

George Whitefield

Sermon 16

The Observation of the Birth of Christ, the Duty of all Christians; or the True Way of Keeping Christmas

Matthew 1:21, "And she shall bring forth a Son, and then shalt call his Name Jesus: For he shall save his People from their Sins."

The celebration of the birth of Christ hath been esteemed a duty by most who profess Christianity. When we consider the condescension and love of the Lord Jesus Christ, in submitting to be born of a virgin, a poor sinful creature; and especially as he knew how he was to be treated in this world; that he was to be despised, scoffed at, and at last to die a painful, shameful, and ignominious death; that he should be treated as though he was the off-scouring of all mankind; used, not like the son of man, and, therefore, not at all like the Son of God; the consideration of these things should make us to admire the love of the Lord Jesus Christ, who was so willing to offer himself as a ransom for the sins of the people, that when the fullness of time was come, Christ came, made of a woman, made under the law: he came according to the eternal counsel of the Father; he came, not in glory or in splendor, not like him who brought all salvation with him: no, he was born in a stable, and laid in a manger; oxen were his companions. O amazing condescension of the Lord Jesus Christ, to stoop to such low and poor things for our sake. What love is this, what great and wonderful love was here, that the Son of God should come into our world in so mean a condition, to deliver us from the sin and misery in which we were involved by our fall in our first parents! And as all that proceeded from the springs must be muddy, because the fountain was so, the Lord Jesus Christ came to take our natures upon him, to die a shameful, a painful, and an accursed death for our sakes; he died for our sins, and to bring us to God: he cleansed us by his blood from the guilt of sin, he satisfied for our imperfections; and now, my brethren, we have access unto him with boldness; he is a mediator between us and his offended Father.

Therefore, if we do but consider into what state, and at how great a distance from God we are fallen; how vile our natures were; what a depravity, and how incapable to restore that image of God to our souls, which we lost in our first parents: when I consider these things, my brethren, and that the Lord Jesus Christ came to restore us to that favor with God which we had lost, and that Christ not only came down with an intent to do it, but actually accomplished all that was in his heart towards us; that he raised and brought us into favor with God, that we might find kindness and mercy in his sight; surely this calls for some return of thanks on our part to our dear Redeemer, for this love and kindness to our souls. How just would it have been of him, to have left us in that deplorable state wherein we, by our guilt, had involved ourselves? For God could not, nor can receive any additional good by our salvation; but it was love, mere love; it was free love that brought the Lord Jesus Christ into our world about 1700 years ago. What, shall we not remember the birth of our Jesus? Shall we yearly celebrate the birth of our temporal king, and shall that of the King of kings be quite forgotten? Shall that only, which ought to be had chiefly in remembrance, be quite forgotten? God forbid! No, my dear brethren, let us celebrate and keep this festival of our church, with joy in our hearts: let the birth of a Redeemer, which redeemed us from sin, from wrath, from death, from hell, be always remembered; may this Savior's love never be forgotten! But may we sing forth all his love and glory as long as life shall last here, and through an endless eternity in the world above! May we chant forth the wonders of redeeming love, and the riches of free grace, amidst angels and archangels, cherubim and seraphim, without intermission, for ever and ever! And as, my brethren, the time for keeping this

festival is approaching, let us consider our duty in the true observation thereof, of the right way for the glory of God, and the good of immortal souls, to celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ; an event which ought to be had in eternal remembrance.

It is my design to lay down rules for the true keeping of that time of Christmas, which is now approaching.

I. I shall show you when you may be said, not to observe this festival aright.

II. I shall show you, when your observation and celebrating of this festival is done according to the glory of God, and to the true manner of keeping of it.

III. Shall conclude with an exhortation to all of you, high and low, rich and poor, one with another, to have a regard to your behavior at all times, but more especially, my dear brethren, on this solemn occasion.

I. My brethren, I am to show when your celebration of this festival is not of the right kind.

And FIRST, you do not celebrate this aright, when you spend most of your time in cards, dice, or gaming of any sort.

