Job for this, there will be a storm come upon him. And so there will upon you. There was a great hail. Why, say you, whatever will that hail do? I wonder what is to become of the poor church: she will never stand this, to be sure, it will tear her all to pieces. John, just tell us how it is with the church after all these persecutions, and after all these storms of hail from Rome Pagan and Rome Papal, and various ways. There she is in heaven; that is, in the heavenly dispensation. She has not been moved, then. No, Satan tried to drive her away, but could not. What condition is she in? Well, she is clothed with the sun, Christ Jesus; the moon, the gospel, under her feet, to light her path: "Thy word is a light to my feet, and a lamp to my path;" and on her head a crown of twelve stars. And is she frightened at her foes? No, she is labouring to bring forth mystically the holy child Jesus. And we read in that same chapter of the war between the dragon and his angels, and Michael and his angels, how Satan was overcome, and the kingdom possessed. But I must go back again to the 132nd Psalm. David brought in the ark. Now just see what consequences followed. Thereon was the mercy seat; there God dwelt; there it was the priest presented the people by the sacrifice he had offered; there it was he went in once a year, to typify Jesus Christ entering into the holy of holies, and confirming to us this everlasting covenant. When this ark is brought in, then in comes the Saviour, and then in comes the blessed God, and then in comes everything you can possibly desire. And it stands thus:—"If thy children will keep my covenant, and my testimony that I shall teach them, their children shall also sit upon thy throne for evermore." Well, Jesus Christ is thus brought in, for the Lord hath sworn, "Of the fruit of thy body will I set upon thy throne," pointing to Christ; and Christ did keep the covenant, and the testimony which God taught him, for he grew in wisdom and stature, and the grace of God was upon him; he kept the covenant and the testimony, and he sits upon the throne for evermore. Here is the bringing in of the ark of the covenant. Jesus

Christ did not come into the world without it, and he did not go out of the world without it. You know those beautiful words, "This is my blood, in the new testament;" that is, the new covenant. And now the Lord comes in. "For the Lord hath chosen Zion; he hath desired it for his habitation. This is my rest for ever, here will I dwell, for I have desired it." And can we not say that we have desired it? Ah, we can indeed say—we that know the Lord—

"There my best friends and kindred dwell,
There God my Saviour reigns."

We can understand the sorrows of Zion's children, we can understand their joys; we can understand their sentiments, aims, objects, and motives, and so we have chosen that good part that shall not be taken from us. "One thing have I desired." What is it, David? If it is anything in accordance with God's truth, you shall have it. Why, it is "that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life." Oh, you shall have that, then. "This is my rest for ever," as though the Lord should say, now this Zion I have chosen for ever; I am quite content, quite happy; I shall rest there in my love. And this is our rest for ever. Shall we ever want to change our God away for another God? Ah, not we:—a God that will last to eternity. Shall we ever be disturbed? Can anything in the shape of dissatisfaction ever arise? Never. And then comes plentiful provision. "I will abundantly bless her provision," that provision means the Christ of God, the truth of God, the blessings of the everlasting covenant; "I will satisfy her poor with bread." Ah, David, now you are letting us into the secret of your 37th Psalm. To my disgrace, I was going to say, that verse of the 37th Psalm puzzled me for years,—“I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread.” If I had had sense just to read the 132nd Psalm, I should have got at David's meaning. Not begging bread;—how is that? Because they are so satisfied with Zion's bread, and God so abundantly blesses that provision, that they do not need any other, and therefore they will not go away; well knowing that no such bread can be obtained anywhere else. "He that shall eat of this bread shall never die;" he that shall eat of this bread shall hunger no more; his seed not begging bread must be understood not literally but *spiritually*. "I will also clothe her priests," meaning all the people, for all God's people are priests, consecrated to him, "with salvation; and her saints," the same people under another name, "shall shout aloud for joy." This is bringing in the covenant; seeking the kingdom of God, and his righteousness by this everlasting covenant. "There will I make the horn of David to bud;" And, bud after bud, till the right branch comes; then, when it comes, this is the branch of righteousness it shall stand. "I have ordained a lamp for mine anointed," the glorious gospel of God to set forth the Glory of Christ; "his enemies will I clothe with shame; but upon himself shall his crown flourish." So then seek the kingdom in this order and in this way. And if I am speaking to any of you that do not understand this, may the Lord keep you seeking till you do understand it; you will understand it in the Lord's own time.

Then, thirdly, seek the kingdom as Daniel did. What a solemn occasion was that! How the Lord blessed those four men in giving them that caution. By themselves they might have taken a little wine in moderation. But I do not suppose the Babylonians were very moderate; their belly was their god, and they would eat enormously, and drink to intoxication. Therefore those four men were wise; they saw the only safe course was to have none at all; for if we take one drop, we may take another, and by degrees be drawn into the same intoxication as we see among these Babylonians; therefore our wisest course is to taste not, touch not, handle not. And how the Lord thereby prepared them for what was to come. Presently a decree comes out from one of the most

tyrannical kings that ever lived against their lives; but the men are sober, and spiritual, and solemn; they seek God by earnest prayer; they sought the kingdom of God, the reign of God, the interposition of God; and what a time that was! Oh, what a beautiful view, when Daniel could see all the kingdoms of this world passing away like the chaff of the summer threshing floor; and he saw the kingdom of Jesus Christ, immovable, indestructible, and saw it lasting for ever, and the people like the kingdom, as it saith in that same 2nd of Daniel and in the 125th Psalm: in the 2nd of Daniel, that the kingdom shall not be left to other people, the same people that possess it to-day shall possess it for ever; and in the 125th Psalm, "They that trust in the Lord" shall be like the God, and like the kingdom in which they trust,—they "shall be as Mount Zion, which cannot be removed, but abideth for ever."

