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January 4, 1852 in the First Congregational Unitarian Church, by William
Henry Furness**

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A DISCOURSE FOR THE TIME, DELIVERED
JANUARY 4, 1852 IN THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UNITARIAN CHURCH ***

**A
DISCOURSE
FOR THE TIME**

DELIVERED JANUARY 4 1852

IN THE

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UNITARIAN CHURCH

BY

W. H. FURNESS

PASTOR

**PHILADELPHIA
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1852**

DISCOURSE.

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**ROM. 14:7.
'NONE OF US LIVETH TO HIMSELF.'**

In speaking from these words last Sunday morning, and in endeavoring to enforce the great truth which they express, I began with referring to certain facts which characterize that most brutal and ruthless military revolution which has just commenced in France, and the recent news of which made every heart, that cherishes any regard for Freedom and Humanity, burn with indignation. The first statements to which I alluded have been more than confirmed. Unarmed, unoffending citizens, utterly ignorant of what was going on, and taking no part in it, were shot down by hundreds in the streets, and then transfixed with bayonets. If but a window was opened, a shower of bullets was poured into it. Cannon were brought to bear upon whole blocks of private dwellings. In one instance, a woman who rushed out of the house to the help of her husband, who had fallen under the fire of the soldiery, was instantly despatched and laid dead at his side. Bloodshed and terror filled the place, and scenes were enacted, so eyewitnesses report, that baffle description, and that can find a parallel only when cities are sacked.

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Now, I refer to these facts, not to harrow up your feelings, my hearers, but because these facts, and such as these, speak trumpet-tongued, as to the vital interest and the sacred religious duty which every private man, no matter how humble and obscure,—nay, which every woman has, in those great questions that agitate nations, in what are designated as matters of public concern and the public welfare.

I know very well that there are those who deplore it, and consider it a great grievance, that here, in this country, there is so much agitation of public matters in private circles, and by private, unofficial persons. To be sure, one would like to have quiet, if he could. But there is no help for it. We must take our lot as we find it. And such is the nature of our social fabric; drawing all the power of the government from the people, from the individuals that compose the people, that it is made the direct and plain duty of every man and woman of us to know about those things, which are public, for this very reason, because they concern the many,—the high and the low, the rich and the poor, the security, the happiness, the improvement, the civil and the religious liberties of every man in the land. A necessity is upon us; and if we have been accustomed to confine our ideas of duty and religion to the Church and the Sabbath, the sooner we get our minds sufficiently enlarged to see the religious obligation which binds us to the great Public of mankind, the better for us, for our neighbors, and for all men.

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So, then, the fact that private men are interested in public affairs, even though it be attended with a good deal of excitement,—that is not the thing to be deplored. But what is to be lamented is, that false way of thinking, out of place in this country, out of time in this age, by which thousands justify themselves in continuing ignorant and indifferent to things of a vital private concern, simply because they are of a public and general character. What is more common than to hear men say, in reference to such matters, 'They are no concerns of ours. We care nothing about them. Let those busy themselves about them who are so disposed. As for us, we are not going to perplex our brains, and fret and worry ourselves. We will mind our own business.' And, in the proud consciousness of this virtuous resolution, they wrap themselves up in their comforts, and keep aloof and indifferent, and flatter themselves that they are the wise and the prudent, they are the enlightened, judicious ones. They are no meddlers. They do not trouble themselves about what does not concern them.

But though we will not meddle with public affairs, who shall answer for it that public affairs will not meddle with us? With such facts as I began with mentioning, glaring in our faces, sickening our very hearts with horror and indignation, who will say that public affairs may not interfere with us, with our very lives, yes, and with what ought to be dearer to us than our lives? Let them take their own course, as you say. And then, as surely as we breathe, bad men will gain the ascendancy,—ignorant, unprincipled, ambitious men, despisers of human life and human rights, ready to shed blood to any extent to gratify the devilish lust of power. Into such hands will public affairs fall. And then there is no man—there is no woman, so retired but she shall find to her cost, that she has an interest, the very deepest,—that her all is involved in these things,—that they may tear from her her father, her husband, her brother or her son, aye, and her own life also, which she is pampering so delicately.

