Hall N.

A

# DISCOURSE

DELIVERED IN

## THE FIRST CHURCH, DORCHESTER,

On the Sunday

SUCCEEDING THE FUNERAL

OF

## ROBERT THAXTER, M. D.,

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By NATHANIEL HALL.

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DORCHESTER, SUNDAY EVENING, FEB. 15, 1852.

REV. NATHANIEL HALL.

DEAR SIR,

A meeting of members of the First Parish and friends of the late Dr. THAXTER was holden this evening, to consider your sermon of this morning.

They feel grateful to you for your just and affectionate tribute to the life and character of our respected citizen, faithful friend and beloved physician, Dr. ROBERT THAXTER. They think such a notice of a man so widely known and highly esteemed, should be extended beyond the hour of its delivery, and that very many who were not of our parish or even of this town would like to read it and preserve it. They therefore request a copy for the press.

Very gratefully and respectfully,

EDWARD JARVIS,
SAMUEL DOWNER, JR.
ISAAC CLAPP,
JNO. H. ROBINSON,
JOSEPH TUTTLE,
} *Committee.*

# DISCOURSE.

Colossians iv. 14.

"THE BELOVED PHYSICIAN."

The words foretell and express my theme. I would speak to you of the "beloved physician," — not him long since of Rome, but him whom our own eyes have seen, our own hearts have loved — whom we are to see, alas, no more. He is in all our thoughts to-day: why, then, should he not be spoken of, even here? Why should not the pulpit accept the theme thus presented in the minds and hearts that have gathered around it, and make it, if it may, a theme for religious instruction and improvement? Such, I feel, it may be made; and that we could not better employ the time before us than in a direct contemplation of the life and character of him, who has just passed, beloved and lamented, from among us. Rarely, indeed — you will bear me witness — do I allow myself to speak

of character here in terms of eulogy. My reverence for the place and the occasion, my sense of duty and of propriety, forbid it to be otherwise. Imperfect as all are — too sadly so — it were better to look away from men, in our meditations here, to that perfect goodness, which has dwelt but in one on earth; away from the erring, though sincere, disciple, to the immaculate and glorious Master. Still, it may be well for us to contemplate, occasionally, the goodness that is nearer the level of our own, yet far above it; and which may be to us a more effective rebuke and incentive for the very imperfections that declare it human — human, and therefore attainable: and more especially when that goodness has had its walk among us, has gone out and come in before us, a long honored and familiar presence. Indeed, it seems but grateful to Him who gave and inspired it, to do this. *Then* to do it, when Death, in transferring it from the realm of perception to that of memory, has etherealized our conceptions of it; has separated the extraneous from the intrinsic, the interlaying dross of the fleshly nature from the pure gold of immortal character. Beautiful office which Death performs for human character! — enshrining it where it is thenceforward seen without the infirmities which here attended it, and which so greatly, through our self-love, or otherwise, obscured it to our view.

And who shall say that it is not a more just, as well as a kinder, estimate, we are thus led to form of human character? that, in the close contact with it which life enforces, and in the collision of tastes and opinions and interests, we are not prevented from the worthiest judgment? that it may not need the distance to which Death removes it, in order to be rightly seen and duly appreciated? Or is it but the transfiguring power of the affections? — that moonlight radiance with which they invest the image of the departed, and in which defects and deformities are softened and lost in the essential excellence.

Of him to whom I have referred, there are especial reasons urging me to speak. A resident among you for three and forty years, in the active and unremitted labors of a profession which brings its functionaries into intimate relationship with those they serve, and wins for them a personal interest and attachment; admitted, in the discharge of its offices, through all these years, in seasons of deep anxiety and of mortal peril, to your dwellings and bedsides, as one upon whose skill your dearest earthly hopes, under God, reposed; associated, thus, with your intensest experiences, alike of trembling fear and buoyant gladness, of joy at the advent into your home's circle of a new object for its love, and of anguish at the departing from it of the venerated and endeared; his image, woven thus into

the very fibres and heart of your domestic life — how could he pass away, and you not feel it? how could he, and I not speak of him?

