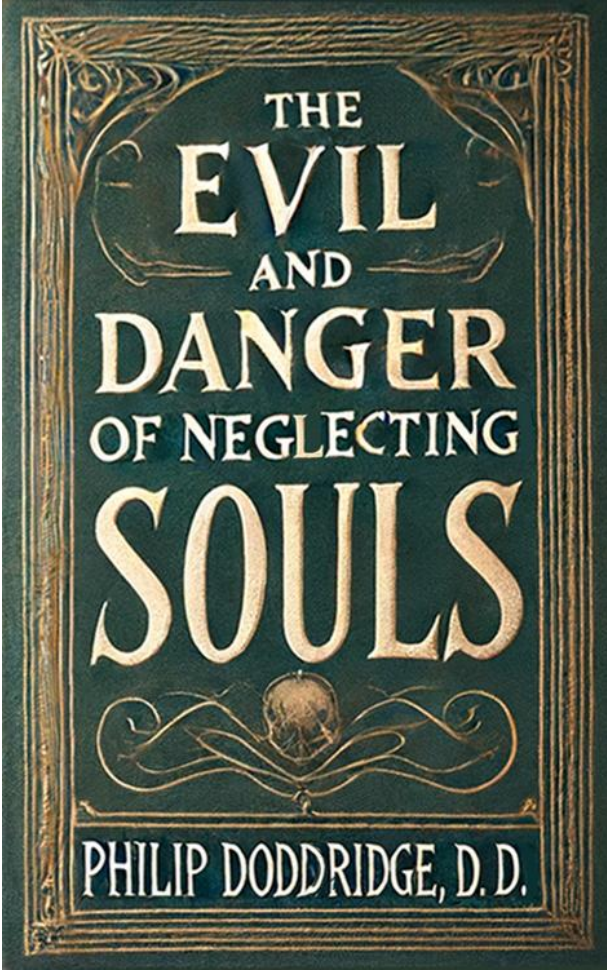


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The Evil and Danger of Neglecting Souls

by Philip Doddridge, D. D.

A SELECTION OF TRACTS

ON THE

DUTIES, DIFFICULTIES, AND ENCOURAGEMENTS

OF THE

CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

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The Evil and Danger of Neglecting Souls

"If thou forbear to deliver them that are drawn unto death, and those that are ready to be slain: if thou sayest, Behold, we knew it not,—doth not he that pondereth the heart consider it? and he that keepeth thy soul, doth not he know it? and shall not he render to every man according to his works?" - Proverbs 24:11-12

For the explication of these words, I would offer three plain and obvious remarks:—

(1.) That the omission, which is here charged as so displeasing to God, though immediately referring to men's natural lives, must surely imply that the neglect of their souls is much more criminal.

The text strongly implies that we shall be exposed to guilt and condemnation before God by forbearing to deliver them that are drawn unto death and those that are ready to be slain. This must directly refer to innocent persons brought into visible and extreme danger by some oppressive enemy, either by the sudden assault of a private person, or by some unjust prosecution under forms of law; and may particularly extend to cases where we have reason to believe a capital sentence has been passed in consequence of false witnesses, detected before execution is done; and if the neglect of that be (as you see it is) represented as highly criminal, it must be a much more heinous crime, by any neglect of ours, to permit the ruin of men's souls without endeavouring after their recovery, when they are, as it were, drawn away to the extremest danger of eternal death, and are ready to be slain by the sword of divine justice.

(2.) The text seems to suppose that men would be ready to excuse themselves for this neglect. It is true, indeed, that at the first sight of a miserable object, we naturally find a strong impulse to endeavour to relieve it. Our hearts, as it were, spring in our bosoms, and urge us forward to exert ourselves on such an occasion; which seems to be intimated by that word, which we render forbear, which often signifies to check, to restrain, and hold back a person from what he is eager on doing; but the wise man intimates, there may be danger of suppressing these generous sallies of the soul on the first view of the object; of suffering our charity to cool, and then of searching out apologies for our inactivity. You may be ready to say, Behold, we knew it not. "I did not particularly see the

- It was allowed amongst the Jews, that if any person could offer anything in favour of a prisoner after sentence was passed, he might be heard before execution was done; and therefore it was usual (as the Mischna says) that when a man was led to execution, a crier went before him and proclaimed, "This man is now going to be executed for such a crime, and such and such are witnesses against him;—whoever knows him to be innocent, let him come forth and make it appear."

Danger: I did not, however, apprehend it to be so extreme; or, I did not know the innocence of the person in danger; or, if I did believe it, I knew not how to deliver him. I did not think the interposition of such a person as myself could be of any importance in such an affair. I was sorry to see innocence overborne, and weakness oppressed; but I was myself too weak to contend with the mightier oppressor; too poor, too ignorant, or too busy, to meddle in an affair where those who were much my superiors were concerned, and had determined the case. I had no obligations to the person in danger; I had no concern with him, nor anything to do to embarrass myself with his

affairs." — If these excuses be just, it is well. Nevertheless, the text supposes,

(3.) That these excuses might often be overruled by an appeal to men's consciences, as in the sight of God.

Doth not he that pondereth the heart consider it? As if he should have said, "It is an easy thing to excuse omissions, so that a fellow-creature shall have nothing to reply; but whoever thou art that readest these words, I charge thee to remember that it is comparatively a very little matter to be judged of man's judgment: he that judgeth thee is the Lord; and he pondereth the heart: he weighs, in a most accurate balance, all its most secret sentiments. I there cut off all chicanery and trifling debate at once, by placing thee in his presence, and laying open thy conscience there. Thou canst answer me; but canst thou answer the heart-searching God? Does not He, the great Father of Spirits, see, in every instance, how inferior spirits conduct themselves? Does he not precisely know the situation in which thy heart was, at the very moment in question? Thou sayest thou knewest it not; but he is witness whether thou indeed didst, or didst not, know it; and he also sees all the opportunities and advantages which thou hadst for knowing it: all the hints which might have been traced out to open a more explicit and particular knowledge; every glimpse which thou hadst when thou wast (like the priest, when he spied at a distance the wounded traveller) passing by on the other side, and perhaps affecting to look the contrary way."

