

# The Standing Ordinances of Religion

by J.H. Newman

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of standing ordinances in Christianity, highlighting their role in perpetuating doctrines, arresting attention, and embodying unseen realities.*

**Scripture:** Exodus 12:26, Leviticus 8:35, Leviticus 22:18, Numbers 24:1, Deuteronomy 31:19, 1 Samuel 13:13, Luke 17:1, Acts 10:44

**Topics:** "Sacred Ordinances", "Divine Grace"

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## Description

J.H. Newman preaches about the importance of adhering to the Standing Ordinances of Religion, emphasizing the perpetuation of doctrines through ordinances, the embodiment of unseen realities, the testimony against sin, and the influence of old institutions on affections. He urges believers to consider the value of ordinances in arresting attention, calling sinners to repentance, and defending against error. Newman highlights the significance of positive ordinances as channels of divine grace, the divine injunction to observe them, the consequences of neglecting them, and the sacramental character that witnesses for the truth. He challenges the notion of spiritual independence from external helps, pointing to the spiritual-mindedness of biblical figures and the unity and communion fostered by the ordinances appointed by Christ and His Apostles.

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## Transcript

MOST of us, perhaps, will find, upon examination, that we do not feel and act, as the Apostles and the early Church felt and acted, with regard to the Ordinances of our Religion. The reader is entreated to give this suggestion a fair consideration; not to hurry on, nor turn away from the recollection, that we shall all one day be judged, not merely by what we actually knew, but by what we might have known, respecting our duties to CHRIST and His Church. Let him consider, whether his own reason, and the Holy Scriptures, which were expressly written in order that we might possess full religious knowledge, do not say more on this subject than he has yet duly weighed and acted upon.

First, consider what Reason says; which surely, as well as Scripture, was given us for religious ends.

1. Can you possibly imagine any better method of perpetuating doctrines, than by ordinances, which live on like monuments? Consider, for instance, what is implied in Christian Salvation; remember whose property and subjects we are when we come into the world; and then endeavour, if you can, to estimate the value of those two Blessed Ordinances, which are the standing and definite publication, to every one of us, to our fathers, and our children, of the infinite mercies of GOD, as manifested in the Covenant of the

Gospel. E. g. a generation of ungodly men (suppose) rise up and possess the earth; Satan, through their means; corrupts all that he can, in the world; but meantime, something is living on, in the very midst of them, independent of the variable opinions of the human mind; something, which they cannot spoil, and which, after they are gone to their account, and all their wretched folly has spent itself upon their own head, will come forth pure and unsullied, full of sweetness and edifying comfort to the remnant which shall then rise up, who will feed upon it by faith, and form anew the living temple of the HOLY GHOST, in their generation. Thus the consecrated Form of Religion will be like some fair statue, which lies buried for ages, but comes forth at length as beautiful as ever; they will be furnished with all requisites for teaching us those lessons, which the preceding age has been engaged in obliterating.

2. If it be true that our weak and carnal minds do not readily dwell upon, nor comprehend, spiritual things by themselves, can we conceive any thing more precious to us on earth, than the outward forms which GOD Himself has appointed to arrest our attention, to embody unseen realities, to serve as a kind of ladder between earth and heaven, between our spirit and the Spirit of Holiness? It is much to our purpose to observe, that Almighty GOD Himself directly declares that this is His design, in the institution of Forms and Ordinances. And the consideration of such passages of Scripture may perhaps set us on asking ourselves whether we can be really desiring the end, if we find ourselves at all irregular in seeking the means which He has appointed. (Vide Exod. xii. 26. xiii. 5--10. and 11--16. Levit. xxiii. 43. Josh. iv. 1--7.)