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There is some excuse for the people of France, ground down as they have been by ages of oppression, denied the right to think, to judge, to act for themselves, made to believe that their rulers held their power by the grace of God—there is some excuse for them. But, whatever may be their excuse, there can be no doubt that it is the ignorance, the indifference, the cowardice, the selfishness of the people at large that have caused their public affairs to wade so often towards a settlement, through such frightful streams of innocent and unoffending blood. Here, in our land, the peace and security of private life are as fully and extensively insured as they are, precisely for this reason, because of the lively and general interest which the people in their private capacity take in things of public concern. In this country more than in any other, the people keep a watchful and commanding eye upon public matters. And, with all the excitement and agitation which it involves, it is the great pledge of our private and personal security.

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But if the indifference to public affairs, which is now confined only to a class—only to a portion of the people—to too large a portion, indeed, but still only to a portion,—if it were to become general, if things were allowed to go on their way, without any interest taken in them by private persons, by those whose intelligence goes to create a commanding public opinion, then you would soon find your private interests, the comfort and lives of individuals, threatened and assailed. If your public affairs, as they are directed in your Public Councils, were uncontrolled by the sentiments of private men, they would soon be coming down into our streets and into our private dwellings with a most disastrous influence. They would make their appearance in the shape of armed men. They would be heard in the rattle of musketry and the roar of cannon; and the door-posts of the humblest and of the richest homes of the people might be spattered with the blood of inoffensive men, women, and children,—of the very persons who maintain that they have nothing to do with public matters.

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Already, well off as we may be in comparison with other nations, have not our public concerns, through the criminal neglect and insensibility of the people, taken such a direction as, if it does not put us in peril of having our blood spilt in the streets, yet endangers the sacred rights of Free Thought and Free Speech, and makes it hazardous to property and to personal liberty to obey the plainest dictates of humanity? There are things, as I have already intimated, which ought to be dearer to us than life, which may be exposed to suffer loss; and which are exposed to harm at this very hour by the bad administration of our public concerns.

No doubt, these quiet people who have been so savagely butchered in the streets of Paris, little dreamed, when they left their homes that day, that they would be shot down as the enemies of the Government. They had nothing to do with the Government. They had no thought of crossing its path. They were pursuing the even tenor of their own quiet way. They desired only to mind their own business. And yet, had they been taking the most active interest in public affairs, they could not possibly have come to so miserable an end, as I will presently show.

The simple, religious truth is, and the sooner every man accepts it, and makes up his mind and his life to it, the better for him, for our country, and for the world—the plain truth is, that '*no man liveth or can live to himself*'—that the interests, the highest interests, the personal character and salvation, the very life of the individual, in the most obvious and in the profoundest sense of the word, life, is wrapt up with the interests of the whole; in other words, with the public interest, with public affairs. We cannot—no man can separate himself and stand apart, and insist upon being ignorant and indifferent. It lies within our own will to say, whether we will meet and endeavor to answer the claims which the welfare of the whole has upon us, whether we will take a lively interest in the public interest; but it is not a matter of our own will whether we shall suffer or not. We may choose whether or not we will act; but the consequences, and they may be most deadly,—the consequences of our action or our no-action we cannot escape. They may fall upon us with a crushing power at our very firesides, and ruin our private and domestic peace for ever. So long as we live in society, and build our houses near our neighbors, we may or may not take an interest in the public provision which is made against fire, but we cannot avoid the danger and the consequences of a conflagration. Because a man keeps himself retired, never reading, never thinking about what is going on on the public theatre of the world, he has no security against being shot down like a dog in the streets, as the case of those unfortunate citizens of Paris shows.

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Certainly then, since we are liable to suffer from public affairs taking a wrong direction, whether we take an interest in them or not, it is worth our while to suffer for a cause. There is small comfort in incurring danger and in losing one's life for nothing. If we must suffer, when public events go wrong, it is best by far to suffer for something. For in times of universal alarm and disorder, when property and life are put in peril, they suffer the least, though they lose everything, who are inspired by the conviction that they have tried to be faithful and to do their duty. They have a life in them which bullets and bayonets and cannon-balls cannot reach. When men perish for a cause to which they were utterly indifferent, for which they cared nothing, of which they knew nothing, then they perish as the brutes perish. Then death comes to them as a fatal accident; and the only moral that can be drawn from their fate, is that it is folly for men to think to live unto themselves. No glory shines from their graves; no renown immortalizes their memories. But when men suffer and die for a cause, into which they have thrown their whole souls, when they perish for a principle, then their death is noble, and they do not die like the brutes, but like men. Then they are heroes and martyrs, and though dead, they speak with mighty angel voices; and their blood hallows for ever the spot on which it is shed, 'down to earth's profound, and up to Heaven,' and they become immortal in the affection and reverence of mankind, and in the influence which they exert upon the course of human affairs. For this reason it is, that I said just now, that those quiet people who have been killed in the streets of Paris, could not have perished so miserably had they taken an active interest in the great public question of Liberty. Then they would have had a spring of life in their own hearts; then they would have suffered for a cause for which it is worth any man's while to suffer, and die any death that a relentless power might inflict.