Nor was it in vain that the wise man renewed his exhortation in a different form. He that keepeth thy soul, doth not he know it? As if he had said, "Consider God, as keeping thine own soul; as holding it in life; as preserving thy spirit by his continued visitation; and then say, O thou that neglectest the life of thy brother, whether he must

not be highly displeased with that neglect? May he not reasonably expect that while He, the Lord of Heaven and Earth, condescends to become thy guardian, thou shouldst learn of him, and be according to thine ability, and in thy sphere, a guardian to the whole human race, and shouldst endeavour, in every instance, to ward off danger from the life, from the soul of thy brother!"

And that these thoughts may enter into thy mind with all their weight, it is added, once more, in this pointed form of interrogation. Will he not render to every man according to his works? "I appeal to thine own heart. Is he not a Being of infinite moral, as well as natural, perfections, and will he not, as the Judge of all the earth, do right? Would he not have remembered and rewarded thy generous care for the preservation of the miserable creature in question? And, on the other hand, will he not reckon with thee for such a failure? Human laws, indeed, cannot punish such neglects; but the Supreme Legislator can, and will do it. Think of these things, and guard against such fatal negligence in every future instance. Think of them, and humble thyself deeply before God, for every past instance in which such guilt has been incurred."

God is my witness, that I mean not to insinuate the least disrespectful thought with regard to any one of you. Nevertheless, permit me to say it without offence (for I say it in the fear of God, and with the sincerest deference and friendship to you). I am afraid the extensive and important obligations of the ministerial office are not generally considered and remembered among us as they ought. I apprehend much more might be done to the honour of God and the good of souls than is commonly done, even by those who, in the main, have a principle of true religion in their hearts; by those who keep up the exercise of public worship in a regular and honourable manner, and appear not only irreproachable in their conversation,

but, if considered as in private life, bring forth the fruits of righteousness. The learned, the wise, the virtuous, the pious minister, is, I fear, often negligent of a considerable part of his trust and charge, and thereby fails to deliver, as he might, those that are drawn unto death, and perhaps are just ready to be slain.

To awaken our spirits, therefore, from that insensibility, in this respect, into which they are so ready to fall, I shall take the liberty,

I. Briefly to consider what excuses we may be most ready to offer for neglecting the souls of men.

II. Seriously to represent the great evil of that neglect in the sight of God, notwithstanding all those excuses. After which,

III. I shall add a few hints, by way of reflection, as the time may admit.

(I.) I am to consider what excuses we may be ready to make for neglecting to do our utmost for the salvation of men's souls. — Particularly,

1. That we do something considerable for that purpose; that we take care for their instruction in public; reading the word of God to them when they are assembled together in his house; explaining and enforcing it in our expositions and sermons; presenting prayers and praises to God in their name; and, at proper seasons, administering the sacraments in such a manner as we judge most agreeable to the institution of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And so far indeed it is well; and a most wise and gracious appointment of our blessed Redeemer it is, that such ordinances

should be administered on solemn stated days, and by men appropriated to that employment; in consequence of which, such knowledge is dispersed, as is, through the divine blessing, effectual for the salvation of many souls; and I am not afraid to say that this would make the Christian ministry, even in the hands of ignorant, careless, and vicious men, a blessing to the nation where it is settled, so long as reading the Scriptures, and almost any kind of prayers in an intelligible language, make a part of divine service in their assemblies. Much more then will it be so in the hands of wise, sober, and religious men.

But while we are thus pleading our diligence and care in the administration of public ordinances, it will be kindness to ourselves, seriously to ask our own hearts, at least, how they are administered. It is a very important trust to have the management of men's religious hours committed to us; their seasons of social worship being, comparatively, so short, and so infinitely momentous. Methinks, we do almost, as it were, put our own lives in our hand while we undertake it, and may justly tremble on the view of that awful account which we are to give of it.

I hope, Sirs, we have the testimony of our own consciences before God, that we do not, on these solemn occasions, content ourselves with cold essays on mere moral subjects, however acute, philosophical, or polite; nor make it our main business, in our sermons, to seek the ornament and elegance of words, the refinements of criticism, or the nice arrangement of various complex and abstruse argumentations. When we speak, in the name and presence of God, to immortal creatures, on the borders of eternity, I hope we entertain our hearers with plain, serious, and lively discourses, on the most important doctrines of Christianity, in their due connection and their relation to each other, in such a manner as

we, on mature consideration, do verily believe may have the most effectual tendency to bring them to God through Christ, and to produce and promote in their hearts, through the divine blessing, the great work of regeneration and holiness. I hope and trust that God is our witness, and that the people of our charge are witnesses, that not one of those who diligently attend on our ministry, though but for a few succeeding Sabbaths, can fail to learn the way of salvation, as exhibited in the gospel; and that we speak of it as those that are in earnest, and do, from our very souls, desire to answer the great ends of our ministry, in the prosperity of the Redeemer's kingdom, and the eternal happiness of those invaluable souls whom he has committed to our care,—otherwise, we may incur great and fatal guilt, though public worship be constantly and decently carried on, and though a reasonable proportion of time be employed in it, with numerous and attentive auditories; to whom we may be as the lovely song of one that has a pleasant voice, while in the ears of God, for want of that fervent charity, which should dictate and animate all, we are but as sounding brass, or as a tinkling cymbal.