This is a season, for which there is no more allowance for wasting of your precious time in those unlawful entertainments, than any other. Persons are apt to flatter themselves that they are free and at liberty to spend whole evenings now at cards, at dice, or any diversion whatsoever, to pass away, as they call it, a tedious evening. They can do any thing now to pass away that, which is hastening as fast as thought: time is always upon the wing; it is no sooner present but it is past, and no sooner come but it is gone. And have we so much to do, and so little time to do it in, and yet complain of time lying heavy upon our hands? Have we not the devil and the beast to get our of our souls? Are not our natures to be changed, our corruptions to be subdued, our wills to be brought over to God, or hard hearts to be softened, all old things to be done away, and all things to become new in our souls? Is there not all this to be done? And yet we have too much time upon our hands! It is well, that instead of having too much time, it be not found that we have got too little, when we come to die: then we shall wish, my brethren, that we had made more account of our time, that we had improved it for the glory of God, and the welfare of our immortal souls.

Good God! How amazing is the consideration, that many can go to church in the morning, and take the Sacrament, and come home and spend the afternoon and evening in cards. Is this, my brethren, discerning the Lord's body? Is this taking the sacrament according to its institution? Is not this a pollution thereof, and making the blood of the covenant an unholy thing.

Therefore, those of you who have made this your practice in times past, let me beseech you, in the bowels of mercy, not to do so any more; for, indeed, it is earthly, it is sensual, it is devilish. Consider what is said of those who eat and drink at the Lord's table unworthily, that they eat and drink their own damnation: And can they, my brethren, be said to eat and drink any otherwise, who no sooner go from the table of the Lord, but run to the diversions of the devil? Indeed this is exceeding sinful, and displeasing unto the Lord; then forbear those diversions which are so evil in themselves: O be not found in those exercises, and in that pleasure, which you would not be found in when you come to die. Thus, my brethren, you see it is not a right celebration of the birth of the Lord Jesus, to spend it in cards, dice, or any other diversions, which proceed so directly from the devil, and are destructive to all true goodness.

SECONDLY, They cannot be said truly to celebrate this time, who spend their time in eating and drinking to excess.

This is a season when persons are apt to indulge themselves in all manner of luxury: iniquity now abounds apace; nothing is scarcely to be seen but things of the greatest extravagance imaginable; not only for the necessities of the body, but to pamper it in lust, to feed its vices, to make it go on in sin, to be a means for gratifying our carnal appetite; and this is a means to make us forget the Lord of glory. This makes us only fit to do such drudgery, as the devil shall set us about; this is only preparing to run wheresoever the devil sends: this, instead of denying ourselves, is indulging ourselves, this is not, nor cannot be called, a celebration of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we are making ourselves worst than the beasts that perish.

I am not speaking against eating and drinking of the good things of life, but against the eating and drinking of them to excess, because, thus they unqualify us for the service of God; and to our fellow-creatures they make us unsociable, and may occasion us to be guilty of saying and acting those things, which we should be ashamed to think of, if we had only ate or drank with moderation.

Therefore, my dear brethren, let me beseech you to set a watch over yourselves; be careful that you do not run into that company which may tempt you to evil, for would a man run himself into danger on purpose? Would a man enter himself into that company, where, before he goes, he knows he shall be exposed to great temptations; and therefore, if you have any reason to think that the company you are going into will be a temptation, I beseech you, by the mercies of God in Christ Jesus, that you would not run into it.

How can you say, "Lead us not into temptation," when you are resolved to lead yourselves into it, by running into the occasions of sins. You are commanded to keep from the appearance of evil; and do you do that, by running into the place and company where it is like to be committed? No, this is so far from avoiding, and shunning it, that it is a plain proof to the contrary; therefore, if you are for observing this time, this festival of our church, let it not be done by running to excess; for you plainly see, that those who are guilty thereof, cannot be said properly to celebrate it.

THIRDLY, Nor can they, my brethren, be said to keep, or rightly observe the commemoration of the birth of our Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ, who neglect their worldly callings to follow pleasures and diversions.

