

SERMON XX.

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HOW MAY THE WELL-DISCHARGE OF OUR PRESENT DUTY GIVE US ASSURANCE OF HELP FROM GOD FOR THE WELL-DISCHARGE OF ALL FUTURE DUTIES?

*And David said unto Saul, Thy servant kept his father's sheep, and there came a lion, and a bear, and took a lamb out of the flock : and I went out after him, and smote him, and delivered it out of his mouth : and when he arose against me, I caught him by his beard, and smote him, and slew him. Thy servant slew both the lion and the bear : and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be as one of them, seeing he hath defied the armies of the living God. David said moreover, The Lord that delivered me out of the paw of the lion, and out of the paw of the bear, he will deliver me out of the hand of this Philistine. And Saul said unto David, Go, and the Lord be with thee.—1 Samuel xvii. 34—37.*

*Wait on the Lord : be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart : wait, I say, on the Lord.—Psalm xxvii. 14.*

*The way of the Lord is strength to the upright : but destruction shall be to the workers of iniquity.—Proverbs x. 29.*

*And he went out to meet Asa, and said unto him, Hear ye me, Asa, and all Judah and Benjamin ; The Lord is with you, while ye be with him ; and if ye seek him, he will be found of you ; but if ye forsake him, he will forsake you.—2 Chronicles xv. 2.*

OUR reverend and worthy brother who hath the ordering of the Morning Lectures in this place, hath now and heretofore in great wisdom singled out many choice, select cases, relating to the mystery of practical godliness, and of singular use to all those who desire to know and feel more in themselves of the power of inward, experimental Christianity. Surely it is not for nothing that God should send to this auditory so many of his messengers, one after another, morning by morning, “rising up early and sending.” (Jer. vii. 25.) “To whom much is given, of them much will be required.” See that you improve these extraordinary means of grace.

The case that is fallen to my lot this morning is this ; namely, *How may the well-discharge of our present duty give us assurance of help from God for the well-discharge of all future duties ?*

This question hath two parts in it, and cannot be so well grounded upon a single text ; therefore I shall name three or four ; you may have your eye upon all : namely, 1 Sam. xvii. 34—37 ; Psalm xxvii.

14 ; Prov. x. 29 ; 2 Chron. xv. 2. I do not name these several scriptures as so many texts which I intend to preach upon, but as so many proofs of the truth of the point, that it is a case very agreeable to the scriptures and to the analogy of faith : and so I shall take it up, and for once preach common-place-wise upon it ; which was a way of preaching much in use in the last century and upwards by many eminent divines, and not without great success. Now we tie ourselves to single texts : then they preached upon such and such subjects, proving what they said by scripture ; and in this good old way I shall walk for once. Pray follow me with due attention.

This case or question may be resolved into two :—

I. *What our present duty is.*

II. *How the well-discharge of that may encourage us to hope in God for his help and assistance in all future duties.*

I. *What is our present duty?*—Before I define this, it will be necessary to speak something previous to it, which may help us much in this inquiry, and lead us, as it were, by the hand into a right understanding of our present duty. The steps I shall go by are these,—showing you,

1. *What “duty” is, in the general nature and notion of it.*—It is an act of obedience to the will of our superiors. God being our sovereign supreme Lord, Master, and Lawgiver, our duty lies in subjecting ourselves in all things to his will. Duty is that which is due from man to God : it is *justitia erga Deum*,\* it is “justice toward God.” We do not do God right, we rob him of his glory, if we do not do our duty. God knows, indeed, how to recover his right ; and the wrong [that] we do in sinning against him, will in the end redound to our own souls. (Prov. viii. 36.) Every sinner deals injuriously with God : he does not give “unto God the things that are God’s ;” (Matt. xxii. 21 ;) he withholds the obedience that is due unto God ; he will not be subject to his law ; he does not do his duty.

2. *Something is our present duty.*—God hath filled up all our time with duty : not one moment left at our own disposal. We must give an account to him of every thing we do in the body, from first to last : every day hath its proper works, “the things of itself.” (Matt. vi. 34.)

3. *Nothing that is sinful and in itself unlawful, can be our duty at any time ; and therefore, to be sure, not our present duty.*—This needs no proof.