But granting, as I would willingly suppose, and as with relation to you, my brethren, I do firmly believe, all these reflections can be answered with satisfaction,—here is indeed a part of your duty honourably performed, and an important part of it too;—but is that part, though ever so important, to be substituted for the whole? The diligent inspection of our flock, pastoral visits, the observation of the religious state of families, personal exhortations, admonitions, and cautions, by word or letter, as prudence shall direct, catechising children, promoting religious associations among the younger and the elder people of our charge, and the strict and resolute exercise of discipline in the several churches over which we preside,—are these no parts of our office? Will we say it with our dying breath?—will we maintain it before the tribunal of Christ, that they did not belong to

the Christian ministry?—and if not, will our care in other parts of it be allowed as a sufficient excuse before him for our total omission of these. We have preached, and prayed, and administered the sacraments. These things we should indeed have done; and when we had taken the care of congregations upon us, we could hardly avoid it; but surely our own consciences will, now or hereafter, tell us that we ought not to have left the others undone;—but we may, perhaps, for a while elude the conviction, by pleading.

2. That the care of particular persons more properly belongs to others, especially to heads of families, who have more opportunities of being serviceable to those under their charge, and indeed have the most immediate concern in them.

It certainly does. But does it belong to them alone? — or if it did, do not they belong to us and to our care? — and is it not the part of every superior officer of a society to see to it, that the subaltern officers be careful and diligent in the discharge of their duty? — and in this case, are we to take it for granted that, in our respective congregations, heads of families are so of course? — that they pray in their families; that they read the Scriptures and other good books there, especially on the evening of the Lord's Day; — that they catechize their children; and solemnly press upon them, and upon their servants, the serious care of practical religion. Are we roundly to conclude, without any further inquiry, that all this is done, and done in so diligent and so prudent a manner as that there is no need of any particular exhortations, instructions, or admonitions from us? Would to God there were any one congregation in the whole kingdom of which this might reasonably be presumed to be the case! But if it were indeed so, would not our concurrence with these wise and pious heads of families, in so good but so difficult a work, encourage and strengthen them to prosecute it with greater

cheerfulness and vigour? Would it not quicken both their cares and their endeavours? And might it not, by the divine blessing, promote the success of them? Might it not gain on the minds of children and servants, to see that we do not think it beneath us, tenderly to care for their souls? And might not our tender and condescending regards to them in private, by convincing them how well we mean them, render our public labours more acceptable and useful to them? Now, we well know that the children and servants of the present generation are the hopes of the next; as they are probably those that, in their turns, will be parents and governors of families, whose children and servants, when they arise, will one way or another feel the happy or unhappy consequences of our fidelity or neglect; — and when such affairs are in question, shall we allow ourselves to plead,

3. That we have so much other business, and such various engagements of a different kind, that we cannot possibly attend to these things?

But give me leave, my brethren, to observe, that the question here is not whether we can find out other agreeable ways of filling up our time, but whether those other ways are more important, and whether that different manner of employing it be more acceptable in the sight of God, and will turn to a better account in that great day, when our conduct is to be finally reviewed by Him? We must indeed have our seasons of recreation, and our seasons of study; but it will easily appear, that no regards to either of these will vindicate or excuse our neglect of the private duties we owe to our flock, in giving diligence to know their state, and being careful to teach them, not only publicly, but from house to house.

Recreation, to be sure, can afford no just apology for neglecting it; since to follow this employment prudently, might be made a kind of

recreation from the labours of a sedentary and studious life. A grave and severe recreation, you will perhaps say. Grave indeed, I will acknowledge it to be; but not therefore to a serious mind less delightful. So much of those two noblest and sweetest exercises of the soul, devotion and benevolence, would naturally mingle with these pious cares and tender addresses, as would renew the strength which had been exhausted in our studious hours, and the manly, shall I say, or rather the God-like joy it would administer, would quite discountenance that which we find in the gay indulgences of a humorous and facetious conversation; though I see no necessity of forbidding that, at proper intervals, so far as its cheerfulness is consistent with wisdom and religion; and I am sure, that if we can turn our seasons of recess from study to so profitable an account as would be answered by the duties which you know I have now in view, it will be a most happy art, well becoming one who is truly prudent, and would therefore husband his time to the best purposes for eternity; in which view, it is evident that the smallest fragments of it, like the dust of gold, are too valuable to be lost.

The great proportion of time to be given to our studies will, no doubt, be urged, as a yet more material excuse; but here it is obvious to reply, that a prudent care in the duties I am now recommending is very consistent with our employing a great deal of time in study; and particularly, with our giving it, what I hope we shall always learn to value and redeem, our morning hours, to which some of the evening may also be added; and if these will not generally suffice, give me leave to ask, what are those important studies that would thus engross the whole of our time, excepting what is given to devotion and to what is generally called recreation?

I have had some little taste of the pleasures of literature myself, and have some reason to hope I shall not be suspected of any prejudice

against it; nor am I at all inclined to pass those contemptuous censures on the various branches of it, in which ignorance and sloth are often, with strange stupidity, or with yet stranger assurance, seeking, and it may be finding a refuge; but on such an occasion I must freely say that I fear many things, which employ a very large portion of our retired time, are studied rather as polite amusements to our own minds than as things which seem to have any apparent subserviency to the glory of God and the edification of our flock; and consequently, I fear, they will stand as articles of abatement, if I may so express it, in our final account; and when they come to be made manifest, it will be found that works shall be burnt, as being no better, in the divine esteem, "than wood, hay, and stubble," how beautifully soever they may have been varnished, or gilded over.