Alas! many, instead of keeping this time as it ought to be, run into sin with greediness; instead of devoting their time to the Lord, it is only devoted to the devil and their own lusts. How many who thus mispend their time, at this season, lay by the work of their callings for a considerable time, with no other view, but to follow earthly, sensual, and devilish pleasures. If they should go to hear a sermon, or to a society, my brethren, the mouths of all the Pharisees at once are open against them, that they are not only a going to be ruined themselves, but are going to ruin their families too; they think it needless to make so much ado; this is being righteous over-much; but you may be as wicked as you please, and they will not cry out; however, when you are wicked over-much, by serving the devil and your own pleasures for a week or a month together, then, my brethren, with them you are only taking a little recreation, spending your time in innocent diversions; no one cries out against you, there is no outcry that you are going to be ruined. Again, if you give never so small a matter among the poor people of God for their relief, then you are robbing your families, then you are going to turn madmen! And in a few days will be to methodistically mad, that you are not fit for a polite gentleman's conversation; but if you spend one hundred times the money in playhouses, &c. on your lusts and pleasures, then you are liked and esteemed as a good friend and companion; but, my dear brethren, these good companions in the world's account, are never so in the Lord Jesus Christ's. You cannot serve God and mammon; you must either lost your lusts, your pleasures, and your delights, or you cannot expect to find favor with God; for indeed, and indeed, the ways that too many follow at this time, are sinful, yea, they are exceeding sinful. You see they cannot be said to celebrate this holy time, who thus mispend their precious time to the neglect of their families; such are destroying themselves with a witness.

Thus, my dear brethren, I have shown you who they are who do not observe this holy festival.

II. I come now, in the second place, to show you, who they are who do rightly observe, and truly celebrate the birth of our Redeemer.

And I shall show you who they are in two particulars, directly opposite to the others; and then, my brethren, take your choice: you must choose the one or the other, there is no medium, you must either serve the Lord or Baal; and, therefore, my dear brethren, let me beg of you to consider,

FIRST, That those spend their time aright, and truly observe this festival, who spend their hours in reading, praying, and religious conversation.

What can we do to employ our time to a more noble purpose, than reading of what our dear Redeemer has done and suffered; to read, that the King of kings, and the Lord of lords, came from his throne and took upon him the form of the meanest of his servants; and what great things he underwent. This, this is an history worth reading, this is worth employing our time about: and surely, when we read of the sufferings of our Savior, it should excite us to prayer, that we might have an interest in the Lord Jesus Christ; that the blood which he spilt upon mount Calvary, and his death and crucifixion, might make an atonement for our sins, that we might be made holy; that we might be enabled to put off the old man with his deeds, and put on the new man, even the Lord Jesus Christ; that we may throw away the heavy yoke of sin, and put on the yoke of the Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, my brethren, these things call for prayer, and for earnest prayer too; and O do be earnest with God, that you may have an interest in this Redeemer, and that you may put on his righteousness, so that you may not come before him in your filthy rags, nor be found not having on the wedding garment. O do not, I beseech you, trust unto yourselves for justification; you cannot, indeed, you cannot be justified by the works of the law. I entreat that your time may be thus spent; and if you are in company, let your time be spent in that conversation which profiteth: let it not be about your dressing, your plays, your profits, or your worldly concerns, but let it be the wonders of redeeming love: O tell, tell to each other, what great things the Lord has done for your souls; declare unto one another, how you were delivered from the hands of your common enemy, Satan, and how the Lord has brought your feet from the clay, and has set them upon the rock of ages, the Lord Jesus Christ; there, my brethren, is no slipping; other conversation, by often repeating, you become fully acquainted with, but of Christ there is always something new to raise your thoughts; you can never want matter when the love of the Lord Jesus Christ is the subject: then let Jesus be the subject, my brethren, of all your conversation.

Let your time be spent on him: O this, this is an employ, which if you belong to Jesus, will last you to all eternity. Let others enjoy their cards, their dice, and gaming hours; do you, my brethren, let your time be spent in reading, praying, and religious conversations. Which will stand the trial best at the last day? Which do you think will bring most comfort, most peace, in a dying hour? O live and spend your time now, as you will wish to have done, when you come to die.

SECONDLY, Let the good things of life, you enjoy, be used with moderation.

I am not, as the scoffers of this day tell you, against eating and drinking the good things of life; no, my brethren, I am only against their being used to an excess; therefore, let me beseech you to avoid those great indiscretions, those sinful actions, which will give the enemies of God room to blaspheme. Let me beseech you, to have a regard, a particular regard to your behavior, at this time; for indeed the eyes of all are upon you, and they would rejoice much to find any reason to complain of you. They can say things against us without a cause; and how would they rejoice if there was wherewith they might blame us? Then they would triumph and rejoice indeed; and all your little slips, my dear brethren, are, and would be charged upon me. O at this time, when the eyes of so

many are upon you, be upon your guard; and if you use the good things of this life with moderation, you do then celebrate this festival in the manner which the institution calls for.

