

Sermon by James Freeman 1796

Delivered by Earl Holt

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1 Thessalonians 5:13, 14

BE AT PEACE AMONG YOURSELVES.

NOW WE EXHORT YOU, BRETHREN, WARN THEM THAT ARE UNRULY,
COMFORT THE FEEBLE MINDED.

On these public festivals the ministers of the gospel are allowed to be more particular than on common occasions. Instead of confining themselves to general observations, they are permitted to consider the situation of the country in which they live, and to give their discourses a political turn... But though they have this liberty, yet they must proceed with cautious steps: for as different parties are found in all free states, by delivering their sentiments in too open a manner, they may offend some of their hearers of the following sermon composed in the spirit of moderation; it is hoped will not give any pain to honest citizens of either party.

The words which I have chosen for my text, express the three principal ideas which are to be the subject of this discourse. Notwithstanding the profusion of blessings which heaven has showered down upon us, there are some men who are continually apprehending public calamity, whose hearts fail them for fear of the evils which they think are coming on their country: they are *feeble minded*, and I would endeavour to *comfort* them. The distinguishing privileges which we enjoy cannot be perpetuated, unless we reverence the institutions of our country, obey the laws, and respect our rulers and magistrates: I would therefore *warn the unruly*. In fine, a spirit of party and faction, when carried to too great a length, will interrupt our tranquility, embitter our minds against each other, and poison all the sweets of liberty: I would therefore recommend *peace*.

I. The climate which we inhabit is so salubrious, the soil which we cultivate is so productive, and the means of private and domestic happiness can so easily be obtained in this favored country, that no reasonable man has any thing to complain of on these heads. If we find any one poor, diseased, or wretched, it is not because he is an inhabitant of the United States, but because he is an inhabitant of the world; for calamity of some sort or other is inseparable from a part of mankind, even in the best situations. As those however who suffer no real evil, are too often industrious in conjuring up imaginary distress so it is with some among ourselves: they feel all the weight of misery, in the midst of plenty, peace, and public prosperity.

The love of the land in which we live is so natural a principle, that it is not easy to find a man who is not in his heart a patriot: we all rejoice in the happiness of our fellow citizens; we all desire the prosperity of our country.* Nay there are a few who do not carry their patriotism to such an excess, that it degenerates into local partiality. They would be willing to see their own country rise, even if it rose on the ruins of other nations. The theoretical sentiments of men therefore, however erroneous we may think them, afford no proof that the advocates of them are not the friends of the people. Whigs and tories, federalists and antifederalists may be all equally good patriots. When therefore I observe, that there are some among us who think the government under which we live too popular, and who imagine they can foresee that many evils will spring from the excess of liberty, though I believe their fears ungrounded, I mean not to censure them. That freedom, one of the most precious legacies of heaven, produces some bad effects, must be conceded. There can be no genuine liberty where all power does not originate from the people. But the people are not always virtuous. They may be virtuous, but they are not always wise. In choosing legislators and magistrates they sometimes betray a want of judgment; and are influenced not by the merit of the candidate, but by circumstances of no value. Hence it is that they may continue year after year to appoint to public offices persons, who of all men in the state are the most unfit to manage them. But the greatest misfortune is, that in free countries those who court the favor of the people and guide their opinions and conduct are too often artful and corrupt. The records of history, as well as the experience of our own times, prove that popular demagogues, who gain the affections of the multitude by haranguing on the topics of patriotism and freedom, are frequently destitute of moral principle and the fear of God, are men who have no other object than to advance their own interest, and who by the insolence with which they treat those who contradict their opinions and confute their arguments, demonstrate that if they arrived at power, they would become tyrants and oppressors. For these and similar reasons some men who sincerely desire the happiness of their fellow citizens, regret that our governments are so popular. They wish that elections were less frequent, that rulers were less dependent on the suffrages of the people, and that it was less often in the power of artful men on the one hand, or ignorant men on the other, to agitate the public mind. They foresee the time, when we shall become prey of anarchy, and when in consequence of an excess of liberty, the people will be deprived of liberty itself. These apprehensions fill them with distress, and render them less sensible of the blessings which they enjoy in this free and happy country.

But these apprehensions appear to me unreasonable; not because it must not be acknowledged that evils result from liberty, but because fewer evils are derived from this source than any other. Whilst a vestige of freedom remains in a country, its necessary ill effects must also remain: that is, as long as the people retain any power, they may, if they are disposed, abuse their power; and they will be still liable to be deceived by the arts of the popular leaders. Other countries not as free as our own are nevertheless torn by factions; and they appoint to office as many improper men in proportion as are chosen here. There is no way therefore of entirely preventing the bad effects of liberty, but by

