PRESCHING ACCORDING TO COMMAND.

A sermon preached in his own pulpit, Jan. 19, 1854, by the Rev. John M. Buxton, Missionary of the Clevelend Street Church, Boston.

"And the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the second time, saying, Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city: and he went."—JONAH 3:2.

The preacher is the only public speaker who is not at liberty to choose his own topics. He is sent to men just as an envoy is sent to a foreign nation, and he has absolute and unchangeable instructions as to what he shall say. "Now, then, we are ambassadors for Christ." If an ambassador should take it upon himself to modify his message to suit his own taste, or to accommodate his terms to the recipient's wishes, he would lose his position. When he is to deal, he would be recalled at once. Originality must not be his aim, but submission to authority. He is not to suit his terms to the people, but to endeavor to bring the people to those terms. He is not to ask himself, What do my audience wish to hear? but, What am I commanded to say? In regard to our responsibility in preaching, hearing, and obeying, I wish to set before you to-day lessons from the life of an apostle preacher. In the first place, the preacher's text: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown." That is anything but an agreeable text to preach from. A minister likes to say pleasant things, and not severe things. For a sermon always has an echo. The pew is a sounding-board that gives back what it receives. And if the preacher utters an agreeable sound, or a disagreeable sound, it will come back in the same tones. So that if a minister wishes to be thought well of, he must make the people think well of themselves. If he is to listen, "good preacher," "fine sermon," from their lips, he must say, "good people," "fine Christians," with his lips. And I am perfectly willing to admit that it is just as pleasant for the preacher to be praised as it is for the people.

Well, then, you see that Jonah had about as small a chance of becoming a popular preacher when he entered Nineveh as ever any man had. And that was the trouble, that was the discouragement which made him run away on first being sent. "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it." For his whole life is come up before me. With that command entrusted to him, with that message on his lips, do you think he will be likely to have crowds following him, and be hailed by the citizens as the most charming preacher that ever visited Nineveh? I think not. Then why did he take such a text? Why did he not discourse on "The Civilizing Influence of Great Cities"? That would have been an interesting theme for that time when Nineveh would not preach a sermon on "The Power of Commercial Enterprise"? That would have been an extraordinary taking subject in a city of which the prophet Nahum declared that there was no end of the store and glory of her pleasant furniture. At least, some such topic might have been chosen to introduce the preacher to the great city, and pave the way for presenting more vital themes. Ah! but you see Jonah was not allowed to choose his subject. The Lord gave him his theme. "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown." And I feel mightily when before his audience he was forced to add, "Preach the preaching that I bid thee." So he was shut up to one topic.

Well, then, there is the problem of the preaching. It presents the genuine image and superabundance of the gospel, but cuts out its core. Its error is in its defect, rather than in its dole. It dulls the edge of the truth, but it does not destroy it. But I can say to you, dear brethren, and I may say to you, dear women, about the love of God, but saying it at the wrong time and place. It proclaims the message designed for obedient disciples, when the demand is for a Nineveh message to the disobedient. But there is no option in such a matter. When God sends us to sinners, it is with a message for sinners; and that will be a different term from those in which communication to the church is administered.

I have a message to the disobedient and the ungodly this morning; and in God's name I warn you that if you die in your sins, you must perish; unless you accept Christ as your personal Saviour. Coming to church won't save you, except you come to Christ; praying "Our Father who art in heaven" won't save you, unless you receive the Son of God as your Redeemer. I have no instruction in regard to time as Jonah had, but I have distinct and definite instruction in regard to the fact. I open my commission, and I read in 3 Peter 3:10, "But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat; the world also, and the works that are therein, shall be burned up. No eye hath seen, no ear hath heard, no heart hath thought the things which God hath prepared for them that love him." Mark you who they are that are to suffer this vengeance, those that know not God, when Jesus Christ has come into the world in order to save his elect who believe in the gospel of Christ; those who refused in own right as their personal Saviour; those that would not obey that command of the gospel, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ;" those who committed that great sin of willfully rejecting God's Son who died for them. And how many such there are in this congregation! Moral men, who with all their morality have not learned that "grace" of love to Christ; courteous men, who with all their culture have thought nothing of silently ignoring and rejecting God's great gift of eternal life! The whole of the works have not obeyed what Christ has said: "This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom He hath sent." Obedient children, who with all their filial regard for their parents will have yet lived for years in deliberate disobedience to their Father in heaven. Oh, I shrink from setting before you the terrible things of which God has warned you. I have no words of my own on such a theme. So unworthy myself, so deeply sensible that if I have obeyed all, it is only by the "grace of God" that I am what I am, and I dare not begin that discussion of those who abide still in unbelief, as I once did. Nay! I dare not do it. But I have the word of God, saying, "Preach the preaching that I bid thee," and so I stand with pain of heart that in your faces that might be shining, that in the sight of the knowledge of the glory of God, I must flash the hard glare of the wrath to come, and confront you, every one, with the terrible thing of which God has warned you.
But supposing Jonah had had doubts about the likelihood of such an event as the overthrow of a great city of half a million inhabitants, with walls a hundred feet high, and so thick that two chariots could be driven abreast upon them—and all to be laid low in six weeks—wouldn’t it be a very improbab