And instead of running into excess, let that money, which you might expend to pamper your own bodies, be given to feed the poor; now, my brethren, is the season, in which they commonly require relief; and sure you cannot act more agreeable, either to the season, to the time, or for the glory of God, than in relieving his poor distressed servants. Therefore, if any of you have poor friends, or acquaintance, who are in distress, I beseech you to assist them; and not only those of your acquaintance, but the poor in general. O my dear brethren, that will turn to a better account another day, than all you have expended to please the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, or the pride of life. Consider, Christ was always willing to relieve the distressed; it is his command also; and can you better commemorate the birth of your king, your Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, than in obeying one of his commands?

Do not, my dear brethren, be forgetful of the poor of the world; consider, if providence has smiled upon you, and blessed you with abundance of the things of this life, God calls for some returns of gratitude from you; be ye mindful of the poor, and when you are so, then you may be said to have a true regard for that time which is now approaching; if you would truly observe this festival, let it be done with moderation, and a regard to the poor of this world.

THIRDLY, Let me beg of you not to alienate too much of your time from the worldly business of this life, but have a proper regard thereunto, and then you may be said rightly to observe this festival.

God allows none to be idle: in all ages business was commended; and therefore do not think that any season will excuse us in our callings; we are not, my brethren, to labor for the things of this life inordinately, but we are to labor for them with all moderation: we are not to neglect our callings; no, we are to regard those places and stations of life, which God in his providence has thought convenient for us; and therefore, when you neglect your business to the hurt of your families, whatever pretense you thereby make for so doing, you are guilty of sin; you are not acting according to the doctrine of the gospel, but are breaking the commands of the Lord Jesus Christ, both according to his word, and to his own practice.

At this festival, persons are apt to take a little more liberty than usual; and if that time from our vocations is not prejudicial to ourselves or families, and is spent in the service of God, and the good of immortal souls, then I do not think it sinful; but there is too much reason to fear, that the time spent upon our own lusts, and then it is exceeding sinful, it is against our own souls, and it is against the good of our families, and instead of commemorating the birth of our dear Redeemer, we are dishonoring him in the greatest degree possibly we can.

Therefore, inquire strictly into your end and design in spending your time; see, my brethren, whether it proceeds from a true love to your Redeemer, or whether there is not some worldly pleasure or advantage at the bottom: if there is, our end is not right; but if it proceed entirely from love to him that died, and gave himself for us, our actions will be a proof thereof; then our time will be spent, not in the polite pleasures of life, but according to the doctrine and commands of the blessed Jesus; then our conversation will be in heaven; and O that this might be found to be the end of each of you, who now hear me; then we should truly observe this festival, and have a true regard to the occasion thereof, that of Christ's coming to redeem the souls of those which were lost.

Let me now conclude, my dear brethren, with a few words of exhortation, beseeching you to think of the love of the Lord Jesus Christ. Did Jesus come into the world to save us from death, and shall we spend no part of our time in conversing about our dear Jesus; shall we pay no regard to the birth of him, who came to redeem us from the worst of slavery, from that of sin, and the devil; and shall this Jesus not only be born on our account, but likewise die in our stead, and yet shall we be unmindful

of him? Shall we spend our time in those things which are offensive to him? Shall we not rather do all we can to promote his glory, and act according to his command? O my dear brethren, be found in the ways of God; let us not disturb our dear Redeemer by any irregular proceedings; and let me beseech you to strive to love, fear, honor and obey him, more than ever you have done yet; let not the devil engross your time, and that dear Savior who came into the world on your accounts, have so little. O be not so ungrateful to him who has been so kind to you! What could the Lord Jesus Christ have done for you more than he has? Then do not abuse his mercy, but let your time be spent in thinking and talking of the love of Jesus, who was incarnate for us, who was born of a woman, and made under the law, to redeem us from the wrath to come.

Now to God the Father, God the Son, &c,