

A Significant Injunction

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Of all the many injunctions that fill the pages of the Old Testament none is more significant than the last — Malachi 4: 4.

When Malachi prophesied many centuries had passed since the giving of the law at Horeb, and the nation to whom it had been given had seen many vicissitudes and disasters. This had been so much the case that there would surely have been with many the tendency to reason that legislation given when the people were in wilderness circumstances could hardly be binding in all respects when they were settled in a land of their own, or when later they were scattered in Assyria or Babylon, or even later still when a feeble remnant were permitted once more to dwell in the land of promise. In its main provisions it might stand, but hardly in all its subsidiary enactments. Thus they might have said.

Knowing this tendency, the final injunction was given. The remnant in the land were reminded that the law had been given to "**all** Israel," and therefore it applied to them. Moreover all the "**statutes and judgments**," that had supplemented the main commandments, stood in their integrity, neither repealed nor altered. Changes in human circumstances do not impose any change upon the Divine requirements.

It is not difficult to see that this must be the case. The law given through Moses dealt with the fundamental evils and disorders that mark men and their hearts and ways as the fruit of SIN. Changes in circumstances may produce a few ripples on the surface of the darkflowing river of sin, but they do not alter its destination nor enlighten its darkness. In His holy law with its statutes and judgments God had in view fundamental facts and not surface changes.

Now something very similar to this verse in Malachi meets us when we turn to the closing words of the New Testament. True, it is not a vindication of the original law of Moses, but it is a warning of a very stringent and solemn kind against in any way tampering with "the words of the prophecy of this book." Primarily the warning applies no doubt to the words of the book of Revelation, but coming as it does at the very end, we believe it applies in a secondary way to the whole of the New Testament if not of the whole Bible. We are neither to add to it nor to take away.

In the light of this we are bold to affirm that the instructions given to the saints of our dispensation — the church — stand unchanged, though many vicissitudes and disasters have marked its history as a professing body on the earth. We are not at liberty either to disregard or to alter the commandments and instructions left for us.

We have, of course, to recognize dispensational changes. The coming of Christ inaugurated a new day, since He was, "the Dayspring from on high" (Luke 1: 78), bringing light into the midst of the darkness. And further, the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost was the beginning of a new dispensation. In His farewell discourse in the upper chamber, recorded in John 13 — John 16, our Lord spoke of new things that the Spirit would bring to pass, and of the further revelations that would reach the disciples through Him. But what has thus been made known abides with its full authority for us today.

Our standing before God is not on a legal basis. The Scripture statement is very definite; "Ye are not under the law, but under grace" (Rom. 6: 14). So the commandments that we find connected with

our Christian faith are not given in order that by our obeying them we may achieve acceptance before God. Yet **commandments** there certainly are; and it is remarkable how much is said about them in John's Gospel, chapters 13 - 16, and in John's Epistles.

In the Gospel chapters we have the Lord's farewell discourse with His disciples around Him. He spoke of a "new commandment," which He gave them, and "My commandments," and also of "the Father's commandment," which had been given to Him and which He had kept. Their obedience was to be fashioned after the manner of His. He spoke also of His "word" and His "sayings," for He had indicated His mind and will for them in many things He had said, though not expressed in definite commandments. To those who really love Him, His will for them, no matter in what form expressed, comes with authoritative force.

In John's first Epistle we find "commandment" mentioned about a dozen times, and the last mention is a significant one — "His commandments are not grievous" (1 John 5: 3). The Epistle has strongly emphasized the fact that the true believer is born of God, and hence has a nature which expresses itself in love and in righteousness, and therefore finds delight, and not a grievous burden, in the very things which are commanded.

Another fact is worthy of our very careful thought. When the Apostle Paul wrote his first Epistle to the saints at Corinth, instructing them as to many things that had been very disorderly in both the private lives of many of them and in their assembly gatherings, he called upon them to recognize and acknowledge that the things he had written to them were "the commandments of the Lord" (1 Cor. 14: 37). This applied no doubt to all the instructions he had given to them in the Epistle, but with special force to what he had laid down in chapter 14.

Now that chapter is specially concerned with the order to be observed by the saints in Corinth when they were gathered together as the assembly of God in that city. If they carried out the instructions given, things would be done "decently and in order," as the last verse of the chapter says. And not only so, but the church would be edified and God glorified; and this latter in such a powerful way that an unbeliever coming into their assembly would be greatly affected and constrained to confess that God was indeed amongst them.

The church, according to Ephesians 2: 29, is "an habitation of God through the Spirit," therefore in the assemblies of the saints the Holy Spirit is to be supreme, and to act as He may see fit. It is He who produces all the gifts that may enrich the church, as is stated in chapter 12, and it is He who is to control their exercise as we have laid down in chapter 14.

The tendency today, we venture to think, is just the same as it was in the days of Malachi. Many centuries have rolled since the Apostolic letters were written, many defections and disasters have supervened in the history of the church. Are these ancient instructions valid today? We have, on the one hand, reached a very advanced stage in the process of human civilisation and scientific discovery, and, on the other hand, fallen upon very broken and divided conditions in Christendom, so are we still to observe what the Apostle has laid down? May we not accommodate things to agree more with the spirit of our times?

The answer clearly is — No, we may not. It is a remarkable fact that in this same epistle Paul was inspired to give the Corinthians his judgment on certain matters as to which they had written to him, as we see in 1 Corinthians 7. In verses 6, 10, 25, 40, he differentiates between things definitely commanded by the Lord, and what he judged to be right and pleasing to the Lord, though there was no distinct command given. Having given his spiritual judgment, he says very significantly, "and I think also that I have the Spirit of God." That being so, I trust that none of us wish lightly to set aside Paul's

judgment.

But when we do have definite commands the case is decisive. Yet how often are the commands of chapter 14 set aside, or at least forgotten and ignored. All too many treat them as being merely Paul's notions, which we may disregard with impunity. Others would not lower the word of the Lord to that extent, but would nevertheless say that though suitable for the Apostolic age they are hardly the thing for the twentieth century.

And if any would say to us, Yes, but these commands were given to one special church — Corinth — and not repeated in epistles to other churches; we should have to reply, that 1 Corinthians 1: 2 shows that all in the Epistle, though addressed primarily to the church at Corinth, was secondarily addressed to "all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours." The commands applied universally to all true saints in those days, wherever they might be. They apply just as universally to all true saints today.

Are we obeying them?