

PROVING GOD

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"Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it."--Malachi iii. 10.

In speaking from these words, I propose, first, to notice the fact that it is our duty to prove God; secondly, how we may do this; thirdly, what is implied in the injunction, "Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house;" fourthly what is implied in obeying the spirit of this injunction; fifth, the meaning of the language, see "if I will not open the windows of heaven."

I. IT IS OUR DUTY TO PROVE GOD.

God establishes and manifests his own truth, to make man know and see that he is the God of truth, by coming out and demonstrating it by his conduct. He has limited his operations; they are controlled by certain laws both of nature and of grace. He has wisely limited himself to a certain order and way of doing things. Now, let me say, in the next place, that he likes to rebuke infidelity. His heart is greatly set upon the results which he has promised--those things which must result from his coming forth and demonstrating his truth. He holds us responsible for placing ourselves in such a position as to come within the conditions, the fulfillment of which are indispensable to his coming forth, in the established and revealed order of things, to establish his truth before the world.

II. HOW ARE WE TO PROVE GOD?

That is, how are we to put God's truthfulness to the test, so as to show to ourselves, and to demonstrate to everybody else, that his promises are true? 1. If we would prove his truthfulness, we must fulfil certain conditions upon which these promises are to be fulfilled. These conditions are expressly revealed, or implied, in his universal rules in the Bible. It would not manifest his truthfulness to fulfil these promises when the stipulated conditions are not complied with. It would then rather prove him untrue. For example, if he has proposed certain conditions, and informed us that unless these conditions have been complied with, he will not fulfil the promises, why, if he should, under such circumstances, dispensing with the conditions, fulfil the promise without them, instead of proving his truthfulness, he would prove that he was a liar. For example, he has said that he will be inquired of by the house of Israel to do it for them. He will be inquired of in faith, and nothing shall be received without faith. There are multitudes of such declarations in the Bible, which affirm that he will do certain things under certain conditions, and that he will not do without these conditions. If, therefore, he would prove himself to be true, he must not fulfil these things until we have fulfilled the conditions, otherwise he would prove his own Word to be false. 2. This leads me to say again, that in the world, to prove himself true, he is obliged to deny us unless we ask in faith. Again: he has told us, that certain conditions, such as the use of certain means, are conditions upon which he will do certain things. For example, suppose he has commanded us to repent, and promises to forgive us if we do repent, suppose he should for once forgive us without repentance? He who prays for forgiveness without repentance is tempting God--asking him to do that which he has expressly declared he will not do. When, therefore, people ask God to break through any revealed condition upon which he has promised to do or not to do certain things--observe, in order to prove his truthfulness, he must refuse to do these things, because the conditions are not fulfilled. Before I was converted, I had this thought in mind, I wondered God did not answer prayer (for I was in the habit of going to prayer meetings as often as I could, even before I was converted--I have no doubt God led me to do so). I heard so much prayer, that I wondered why it remained unanswered--I wondered whether God's promises were untrue, or whether the people were not Christians. It did not occur to me for some time, that by the very truth of these promises, God was pledged not to answer them, unless they were offered upon certain conditions, and that the very fact of their not being answered, proved that they were not offered upon the prescribed conditions; and that God was not therefore untrue, because the Bible taught that it would be so under such circumstances. How remarkable it is that the very things which stumble impenitent men, and often, in fact, professors themselves--when seen from a right point of view, these things carry a demonstration on the very face of them. For instance, under certain circumstances God has promised to withdraw his blessing: under certain other circumstances, he promises to give it. Now, suppose we see him withhold it, when we have not

complied with the prescribed conditions. Suppose, again, that we fulfil the conditions and then see that he fulfil the promise. For I do not mean that it is our duty to prove God by disobeying him, so that we may see him fulfil his promise by withholding, for that reason; but the contrary, by fulfilling the conditions upon which he will surely give us the blessing. But when, as a matter of fact, we fail in our obedience--in the fulfillment of what he requires--when we fail to do this, he withholds the blessings; comply with the conditions, and then see whether he will not fulfil his promise.