But *how* shall I speak of him? How can I, thus publicly, at all, without a consciousness of rebuke in the thought of that sensitiveness, which shrank even from the most private commendation, and almost repelled the common expression of grateful indebtedness? And yet such rebuke, I feel, would be checked, in its instinctive rising, by that benevolence which ever merged the thought of self in a desire to serve and benefit others.

How, then, shall I speak of him? Not as his professed biographer or eulogist: not in the pretension of giving, with aught of completeness, a sketch of his history or a delineation of his character. I have neither that knowledge of his earlier life, nor have I enjoyed that measure of intimacy with him, which would lead me to feel justified in attempting it. My purpose is, simply, to offer to your notice such points in his outward life as have chanced to become known to me, and some of those characteristic moral traits, which were too strikingly obvious not to be apprehended by those who have been, for any length of time, in his society and neighborhood, and which were too remarkable and rare, in the degree of their activity and strength, to be suffered to pass without a reverent recognition.

Our departed friend entered life on the twenty-first day of October, of that memorable year in our American annals, 1776, in the town of Hingham, Ms. His father was a physician there, of high repute, and in wide and successful practice. The oldest of five children, his boyhood was passed in the bosom of a happy home; into which Death, however, more than once entered, putting infant forms to their unwaking sleep. At the age of eighteen he entered Harvard College, one of a class which boasts some of the distinguished names of our community — a Channing, a Tuckerman, a Story. Graduating in 1798, he commenced, in his native village, and beneath the instruction of his father, the study of his profession — the profession of his early choice, and his latest love. And if, as is probable, a natural taste and preference, fostered and increased by that familiarity with its functions and employments in which his youth was passed, inclined him to its choice, it was, we are sure, confirmed and hallowed by a filial reverence and affection, which would have gone far to make a father's occupation his own, even had it been naturally distasteful to him; a filial reverence and affection, let me add, which suffered no decay with the departure of its object and the flight of years, but beautified his character to the last — disclosing itself, though indirectly and incidentally, as a living and commanding presence, even beneath

the chill shadows of age; and in view of which it was fitting and kind that his form in death should have been borne to that paternal sepulchre, to sleep side by side with its honored dust. Nor, among the various motives which may have influenced him in the choice of his profession, can we doubt that one, of no inconsiderable prominence, was in the opportunities it affords for doing good. As a position of usefulness he most loved it, if as such he did not, in part, elect it. Not for its revenues, nor its distinctions, did he toil in it, even into old age, falling at last a martyr in his devotion to it, but for the field it opened to him whereon to serve and bless his fellow beings. It was to him — so he viewed, and so made it — a noble profession. And such, in truth, it is. Notwithstanding all the disrepute which vulgar and sordid aims have brought upon it — as they have, indeed, more or less, upon all professions; notwithstanding the impositions which have been, and are, practised, beneath its shelter, upon men's ignorance and credulity; notwithstanding the false theories and harmful errors which have found place within it — and in what department of human science or activity have there not been these? — it is yet a noble, and should be an honored, profession. So long as man is made subject to injury and disease; so long as a perfect knowledge of this delicate and

complex structure which enshrines the spirit, and of those secrets of healing power which God has locked up in his natural creations, can be obtained but by a devoted and exclusive study of them; so long, in a word, as bodily health and soundness is the great blessing of a mortal existence, upon whose presence other and higher blessings are so often made contingent — so long must the profession of which I speak have an intrinsic importance and honorableness which few beside can justly claim.

After practising for several years in his native town, Dr. Thaxter, in the year 1809, established himself here. He had already, as I learn, attained to some considerable distinction as a learned and skilful practitioner — a distinction which was by no means lessened by his removal to this nearer vicinity to the metropolis — whose most distinguished physicians accorded him, then as afterwards — alike for his enlarged and liberal professional views, and his manly simplicity and integrity of character — their confidence and respect. The field of his practice, for many years after his removal here, included the neighborhood of his earlier residence; many who had known him as their physician there, being unwilling to relinquish him for another, and some of them retaining him, with a constancy of attachment which speaks of something more and better than professional worth, so long as they lived. His circuit of