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I know that it is a very wise injunction, that every man should mind his own business; and that, if every man would only do that, the world would go on as well as heart could wish. I believe this, firmly. But then, since, in the very constitution of things, every man's 'own business' is inextricably interwoven with every other man's 'own business,' who shall draw the line? Who shall define the circle and the sphere of the private individual? Has not our Creator defined it already in our very being, inasmuch as, by the indestructible ties of human sympathy and a common nature, he has bound up the life, the interests, the business of the individual, with the life, the interests, the business of the whole? By his very nature, then, is it not every man's own business to know what the world is busy about, and to take an interest in the world's affairs, because they are his own? Is it not a truth written in the constitution of every individual man, the well-known declaration of the Roman slave: 'I am a man, and I hold nothing human foreign to me?' And does not our common Christianity teach over and over again in a thousand ways, that we are all members one of another, and that no man lives for himself? And is there any one fact, which the progress of events is now making, more manifest than the oneness of all mankind? Why, my hearers, it is because this simple and indestructible fact is not seen; because individuals are for ever trying to live, and work, and enjoy, not with and for, but at the expense of, their fellow-men, that things are so continually getting out of joint, and the world is so full of uproar and misery. My brothers, we are all One; and if we are resolved to mind each his own business, we must attend to the business which God and nature have given to us. We must interest ourselves in the cause of our common humanity. I do not say, that we must make this great cause our business. It is made our business already by our Maker.

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Consider then how the case stands. If we fling our whole hearts with a generous ardor into the conflict for the welfare of our brother, seeing to it with all vigilance that public affairs go wisely and justly, then if the fortunes of this good cause prosper, it is well with us; we triumph with it. But if it should be defeated, and we should be involved in its defeat, and suffer danger, loss, and even death itself, still how powerfully should we be sustained by the consciousness of suffering in

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so grand a behalf, for such a glorious reason! Who would not rather suffer with the Right than prosper with the Wrong? But if we will not fling our hearts into anything of a general and generous interest, if we insist that we will keep at a distance from all such matters, that we will be ignorant and insensible, we gain no additional security. Still our private lot is inextricably bound up with the public interest; and when those interests suffer, we must suffer with them, but with no sustaining power in our own minds. We may be shot down with the heroes and martyrs of Humanity without the heroes' joy or the martyrs' radiant crown. 'No man liveth to himself.' Since such is the simple Bible truth, and since it is a truth, which it becomes us to look at fully, and adopt as a fundamental principle and law of our thinking and of our living, let no one turn a deaf ear, and say I am talking politically now, because I refer to considerations of a public, and if you please, of a political character, to urge home upon your reason and your consciences your sacred duty as men, and as Christians, to take a hearty, intelligent, self-sacrificing interest in what is going on on the public theatre of the nation to which you belong, and of the world to which you belong as well, and in whose fortunes, we are every one of us so deeply interested.

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But this is no hour for apologies. This is no time for grown-up men to be dodging and hiding, and evading a great duty, under words and phrases. Political! what if I am political? what if every pulpit in the land should be ringing in these days with political events? God knows there is need. We should be lost to the ordinary feelings of men, if we could remain silent when political events are arresting and absorbing public attention, and threatening to rouse all the passions of the human heart, and to shake the earth out of its place. This present time, in which we are living, is no holiday, when a man can throw himself down in the shade, and dream his soul away. The fires, that are kindling on the earth, flash their portentous light into the inmost retirement of private life. The world is resounding with great events. And cold indeed must be our hearts, we are not worthy to live at so momentous, so unprecedented a period, if we refuse to be reminded of those indissoluble ties of a common nature and a common interest, which the course of things is laying bare to all men's view. As you are men, human beings, your hearts must beat with a new and stirring sympathy for the great Public of Christendom, of which you are each an inseparable portion, when you see the second great nation of Europe, after all the terrible experience of the last three-quarters of a century, again falling prostrate in the dust beneath the blow of a base usurper, with no great exploits at his back to extenuate the insolence of the brutal deed; again laid low beneath a despot's feet by that vulgar instrument of power, a standing army. I think there can hardly be found in modern history any parallel to this outrage upon truth, freedom, and humanity—to this implied contempt for human rights and human nature. A robber-hand has seized the great French nation, and flung it down into the dust to be trampled upon at pleasure. At such startling tidings, what man is there so humble or so weak, who can repress the solemn appeal to God, which must rise instinctively from every heart of flesh? Who can help having his attention arrested and engrossed? Who does not long to be saying something, doing something, or suffering something, for the outraged rights, the imperilled interests of our Common Humanity, our One Nature?

