

George Whitefield

Sermon 20

Worldly Business no Plea for the Neglect of Religion

Matthew 8:22, "Let the dead bury their dead."

St. Paul preaching at Athens, tells them, that as he passed by and beheld their devotions, he perceived they were in all things too superstitious. But was this apostle to rise, can come publishing the glad tidings of salvation in any of our populous cities, he would see no reason why he should charge the inhabitants with this; but rather as he passed by and observed the tenor of their life, say, I perceive in all things ye are too worldly-minded; ye are too eagerly bent on pursuing your lawful business; so eagerly, as either wholly to neglect, or at least too heedlessly to attend on the one thing needful.

There cannot then be a greater charity shown to the Christian world, than to sound an alarm in their ears, and to warn them of the inexpressible danger, of continually grasping after the things of this life, without being equally, nay a thousand times more concerned for their well-being in a future state.

And there is still the more occasion for such an alarm, because worldly-mindedness so easily and craftily besets the hearts of men. For out of a specious pretense of serving God in laboring for the meat which perisheth, they are insensibly lulled into such a spiritual slumber, as scarce to perceive their neglect to secure that which endureth to everlasting life.

The words of the text, if not at first view, yet when examined and explained, will be found applicable to this case, as containing an admirable caution not to pursue the affairs of this world, at the expense of our happiness in the next.

They are the words of Jesus Christ himself: the occasion of their being spoken was this; As he was conversing with those that were gathered round about him, he gave one of them an immediate summons to follow him: but he, either afraid to go after such a persecuted master, or rather loving this present world, says, "Suffer me first to go home and bury my father," or, as most explain it, let me first go and dispatch some important business I have now in hand. But Jesus said unto him, "Let the dead bury their dead;" leave worldly business to worldly men, let thy secular business be left undone, rather than thou shouldst neglect to follow me.

Whether this person did as he was commanded, I know not; but this I know, that what Christ said here is person, he has often whispered with the small still voice of his holy Spirit, and said to many here present, that rise up early and late take rest, and eat the bread of carefulness, Come draw off your affections from the things of this life; take up your cross and follow me. But they, willing to justify themselves, make answer, Lord, suffer us first to bury our fathers, or dispatch our secular affairs. I say unto all such, "Let the dead bury their dead," let your worldly business be left undone, rather than you should neglect to follow him.

From the words thus explained, naturally arises this proposition, that no business, though ever so important, can justify a neglect of true religion.

The truth of which I shall first show, and then make an application of it.

I. FIRST then, I am to prove, that no temporal business, though ever so important, can justify a neglect of true religion.

By the word religion, I do not mean any set of moral virtues, any partial amendment of ourselves, or formal attendance on any outward duties whatsoever: but an application of Christ's whole and personal righteousness, made by faith to our hearts; a thorough real change of nature wrought in us by the invisible, yet powerful operation of the Holy Ghost, preserved and nourished in our souls by a constant use of all the means of grace, evidenced by a good life, and bringing forth the fruits of the Spirit.

This is true and undefiled religion, and for the perfecting this good work in our hearts, the eternal Son of God came down and shed his precious blood; for this end were we made, and sent into the world, and by this alone can we become the sons of God. Were we indeed to judge by the common practice of the world, we might think we were sent into it for no other purpose, than to care and toil for the uncertain riches of this life: but if we consult the lively oracles, they will inform us, that we were born for nobler ends, even to be born again from above, to be restored to the divine likeness by Jesus Christ, our second Adam, and thereby be made meet to inherit the kingdom of heaven; and consequently, there is an obligation laid upon all, even the most busy people, to secure this end; it being an undeniable truth, that all creatures ought to answer the end for which they were created.

Some indeed are for confining religion to the clergy, and think it only belongs to those who serve at the altar; but what a fatal mistake is this, seeing all persons are indifferently called by God to the same state of inward holiness. As we are all corrupt in our nature, so must we all be renewed and sanctified. And though it must be granted, that the clergy lie under double obligations to be examples to believers, in faith, zeal, charity, and whatever else is commendable and of good report, as being more immediately dedicated to the service of God; yet as we have been all baptized with one baptism into the death of Christ, we are all under the necessity of performing our baptismal covenant, and perfecting holiness in the fear of God: for the holy scriptures point out to us but one way of admission into the kingdom of Christ, through the narrow gate of a sound conversion: And he that does not enter into the sheepfold, whether clergy or lay-men, by this door, will find, to his everlasting confusion, there is no climbing up another way.

Besides, what a gross ignorance of the nature of true religion, as well as of our own happiness, does such a distinction discover? For what does our Savior, by willing us to be religious, require of us? But to subdue our corrupt passions, to root out ill habits, to engraft the heavenly graces of God's most holy Spirit in their room; and, in one word, to fill us with all the fullness of God.