But let me say again, we are to prove him in this sense; we are to use the appointed and revealed means. We should do this even in obtaining our daily bread. Who believes that if he depends on God, in the use of the appointed means, for procuring his daily bread, that he will not get it? If we use the appointed means, in an appropriate manner, then we prove God, and see whether he will really fulfil his promises. "Trust in the Lord, and do good, so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed." Now, suppose a person neither "trusted in the Lord," nor "did good," in the sense here meant, who can wonder that he does not "dwell in the land?" Especially does this apply to spiritual things--the greatest and most important blessings. But let me say again, by the appointed means I mean things to be done which God requires, and done in the manner in which he requires them to be done. Not only is prayer to be made, but made in that spirit which God requires; it is to be such prayer as God promised to answer. Efforts are to be made in the spirit God requires. Men must preach the truth, but they must preach it in a proper manner, in season and out of season, and adapt it to the understanding of the hearers. They must live it, as well as preach it--not contradict it with their lives, while with their lips they declare it. This applies not only to preachers, but to all classes of persons. Means are to be used, in faith, and perseveringly, they must do the thing that God told them to do; but mark the way--see that you do all things according to the spirit and meaning of his Word. Now, certainly, unless people do this--unless they really comply with the spirit as well as the letter of his injunction--how can they expect to obtain the blessing?

But let me says again, we must depend upon God. For example; the Bible plainly presents the subject in this way:--everything is to be done with the same heartiness, and perseverance, and with the same spirit that we would do it if we were expecting to accomplish it ourselves, without God having anything to do with it. The same language is used in precept and requirement throughout the Bible, as is used in this text. God comes out just as human lawgivers, commanding men to do certain things, in a certain manner, and with a certain spirit. Now, observe; he everywhere insists upon their doing them; they must, therefore, go about the work as if they were expecting to accomplish it, by the efforts they were making, by their own strength; yet, unless we do it in faith--throwing ourselves upon God--we shall not succeed. These two truths stand out together all through the Bible. Just as the farmer goes and sows the seed, as if God had nothing to do with it, and understands that, without the blessing of God, he cannot raise anything. We must be in this state of mind--willing to throw it upon his own blessing--knowing assuredly that unless he succeeds our efforts, no good will result. In this respect the Bible abundantly places things temporal and things spiritual precisely upon the same footing. "Except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain." Now, the watchman goes about the city, as if God had nothing to do with it. The watchman would tempt God, if he laid down to sleep, and left it literally to God; he, therefore, is to keep the city as thoroughly, honestly, and earnestly, as if God paid no attention to it; and yet to know that unless God watched too, all that he does is in vain. Everything in respect to life, health, and property--everything worldly and spiritual--is placed by God on the same footing, declaring that without his blessing we can do nothing; yet telling us to do the thing precisely as if we could do it ourselves. Now, persons generally do not understand this; they tempt God in these things, for they apply this interposition only to temporal things, and, instead of complying with the conditions upon which God offers to bless them, they are laying a stumbling-block before their own feet.

But let me say again (I wish I had time here to take up the parallel, to show what the Bible really does teach--to show that the obstacle with regard to God's sovereignty is a stumbling-block which men create for themselves; and that they might just as well lay the same stumbling-block, and pursue the same course, with reference to things of the world), in order to prove God, we must abstain from whatever tends to hinder and prevent success. Everybody knows this is true in respect to temporal things--they know that if they take poison they may expect sickness; with regard to temporal matters, they understand very well, that if they throw obstacles in their own way they may blame themselves for want of success: yet, in spiritual things, it is strange, multitudes throw obstacles in their own way; and yet how do they account for the want of success? They are bound to account for it just as the slothful man in business--they ought to blame themselves just as the man who makes careless calculations in temporal matters; the fact is, that when persons do not abstain from those things which tend to hinder their success, the blame is their own; and if they do not want to tempt God they must ascribe it to themselves just as much as if they had failed in any earthly scheme by using means to