3. Further, religious ordinances are, to the consciences of individuals, a recurring testimony against sin. Can we conceive any thing more precious in an ungodly world, in the perverse world of our own heart? Dare we then suffer to decay, and go to nought, the means which GOD has provided for calling sinners to repentance, and even the best men to self-examination? Shall we suffer ourselves to think and speak lightly of them, and neglect to defend them when they are attacked? To remove a barrier against error, is in its measure to encourage and tempt men to it; and comes under the denunciation pronounced by our Blessed LORD, (Luke xvii. 1, 2.) "Woe unto him through whom offences come; it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should make to stumble one of these little ones."

Just the same care did GOD take of His peculiar people of old. "Write ye this song for you, and teach it the children of Israel; put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for Me against the children of Israel. For when I shall have brought them into the land which I swear unto their fathers, that floweth with milk and honey, and they shall have eaten and filled themselves, and waxed fat; then will they turn unto other gods, and serve them, and provoke Me, and break My covenant. And it shall come to pass, when many evils and troubles are befallen them, that this song shall testify against them as a witness; for it shall not be forgotten out of the mouths of their seed." (Deut. xxxi. 19--21.)

"Which of you," says Hooker, "receiveth a guest whom he honoureth, and whom he loveth, and doth not sweep his chamber against his coming? And shall we suffer the chambers of our hearts and consciences to lie full of vomiting, full of filth, full of garbage, knowing that CHRIST hath said, 'I and My Father will come and dwell with you'?... Blessed and praised for ever and ever be His Name, who, perceiving of how senseless and heavy metal we are made, hath instituted in His Church a Spiritual Supper, and an Holy Communion, to be celebrated often, that we might thereby be occasioned often to examine these buildings of ours, in what case they stand. For sith GOD doth not dwell in temples which are unclean; sith a shrine cannot be a sanctuary to Him; and this Supper is received as a seal unto us, that we are His house and His sanctuary; that His CHRIST is as truly united unto me, and I to Him, as my arm is united

and knit unto my shoulder; that He dwelleth in me as verily as the elements of bread and wine abide within me; which persuasion, by receiving these dreadful mysteries, we profess ourselves to have; a due comfort, if truly; and if in hypocrisy, then woe with us.

4. These arguments, in behalf of the duty of keeping to the Standing Ordinances of Religion, are strengthened by the consideration of the peculiar influence which old and familiar institutions exert over the affections. If Christianity were left to select and reject its ordinances, as one age succeeded to another, there would be no safeguard for the permanence and identity of the religious temper itself. GOD indeed might invisibly preserve it; but so He might (did He so choose) without ordinances of any kind. But, since He has vouchsafed to employ them, it is but judging according to the revealed course of His Providence, to say, that His purpose is more fully answered by their being of a standing than of a variable nature. Thus we find an argument from the reason of the case, for rigidly adhering to those which have been transmitted to us.

5. Consider for one moment what becomes of any of us, if we be not blest and supported with the Divine Grace; and then consider through what channels it is most natural to expect, and safest to seek this Grace: whether through Standing Ordinances, those to which the Church has ever had recourse as appointed by CHRIST and His Apostles, or those which we follow without inquiry as to their antiquity or acceptableness. The analogy of former dispensations leads us to the same conclusion. Abraham at Hebron (Gen. xv. 8, 9.) seeks a sign; Almighty GOD refers him to the usual ordinance of worship, sacrifice, and therein sends him a sign. So again, He might have revealed Himself to Moses in any place; but if Moses would find Him, it must be in the Tabernacle. Cornelius prayed and fasted, certainly not expecting a supernatural vision; but one was sent him, with the message of salvation. On the other hand, it is the peculiarity of false prophets and unsound teachers to seek change and novelty in the rites with which they approach GOD. "When Balaam saw that it pleased the LORD to bless Israel, he went not as at other times to seek for enchantments, but he set his face towards the wilderness." (Numb. xxiv. 1.) Accordingly he is obliged to speak with a wavering belief: "Peradventure the LORD will come to meet me."