Let me here, in particular, address myself to my younger brethren, with a frankness which may be to them more excusable, while I urge them to a Christian self-denial upon this head, where perhaps it may be, of all others, the more difficult. I do not apprehend persons of your approved character to be in danger of any other kind of luxury and intemperance; but there is, if you will permit me so to call it, a sort of refined, intellectual luxury, with regard to which I am jealous over you, lest you should be seduced into it, or rather, lest some of you be already ensnared by its specious charms.

I would not, my young friends, be so severe and cruel as to desire you should be confined from that high and elegant entertainment, which a person of genius and taste will find in the masterly writings of the ancient orators, historians, and poets; or in those polite and elegant pieces which our own and other modern languages may afford; from which the wise man and the Christian will learn many things of solid use, as well as matters of most delightful amusement. Neither would I pretend to forbid some mathematical and philosophical researches,

into which you are initiated in your academical course, and with which you will do well to retain and improve your acquaintance in the progress of life; both to strengthen your rational faculties by that strenuous exercise, and to improve your knowledge of the works of God; which will appear great, wonderful, and delightful, in proportion to the degree of sagacity and diligence with which they may be searched out. But it is one thing to taste of these poignant and luscious fruits, and another to feed and live upon them: one thing to make the most noble and substantial parts of them our entertainment and refreshment, and quite another to make their circumstantial curiosities the chief business of our study, and the favourite subjects of our most attentive inquiry. That true greatness and elevation of mind, which the gospel is so admirably calculated to produce, would teach us a much sublimer science; and if, for the sake of these little things, we neglect to pray for those whom God hath committed to our care, to inquire into their religious state, to pursue them with suitable applications and addresses, the time will come when we shall assuredly own that we dearly purchased the most refined pleasures they could possibly give us; not to say how much greater and nobler pleasure we even now resign, while our duty is neglected.

Oh, my brethren, let us consider how fast we are posting through this dying life which God has assigned us, in which we are to manage concerns of infinite moment; how fast we are passing on to the immediate presence of our Lord, to give up our account to him. You must judge for yourselves; but permit me to say, that, for my own part, I would not, for ten thousand worlds, be that man who, when God shall ask him at last how he has employed most of his time while he continued a minister in his church and had the care of souls, should be obliged to reply, "Lord, I have restored many corrupted passages in the ancient classics, and illustrated many which were

before obscure; I have cleared up many intricacies in chronology or geography; I have solved many perplexed cases in algebra; I have refined on astronomical calculations; and left behind me many sheets on these curious and difficult subjects, where the figures and characters are ranged with the greatest exactness and truth; and these are the employments in which my life has been worn out while preparations for the pulpit, or ministrations in it, did not demand any immediate attendance." Oh, sirs, as for the waters which are drawn from these springs, how sweetly soever they may taste to a curious mind that thirsts for them, or to an ambitious mind, which thirsts for the applause they sometimes procure, I fear there is often reason to pour them out before the Lord, with rivers of penitential tears, as the blood of souls which have been forgotten, while these trifles have been remembered and pursued.

Nor am I without my fears that a great deal of studious time is lost in an over-artful composition of sermons, and in giving them such polish and ornament as does not conduce to their usefulness, nor any way balance the labour employed in the work. If we do not diligently watch over our hearts, this will be an incense offered to our own vanity, which will render our sacrifice less acceptable to God, however we and our hearers may be delighted with the perfume.

Greater plainness and simplicity of speech might often be more useful to the bulk of our auditory, and perhaps more acceptable too; and, on the whole, it might be at least equally beautiful. For all that are not children in understanding know that there is a natural and manly kind of eloquence, arising from a deep sense of the subject, and an ardent love for the souls of our hearers, which is of all others the most to be desired and esteemed. And though such discourses may be attended with some little inaccuracies, and may want something of the varnish which exacter preparation might set on,

yet, surely, where a habit of speaking is formed by proper application, and the materials of a sermon are well digested in the mind, it will rise above a reasonable contempt. And if, where more exact preparation is made, a care to preserve those niceties of composition deaden the manner of the delivery, and take off either its solemnity, its vigour, or its tenderness, I cannot but apprehend it as injurious to the character of the orator as to that of the Christian. The most celebrated speakers, in judicial courts and in senates, have in all nations and ages pursued the method I now recommend; and the most acceptable preachers have successfully attempted it.

On the whole, permit me to say, it would be a fatal thing to barter away the souls of our people for the highest and justest reputation of speaking well; yet I fear there are many who, in this view, do it for nought, and have not, in any sense, increased their wealth by the price. But perhaps, after all, the most plausible excuse may be that which I have reserved as the last that I shall mention, viz:

4. That the attempts I am proposing might displease those that attend upon our ministry; upon which account it may seem, both with respect to them and ourselves, a necessary precaution of prudence to decline them. This is the lion in the street, which we often plead, slothful as we too naturally are, for staying within doors, when our duty calls us abroad on these charitable errands; but I hope, on a nearer approach, it will not be found so fierce, or so invincible, as a timorous imagination paints it.

Methinks, brethren, we make a very unfavourable representation of the temper and character, not to say of the breeding and understanding of our people, when we so readily take it for granted that they will be displeased with us for addressing those exhortations to them in private, which they seem so desirous of receiving from us

in public. Let us ask our own consciences, would they all be displeased? If not, the displeasure it might give to some can be no excuse for neglecting it with regard to others. And are we indeed so miserable as to be situated among whole congregations, in whom ignorance, pride, and profaneness prevail to such a degree, that a minister who would be welcome among them, if he came only as a common visitant, should be looked upon with contempt or indignation, when he came expressly as a "friend to their eternal interests," and would step a little out of the common way for their salvation?