practice became thus a widely-extended one; so much so, that, as calls multiplied at its centre, he gradually, as a necessity, contracted it, to the exclusion, at length, with some few exceptions, of all but his immediate neighborhood; his going out of it being, mainly, to meet calls for consultation, which, in the latter portion of his life, were very many. In contracting the surface over which his labors spread, he by no means lessened the sum of them. They have been, from the beginning, arduous and incessant, to an extent which few, probably, have had experience of, and which few could have endured; his originally sound constitution, and an invariable simplicity of living, enabling him to undergo, with seeming impunity, a vast amount of exertion and exposure. For more than thirty years he was undetained, by bodily disability, from a single patient. No weather, no distance, no previous fatigue, no indisposition which left ability of motion, prevented him in the performance of his professional duty. Even in some of the severest nights of this present winter, did he promptly respond to the calls made upon him; never pleading himself, nor suffering others for him, one of the many excuses to which he was so well entitled. And, beside the physical exertion incident to his duties, was the intense mental anxiety, which, not unfrequently, attended them. Whether it had its origin in a

sense of professional responsibility alone, or partly in a feeling more tender and humane, he had, certainly, large experience of it. Truly and greatly did he suffer with his suffering patients. In no unmeaning sense did he bear their sicknesses.—Few live so exclusively in and for their profession. Its interests were to him the absorbing ones; its work, his only work. Most men have objects of pursuit beside the main one; bye-paths, alongside the broad one of their calling, into which they occasionally retreat, for the indulgence of some taste, or the accomplishment of some private or public end. It was otherwise with him. He was strictly the physician. He, at no time, held office in town or State; though ever a good and reliable citizen. He took no active part in politics; though he had his opinions, and was true to them, at the polls and elsewhere. To the many subjects that, one after another, arrest and excite the popular mind, he was comparatively indifferent. His thoughts, his conversation, his reading, his studies, his powers of body and mind, his time, his life, were given — not to say wholly, to a degree the most remarkable — to his profession.

His life, as he desired, was one of labor to its close. His hope, often of late expressed, that he might not outlive his usefulness, was graciously fulfilled. He labored to the last; keeping manfully

at bay — touchingly, as we see it now — the threatening infirmities of age, by his resolute determination and self-denying activity. His sickness, contracted by attendance upon a poor foreigner, was of about a week's continuance. It brought him but little, if any, suffering; inducing a lethargic state, which continued, with occasional and short intervals of wakefulness — intervals, also, of perfect consciousness — until, by a slight struggle, his mortal life was closed. He, who had stood over so many death-beds, had come at last to his own. He who had arrested for so many the progress of disease, had no skill that could save himself. His hour had come; and not to him, we believe, unwelcomely.

His profession, I said, was his life. To it he had given the freshness and prime of manhood; to it, amidst failing senses, but an unfailing heart, he gave all the energies which age had spared him; upon its altar — say, rather, upon the altar of Humanity and Duty — literally and truly, did he offer himself up. His profession was his life. And may it not have been kindly ordered — kindly for him — that the mortal arrow by which he fell, should have been received in the conscientious exercise of its functions? Surely, it *was* kindly ordered, that the candle of his life should go out by the sudden gusts of disease, instead of burning on, lower and lower in its socket, into bodily helplessness and intellectual eclipse.

On a gentle eminence, swept by his native airs, his form reposes; that form, which, many a time to come, we shall all but see — so familiar has it been to us. The snows of winter are above and around it; but not they shall be the emblem of our regard for him; rather, the fragrant greenness with which summer shall displace them. And snows and verdure shall mark the flight of many a year above his silent dust, before his image shall lose its freshness to our memory, or the record of his kindnesses grow dim upon our hearts.

Let me now speak, more particularly, of some of his characteristic traits. And one — and it is that which seems to me to have been the prominent and commanding one of his character, as it is that by which we shall most love to remember him — was a disinterested kindness — an habitual overlooking of himself, in his desire to render to another a needed service. How many can testify to this! How many the services, which, at personal inconvenience and discomfort, he has done for those who had no claim upon him but that of their humanity; and who, as he well knew, could render him nothing in return, save thanks — if even these they would! How many the services, extra-professional, which he has voluntarily rendered, in purest kindness and compassion, because there was no