And will men be so much their own enemies, as to affirm this belongs only to those who minister in holy things? Does it not equally concern the most active man living? Is it the end of religion to make men happy, and is it not every one's privilege to be as happy as he can? Do persons in business find the corruptions of their nature, and disorder of their passions, so pleasing, that they care not whether they ever regulate or root them out? Or will they consent that ministers shall be alone partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light? If not, as they desire the same end, why will they not make use of the same means? Do they think that God will create a new thing upon the earth, and, contrary to the purity of his nature, and immutability of his counsel, admit them into heaven in their natural state, because they have been encumbered about many worldly things? Search the scriptures, and see if they give any room for such a groundless hope.

But farther, one would imagine there was something of the highest concern and utmost importance in our temporal affairs, that they should divert so many from purifying their hearts by faith which is in Christ Jesus.

A covetous miser, who neglects religion by being continually intent on seeking great things for himself and those of his own household, flatters himself he herein acts most wisely; and at the same time will censure and condemn a young prodigal, who has no time to be devout, because he is so perpetually engaged in wasting his substance by riotous living and following of harlots. But yet a little while, and men will be convinced, that they are as much without excuse who lost their souls by hunting after riches, as those who lose them by hunting after sensual pleasures. For though business may assume an air of importance, when compared with other trifling amusements, yet when put in the balance with the loss of our precious and immortal souls, it is equally frivolous, according to that of our Savior, "What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lost his own soul; or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?"

And now what need we any further proof? We have heard the decision out of Christ's own mouth. But because it is so difficult to convince such of this important truth, whose hearts are blinded by the deceitfulness of riches, that we had need cry out to them in the language of the prophet, "O earth, earth, hear the word of the Lord," I shall lay before you one passage of scripture more, which I could wish were written on the tables of all our hearts. In the 14th of St. Luke, the 18th and following verses, our blessed Lord puts forth this parable, "A certain man made a great supper, and bade many, and sent his servant at supper-time, to call them that were bidden: but they all, with one consent, began to make excuse. The one said, I have bought a piece of ground, and I must needs go and see it, I pray thee have me excused. And another said, I have bought a yoke of oxen, and I must needs go and prove them, I pray thee therefore have me excused. So the servant returned, and showed his master all these things." And what follows? Did the master accept of their excuses? No, the text tells us the good man was angry, and said, "that none of those which were bidden, should taste of his supper." And what does this parable teach, but that the most lawful callings cannot justify our neglect; nay, that they are no longer lawful when they in any wise interfere with the great concerns of religion? For the marriage supper here spoken of, means the gospel; the master of the house is Christ; the servants sent out, are his ministers, whose duty it is, from time to time, to call the people to this marriage-feast, or, in other words, to be religious. Now we find those that were bidden, were very well and honestly employed. There was no harm in buying or seeing a piece of ground, or in going to prove a yoke of oxen; but here lay their faults, they were doing those things, when they were invited to come to the marriage feast.

Without doubt, persons may very honestly and commendably be employed in following their respective callings; but yet, if they are engaged so deeply in these, as to hinder their working out their salvation with fear and trembling, they must expect the same sentence with their predecessors in the parable, that none of them shall taste of Christ's supper: for our particular calling, as of this or that profession, must never interfere with our general and precious calling, as Christians. Not that Christianity calls us entirely out of the world, the holy scriptures warrant no such doctrine.

It is very remarkable, that in the book of life, we find some almost of all kinds of occupations, who notwithstanding served God in their respective generations, and shone as so many lights in the world. Thus we hear of a good centurion in the evangelists, and a devout Cornelius in the Acts; a pious lawyer; and some that walked with God, even of Nero's household, in the epistles; and our divine master himself, in his check to Martha, does not condemn her for minding, but for being cumbered or perplexed about many things.

No, you may, nay, you must labor, out of obedience to God, even for the meat which perisheth.

But I come, in the SECOND place, to apply what has been said.

I beseech you, by the mercies of God in Christ Jesus, let not your concern for the meat which perisheth be at the expense of that which endureth to everlasting life; for, to repeat our blessed

Savior's words, "What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul; or, what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?"

Were we always to live in the world, then worldly wisdom would be our highest wisdom: but forasmuch as we have here no continuing city, and were only sent into this world to have our natures changed, and to fit ourselves for that which is to come; then to neglect this important work for a little worldly gain, what is it but, with profane Esau, to sell our birth-right for a mess of pottage.