If this were really our case, who would not say with the prophet, Oh, that I had in the wilderness a lodging-place of wayfaring men, though it were but such a wretched cave as travellers find in a desert, that I might leave my people, and go from them; for they be all an assembly of treacherous men! Of treacherous men indeed, if, while they call themselves Christians and Protestants, they should think themselves injured and affronted by the exhortations of their ministers, while they would warn every man, and teach every man in all wisdom, that they might present them perfect in Christ. But, blessed be God, bad as the world is, there is no room to imagine this to be the case, or anything like it. Perhaps, while we are delaying, and coldly deliberating about it, many lively Christians under our care are earnestly praying that God may put such a thing into our hearts; and should we attempt it, I doubt not but they would receive us as angels of God, or even as Christ himself; their love to us would be more abundantly confirmed, and their hearts cemented in closer bonds than they have yet known; and many others would at least own that we acted in character, and maintained a more apparent consistency of behaviour, if the affair were properly conducted.

Did we indeed pretend to control them in the management of their temporal affairs, or to exercise a lordly dominion over their faith and their conscience, they might justly be displeased; or did we craftily demand that they should lay open to us the secrets of their breasts in confession, their suspicions were pardonable, and their resentments reasonable. But it must be great malice and folly to suspect any design of that infamous nature from our visiting them as pastors, with pious exhortations and affectionate prayers, as those who are concerned for them and their children and servants, that their souls may prosper and be in health. A solicitude for the health of their bodies is esteemed friendship and gratitude, and inquiries concerning it seem but common decency; and can it offend them to find we are solicitous about that welfare which is infinitely more important, and, by virtue of our office, our peculiar charge?

Yes, you will say, in one instance it will displease; for when we are obliged to blame anything which we see amiss in them, their pride will naturally take fire on such an occasion; and perhaps those whom we have thought our best friends will become our enemies, if we venture to tell them such disagreeable truths as fidelity may extort in some circumstances. This is, after all, the main difficulty; and, as I cannot wonder if it impresses our minds, I pray God to forgive the perverseness of those that make it so great. Yet, surely, it is possible to manage reproof so that in most instances it shall oblige rather than provoke. If we tell our hearers of their faults privately; and if we do it with tenderness and respect; if we show by our manner of speaking, that what we say proceeds from an humble fear lest we should displease God, betray our trust, and injure their souls by neglect; if at the same time our behaviour to them be, as it surely should be, constantly obliging; if we do our utmost, so far as truth and justice will permit, to guard and shelter their character in the world; and bring our complaints of them to none but themselves,—

bad as the world is, I believe few will quarrel with us upon this account; but we shall see, as Solomon observed, that "he who rebuketh a man will afterwards find more favour than he that flattereth with his tongue."

But supposing the worst that can happen, that folly and wickedness should prevail so far over all the tender and prudent address of the friend and the pastor, as to render us evil for so great a good, and hatred for so generous and so self-denying an instance of love, how could that hatred be expressed? Seldom in any more formidable manner than by withdrawing from our ministry, and discontinuing what they have done for our support; for the revelings of persons of such a character can seldom hurt any but themselves.

Now I hope, brethren, we shall always retain so much of a manly, not to say a Christian spirit, as to choose to retrench some of our expenses, to forego some of the entertainments of life, to cast ourselves and families on Providence, or even, if it were necessary, to subsist in an honest and creditable poverty by the daily labour of our own hands, much rather than meanly to crouch to such haughty sinners, and sacrifice duty, honour, and conscience to the arrogance of their petulant temper. Let us fear God as we ought, and we shall find nothing to fear from them; but we should be willing to imitate the fidelity and courage of the Baptist, though the wrath of a king might be provoked by it, and imprisonment or martyrdom might be its reward. I hope such considerations as these may effectually obviate the excuses which indolence or cowardice may be ready to form for our neglect of men's souls, especially when we go on,

(II.) To consider the great evil of that neglect, as it appears in the sight of God, notwithstanding all these excuses, or any of the like kind, with which we may endeavour to palliate it.

But who can fully represent it, as it appears to His capacious and all-penetrating view! What human mind can conceive the infinite evil! It is not, sirs, a subject on which to display the wantonness of wit, or the colourings of artificial harangue; a terrible kind of solemnity attends it, and I attempt the display of it with fear and trembling. If it seem a light matter to us to forbear to deliver those that, in this sense, are drawn unto death and them that are thus ready to perish, consider, my brethren, and oh! may my own conscience always consider, what the death of the soul is! How many wretched souls are continually dying around us! What gracious provision God has made to prevent it! And what peculiar obligations we are under, to labour to the utmost for the preservation of their lives!

1. Let us think what the death of the soul is.

The apostle James intimates that it is a thought of great importance when he says, "He that shall turn a sinner from the error of his way, shall save a soul from death." As if he had said, do but reflect what that is, and you will find your success is its own reward. We well know that to save a soul from death is not merely to prevent the extinction of its being, though even that were much; but to prevent its positive, its lasting, its eternal misery. It is to prevent its being slain by the pointed and flaming sword of divine justice.

It is a tragical spectacle to behold a criminal dying by human laws, even where the methods of execution are gentle; as, through the lenity of ours, they generally are amongst us; and I doubt not, but it would grieve us to the heart to see any who had been under our ministerial care in that deplorable circumstance; but oh! how much more deeply must it pierce our very souls to see them led forth to that last dreadful execution, with those of whom Christ shall say, "As for these mine enemies, who would not that I should reign over

them, bring them forth, and slay them before me!" Oh, how will it wound us to hear the beginning of those cries and wailings which must never end! How shall we endure the reflection, "These wretches are perishing forever, in part because I would not take any pains to attempt their salvation!" — and is this so strange a supposition, that some, once under our ministry, may then perish in our sight? Would to God that it were only less probable! But, on the contrary, let us,

2. Consider, how many souls, precious and immortal as they are, seem to be continually dying around us!

Are there but few that miscarry? Let Peter inform us, when he says, that "the righteous scarcely are saved." Yea, let our Lord himself inform us, when he says, "Strait is the gate and narrow is the way that leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it; whereas wide is the gate and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction, and many there be that go in thereat." We grieve to see epidemical distempers prevailing around us; we are ready, as Providence calls us, to visit the sick and the dying; and could take little pleasure in our health if we did not endeavour to succour them, as we have opportunity.