prevent their own efforts. Suppose parents seek for the conversion of their children, and yet place them in such situations in life as almost invariably to ruin them. I knew a gentleman in the city of New York, who had a son going down to destruction. He had prayed much for him himself, and entreated me to pray for him; for he was getting into such bad company and such dissolute habits that he was afraid he would be ruined. I inquired where the young man was engaged, and was told he was in _____ 's store. In _____ 's store! Now, I knew the character of that store well; the young man was employed in selling liquor in small quantities! I accordingly gave the father distinctly to understand, that unless he removed his son from such temptations, I could not think of praying for him under such circumstances. "Get him out of temptation's way, as much as you can," said I, "and then I will pray for him, but while he is in such a hotbed of temptation I will not tempt God by praying for him." Now, how many of you are doing this? How many of you are thus sleeping over the conversion of your children, and will probably go on to do so until they are plunged into the depths of hell? How many of you are complaining that your children are not converted, while you yourselves are placing stumbling-blocks in their way? What does this mean?

I have often questioned persons--wives, for instance, who have wanted their husbands converted. They say their husbands ridicule their religion, and so forth. "Well, sister," I said to one of these, "how do you live before your husband--do you manifest a temper calculated to make him see the true character of religion? What are you doing? Do you, in your life, give evidences of the truth and value of religion as you hold it before his eyes? Or, do you contradict it every day? Are you a living epistle--a living illustration of religion before his eyes? Or, are you a living and perpetual denial and contradiction of it?" Now, in multitudes of cases I have found the obstacle to be in the wife; she has been more in the way of the conversion of her husband, perhaps, than the devil himself; for, were she out of the way, or living as she ought, the devil would not find it so easy to persuade the husband that there was no truth in religion. You cannot [help] seeing that these very persons are often themselves the means of preventing the object they seek after. I have often had occasion to tell fathers and mothers that they themselves were the obstacles--the spirit they manifest, their manner of life, their selfish and worldly motives of action--while they continue as they are, they need never expect the conversion of their children. They are living denials of the Gospel before them. No! they take the strongest means to prevent their salvation! I have often thought what wonders we see in society; look where we will, how many persons seem determined to prove that Christ lied when he told them the solemn truth, "Ye cannot serve God and Mammon!" They profess to serve God; yet, on the face of their lives they serve Mammon. Again: Christ has informed us that it is next to impossible that a rich man should enter the kingdom of God; but many seem to read it thus--"How surely shall a rich man enter the kingdom of God," as if salvation depended on their being rich! Again: they seem as anxious to get riches for their children as if it were written, "How surely shall children enter the kingdom of heaven if they be rich." Christ represents the salvation of rich persons as next to impossible; and were it not for the wonderful power of God, it would be impossible. He compares it to a camel passing through the eye of a needle, which is certainly marvelously difficult. Persons who are thus labouring and toiling for riches for their heirs, seem as if they were labouring to send their children to hell, or to prove the Bible untrue--to prove that there was no difficulty in the way of their being rich and saved too. These are but illustrations; had I time I could go into ample details of individual instances, in which things are done which stand right in the way; but what I have said will abundantly suffice to show that the difficulty is not with God--that he is doing just as he promised, under such circumstances, to do; and the result will be just what he says it will--they will lie down in sorrow.

I once knew a father who wished to influence his four sons to give up the use of tobacco. He told me that he had always warned them, spoken to them seriously, again and again on the subject, but it did not seem to do them any good; his expostulations were all in vain. When speaking to them on one occasion, one of them said, "Father, you have always used it yourself! Example is said to be more forcible than precept." Now, what do you suppose the father said? Why, nothing, of course; he stood terribly rebuked. The same thing, in principle, I have seen a multitude of cases, where the persons were actually inculcating by their example what they blamed in others, and thus placing a formidable obstacle in the way of conversion of their friends and families, and who were nevertheless, still expecting that they would be converted.