Alas! how unlike are Christians to Christianity! They are commanded to "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness," and all other real necessities shall be added unto them; but they are fearful (O men of little faith!) that if they should do so, all other necessities would be taken from them: they are strictly forbidden to be careful for the morrow, and yet they rest not night or day, but are continually heaping up riches for many years, though they know not who shall gather them. Is this acting like persons that are strangers and pilgrims upon earth? Is this keeping their baptismal vow? Or rather, is it not directly apostatizing from it, and deserting the service of Jesus Christ, to list themselves under the banner of mammon?

But what will be the hope of such worldlings, when God shall take away their souls? What if the almighty should say to each of them, as he did to the rich fool in the gospel, "this night shall thy soul be required of thee;" O then, what would all those things profit them, which they are now so busy in providing?

Was eternal life, that free gift of God in Christ Jesus, to be purchased with money; or could men carry their flocks beyond the grave, to buy oil for their lamps, i.e. grace for their hearts, when they should be called to meet the bridegroom, there might be some reason why God might well bear with them: but since their money is to perish with them; since it is certain, as they brought nothing into the world, so they can carry nothing out; or supposing they could, since there is no oil to be bought, no grace to be purchased when once the lamp of their natural life is gone out; would it not be much more prudent to spend the short time they have here allotted them, in buying oil while it may be had, and not for fear of having a little less of that which will quickly be another man's, eternally lose the true riches?

What think you? Is it to be supposed, it grieved that covetous worldling before mentioned, when his sprung into the world of spirits, that he could not stay here till he had pulled down his barns and built greater? Or think you not that all things here below seemed equally little to him then, and he only repented that he had not employed more time in pulling down every high thought that exalted itself against the Almighty, and building up his soul in the knowledge and fear of God?

And thus it will be with all unhappy men, who like him are disquieting themselves in a vain pursuit after worldly riches, and at the same time are not rich towards God.

They may, for a season, seem excellently well employed in being solicitously careful about the important concerns of this life; but when once their eyes are opened by death, and their souls launched into eternity, they will then see the littleness of all sublunary cares, and wonder they should be so besotted [intoxicated, loaded] to the things of another life, while they were, it may be, applauded for their great wisdom and profound sagacity in the affairs of this world.

Alas! how will they bemoan themselves for acting like the unjust steward, so very wisely in their temporal concerns, in calling their respective debtors so carefully, and asking how much every one owes to them, and yet never remembering to call themselves to an account, or inquire how much they owed to their own great Lord and master?

And now what shall I say more? The God of this world, and the inordinate desire of other things, must have wholly stifled the conscience of that man, who does not see the force of these plain reasonings.

Permit me only to add a word or two to the rich, and to persons that are freed from the business of this life.

But here I must pause a while, for I am sensible that it is but an ungrateful, and as some may imagine, an assuming thing, for such a novice in religion to take upon him to instruct men in high stations, and who perhaps would disdain to set me with the dogs of their flock.

But however, since St. Paul, who knew what best became a young preacher, commanded Timothy, young as he was, to exhort and charge the rich with all authority; I hope none here that are so, will be offended, if with humility I beg leave to remind them, though they once knew this, that if persons in the most busy employ are indispensably obliged to "work out their salvation with fear and trembling," much more ought they to do so, who are free from the toils and encumbrance of a lower way of life, and consequently have greater opportunities to leisure to prepare themselves for a future state.

But is this really the case? Or do we not find, by fatal experience, that too many of those whom God has exalted above their brethren, who are "clothed in purple and fine linen, and fare sumptuously every day," by a sad abuse of God's great bounty towards them, think that their stations set them above religion, and so let the poor, who live by the sweat of their brows, attend more constantly on the means of grace than do they?

But woe unto such rich men! For they have received their consolation. Happy had it been if they had never been born: for if the careless irreligious tradesman cannot be saved, where will luxurious and wicked gentlemen appear?

Let me therefore, by way of conclusion, exhort all persons, high and low, rich and poor, one with another, to make the renewal of their fallen nature, the one business of their lives; and to let no worldly profit, no worldly pleasure, divert them from the thoughts of it. Let this cry, "Behold the bridegroom cometh," be ever sounding in our ears; and let us live as creatures that are every moment liable to be hurried away by death to judgment: let us remember, that this life is a state of infinite importance, a point between two eternities, and that after these few days are ended, there will remain no more sacrifice for sin; let us be often asking ourselves, how we shall wish we had lived when we leave the world? And then we shall always live in such a state, as we shall never fear to die in. Whether we live, we shall live unto the Lord; or whether we die, we shall die unto the Lord; so that living or dying we may be the Lord's.

To which end, let us beseech God, the protector of all them that put their trust in him, without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy, to increase and multiply upon us his mercy, that he being our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal, that we finally lose not the things eternal; though Jesus Christ our Lord.