But let us look round and see whether that distemper which threatens the death of souls be not epidemical indeed. With all the allowances which that charity can make which believeth all things, and hopeth all things, which it can with any shadow of reason hope and believe, must we not own that there are marks of eternal death on many? And that there are many more in whom we can see nothing which looks like a token of spiritual life? So that the best we can say of them is that possibly there may be some latent sparks of it concealed in the heart, which as yet produce no effect to the honour of their profession or the benefit of the world. In the meantime, sinners are spreading the infection of their infidelity and their vices

far and wide; as if, like some illustrious wretches that have been miscalled heroes, they accounted the destruction of numbers their glory. Can we behold such a contagion spreading itself even in the Christian church, which ought to be healthful as the regions of Paradise, and not bitterly lament it before God? Or can we seriously lament it, and not endeavour its redress? Especially when we consider,

3. What gracious provision God hath made to prevent their death. "Is there not indeed balm in Gilead? Is there not a Physician there?" Even this glorious gospel of the blessed God, whose efficacy we have so often heard of and seen! And shall they yet perish? Adored be the riches of divine grace, we know (and it is infinitely the most important part of all our knowledge) that there is a rich and free pardon proclaimed to all that will sue for it, and accept the benefit in a proper, that is, a grateful manner; for cordial acceptance and real gratitude are all it demands. One would expect the tidings should be as life to the dead; but we see how coldly they are received — how shamefully they are slighted — how generally, yea, how obstinately they are rejected; and what is the consequence? Refusing to believe on the Son of God, they shall "not see life but the wrath of God abiding on them," with an additional weight of vengeance, as it well may.

Now, is not this enough to make our very hearts bleed to think that immortal souls should die under the gospel? Yea, die under aggravated guilt and ruin! So that, instead of being anything the better for this delightful message of peace and grace, they should be forever the worse for it, and have reason to wish, throughout all eternity, they had never seen the faces, nor heard the voices of those that brought it, but had been numbered among the sinners of Tyre and Sidon, of Sodom and Gomorrah.

If we do not, on the express authority of our Lord, believe this to be the case with regard to impenitent sinners under the gospel, we are not Christians even of the lowest class; but if we do believe it, and are not affected with it so far as to endeavour their recovery, I see not how any regard to our own temporal interest, or that of others, can entitle us to the character, either of prudence or humanity; even though we had not been distinguished by a public office in the church, but had passed through life in the station of the obscurest among our hearers. But it is impossible I should do justice to my argument if I do not urge,

4. The consideration of the peculiar obligations we are under to endeavour the preservation of souls, not only in virtue of our experience as Christians, but of our office as ministers.

If we were only to consider our experiences as we are Christians, if we have anything more than the empty name, that consideration might certainly afford us a very tender argument to awaken our compassion to the souls of others. We know what it is ourselves to be upon the brink of destruction, and in that sad circumstance to obtain mercy; and shall we not extend mercy to others? We have looked to Jesus, that we might live; and shall we not point him out to them? We have tasted that the Lord is gracious; and shall we not desire to communicate the same happy relish of his grace to all about us? He has magnified the riches of his pardoning love to us; and shall we not, with David, resolve that we will endeavour to teach transgressors his ways, and labour to promote the conversion of sinners unto him? Even now he is keeping our souls, his visitation preserves our spirits; and, as it is by his grace that we are what we are, it is by having obtained help from him that we continue unto this day; and shall his grace, daily bestowed upon us, be in vain? Shall

not we have compassion on our fellow-servants, as the Lord continually hath pity on us?

But our office as ministers completes the obligation, when we consider the view in which the word of God represents that office, and the view in which we ourselves have received it.

As for the former of these, we are all acquainted with those representations; and it is greatly to be wished, for our own sake and that of our people, they may be very familiar to our minds. Let us often listen with becoming attention to the blessed God as speaking to us in those words which he once addressed to the prophet Ezekiel, that faithful, approved servant of the Lord: "Son of man, I have made thee a watchman to the house of Israel; therefore, hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me. When I say to the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; and thou givest him not warning, nor speakest to warn the wicked from his evil ways to save his life, the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand:" — and with apparent reason may the sentinel be punished for the desolation which the enemy makes, while, instead of watching, he sleeps.

We are elsewhere represented as men of God, as soldiers of Jesus Christ, as made overseers or bishops by the Holy Ghost, as under-shepherds in subordination to Christ, the great Shepherd and Bishop of souls; and should not the thought, gentle as it is, awaken us to diligent inspection over the sheep he has committed to our care? Otherwise, we are but images of shepherds, as it is represented in those lively and awful words of God, by Zechariah, which methinks might strike terror and trembling into many, who, in the eye of the world, may seem the happiest of their brethren: — "Woe to the idol-shepherd that leaveth the flock." The sword of divine vengeance,

which, by his negligence, he has justly incurred, "shall be upon his arm, and upon his right eye;" upon that eye which should have watched over the flock, and that arm which should have been stretched out for its rescue; so that he shall be deprived of those capacities he abused, and be made miserable in proportion to that abuse; for "his arm shall be clean dried up, and his right eye shall be utterly darkened." Such we know are the pathetic views which the Scripture gives us of our office, and of the guilt and danger attending the neglect.

I might, if my time would admit, further urge the views with which we have ourselves received it, and engaged in it. Most of us, when we undertook the pastoral charge, solemnly recorded our vows before God, "that we would endeavour, with all diligence and zeal, to attend to the services of this holy function; that we would be instant in season and out of season, and labour to discharge the private as well as public duties of the ministerial life."