other who could, or who would, perform them; services, in themselves, perhaps, distasteful and revolting, and made tolerable only by the approving witness of conscience and the heart! How many sufferers in homes of poverty have received from him a constancy and fidelity of attention and care, which to none could be exceeded, and which would probably have been less to those who had wherewith to reward him, and could command for themselves services that the former could not! How many a just and looked-for demand has he generously withheld — amounting, aggregately, to thousands — because, though the will, as he knew, was good to meet them, the ability was small! How many have asked, again and again, for the sum of his charges against them, and always in vain, because he saw that, through feebleness or age, they were needing for themselves the little they possessed! Many, many, I doubt not, have been his deeds of mercy, of which He only who "seeth in secret," and their humble recipients, know. Truly did he fulfil the injunction — "When thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth." One of his last acts abroad, while feeling within him the approaches of his fatal sickness, was a distant visit of kindness and charity, whose pecuniary result a private memoranda alone disclosed. He kept from view not only

the specific deed, but, in a great measure, and to the degree of its fulness certainly, the feeling which gave it birth. Both the meandering rill and its gushing fountain were shaded from observation; enough for him, if God saw them, and man was made happier by them. For the stranger, and for some who were not such, it was difficult to believe in the heart of tenderness that was in him. You were led to question, at times, from the absence of its usual betokenings, the existence of the kindness, which, at that very moment, was warmly glowing beneath that seeming coldness, and which would then have revealed itself, had occasion offered, in the doing of a needed service, though it could not be tempted into the utterance of an unneeded word.

That this peculiarity was a fault, none, surely, would have the heart to say. That, to the degree it existed in him, it was a misfortune, all, I think, will admit; that there was less pleasure and satisfaction, by it, from his society and friendship; that it prevented, with many, a true estimate of his worth, and that tribute, consequently, of respect and esteem, which was so justly his due. Most men, perhaps, are estimated, as regards character, for more than they are intrinsically worth: they seem to others, and take pains to seem, better than they really are. The former extreme may be the worse;

but either is bad. Better, to seem what we are; to endeavor to hide, neither a failing, through an overweening desire for others' approval, nor a virtue, through an indifference to it. Better for virtue — for its possessor's happiness, and for its own good name — that it bear its own acknowledged likeness; that it be seen and hailed, in its daily walk, as the heavenly presence which indeed it is; that it take to itself a body befitting its celestial nature. But, after all, what is the body to the soul? The essential thing is the quality, the virtue — inward, vital, pure. Whatever relates to mere externals is of smallest moment, compared with this. He who bears within him a genuine disinterestedness, leading him to do whatever his hands find to do of kindness and help; who regards not, as a motive of action, human commendation, but seeks only to do good, in the love of goodness; to make others happier, for their own sakes, and not that the deed may be reflected back upon himself, in favors or acknowledgments, — he is the man whom the universal heart, whenever it knows him, must respect and love. And such will be known. Earlier or later, however hidden beneath a rough exterior, however secretly their deeds are done, such will be known; and all the more readily will the heart leap to do them justice, because of the injustice it may have done them, though unwittingly, in its earlier judg-

ments. It is a striking, and an instructive fact, one both for encouragement and for warning — that, sooner or later, *character*, be it good or bad; the real, substantial, inward character, declares itself, and receives its just estimate, in the world, and before men. "There is nothing covered that shall not be revealed." — I have spoken of disinterestedness as a leading trait in the character of him who has just gone from us. It was, says one who best should know, conspicuous in his boyhood. Then did he begin to live for others; to think of those around him first, and himself last; to find his pleasure in serving whom he could. Even then did the bud appear of that sacred flower, which has expanded so widely since, and exhaled its fragrance for so many hearts; and which has gone, now, to bloom, with new and brighter lustres, in the upper gardens of the Lord.