But I remark again, We must not stickle at little things. For example, "If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off." It is not promised that we shall be saved with it on. We cannot say, "God must save us with our right hand." The idea is this, that the most useful thing,--things which are important to you--if, after all, they become to you such a stumbling-block that you cannot stand, put them away. The right hand is certainly most useful; but even if it were "the right eye," we are told "to pluck it out." What, then, is the principle involved here? We are never to expect God to grant us blessings promised on condition of any sacrifice or self-denial, if we neglect the conditions imposed upon us. "If thy

hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off and cast them from thee; it is better for thee to enter into life halt and maimed, rather than, having two hands or two feet, to be cast into everlasting fire." Now, what does this teach? Why, "if even your right hand offend you, cut it off, or I shall let you go to hell; for you need not think that if you refuse to make the self-denial I shall save you notwithstanding." While you hesitate, and will not walk up to the mark, and undertake this self denial, which God makes the sole condition of blessing you--while you will not do this, you labour in vain; he will not bless you, he will not prosper you. Now, this may be applied to a thousand things; the fact is, that if a Christian, or any person, would have God's blessing, he must absolutely stickle at no act of self-denial required as a condition--he must strenuously avoid anything prohibited, or aught that would stand in the way of his obtaining the thing promised; and if we do not regard these conditions, the fault is our own if we do not obtain the blessing.

But I remark again, Another condition indispensable to proving God, is, that we really enter into God's motives, and do what we do for the motives from which God acts. We must be benevolent, not selfish. If, for example, we pray for sinners, we must regard sinners as he does; and desire their conversions for the same reason that he desires it. If we seek blessings for ourselves, we must ask them for the same reason for which he would be able to grant them. "Ye ask and receive not, because ye ask amiss," that is, your motive is not right--you do not sympathise with God's motives--you do not ask the blessing, for a reason for which it would be honourable for God to grant it.

But this leads me to pass from this part of the subject and to proceed to inquire.

III. WHAT IS IMPLIED IN THE INJUNCTION OF THE TEXT. "Bring ye," &c. The prophet asks in the ninth verse, "Will men rob God?" What is the spirit of all this? The Jews had neglected their duty--they had been selfish--they had refused to bring unto God the offerings as he required them to do,--they had gone astray, turning away from sympathizing with him--they had gone in their own ways, and had not brought the offerings to God's house, and paid their tithes--in short they had turned away from his commandments; this is what they had done. Now, what did he require of them? That they should return to him, and he would return to them. Now, a spiritually minded Jew would have understood these requirements to mean not merely the outward bringing of certain tithes and offerings; but, a returning of their hearts to God in the true spirit of obedience, and then they would prove him, and see if he would not be as good as his word, and give them the blessings they sought.

The true spirit of obedience begins here--make first an offering of yourself to God. Whatever else you offer, keeping back yourself, is an abomination. Yourself is the first great offering; offer yourself a living sacrifice; by a perpetual offering, offer yourself up to God. What is true devotion? I have often thought that many persons entirely mistake the Gospel idea of devotion, seeking to be, and believing themselves to be, devout, without being or pretending to be, pious. They work themselves up into an excited frame of mind, till they have produced certain feelings, and this they deem devotion. To be devoted to a thing--what is it? What is it for a man to be devoted to his business? To be diligent, to have his heart in the undertaking, and to give all his energies to the work--this is devotion to business. What is a man's devotion to his wife, a wife's to her husband, a mother's to her children? Now, what would you think of a mother who sat down and neglected her children--who sat down and worked herself up into a state of devotion to her offspring, and allowed them meanwhile, to go without their dinner? What would you think of a business man who let his business go to ruin while he was engaged in these devotional feelings? What would you think of the farmer who indulges in these devotional frames of mind, and neither ploughed his ground, sowed his seed, nor took care of his hedges? Now, I have known persons so infinitely mistaken on this whole question, that they have tried to be devotional without possessing a particle of piety. To be devoted, is to give the mind up by a voluntary act, and to expend all your energies on any particular thing. To be devoted to God, is to give ourselves up to him, to be devoted to his glory, to give up body and mind and all our energies to the great work to which he calls us. Remember, the first offering is to be yourself; for this is an offering which many have withheld. They have given tithes and all other offerings, but have withheld the offering--themselves.