So much for what Reason suggests to us. Now let us observe what GOD Himself has directly told us in Scripture concerning Standing Religious Ordinances.

1. He positively enjoins them. Turn to the Jewish ceremonies, and remember that they were, (1.) Often unintelligible in their full import, yet positively enjoined, even on pain of death. E. g. Circumcision (Gen. xvii. 14.), the Passover (Exod. xii. 15. Numb. ix. 13.) And remember that our faith and obedience are chiefly tried in things not understood, as, for instance, in the prohibition of the tree of knowledge. (2.) They were afterwards found to be significant. See the Epistle to the Hebrews throughout. Just as wise teachers store the minds of children with things which they will not fully understand till a future day, so does our Divine Master admit us to the Symbols of that eternal worship and service of Him, which shall constitute the blessedness of the next life, a blessedness which it hath not entered into man's heart to conceive. (3.) The ordinances of the Christian Church are held in such high honour, that even to those whom He had first enriched with His miraculous gift, it was yet a farther and indispensable blessing to receive a solemn admission into her sacred mysteries. Mark, for instance, St. Peter's converts, Acts x. 44--48. They had received the HOLY GHOST, and spake with other tongues: "Then answered Peter, Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized which have received the HOLY GHOST as well as we? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the LORD." Vide also Acts xiii. 2, 3.

2. GOD provided that the Jews should be able to keep His ordinances; rather interrupting the course of nature, and controlling the feelings of whole nations, than that the ordinances of His service should be set aside on a single occasion. If He commands the observance of the Sabbath in the wilderness, He provides for the people a double store of manna on the day before, and miraculously preserves it from corruption. (Exod. xvi. 5. 24.) If He directs that the land be allowed to lie fallow every seventh year, He sends a triple harvest in the sixth year. (Levit. xxv. 21.) If He enjoins all the males to leave their homes, and appear before Him thrice in the year, he suspends all the jealous and hostile feelings of the neighbouring nations, and promises that they should not even "desire" the land of the Israelites. (Exod. xxxiv. 24.)

3. We cannot dare to conjecture how much evil may come from neglecting positive ordinances. King Saul departed from the express command of GOD, respecting the way in which sacrifice should be made to Him. He could even make a plausible excuse for what he did; but turn to I Sam. xiii. 13, and see what it drew down upon him: "Thou hast done foolishly; thou hast not kept the commandment of the LORD thy GOD which He commanded thee; for now would the LORD have established thy kingdom upon Israel for ever. But now thy kingdom shall not continue; the LORD hath sought Him a man after His own heart, and the LORD hath commanded Him to be captain over His people, because thou hast not kept that which the LORD commanded thee." Think again of Nadab and Abihu; they did not neglect the worship of GOD; but they thought they might surely take the fire for the sacrifice from whence they would; "surely this was a minor point," as some among us are presumptuous enough to say. But He who gave laws to them and us, knows nothing of minor points. There can be no little sin, for there is no little authority to sin against. Nadab and Abihu were struck dead for offering with strange fire. This is agreeable to the analogy of the physical world, which is open to our senses. It is a simple and apparently harmless thing to place a candle near gunpowder, or to bring certain gases together; but the result may cost us our life.

4. Such was the importance of observing positive ordinances in the Jewish Church. Surely the lesson delivered in the Old Testament is intended for us Christians. We have the same unchanging Father, who was the GOD of Israel, and who has given us the Scriptures that we may have the means of searching out His will. First consider the light in which He views in the law of Moses what we are apt to call "minor points." "Therefore shall ye abide at the door of the Tabernacle of the Congregation day and night, seven days, and keep the charge of the Lord, that ye die not." (Levit. viii. 35.) After the death of Nadab and Abihu, the charge is given "unto Aaron, and unto Eleazar and Ithamar, his sons, Uncover not your heads, neither rend your clothes, lest ye die, and lest wrath come upon all the people." (Levit. x. 6.) "Do not drink wine nor strong drink, thou nor thy sons with thee, when ye go into the Tabernacle of the Congregation, lest ye die." (Ibid.)