Now, I have given but a poor account of seeking this kingdom. I needed two hours instead of hardly one, in order to set forth this great matter of seeking the kingdom; but I felt anxious to set forth the way in which the kingdom is to be sought with certainty of success; for if we seek it by our works, our doings, or by human inventions, or by any other means than those which the Lord hath appointed, we are sure to come short. Hence you read that "many shall seek to enter in and shall not be able." Oh, it is a mercy to be brought into the right way, and to be made earnest and sincere in the sight of God.

Now just a word upon the second part, *the order indicated*—"and his righteousness." I think this righteousness means two things. First, the substitutional righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ. I have touched upon that, but I may just say a word or two more here. We can do nothing without Christ's substitutional work; we cannot confess our sins with any hope of forgiveness in any other way than by the remedy for our sins; we cannot plead the promises of God with any hope of getting the fulfilment of them in any other way than by the substitutional work of Christ. We cannot walk in the precepts, we cannot preach, we cannot attend the Lord's Supper, we cannot go through the ordinance of baptism, we cannot do anything pleasing in the sight of God, except it be by faith in the substitutional work of the Lord Jesus Christ. "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin;" and "without faith it is impossible to please God." Therefore, to seek his righteousness will be to look from time to time to Christ's substitutional work, which we shall daily need—to seek that. Do not let us dream, because we know as clear as the sun at noonday that acceptance with God is by the substitutional work of Christ,—do not let us on that ground dream that we know all about his righteousness that is to be known, that we know all about the qualities, and depths, and uses of his atonement that is to be known. Ever let us remember that those of you that know the most, and that are the most advanced (some of you, perhaps, far beyond what I am) in these eternal things, you still know but little of that great substitutional work in comparison of what is yet to be known. Are not new beauties and new attractions perpetually rising? I even flatter myself that we have been favoured for years from time to time, according to the measure of grace and humble gifts the Lord has bestowed upon me, to see in some small measure, new beauties, new attractions, and shall I say new uses, in this substitutional work of Christ; so that even in that substitutional work,—

"His beauties we can never trace,
Till we behold him face to face."

Then the word "righteousness" here has one more meaning, and that is, that we are to seek in conformity with God's order of things. People think if you seek, that is enough. But when the ark was taken down from the shoulders of the priests, and placed upon a new cart, the Lord manifested his disapprobation by smiting Uzzah, and Uzzah died before

the Lord. And David, I suppose, was partly a Puseyite for a little while. This one invention will not hurt, surely; it is only a cart; it is a new cart, too. If we let this little thief in, we can put him out again when we please. Ah, but, David, the little thieves open the door to let the big thieves in. Oh, this won't hurt. Now it seems a wonderful thing, for David was generally very careful and very scrupulous; perhaps no prophet, no man of God in the Old Testament age was more scrupulous than David about God's order of things. Well, he did not like the Lord's thus dealing with Uzzah, and he went off rather ill-tempered; but it was no use, the Lord did not change. So David was afraid to carry the ark any further. Why, he said, there is something wrong; we had better not have brought the ark; we thought there was some advantage to be gained. So the ark was left at the house of Obed-edom. But by and by, when David saw that the Lord was blessing Obed-edom and all his household,—Ah, said David, now I see the secret; we sought not the Lord after the due order. We took the ark down from the shoulders of the priests, and put it upon a new cart. And so if you take the covenant down from Christ's shoulders, and set it upon something else, you may depend upon it the Lord's chastising hand will come in to set you right, and teach you that you must seek him according to his own order. Now in the Old Testament age, Uzziah, Hezekiah, Josiah, when they ascended the throne, sent all the false gods to—I won't say where; I was going to say an ugly word, but I have not said one this morning, and so I will not now;—they sent them away, broke them all to pieces and determined to seek God after the due order, by his own ordinances, his own institutions. Therefore, to seek his righteousness means to seek him in that righteous order of things which he hath established,—to have no human invention. And I could here show how easily the truth of God becomes in places of worship a secondary thing: First, you get a box of whistles called an organ;—that is a very pretty plaything indeed; and even the Bishop of London told his clergy some time ago that they were not to take their playthings to church. Yet we must have our playthings! Then comes something else, and then something else, and then something else; and there are about thirty or forty people interested in the box of whistles, and thirty or forty interested in something else; you get the place filled with frivolous boys and girls; and the minister, if he is weak and foolish enough to lean somewhat to these things, and he becomes tainted, and becomes assimilated, presently you hear but very little of the good old-fashioned gospel in its vitality and reality; and so the truth becomes a secondary thing. We have had a certain class of men that must be Diotrephes—the heads of the place. The majority of the people do not come to hear the gospel; they are like a little sprinkle you meet with in some places, of mere gossips that will come to chapel at all times, and in all weathers, because they would not omit their gossip, because they would not lose the chance of scandalizing somebody or another, and of showing the people how much they know about other people's affairs. So by degrees down comes the minister, and down comes the truth; the minister turned into a mere door-mat, and the deacons such as some churches are blessed with (this church among the rest), men who ought to be held in the highest respect, are turned into mere dummies, and the soul of the hungry made empty. Let us then have nothing but our God, our Christ, his covenant, his truth; and let our conduct from time to time show, what it has shown, that our object under God is the ingathering savingly of precious souls. And I ask this assembly this morning, has not the Lord prospered you? Have you lacked one good thing? Has he not blessed you in your bodies, in your families, in your business—in every way? God forbid then that we should ever grow weary in well doing; it would be one of the greatest calamities that could overtake us.