l thing? And if it could seem improbable to him, wouldn’t it be much more so to the Ninevites? And what would be Jonah’s authority for such an astounding prediction? Nothing but the word of the Lord. “The word of the Lord came unto Jonah, saying,” and so forth. “And so this was the state of the case,” the word of God, of the invisible God, whom no man has seen, or can see, that word declaring that in forty days this great city shall be destroyed. Out on the other hand, here are these tremendous walls, strong enough to resist a siege for years, and here are these vast military resources of the city, the hundreds of thousands of men and chariots, their arms and munitions, all

said! that they can all be swept away within two months. And Jonah, no doubt, thought this all over, and said to himself: “Why, they will laugh at me if I go with such a message as this; they will mock me out of the city as a fool, or a crazy fanatic.” And he ran away to escape the scorn of such an unwise message. But after he had been chased by God’s judgments, and he is again, sent to do the very thing he tried to run away from. No modification of his message, no turning down of his communication. “Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be destroyed.”

The case is precisely the same with us who preach the Word today. We are commanded by God to His men that unless they repent they shall perish; judgment will certainly overtake them. “The wrath of God cometh upon the children of disobedience.” Those who obey not the gospel shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the presence of His glory. “The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God; the heathen shall be thrust out from before the Lord.” These are statements which I quote from the Word of God which we are sent to preach.

There is a many a minister that has so shrunk from uttering these warnings that he has run away to the Tarshish of some sentiment, easy-giving gospel. “Who wants to be a prophet of ill-omen?” he says. “Who wants to be a preacher that brings warning to men?” He wants to be a savior of bad news, for which nobody will thank him, when he can just as well say something agreeable. Nobody, of course. But if a minister is true to God, he cannot get around it, unless he tramples on his own conscience; unless he violates his own honor; unless he tampers with the sacred commission under which he acts, and forges another in its stead.

Alas! how much of such unfaithfulness there is, the preaching that spends its strength in denying just what one is sent to assert, or what one is sent to warn, in softening and quelling the message as to the effects of unbelief. One of the latest devices in counterfeiting is to bore into the gold coin and hollow it out, extracting the larger weight of precious metal, and replacing it with lead, while the face and front of the coin is unchanged. We have a preaching which much resembles that. If it exhibits a formal compliance unto the command, “Preach the preaching that I bid thee,” but takes out the

end of it, that is, that they obey not the gospel of God. And I leave the Bible to answer its own question. “Whose soul is destroyed from the presence of the Lord, and from the presence of His glory.”

But mark you the result of Jonah’s preaching. “So the people believed God, and proclaimed a fast; and put on sackcloth from the greatest even unto the least of them. At the king’s command they turned every one from his evil way and from the violence of his hands and cries mightily unto God.” And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil that He said He would do unto them, and He did it not.” That was the fruit of plain straightforward preaching. If Jonah had preached his own gospel, perhaps he might have been some name platted about the high tendencies of great cities; some fine-sounding theory about a higher civilization as the great remedy for corrupt society; some elaborate dissertation on the ultimate tendency of all evil to correct itself by reaction, etc. But he would have to say just as much as the singing of a lullaby would do towards allaying the ravages of an approaching tornado. Great sins require stern remedies. And if you believe that in a work that is full of mangled limbs, and deep-rooted cancers and painful ulcers, we need surgeons with sharp knives and keen lancets, you must admit that in a world abounding in deep-rooted and virulent sins, we need to be as truly a kind of preaching that draws blood and makes pain. “Faithful are the wounds of a friend,” says the Scriptures. “What? you say, ‘I thought it was the part of a true friend to speak kindly and gently and lovingly.’ Nay, he that kindly cuts, and faithfully wounds, and gently probes, may be your best friend. Your worst enemy is he that kills you with the exquisite cruelty of kindness. And that is not what the gospel is aiming at. When it wounds a sinner it pains to bless, it wounds to heal. Have you ever noticed that we have the Holy Spirit symbolized by exactly opposite terms? We read about ‘the sword of the Spirit,’ which is the Word of God; and about ‘the anointing of the Spirit.’ The sword wounds; the anointing heals. If you are wounded on account of your sins, you need not be afraid of the sword. The Lord will not use it on you. When the poor man journeying from Jerusalem to Jericho lay wounded and bleeding and stripped, the good Samaritan did not draw a sword on him. He poured oil into his wounds. But if he had met the villain who had waylaid and robbed the man, you may be sure he would not have wasted any oil on them. He would have unsheathed his sword, if he carried one, and let them feel its point.

And if your sins have pierced you through with many sorrows, my friend, if your iniquities have wounded you, and left you with a bleeding conscience and a torn remnant, be sure the Lord won’t wound you any further. The bruised reed He will not break. But if you are all set up with pride and self-conceit, and self-confidence, saying, ‘What have I done to be sorry and repent of? ‘What need have I of forgiveness and atonement? ’What cause have I to confess sin and shed tears?’—if this is your feeling, alas for you; you will not only to be dealt with by the sword of judgment and correction before you can be at peace even for you. You will have to be dealt with by the sword of judgment and correction before you can be at peace... For the Word of God is quick and powerful, sharper than a two-edged sword.