4. *Every thing that is in itself lawful, is not therefore our duty.*—“All things are lawful, but all things are not expedient.” (1 Cor. vi. 12.) Whatsoever is not forbidden under a penalty, is lawful ; that is, whatsoever is not contrary to the rectitude of the law, and in the doing of which we incur no penalty from the law, that is lawful : but nothing properly is our duty, but what is commanded. What we have a command to do or not to do, the doing or not doing of that is our duty, as the command runs in the affirmative or negative. The

\* CICERO *De Naturâ Deorum*, lib. 1.

law strictly enjoins some things ; does tolerate and allow of some others of a more indifferent nature, which *in infimo gradu juris*, "in the lowest degree of legality," may be called "lawful ;" and yet circumstances may render our doing these things unlawful, when God is not glorified, nor our neighbour edified : "All things edify not." (1 Cor. x. 23.)

5. *Every thing that is commanded, and is in its time and place our duty, may not be our present duty.*—Affirmative commands do bind *semper*, but not *ad semper*, as negatives do. Affirmatives bind "always ;" that is, we can never be discharged from that obligation that lies upon us to worship God : but we are not bound "at all times" to the outward acts of worship ; for then we should do nothing else. Neither indeed are we bound at all times to inward acts of worship ; for in our sleep we do not act our grace. A disposition so to do, from an inward habit and principle, is all that God requires, when we are not in a capacity to act either grace or reason. Beside, positive commands must give place to a moral duty, because they will not justify our neglect of that. Hence on the sabbath-day we may and ought to lift our neighbour's ox out of the pit, (Luke xiv. 5,) and to perform any other act of necessary charity, notwithstanding that positive command to worship God upon that day.

6. *That which God now requires of you, and in doing of which you may most glorify God and edify your neighbour,—that is undoubtedly your present duty.*

QUESTION. "How shall we know this ?"

ANSWER 1. *Always look within your calling for your present duty ; for there it lies.*—Do not go beyond your line : "Do your own business." (1 Thess. iv. 11.) We have different gifts and different talents, "according to the grace that is given to us." Let every one attend to that which God hath fitted him for, and called him to. (Rom. xii. 6—8 ; 1 Peter iv. 10, 11.) "The wisdom of the prudent is to understand his way." (Prov. xiv. 8.) God hath appointed to every one his way of living in this world, from "the smith that bloweth the coals," (Isai. liv. 16,) to the king that sits upon the throne. That cannot be our duty which we are not called to. We are not absolute lords, to do what we list : no ; we are under command, and must obey. "I am one set under authority," says the centurion ; "I say unto my servant, Do this, and he doeth it." (Luke vii. 8.) God hath the supreme authority over us : we ought not to move one step but by his direction. Our calling is twofold :—

1. *General.*—As we are Christians ; so all saints are of the same calling : "Called to be saints." (Rom. i. 7.) We are all equally obliged to the duties of our Christian calling ; that is, to serve and worship God, to believe in him, to love and fear him, &c.

2. *Particular.*—So we differ in our callings. Some are called to the magistracy, some to the ministry ; some are masters, some servants ; some called to this, some to that, trade or occupation.

We are called to Christianity by the preaching of the gospel of Christ. We are called to some outward worldly calling by God's

special appointment in his law : "Six days shalt thou labour and do all thy work." (Exod. xx. 9.) Every man hath his work,—a full business which he must not neglect : he must do "all" his work. They "walk disorderly" who "work not at all," (2 Thess. iii. 11,) "living in pleasure" and wantonness, (James v. 5,) having nothing to do. Let all idle, voluptuous gallants consider this, who spend their days in mirth and jollity, scorn the thought of business : they must needs be far from their present duty, who are employed in nothing, or that which is worse than nothing. We are called to this or that employment by Providence. That we should be of some calling, is from the word ; that we are of this or that calling, is from Providence. Providence follows the word, and is a fulfilling of that, some way or other.

Much of the duties of our Christian calling do follow us into our particular callings. As duties of worship must be performed in our families every day, let our particular calling be what it will ; so the same graces must be exercised in our particular callings, which were required in our general callings : the same graces do follow us into our particular callings and into all the works of our hands. They who do not keep up duties of worship in their families, will be as remiss in all duties of practical holiness in their lives. They who are not frequent in prayer, are never eminent in holiness. And as no acts of worship, public or private, do please God, that are not performed in faith, and in the fear of God ; so no common acts of our lives are pleasing to God, if not done in faith, and seasoned with that inward exercise of grace that belongs to all the common actions of a Christian.