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But above all, who that has seen, who that has heard the great Hungarian exile, who has come to us, bringing his unhappy country in his heart, that does not feel his kindred to his oppressed brethren everywhere? I have looked full into those large, sad eyes, in which one seems to look into the great deep of a nation's sorrows. I have heard that voice, coming from his inmost soul, with which he pleaded for his dear native land, and I cannot so much as try to tell you of the profound impression which he made on me. I can set no limits to the power of such a man as I have just seen and heard. It may be (God grant it!) that it is not a mere transitory emotion of enthusiasm that he is awakening among the people of this land. It may be that the influence he is exerting is yet to penetrate the rock of our selfishness and insensibility, and call forth, in full flood, like one of our own great rivers, the mighty stream of our sympathy that shall sweep away from our land and from the earth, every vestige of oppression. Such a thing seems almost possible, when we observe how the advocates of Slavery on our own soil tremble at his approach, and fear to welcome him. Most devoutly do I hope that he may exert such an influence. It is my fervent prayer. It is yours, too, brethren, I do not doubt. But I cannot resist the conviction that he must fail of achieving the object so near his heart, and for which he is spending the strength of a giant, wearing away his life, if indeed a life, so deep and so intense, capable of so much labour, can be worn away.

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Yes, friends, he must fail. And happy will it be for him, great, wonderful as he is, if he comes out unscathed from the fiery and searching trial of his principles, upon which he entered the moment he stepped upon our soil. Yes, he must fail. How can it be otherwise? He must fail; not because this people are averse to the possibility of war, for they have just come out from a war waged, not to extend Freedom you know. He must fail, not because we revere the counsels of the Father of our Country. But he must fail because there is a tremendous obstacle in his way to our free, unfettered sympathy, upon which that fond hope of his, that great heart of his, the treasury of a nation's woes, must be broken at last.

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When he spoke in this city the other evening, he repeated what he had said more than once before, that he had come hither resolved to interfere with no domestic concern of ours, with none of our party questions. But there is one 'domestic concern,' one 'party question,' which, while it is, in an obvious sense, a 'domestic concern,' does, in fact, necessarily and vitally involve those rights of Humanity for which this great man pleads, and which he is considered as representing when he urges upon us the claims of his oppressed country. In reason, and in the nature of things, it is connected with him and with his great purpose.

So clearly is this so, that they, who see what a monstrous Wrong our 'domestic concern' is, what a world of evil it has done and is doing, have watched our illustrious guest with trembling solicitude. For his own sake they are appalled lest he should waver from a faithful application of his own cherished faith; not that they desire him to join them, but they justly expect from him as a true man, that he should allow no shadow of doubt to rest upon his principles and his position.

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For myself, I cannot help thinking, that he looks upon American Slavery as a thing, which we, ourselves, are at this moment busily engaged in abolishing. He finds men, eminent in office and in ability, ranked on the Anti-Slavery side. He knows that they are backed by the great authority of our Declaration of Independence, and assisted by the powerful influence of the freest institutions on the face of the earth; and he naturally regards it as needless and arrogant to interfere in the affairs of so mighty a nation—a nation so vigorous as to be able, one would think, to settle any difficulties that may lie in its way, without assistance from abroad.

But, although he has expressed his determination not to meddle with our domestic institutions, our domestic institutions threaten to meddle with him. Scarcely had he landed on our shores, when a voice was heard in our National Councils, proposing his arrest for incendiary speech; a proposal, the gross insult of which, not only to him, but to us all, was only relieved by its unutterable folly. This is not the only hint of the insolent interference in his concerns, with which the upholders of Oppression on this side of the world have menaced him. He looks, I believe, upon American Slavery as an affair which he, he especially who helped to elevate the peasantry of his own country, knows that we have the power to settle. But, however much he may have heard about it, he does not yet know that we have not the will to settle it. He does not yet know how deep-seated it is, and how mighty and extensive its influence is in deadening our hearts, and controlling our national action. Although he is a man of profound sagacity, yet, with all the information that may have been furnished him, it can only be by degrees, and by actual observation, that his mind will win its way to a true and terrible conviction of the actual state of the case. But he will—he must see how the matter stands; and he will declare, most fervently do I trust, what he cannot help seeing. The fact must become as plain to him as noonday, that there is no one thing in which the oppressed nations of Europe have a deeper interest, than in the abolition of American Slavery; because this is the one thing which prevents the full expression of our sympathy in their behalf, and neutralizes that moral aid, which, if we rendered it to the full extent of our power, would make all material aid entirely superfluous. Some of his words the other evening were very significant. Having said that he had done nothing, and would do nothing to interfere with our domestic affairs, he added that remarkable declaration:—'I more and more perceive, in the words of Hamlet, that there are more things in heaven and earth, than *were* dreamed of in *my* philosophy.'