These vows of God are upon us; and every ordination of any of our brethren at which we assist, adds a further and solemn obligation to them. Let us, therefore, take the greatest care that we do not deal deceitfully and unfaithfully both with God and man. For it is most evident that, though the neglect of immortal souls is very criminal in every rational creature, it is most of all so in us who have so deliberately and so publicly undertaken the charge of them.

It would, indeed, in this case, not only be cruelty to them, but the basest treachery and ingratitude to our great Lord, who has lodged such a trust in our hands: a trust which evidently lies so near his heart. Having redeemed his people with his own blood, he commits them to our care; and, having acquired to himself the most tender claim to our love that can be imagined, he graciously requires this

evidence of it. That we should feed his sheep, yea, his lambs; so putting our office in the most amiable and tender view, and bringing in every sentiment of grateful friendship to excite our diligence in it.

However we may regard it, I doubt not but our blessed Redeemer considers it as the greatest favour, and the highest honour he could have conferred upon us; that, being returned to his throne in the heavens, he should choose us to negotiate his cause and interest on earth, and should consign over to our immediate care that gospel he brought down from heaven, and those souls which he died to save; and that he should make it the delightful labour of our life to follow him in his own profession and employment, to be, of all our fellow-creatures, his most immediate representatives, and, in humble subordination to him, saviours of men. Does not the very mention of it cause our hearts to glow with a fervent desire and generous ambition of answering so high a confidence? Could any one of us endure the thought of betraying it?

How could we, in that case, lift up our faces before him when we shall, as we certainly must, see him, eye to eye! Yes, my brethren, let us every hour recollect it; our Master will ere long come and reckon with us: he will "render to every man according to his works," as my text expresses it, in exact harmony with the language of the New Testament; and which of us would not then wish to appear before him, as those that have been faithfully attached to his cause, and have distinguished themselves by a zeal for his service? Shall we then, any of us, repent of our activity in so good a work? Shall we wish that we had given more of our time to the pursuit of secular interest, or the curiosities of literature, and less to the immediate care of souls? Oh, my brethren, let us be wise in time! We have but one life to spend on earth, — and that a very short one too; let us make the best of it; and lay it out in such kind of employments as we

verily believe will give us most satisfaction in the closing moments of it, and when eternity is opening upon us. It is easy to form plausible excuses for such a conduct: but our own hearts and consciences would answer us, if we would seriously ask them what the course of life in the ministerial office is which will then afford the most comfortable review, and through the riches of divine grace, the most pleasing prospect. — I should now proceed,

(III.) To the further application of these things, in some practical inferences from them:

1. You have all, I doubt not, prevented me in reflecting on the reason we have to humble ourselves deeply in the presence of the blessed God, while we remember our faults this day. I do not indeed at all question but that many of us have set before our people life and death, and have in our public addresses urged their return to God, by the various considerations of terror and of love, which the thunders of Mount Sinai and the grace of Mount Zion have taught us. We have on great occasions visited them and entered into some serious discourse with them, and have often, and I would hope more or less daily, borne them on our hearts before God in our seasons of devout retirement. Blessed be God that in these instances we have, in any degree, approved ourselves faithful! It must give us pleasure in the review; but, oh, why have not our prayers been more frequently presented, and more importunately enforced? Why have we not been more serious and more pressing in our private addresses to them, and more attentive in our contrivances, if I may so express it, to catch them in the net of the gospel? Let us ask our own consciences this day, as in the presence of God, if there be not reason to

- On June the 30th, 1741, a meeting of ministers had been held at Denton, Huntingdonshire, and after that a private conference, in which Dr. Doddridge presented hints of a scheme for the Revival of Religion; and which was approved not only at the Denton conference but also by some of the most eminent of the London ministers of different denominations, and at a meeting of ministers which was held at Northampton the following August. Then it was agreed to take them into a more particular consideration, in a conference at the next assembly, to be held at Kettering, on the 15th of October. To that conference this discourse was introductory. The result was, that the scheme was approved with a few other particulars which had not before occurred, and measures were taken to carry them into execution; and as they were printed originally with the discourse in the form of Resolutions, we subjoin them here:

I. That it may tend to the advancement of religion, that the ministers of this association, if they have not already done it, should agree to preach one Lord's day on family religion, and another on secret prayer; and that the time should be fixed, in humble hope that concurrent labours, connected with concurrent petitions to the throne of grace, may produce some happy effect.

II. That it is proper that pastoral visiting should be more solemnly attended to; and that greater care should be taken in personal inspection than has generally been used; and, that it may conduce to this good end, that each minister should take an exact survey of his flock, and note down the names of the heads of families, the children, the servants, and other single persons in his auditory, in order to keep proper memorandums concerning each; that he may judge the better of the particulars of his duty with regard to every one, and may

observe how his visits, exhortations, and admonitions correspond to their respective characters and circumstances.

III. That consequent on this survey it will be proper, as soon as possible, and henceforward at least once a year, to visit, if it be practicable, every head of a family under our ministerial care, with a solemn charge to attend to the business of religion in their hearts and houses, watching over their domestics in the fear of the Lord, we, at the same time, professing our readiness to give them all proper assistance for this purpose.

IV. That it will be highly expedient, immediately, or as soon as may be, to set up the work of catechising in one form or another, and to keep to it stately for one half of the year at least; and that it is probable, future counsels may ripen some scheme for carrying on this work in a manner which may tend greatly to the propagation of real, vital, catholic Christianity in the rising generation.