In showing you your present duty in your particular callings, I shall not insist so much upon duties of worship. You know them,—that prayer, reading the scriptures, meditation, and discourse of what you hear out of the word, are all duties ; and you know when they should be performed,—morning and evening, and as oft as your necessary occasions will permit. Whether you do them,—I must leave that to God and your own consciences. But the present duty [that] I would fix you in, is that of practical holiness, which is your constant duty every moment of the day. I would clear up this to you, and show you what it is, and where it lies ; that, if it be the will of God, you may be always found in it.

I say, then, that your present duty lies in a present exercise of grace, suitable to the present work and business in all its circumstances which you are at any time employed in. If you buy or sell, it must be in the fear of God ; if you marry, it must be in the Lord. "Whether ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do," you must do it to God's glory ; (1 Cor. x. 31 ; ) which cannot be, if you do not act grace in every thing [which] you do. The true gospel-holiness of an action lies in that grace that goes along with it : it is grace only that turns an action heaven-ward and God-ward. You have no other way to fence yourselves from the temptations, snares, and sins that border upon all the works of your calling, but by keeping yourselves in a due

exercise of grace. Being "in the fear of the Lord all the day long," (Prov. xxiii. 17,) that is the way to "eschew evil, and to do good:" (1 Peter iii. 11 :) it is "the beginning of wisdom;" (Prov. ix. 10;) he acts like a fool who acts without it. "The fear of God" in scripture is put for all the graces of the Spirit; and in that sense I now press it upon you.

You see, your present duty lies in your present work, in the daily business of your particular callings. I suppose, your callings are lawful; that there are no stage-players, conjurers, diviners, astrologers, here. Those who are of such callings, their duty is to leave them, and to betake themselves to some honest employment consistent with grace; and then grace will help you out in it wonderfully. I could name some other callings that I would hardly advise a Christian to. But whatever lawful calling you are of, whatever office you bear, whatever relation you stand in,—as husbands, wives, parents, children, masters, servants,—whatever your trade, occupation, or employment is, there are particular duties proper to your callings, which cannot be performed but by a suitable exercise of grace, by which you show the respect [which] you have to God, in doing what you do, regulating and moderating yourselves and all your actions, by that rule of the word. You may do the works of your calling, and yet not do the duties of your calling. If you seek only yourselves, your own profit, pleasure, &c., this is not to serve God, but yourselves. You must do what you do in faith, as to the Lord; and then every thing you do will be an act of worship, because it carries in it a religious respect to the will of God.

Herein lies the nature of all practical holiness,—to do every thing after a godly sort. Whatever you are doing, be sure you be in the exercise of some grace: there can be no godliness without grace. Grace in exercise consists in the gracious actings of a holy soul, suitable to the matter or occasion that is before us for the exercise of such or such a grace. Or thus: grace in exercise lies in the various emanations of spiritual life, showing itself in suitable and seasonable actings, as the matter requires. The Spirit of God, dwelling in believers, hath a hand in every thing [which] they do as saints, and doth shape himself in them into that frame, into those holy passions and affections, that may best become a saint in such circumstances; that is, the Spirit does act these things in and by our souls, makes use of our faculties, lets out himself through our hearts, makes us to act so and so. The Spirit is said to "cry, Abba, Father," (Gal. iv. 6,) because it makes us to do so. For instance: if the matter between God and a soul be sin, the Spirit works faith in the blood of Christ, for our justification and pardon; works repentance and humiliation, brings us to self-denial, in order to the mortification of sin in our hearts and lives. If the matter be any lawful business that we are called to in the place and relation [which] we stand in, the Spirit directs us how to do it in the best manner, so as God may be most glorified. Grace in the heart guides the hand. The heart is the seat of all affections: the Spirit knows that man will act so and so, as he

stands affected; and therefore the Spirit sets the affections right for God, works in the heart a true love to God, a holy fear of God, a zeal for his glory. These gracious dispositions toward God follow a saint into all his employments, inclining him to holiness in all his ways.

**OBJECTION.** "Do you ministers take upon you to tell us what we must do in our callings? We have served an apprenticeship, and know better than you what belongs to our business."

**ANSWER.** Mistake me not: for the mystery of your craft, whatever it is, I meddle not with that; God has left you to your own reason and understanding, and so do I. The directions [that] I give you relate only to the religious manner of doing what you do; though I must tell you, it is God that "instructs you to discretion" in all worldly business. (Isai. xxviii. 26.) Whatever your skill and insight is in your calling, prayer may make you wiser: you may obtain a more excellent spirit in your way than you now have, if you seek it of God. (Exod. xxxv. 31—33.) Though you are left to the use of your reason as men, yet faith must go along with it as you are Christians. Therefore I shall show you how to put forth an act of reason in faith.