* *“Omnes patriae dulci tanguntur amore.”*

annihilating liberty itself. But should we gain any thing by this? No: for history shows, that more is to be apprehended from the ambition, avarice, and other vices of the few, than from the follies and weakness of the many. If *men of low degree are vanity, men of high degree are a lie**: if the former are fickle and ignorant, the latter are cunning, false, treacherous, and cruel. The excesses of the people in a free government resemble a river which overflows its banks, and which may sweep away a hay stack or a sheaf of corn; but the excesses of the great despotic government are like an earthquake, which precipitates nations into the abyss of destruction. Fine pictures maybe drawn of a monarch, who like a father watches over the happiness of his subjects, prevents them from injuring each other, diffuses blessings around him, and reigns in the hearts of all his people. But in what age and in what part of the world are these monarchs to be found? If the monarchial and aristocratical forms of government are so excellent in themselves, what can be the reason that the kings, and princes, and nobles of Asia and Europe, by their licentiousness and profusion, their avarice and ambition, their oppressions at home and their wars abroad, have generally proved the scourges of nations? Free countries are commonly the most happy. They may be turbulent; and they will more loudly complain of their sufferings than despotic countries; for which reason the latter may sometimes seem to possess a greater degree of tranquility. But this view is deceptive: for under tyrannical governments the subject is compelled to bear oppression in patience and silence; and it is one of the evils of his situation, that he is afraid even to utter his complaints. Let us not therefore murmur against God, because we experience the few disadvantages which are inseparable from freedom; but let us rather rejoice that we are exempt from the many miseries of despotism.

As on the one hand, there are some who think our governments too popular; so on the other, there are some who are alarmed with the apprehensions that they are becoming less free. Such a fear naturally enters the minds of those who read the history of nations. In various parts of the world, and in different ages, the people have established a free government; but those who they have invested with power have gradually made encroachments, till they have deprived them of all their rights, and depressed them to a state of vassalage. As we are not exempt from the general lot of humanity, this may possibly be our fate at some future period; and it sometimes suspected that there is already a combination of artful and ambitious men who are secretly undermining the liberties of their country. That power naturally tends to corrupt its possessors must be admitted. These suspicions therefore may possibly be not altogether without foundation. But while I allow this, I cannot believe that we are in much danger of being enslaved. We happily live at an enlightened period, when the science of government is better understood than in any former age. We have the experience of all the nations before us; and if we are wise, we can avoid the rocks upon which the freedom of others has been shipwrecked. We have so skillfully framed our constitutions, that it is not easy for any man or body of men to gain the ascendancy. We have magistrates and rulers of various orders to watch and check each other. We have state legislatures and executive officers to arrest the encroachments of the United States, who in return are a guard on the state governments. Add to this that the spirit of jealousy and party, which is undoubtedly an evil, but which may happily prevent still greater evils, is awake, and stands prepared to

* Pf. lxii, 9.

defeat every attack on the liberties of our country. The conclusion from the whole appears to me to be this, that if the citizens of the United States are not destined for permanent freedom, freedom is not then intended for the human race. We have made the fairest experiment; and if it does not succeed, we must submit to the will of heaven: but it will be folly to be cast down, because what is unavoidable ought never to be lamented.

These observations may comfort those feeble minded persons who are alarmed with the apprehension of distant evils. But there are some who fancy that the evil has arrived, and that we have already lost a valuable part of our freedom. What degree of freedom men can bear it is difficult to say. Were they perfectly innocent, restraints of any kind would be unnecessary. But as many individuals among them are ignorant, licentious, or malignant, they ought not to be permitted to do what they please. Order and tranquility seem not consistent with a greater latitude than is allowed to us. In other countries the people have had more power of doing mischief, but this deserves not the name of freedom. The prosperity of a nation arises from such a variety of circumstances, and is frequently so independent of the regulations of men, that I presume not to say that the felicity which we confessedly enjoy is derived from our rulers; but this I may say consistent with truth, that they do not interrupt our happiness; and this perhaps is as much as we can reasonably expect from any government. While we have so much liberty, that our lawful pursuit of profit, knowledge, or pleasure is not impeded by those who are in authority, what more perfect state of freedom can we desire?

From considering these general apprehensions, I might proceed to mention some particular causes of fear. There are persons among us who dread that we shall soon be visited with calamities of war. The present hostile state of Europe, added to the resentment which some of our fellow citizens feel for the insults which we have received, they apprehend, will at length draw us into the general vortex. But as a wish for war is not yet a prevailing sentiment, and as every expedient which wisdom and humanity can dictate will probably continue to be employed to keep us at a distance from the evil, I would hope that we shall not soon be precipitated into it.

As there are some who dread a war, so there are others who think our present situation worse than if we engaged in open hostilities. They conceive that our national character is degraded by the same submission which they maintain we have betrayed under multiplied insults. It is difficult to say to what indignities a nation in good policy may submit, before it proceeds to resent them. This however we venture to affirm, that war is the greatest calamity which can befall it. Indignation, it is confessed, naturally arises in the breast against a haughty or an artful nation, who presuming either on their power or our attachment, insult those who they conceive dare not show their resentment but it is seldom prudence or justice to ourselves to plunge hastily into a war. The temper which the christian religion prescribes to an individual is in general safest for a nation; for revenge is expensive to the tranquility and dearest interests of a community. After a series of slaughters and miseries peace must at last be made; but it is made, not because the objects of the war are obtained, but because the parties are exhausted and re unable to continue the conflict. The late war in which our country was engaged was successful and glorious; but the expence was enormous; and we ought not willingly to incur the same

again, unless for the attainment of ends equally important. Many of our towns were sacked or destroyed, the weight of a large debt was thrown on us and our posterity, and near eighty thousand lives were sacrificed. These prices indeed were not too great to pay for liberty and independence; but few other blessings would not be dearly purchased at such a rate.