How many individuals have I known whose characters, for instance, were not on the altar of God! They would not do anything which would damage them in the eyes of the world. They are unwilling to place themselves in the gap, let men say what they will. They do not come nobly forth, and say, "Lord, here is my character; it is no use to me if it can be of no service to thee. If thou tellest me to do anything for which men will despise me, thou knowest, O my God, I will do it, and leave my character to take care of itself, or leave it to thee." This is the spirit! If God should tell them to do anything which would bring the reproach of mankind upon them, they would do it; if this be not so, it shows the character is not given up to God. Suppose a minister would not preach anything which he

knew was so unpopular that it would bring reproach upon him. I have seen sins--I have known individuals who would, if they were about to rebuke any sin which they knew was rife in the community, and to which they knew a great many influential men were addicted--they would either bear silent testimony against them, or give notice that they were going to preach about it, and then, such persons as felt condemned, of course would stay away. Now, who does not see, that where individuals, for fear they should lose their character with men refuse to come out and rebuke sin, they can never expect to get rid of it. Suppose a minister for example, is afraid to rebuke the sin of intemperance; suppose in America we should not expose the sin of slavery--should we ever get rid of it? Never. God commands us to come out and rebuke sin. Suppose a minister has seen things which call for remark, but upon which "the public mind is sensitive," and which he is consequently afraid to rebuke, how could a man, who thus withholds his testimony, ever expect to get rid of that iniquity? Such evils are always likely to exist until their opponents lay their character, on the altar, and do what God tells them to do, irrespective of the opinions of men--until they hunt it out, expose, and rebuke it. Do they expect God will get rid of it, without their using the revealed and appointed means? He has commanded them everywhere to expose sin, both public and private. Now, suppose there is any sin of so delicate a nature, that the ministers and the Church bear no public and pointed testimony against it, can they expect ever to get rid of it? Never. They must march up, and lay their character on the altar, and say to God, "If thou requirest me, O Lord, to do that for which all men will curse me, I will do it. If thou requirest me, O Lord, to do that for which men will crucify me, I will do it. If thou sayest, 'Speak; reprove iniquity,' I will do so, if I die for it." Now, unless the Church do this--the individual membership, as well as the pulpit--how can they expect to reform the world? The church is the society which God has appointed to reform the world--to take the lead in every reform, and by precept and example to show unto men what they should be. Now, if the Church is afraid to oppose iniquity, can it be wondered that evils great and manifold, roll their desolation over generation after generation? Is it not true that the want of this testimony, both by precept and example, on the part of the church, accounts for the fact that the world is not converted? The Church tempts God by pretending to find a reason for all this in the sovereignty of God. Why, they might as well neglect every temporal affair, and become paupers, and then trace that to the sovereignty of God. God allows evil to exist, and will do so until generation after generation shall have gone to hell, because the appointed means are neglected. There cannot be too much stress laid upon these truths. It is time the Church should understand that unless they devote themselves to the reformation of the world--first reforming themselves--and giving themselves up to every good word and work--things will go on as they have done; but upon whose skirts will the blood be? Jehovah has shaken his skirts, and has said, "Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me--prove me herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it."

This leads me to say, in the next place,--but I cannot enlarge here, because my time is so nearly exhausted, and I must, therefore, pass rapidly to the last head of the discourse--viz.,

V. TO INQUIRE THE MEANING OF THE PASSAGE. See "If I will not open you the windows of heaven and pour you out a blessing that there shall not be room enough to receive it." This language was designed to convey a revealed principle to us which is worthy of all acceptance. In many of the promises, God has revealed the great and fundamental principles of his government. What is true of God under one state of circumstances, is always, under similar circumstances, true of him. What he will do under one state of circumstances, may always be expected of him under similar circumstances. The principle here revealed, is often revealed, expressly or impliedly. It is this--that where his requirements, and the conditions of which he is pledged, are fulfilled, he invariably comes out and fulfils his promises. "Prove me," &c. Now, this is equivalent to saying, "If you prove me, I will surely pour out," &c.