Some think they are never to make use of faith, but when reason fails them. It is true, in such cases faith is of singular use; Abraham found it so: yet God expects that in the ordinary course of our lives, in all common matters that pass through our hands, reason and faith should go together; for both have their distinct parts in all our ordinary undertakings: and faith is always superior to reason. Reason is subservient to that, as a handmaid, putting forth its utmost strength in all human endeavours, still leaving room for faith to deal with God for a blessing, that all may issue well at last.

**OBJECTION.** "How may we know when reason and faith go together?"

**ANSWER 1.** When, at our entrance upon any business, we seek wisdom and understanding from God, stirring up our reason by our faith, looking up to Him from whom "cometh every good and perfect gift," (James i. 17,) that He would "instruct us unto discretion."

2. When, in answer to faith and prayer, thoughts do come-in that clear up our way to us, and do put us into a right method, pointing out such probable means, inclining to such apposite counsel, as in a rational way tend to the expediting [of] that business [which] we are about. In this case reason owes its light to faith, and ascribes all its skill and discerning to God, who opens the eyes of our natural understandings, and causes the spirit of a man to move aright, in giving a true judgment of what is before us. Such an one can say, "The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong." (Eccles. ix. 11.) "It is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy." (Rom. ix. 16.) Therefore "let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches: but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me." (Jer. ix. 23, 24.)

3. When, under the greatest assurances of our own reason, we yet live in a humble dependence upon God for success, knowing that God can come between us and our reason, and disappoint us; he can disjoint our counsels, and let-in his own will upon us, when we have laid things never so well together. God can spy a flaw in the best human contrivances, to overthrow all; he can smite us "between the joints and the harness," (1 Kings xxiii. 34,) and give us a mortal wound, when we think we are shot-free. Thus does God sometimes frustrate all man's preparations, turning his wisdom into foolishness, disappointing him in the height of his expectation: he looks for good; and, behold, evil comes. (Job xxx. 26.) *He* puts forth an act of reason in faith, *who* trusts to God, and not to his own reason. It is our duty to make use of it as men, though as Christians we ought not to trust in it.

ANSWER II. *Consider present providences.*—Though it is precept, not providence, that makes duty; yet providence points to duty, to the time and season of it. Much of our duty lies in complying with the opportunity and occasion that providence gives for the doing of this or that good work. "To every thing there is a season," and "every thing is beautiful in his time." (Eccles. iii. 1, 11.) The beauty of holiness lies in timing our duties aright. The godly man "bringeth forth his fruit in his season;" (Psalm i. 3;) *βορῶνυ σὺθῆρον*, "meet fruit;" (Heb. vi. 7;) that is, "apposite fruit," "fruit well-placed." What is done out of its place and proper season is not so comely and beautiful: "Do good as you have opportunity." If we would "reap in due season," we must sow in due season; (Gal. vi. 9, 10;) there is a fit season for both. We are never more obliged to our duty, than when we have the fittest opportunity to perform it: and we must eye Providence in this. It is the prerogative of God to appoint times and seasons, not only for his own purposes, but for our duty: he appoints the day, and the things of the day; what and when it shall be done. Should you order a servant to do a business to-day, and he should not do it till the next day, would you not count such an one a disobedient servant, because he observed not your time?

Those in the gospel came into the vineyard at the same hour [at which] they were called: they who were called at one hour, did not come in at another hour. (Matt. xx. 1—4.) A call of God to repentance loses much of its efficacy, if it be not presently complied with; the heart is hardened under it. It is true, God can renew his call; but the first is quite lost, if it be not presently obeyed. "They straightway left their nets, and followed him:" (Matt. iv. 20, 22:) this was a converting call. There are many calls to conversion that are not converting calls: man calls in God's name; but till God speak inwardly to the heart, all the preachers in the world cannot prevail with a sinner to come to Christ. Converting grace is a special providence toward the elect. I am now speaking of the call of common providence to common duties; I mean, such duties as God by his word hath annexed to such providences: "Is any among you

afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms." (James v. 13.) Do the duty of thy present condition: keep time with God, because he keeps time with thee. He gives thee thy daily bread; then perform thy daily duty toward him.