II. There are several other causes which render the *feeble minded* among us discontented; but most of them would be removed by obedience to government. I would therefore, in the second place, *warn the unruly*. In a country where all authority originates from the people, it is rebellion against ourselves to weaken the sanctions of the laws and to bring our rulers into contempt. Ignorant, inefficient, and corrupt magistrates and legislators should be removed from office; but while they remain, they should be treated with respect. Honor is due to the frames and administrators of the laws; but still greater reverence to the laws themselves; for they are a declaration of the public will, and are designed for the common benefit. Through inexperience, want of foresight, and other causes, they may sometimes be inconvenient, and even detrimental; but more pernicious effects will arise from breaking them, than can possibly arise from their operation. Every good citizen therefore will set an example of obedience. He will submit to the laws which he condemns, as well as those which he approves. Should they even abridge his pleasures, oppose his prejudices, and injure his interest, as a friend of the public, he will still cheerfully comply with them. We all, my fellow citizens, condemn men who rise up in arms against the government to avoid the payment of tax, while perhaps we are guilty ourselves, though not in so flagrant a degree, for we may freely break every law which we think unnecessary or opposed to our interest. The conduct of a true patriot will correspond with his words: he will not allow in himself what he condemns in others.

III. One of the worst effects of liberty is sometimes supposed to be the spirit of faction which it generates. In all free states there are two parties, who entertain or pretend to entertain a very unfavorable opinion of each others designs. Such parties already exist in this country; and they seem to be gradually becoming more inveterate against each other. In some degree this mutual opposition is necessary, as it tends to keep alive the spirit of freedom, and to check the encroachments of the ambitious: but when carried too far, it interrupts our tranquility, and extends the hateful spirit of discord into towns, and even into the private recesses of families. I would therefore, in the last place, recommend *peace*.

It would be too romantic to attempt a full reconciliation of the parties of a state; but there are some considerations which should abate their rancor. On unquestionable fact is, that both parties in the country profess themselves the friends of the public welfare; and we ought candidly to admin their pretensions. They differ in the means which they propose, but no in the end: the one may be better politicians than the other, but they are not better patriots. However corrupt their leaders may be, it is not easy to conceive that the great body can be governed by bad motives. In the heat of contention they may charge each other with criminal intentions; but no moderate man entertains such a suspicion; and probably those who make the charge do not seriously believe its truth. If we would judge thus favorably of each other, one great cause of discord would

be removed, as it is impossible to think very ill of a man, however erroneous his opinions may be, the purity of whose intentions we allow.

The factions in the state are kept alive more by attachment to men than measures. Parties enlist under some leaders, whose notions of government they adopt, and whom they endeavour to push into every vacant office. Hence the fiercest contentions take place at the season of elections. These points are undoubtedly of some moment; but a philosopher cannot forbear to smile at the eagerness and agitation which are displayed. It is the happiness of a republican form of government, that no individual is indispensably necessary to the commonwealth, whilst each individual contributes a part to the general welfare. In a country where knowledge is so generally diffused as in this, many more abilities to serve the state than can be appointed to office: some worthy candidates therefore must be rejected; but when two equally honest and intelligent men present themselves, it is not of much consequence who is chosen. The mind, as it cannot remain long in a state of indifference, will naturally take a side in every election; but though a victory is pleasant, yet a defeat should not be mortifying. The object is of sufficient importance to interest our feelings; but not of so much importance, as to make us ill-natured and kindle the flame of discord. After the will of the majority has been declared, provided it has been legally obtained, we should cheerfully acquiesce in it, reserving all the ardor of contest till a new trial is presented.

Other observations might be made to show, that causes sufficient to inflame our hearts against each other do not yet exist among us. But it is time that I should conclude my discourse; which I do beseeching you, my fellow citizens to *be at peace among yourselves*. By your goodwill to your country, and by your regard to yourselves, I entreat you to *be at peace*. Be candid towards those who differ from you in political sentiments. You know that you wish well to your country: charitably believe that your opponents are equally patriotic. Continue to love your native soil, and the government by which you are protected: Promote to the utmost of your abilities the happiness of your fellow citizens. You who are poor labor with diligence in the employments by which you may obtain an honest subsistence. And you who are rich encourage the poor; defraud them not of their hire; animate industry, and banish idleness and want from the land. Be not *unruly*; but let all ranks be obedient to the laws, which are equally binding to every class of men. Finally, be grateful to your heavenly Father for the invaluable blessings which he has bestowed on you and your country. Be not *feeble minded*, and afflict not yourselves with the apprehension of evils which may possibly happen. Repose all your cares in the bosom of Providence, convinced that the Lord God omnipotent reigns, that he governs the world in wisdom, and that he will infallibly bless his children and servants.