This was the uniform tone of the Divine Guardian of the Church then. Is the duty less urgent now? when, (1.) the added claim on our gratitude is all that the New Testament tells us. (2.) The Ordinances are so much fewer, and therefore, first, the trouble of them is so incomparably diminished; next, the preciousness of them (humanly speaking) so much more strikingly seen: they are the only jewels of this sort that we have left.

5. Remark may be made upon the very circumstance, that, in the Christian Covenant, Standing Ordinances are made the channels of its peculiar blessings. The first use of Ordinances is that of witnessing for the Truth, as above mentioned. Now their sacramental character is perfectly distinct from this, and is doubtless a great honour put on them. Had we been left to conjecture, we might have supposed, that in the more perfect or spiritual system, the gifts of grace would rather have been attached to certain high moral performances; whereas they are deposited in mere positive ordinances, as if to warn

us against dropping the ceremonial of Christianity.

This last observation leads to the brief notice of an objection sometimes brought against the necessity of a Christian's attention to Ordinances, grounded on the notion of the spiritual character of Christianity. Now,--1. Are we quite sure that we are more spiritual, and more independent of the external helps of the Church, than Samuel,--Hezekiah,--Josiah,--and Daniel?-- 2. What does our own experience say? Do we see the best and holiest of men becoming most independent and regardless of them, or the very reverse? 3. Are the feelings of love, affection, reverence, tender remembrance, which are entertained towards such places and things as are associated in our minds with the persons who are the primary objects of these feelings, inconsistent with spiritual-mindedness? Are not the Ordinances which Christ and His Apostles have appointed, the bond of perpetuated unity to the Church, a precious and mysterious medium for the "Communion of Saints" in all countries and ages? No one among us would think it a mark of weakness to cherish with attachment and respect a Bible which his father had used for half a century, from which he had learned the words of life and the way of salvation. And is it not a soothing and elevating privilege, to feel that we, even at this distant day, are allowed to come and walk in the very steps of all the holy men of old, the glorious company of the Apostles, and the noble army of martyrs, to take that narrow path, whose farther end they have now found to be in heaven? In walking over the very ground where the holy Apostles lived and walked as Bishops, or in following our LORD Himself into Gethsemane, along the beach of the sea of Gennesareth, or in pausing with Him on the Mount Olivet, as He weeps over Jerusalem, we find ourselves moved with some thing too deep and touching for words, and almost for thought; and is it no privilege, no blessing, to think with Him, to have our spirit admitted to move in the same path which His Holy Spirit hath chosen; to be consecrated with Him and to Him in the water of Baptism, to eat the Holy Supper with Him, to fast with Him, to pray with Him in the very form and very thoughts which flowed from His divine mind and lips?

If these things are so, how can we hold up our heads, and dare-to think of the way in which we have handled His Ordinances, handled that Form in which He has deigned to live on in the world, and to move before the eyes of His Church! If we can recollect the moment when we have been so dead in heart as to have found ourselves considering, not how often our Saviour would let us come and hold communion with Him, but how few times would satisfy Him,--whether "this one" omission would draw down His displeasure,--if there be one of us who lives in this spirit, "how dwelleth the love of God in him?"

Once more, if, when all times, all places, all forms are in themselves alike, yet it has pleased the High and Lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose Name is Holy, to choose to Himself certain forms, places, and times, for His especial dwelling upon earth,--with what reverend and solemn feelings should we go to meet Him there, and approach His altar with our gift! We read (Lev. xxii. 18. 25.) that the GOD of Israel would admit no blemished creature to be sacrificed to Him; nor will He now accept the offering of our hearts unless

we cleanse ourselves from all unbelief, insincerity, and guile: "wash our hands in innocency, and so go to His altar."

OXFORD.

The Feast of St. Mark.

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