A few remarks must close what I have to say. I have already intimated that the common talk in reference to God's sovereignty, as applied to the existing evils in the world, and the want of reformation therein--the manner in which this is talked of, is tempting God as manifestly as if the same course were applied to temporal things. God's purposes do not extend more absolutely to spiritual than temporal things; Divine purposes, foreknowledge, agency, and so forth, extend equally to both. Even the grass will not grow without his blessing. On the subject of religion people are forever applying this talk about Divine sovereignty, election, and such things, as if God had foreordained certain things in respect to religion in such a manner as to interfere with the freedom of man, and set aside his voluntary action in a manner totally different from his conduct in temporal matters. Now, this is quite a mistake; the Bible denies it. God does not ordain anything, in any such sense; there is not one word in the entire Bible which really favours the idea that any election of God's at all interferes with the liberty and free agency of the creature. I have as strong and as high

views of God's sovereignty as any man. I know this, as far as the Divine mind is concerned, there is nothing new or old to him; the judgment day is as present to God as it ever will be. If a man should ask me, "Do you believe in the sovereignty and foreknowledge of God?" I would reply, "Yes." "Do you believe God knows the very hour I shall die?" "Yes." "Can I alter God's purpose so as to change his foreknowledge?" "Certainly not." "Then I might just as well not take any food, or swallow two ounces of arsenic, as I cannot die before my time." They never will die before their time comes; nor will they go one moment over it. What, then, has this to do with their own agency? Who does not know that, notwithstanding God has appointed bounds to their habitation, yet all the circumstances must concur to keep them alive, or they would die before their time. They will not die before their time, because they will not reason in this way; but they will use the means, and do just as common sense would have them do--just as God foresaw that they would do. They will not leap off a precipice, or cast themselves from London Bridge; or anything else of the kind, and then say, "I shall not die before my time!" Oh! that men would use their sense in religion, as well as in other matters! Men know the human mind is left free, responsible, active; and that, therefore, men are to go on, taking care of their property, their health, and their lives, labouring for the results they wish to bring about. But on religious subjects men talk as if they were insane. "If God knows how it will be, what's the use of my doing anything?" Do! Why, act just as you are acting in everything else, or you will go to hell, that's what you will do: just as a man will die who does not take care of his health; and no sovereignty of God in the universe will prevent a man from going to hell who does not repent.

Now, let me ask, What are you doing to secure the salvation of your souls? Are you using any of the prescribed means? How are you living before your families? Are you doing those things which ought to be done, and must be done, to promote religion around you? Do you live, act, and talk--using the means, and in the manner you ought? If not, how do you expect the conversion of the people? Are you endeavouring to remove the evils you see around you? Do you mean to do this? Or are you satisfying yourselves with a merely negative testimony? I have known some ministers who would not preach upon slavery except with previous notice, so that those who held erroneous views might remain away; and others who only preach on it once a year, or only once in their life. Now, suppose all the ministers in the United States should simply once come out and preach against slavery, and think that then they had virtually discharged their duty so far, but to say that as to laying themselves on the altar to put it away, why, they are not going to do any such thing. Iniquity must be rebuked through the press, in the pulpit, in the railway carriages, and wherever it may be supported; and unless men will do this, the evils will not be removed.

I ask you, before God, have the Christian people of London taken hold for the removal of the iniquity of this city? Have they borne steady, energetic, yet benevolent testimony against all these evils in every way? Or have they kept silent, and cowered down before the world? Rely upon it, beloved, that if you seek the conversion of this great city, every minister must lay his character upon the altar--every Christian must put his shoulder to the work, and bid this great iniquity depart in the name of the Lord.

What are you really doing, as individuals? Are there ministers here? Brethren what are you doing? Are you satisfying yourselves with an occasional testimony against such an such an evil without continually pursuing it? If you mean to put them away, you must pursue these evils, or they will pursue you. You must hunt them out, or they will hunt the piety out of you. The natural tendency of things is to get worse, instead of better.

And what are you private members doing in this great work? Are you on the altar? Are you personally talking, labouring, and setting a good example--laying your all upon the altar? If you are doing this, we shall soon hear of it; for Jehovah has pledged himself before the universe, that if you do your duty--lay your character, time, talents, property, your all, upon the altar--he will pour out his blessings in such manner that there shall not be room enough, even in this great city, to contain them. Yes! the righteousness of London shall be like the waves of the sea. Do you believe this? He tells you to prove him; will you do it?

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