ANSWER III. *Consult thy conscience.*—It is a proper judge of what thou hast done, and what thou shouldst do at this instant. Joseph found it so. (Gen. xxxix. 8, 9.) Conscience, in those who are enlightened, cannot easily step over a plain duty; it will stumble at it, and demur about it, does cast a look toward it. Though, by the violence of lust, a man may be hurried another way, yet conscience looks behind: there is a misgiving heart that tells him, "Thus and thus you ought to do." Hear thy conscience speak; it may show thee the right way, and turn thee into it. He is a profligate wretch indeed, who has no reverence for his own conscience: "A wise man's heart discerneth both time and judgment." (Eccles. viii. 5.) Consult thy conscience in what thou art going about; if that startle, stop there, and consider well with thyself. Do not mistake a carnal objection for a scruple of conscience: under the light of the gospel, conscience is better instructed than to doubt of plain duties; all cases of conscience lie in more abstruse matters.

ANSWER IV. *Consider what present temptation thou art under.*—In the light [of] a present temptation, we may see what is our present duty. The devil sets against that, might-and-main: he cares not what we do, if he can keep us from our present duty. He will suffer us to put any thing in the room of that: you may read, pray, and meditate; the devil will allow of any thing but what we should do. He knows it is in vain to tempt some men to gross, scandalous sins; therefore he will reach a duty over the shoulder to them, to juggle out the present duty that lies before them. Take this for a rule; namely, It is always our duty to act in opposition to any present temptation: "If sinners entice thee, consent thou not." (Prov. i. 10.) We do never more effectually resist any present evil, than by setting about that good thing that is contrary to it. When the devil sees his temptations have this contrary effect,—to awaken our zeal for God, and to stir us up to a more vigorous prosecution of our duty,—it is not his interest to go on in that temptation which he sees is such a provocation to holiness, and spurs us on the faster to our duty. The devil knows not this beforehand: his temptations are but trials and experiments that he makes, to see how we stand affected, and how they will take.

ANSWER V. *Consult with the word of God.*—Especially those scriptures that speak to the state and condition thou art in in the world; whether master, servant; parent, child; rich or poor. Gather up those texts, and be often reading them over to thy faith. Mingle them afresh every day with faith: carry them about you in your memory, or in a book fair-written, that you may often have your eye upon them; they will be "a lamp unto your feet, and a light unto your path." (Psalm cxix. 105.) You can never walk exactly in your place and sphere, if you do not walk by this rule; often coming to



the light, that you may see whether your works are wrought in God. Some Christians do many things, many good things, in the dark, or, at least, by a general scripture-light. Some confused notions they have, but no clear, distinct understanding, of their duty. In conversion there are general principles laid in, inclining us to all Christian duties, which, for want of searching the scriptures, we take up by guess: but a distinct, particular knowledge of these duties is an after-work, distinct from our first conversion. It is called "edification," or "building up," which makes us expert, skilful Christians. The scriptures are able to make "the man of God perfect, thoroughly furnished unto every good" word and "work;" (2 Tim. iii. 17;) *ἄριστος πάντων ἔργων ἀγαθῶν ἐξηρτισμένος: ad omne opus bonum perfectè instructus, vel omnibus numeris absolutus*; "a man so skilled in all things appertaining to his duty, so exact in it, that nothing is wanting, nor nothing redundant." He does neither more nor less than God requires; he keeps close to the rule, puts-in all the spiritual ingredients that may give a duty its right season and savour.

ANSWER VI. *Devote thyself in sincerity to the fear of God, through the whole course of thy life.*—Let it be the full purpose of thy heart to cleave unto God, and to do whatever God shall convince thee to be thy duty. Labour to bring your hearts into such a holy frame, before you make a judgment of your present duty. Sincerity toward God does wonderfully enlighten us; it clears-up the eye of the soul, breaks through all prejudices, makes us judge impartially, according to truth. "Integrity and uprightness" will "preserve" us, (Psalm xxv. 21,) and "direct our way." (Prov. xxi. 29.) This I say: That man whose mind is thus set upon his duty, will not find it so difficult a matter to discern what is his present duty;—ordinarily he will not. In some extraordinary cases there may be more difficulty sometimes; but ordinarily it is otherwise. There is a secret guidance of God in this case: "The integrity of the upright shall guide them." (Prov. xi. 3.) There is a voice behind thee, a whisper from heaven, saying, "This is the way; walk in it." David took this course. First he resolves upon universal obedience: "I have said;" (Psalm cxix. 57, 8, 30, 32;) *אָמַרְתִּי Dixi; id est, in animo statuit apud se;*\* (so, verses 106, 112;) and then begs of God to order his steps, and tell him which foot he should put foremost; what he should do first, and what in the next place; how he should "order his conversation aright." (Verses 5, 35, 135.) If the devil finds you unfix'd and unresolv'd, untrusty and wavering, he will assault you with more violence. Resist him, and he flies from you; give back never so little, and he will come upon you with double force. Till we are thus sincerely fixed upon our duty, "standing perfect and complete in all the will of God," (Col. iv. 12,) resolving to do our duty wherever it lies;—till then, we shall be partial judges of our duty, very apt to single out the easiest and shortest duties, stepping over all the rest; we shall seek rather to please ourselves than God in the duty [which] we perform, and, leaning to a carnal judgment, do