V. That there is reason to apprehend, there are in all our congregations some pious and valuable persons, who live in a culpable neglect of the Lord's Supper; and that it is our duty particularly to inform ourselves who they are, and to endeavour by our prayers to God, and our serious addresses to them, to introduce them into communion (to which I question not we shall all willingly add); cautiously guarding against anything in the methods of admission which may justly discourage sincere Christians of a tender and timorous temper.

VI. That it is to be feared, there are some, in several of our communions at least, who behave in such a manner as to give just offence; and that we may be in great danger of making ourselves "partakers of other men's sins," if we do not animadvert upon them; and that, if they will not reform, or if the crime be notorious, we

ought, in duty to God, and to them, and to all around us, solemnly to cut them off from our sacramental communion, as a reproach to the Church of Christ.

VII. That it may, on many accounts, be proper to advise our people to enter into little bands, or societies, for religious discourse and prayer; each consisting of six or eight, to meet for these good purposes once in a week or a fortnight, as may best suit with their other engagements and affairs.

VIII. That it might be advisable, if it can be done, to select out of each congregation under our care, a small number of persons remarkable for experienced prudence, seriousness, humility, and zeal, to act as a stated council for promoting religion in the said society: and that it would be proper they should have some certain times of meeting with each other and with the minister, to join their counsels and their prayers for the public good.

IX. That so far as we can judge, it might, by the divine blessing, conduce to the advancement of these valuable ends, that neighbouring ministers, in one part of our land and another (especially in this county), should enter into associations to strengthen the hands of each other by united consultations and prayer: and that meetings of ministers might, by some obvious regulations, be made more extensively useful than they often are. In which view it was further proposed (with unanimous approbation) that these meetings should be held at certain periodical times: that each member of the association should endeavour, if possible, to be present, studying to order his affairs as to guard against unnecessary hindrances: — that public worship should begin and end sooner than it commonly has done on these occasions: — that each pastor preach at these assemblies in his turn: — that the minister of the place

determine who shall be employed in prayer: — that after a moderate repast, to be managed with as little trouble and expense as may be, an hour or two in the afternoon be spent in religious conference and prayer, and in taking into consideration (merely as a friendly council, and without the least pretence to any right of authoritative decision) the concerns of any brother, or any society, which may be brought before us for our advice: — and finally, that every member of this association shall consider it as an additional obligation upon him to neglect; and are gone to eternal destruction for want of our more prudent, more affectionate, and more zealous care for their deliverance?

In these instances, my brethren, though it is dreadful to say it, and to think it, yet it is most certain that we have been, in part, accessory to their ruin; and have reason to say, with trembling hearts, and with weeping eyes, deliver us from blood-guiltiness, from the blood of these unhappy souls, Oh God, thou God of our salvation! And we have need, with all possible earnestness, to renew our application to the blood and righteousness of a Redeemer: not daring to mention any services of our own as matter of endeavour to be, so far as he justly and honourably can, a friend and guardian to the reputation, comfort, and usefulness of all his brethren.

X. That it may be proper to enter into some further measures to regulate the admission of young persons into the ministry. I will take leave to add one particular more, which has since occurred to my thoughts, and which I here submit to your consideration, and to that of my other reverend brethren, into whose hands they may fall, especially those of our own association, viz.

XI. Whether something might not be done, in most of our congregations, towards assisting in the propagation of Christianity

abroad, and spreading it in some of the darker parts of our own land? In pursuance of which it is further proposed, that we endeavour to engage as many pious people of our respective congregations as we can, to enter themselves into a society, in which the members may engage themselves to some peculiar cares, assemblies, and contributions, with a regard to this great end. A copy of such an association I am endeavouring to introduce among my own people, and several have already signed it. It is a feeble essay; and the effects of it in one congregation can be but very small; but if it were generally to be followed, who can tell what a harvest such a little grain might at length produce. May God multiply it a thousand-fold!

Confidence in his presence; however highly others may have esteemed them, who candidly look on the little we do, and perhaps make more charitable excuses for our neglect than we ourselves can dare to urge before God. Let the remembrance of these things be for a lamentation; and while it is so,

2. Let us seriously consider what methods are to be taken to prevent such things for the time to come.

They that have perished have perished forever, and are far beyond the reach of our labours and our prayers; but multitudes to this day surround us, who stand exposed to the same danger, and on the very brink of the same ruin; and besides these dying sinners, who are the most compassionate objects which the eye of man or of God beholds on this earth of ours, how many languishing Christians demand our assistance! Or, if they do not expressly demand it, appear so much the more to need it! Let us look round, my brethren, I will not say upon the nation in general, but on the churches under our immediate care, and say, whether the face of them is such as becomes the societies of those whom the Son of God has redeemed with his own

blood; and of those that call themselves the disciples and members of a once crucified and now glorified Jesus? Is their whole temper and conduct formed upon the model of his gospel? Are they such, as we would desire to present them before the presence of his glory? What is wanting cannot be numbered; and perhaps we may be ready, too rashly to conclude, that what is crooked cannot be made straight. Nevertheless, let us remember, it is our duty to attempt it, as prudently, as immediately, and as resolutely as we can. Many admirable advices for that purpose our fathers and brethren have given us; particularly Dr. Watts, in the first part of his Humble Attempt for the Revival of Religion, and Mr. Some in his sermon on the same subject: excellent treatises, which, reduced into practice, would soon produce the noblest effects. That those important instructions may be revived, and accommodated to present circumstances, with such additions as those circumstances require, we are this day, having united our prayers, to unite our counsels. I will not anticipate what I have to offer to your consideration in the more private conference, on which we are quickly to enter. To form proper measures will be comparatively easy; to carry them strenuously into execution, will be the greatest exercise of our wisdom and piety. May proportionable grace be given to animate us, and to dispose them that are committed to our care to fall in with us, in all our attempts for the honour of God, and for their edification and comfort!

MONERGISM BOOKS

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