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How could he have dreamed that a people who had made such a solemn declaration of human rights before all the world, a people so lavish in the praise of Liberty, were clinging with such desperation to Oppression, as if it were the very life and soul of their Union and their Power. No matter how much he may have been told, and he is in nothing more remarkable than in the extent of his information, he has not yet known—he cannot know—it could not have entered into his generous heart to imagine, that this Domestic Institution of ours is the one thing that exerts the most marked and predominating influence on our domestic and our foreign policy. He does not see, but he must, that it is the one thing that will make his appeal to our National Government utterly in vain, and that his silence in regard to it will avail him nothing. It must become plain to him that we are ready enough to intervene when the Slave Power requires it for the increase and extension of its own strength. For that we are ready to go to war with our neighbors, and rob them of their territory. In that behalf our statesmen have sought to enlist the interests and sympathies of foreign nations. And that it is, whose interests will prevent us from a full and generous expression of our interest in the downtrodden of other lands. We are interfering with human rights at home, we are constitutionally bound to interfere with them, and we hold it for our advantage to do so; and we cannot intervene to prevent interference with them abroad. On this account alone, could a man of such rare power, of such wonderful eloquence, coming among us upon such a mission, fail. Yes, this favorite domestic institution, corrupting the whole administration of our government at home and abroad,—this it is that will disappoint and defeat the Hungarian patriot's idolised hope. He has come hither as to the very temple of Freedom, and he finds coiled up under her very altar, as its guardian, the serpent of Oppression, and already its deadly hiss has rung in his surprised ear.

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American Slavery has much to answer for; but if it adds this to the mountain of its iniquities, if it is the cause why the hope of bleeding and fettered Europe is blasted, if it break the noble heart of Hungary's devoted servant and chief, and more than all, if it cause him to falter in the cause of universal humanity, what tongue now silent will not join in execrating it? what heart, hitherto cold, will not consecrate itself to the work of its abolition?

The nations of the old world, degraded, trampled upon, and bleeding under the relentless feet of arbitrary power, long and pray for emancipation. The glorious vision of Liberty flits before their aching sight. They stretch out their hearts and hands to us. But the supporters of the old and oppressive forms of government sneer at our boasted universal freedom, as well they may, and point to our millions of bondmen. They can say, with truth, that Liberty does not exist here or anywhere as a realized fact; that it is a chimera and an abstraction, utterly impracticable; that the people are longing for a dream that has never been and can never be fulfilled. Neither the foreign oppressor, nor the foreign oppressed have any foundation in fact for the faith and the hope of liberty; and much I fear we should do little for the deliverance of other nations, even if, as

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we now stand, clinging to Slavery, we were actually to intervene in their behalf. If we saw any chance of strengthening and extending our 'domestic institution,' we might in that case be ready enough to give them our help.

O how plain is it that the one thing which the world claims of us, the one thing that the great Hungarian has to ask of us, for his own people and for all Europe, is that we should prove that *Liberty without Slavery* is a practicable thing. Let this fact be realized, and the world's redemption is sure. Show mankind twenty-five millions of human beings, living together under such free and simple institutions as ours, with not a single slave among them, and then all that we need do is done, and our simple existence as a nation becomes an irresistible intervention against the violation of human rights. To induce us to do this, the Hungarian patriot may well go down on those knees which he would not bend to Emperor or Czar, and adjure us for the love of God and man, by all the dearest hopes and interests of the human race, by the great name of the holy Jesus, to make our liberty complete, to redeem our long-violated pledge, to wipe away the blot that eclipses the sun of our Freedom, and prove, as we may, that all men are children of one Father, brethren of one household, born to the glorious liberty of the sons of the living God. If, in any way, he should be the means in the hands of a gracious Providence of inducing us to do this, he will do more for us than we could do for him, though we were to place all the gold of the East, and of the West, at his disposal.

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