The other trait of which I would speak, as marking the character of our departed friend — or, rather, class of traits — is a downright honesty, an unaffected candor, a single-hearted sincerity, a perfect truthfulness, an old-fashioned — alas! must we call it? — simplicity of conduct and speech. So strongly did these qualities characterize him, that the very abstract statement of them seems almost to bring him before us. He had no guile, no falseness, no hypocrisy. He scorned the faintest sem-

blance of deceit. There was truth in his heart; there was truth upon his lips. He affected nothing. Or if in any thing he was other than he seemed, it was, as already intimated, in a virtue, and not a fault. If aught in the inner man lacked its true index in the outward, it was the goodness that was there; and this was not through a conscious purpose, but rather a natural infelicity. Speech, with him, had but one office, — to express his actual thought; to declare the simple truth, as it lay in his own mind; not to conceal it, not to mystify, not to adorn, but only to declare it. He cast about for no choiceness of phrase in which to express himself, but took the simplest and directest that came to his mind. He gave but few words — we may think too few — to the conventional courtesies of life; fewer still to its empty trivialities; none whatever to its mean concealments and evasive arts. He respected the feeling rather than the expression of courtesy. It was with him in heart, rather than in manner or tongue; a genuine friendliness, with naught of an enforced cordiality. They who have enjoyed his hospitality will testify how they have seen forgotten the plainness — shall I say bluntness — of the form, in their assurance of the heartiness of the thing. There was a simplicity about him, which, even in its approaches, at times, to something like rudeness, was not without its charm;

for you saw that it answered to an inward grace,— a singleness of purpose and of aim. His peculiarities were not eccentricities. He did not adopt them for the sake of notoriety. He had too much manliness, too much freedom from self-regard, to have allowed of this.

His sincerity and candor had no limits or hiding-places in the politic and the expedient. He would not conceal what he felt to be the truth, even for the sake of others' feelings; and yet it was from no lack of pitying kindness, but from an honesty that knew not how to dissemble; from a soul whose vernacular was truth. In opposition to his own interests, no less than to others' feelings; in utter recklessness, or, more probably, thoughtlessness, as to any effect it might have upon his professional standing, would he be strictly true to the conviction of his mind. Few of his calling would feel that they could afford to make the admissions, as to the limitations of its knowledge and skill, which dropped from him naturally and carelessly, because he believed them true. He would not stand — he could not — nor would he have his profession, on any false or factitious grounds, but on those only of reality and fact; and if so they could not, he was willing that both he and it should fall. Doubtless he suffered, in some ways — and was aware that he did — by his honesty and truthfulness. There are so many who

court deception — so much of it, at least, as shall confirm their hope, or flatter their self-esteem — that he who will have none of it, must give disappointment, if not offence. And strong indeed must be his love of sincerity and truth, who, seeing the desire, and knowing the reward, yet declines to gratify it. The truthfulness that bends to nothing, must expect to be misunderstood and misnamed; to have its erectness and inflexibleness referred to a less worthy than their actual source. That there is an extreme in this direction, which, being needless, is to be avoided; that there may be truth in the inward parts, and a most loyal allegiance to it, in word and manner, and, at the same time, a certain deference and regard for the harmless conventionalities, and gentle courtesies, and genial amenities of social life, — this is to be allowed and considered. But who does not feel that the danger, with most, is in the opposite direction? And amidst the artificialness and falseness which so abound, the duplicities and pretences, the smooth speech and unmeaning civilities, it is refreshing and delightful to see the man whose word is simply true; whose language means just what it expresses; who has no masks, no concealments, no subterfuges; who turns never aside, however others may, from the straightforward path of honesty and integrity; who, while his heart is warm with a true benevolence, and ready to sacri-

fice personal interests to its dictates, will never, for any being, or any purpose, sacrifice or compromise the truth.

There is one other trait, which ought not to be omitted in any delineation, however general, of the character of our departed friend, — and that is, his reverence for times and places consecrated to religious worship and instruction; a reverence savoring not in the least of superstition, or a narrow religiousness, but intelligent and wise; in part, perhaps, a result of early culture and association, but more a cherished sentiment and principle of his life. That growing disregard for the institutions of religion, which is to be seen around us; that notion that all times and places are alike sacred, which so often ends, if it does not originate, in a practical regard for none as such, in view of religious ends, — found no countenance, in act or word, from him. Even in the matter of uncovering his head as he crossed the threshold of the house of prayer, he was noticeably particular — a thing too trivial to be named, except as the expression of an inward grace. Although the number and nature of his duties would have furnished plausible excuses for non-attendance on the services of public worship, his absence from them was extremely rare, and only where cases of sudden illness or injury compelled it. As a habit of his life, he scrupu-