\* "That is, he determined in his own mind."—EDIT.

what seems right in our own eyes; and then, to be sure, we are wrong.

**OBJECTION.** "Though by these directions given, I may discern duty from downright sin; yet I am at a loss how to distinguish between duty and duty; between duty in season, and duty out of season. When two duties come together, and present themselves at once to my conscience, I cannot deny but they are both duties; but which to do first, I know not."

**ANSWER.** If this be the doubt, consider whether the scripture hath not decided it. In some cases it hath, and upon such grounds as may help us in other cases to know our present duty; as, Matt. v. 24: "First be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift." So, Matt. vii. 5: "First cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye." When the duty postponed by you does hinder the right performance of that other duty which you are going about, and render it unacceptable to God, then the second duty, as you have ranked them, must take place of the first, and be first done. Acts of worship cannot be done in faith toward God, where charity toward our neighbour is wanting. He doth not believe in God, who loves not his brother. (1 John iii. 10, 23.) And so, in the other case mentioned, it is gross hypocrisy to reprove another, when thou thyself art guilty in the same or a higher kind: "Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam," &c. Beside, *he* cannot understand how to reprove another, *who* doth not first reform himself: the casting out [of] our own sins gives us light how to deal with others': "Then shalt thou see clearly," &c.

**OBJECTION.** "But what if, after all this, it should so fall out, that two duties should press upon my conscience for present performance, and I cannot, either by reason or scripture, determine which to do first, but do hang in suspense, 'am in a strait betwixt two?'" (Phil. i. 23.)

**ANSWER.** This is hardly to be supposed: but, admit it to be thy case, according to thy present judgment; then,

1. *Sit down once more, and consider.*—Weigh them both well, and hold the balance with a steady hand. I am persuaded, you may perceive some preponderancy on one side, that may direct you what to do, from some over-bearing circumstances that turn the scales. God is the God of order, and not of confusion: He does never command two inconsistent duties at the same time. The covenant is "ordered in all things;" (2 Sam. xxiii. 5;) and so must our conversations be, too; (Psalm l. 23;) else we "walk disorderly." Therefore, consider well, what pleases God most; and for once leave out the relation to the present time, which thou art so much puzzled about; and consider the nature of the duties themselves,—which of them is most spiritual, which of them the scripture lays most weight upon. For there is a difference between duty and duty; all are not alike; as "a broken and a contrite heart" is beyond all other sacrifices. (Psalm li. 16, 17.) God did require them too, but not without

this : both together do best ; but, of the two, he had rather have this alone, than the other alone without this. Outward offerings are never pleasing to God, when the heart goes not along with them. Be sure to mind that most which God is most pleased with.

2. If of two duties you cannot resolve which is most your duty at present, then *resolve upon both, and begin where you will.*—God will not be extreme in that case. Do one, and leave not the other undone, but be sure to find time for that also. When one duty doth quite take us off from the performance of another necessary duty that stood in competition with it, it is greatly to be suspected that there is a temptation then : but if you do both, one after another, you can err only in point of time and order ; and God will overlook that in a sincere Christian, who acts according to his present light, and would do that which God likes best, if he could understand his mind ; but, being not able to judge of that, he resolves upon both successively.

3. *Beg of God to resolve thee.*—“O that my ways were directed to keep thy statutes !” (Psalm cxix. 5.) “Shall I go up to Hebron ? or shall I not ?” (2 Sam. ii. 1.) God will “teach” thee what to do. (Psalm xxv. 12.) “He shall direct thy paths.” (Prov. iii. 5, 6.)

## APPLICATION.

In some moving considerations, to quicken you to your present duty.

1. *All the sins of your lives break in upon you, through the omission of your present duty.*—Do but stop that gap, and keep it stopped ; and then there will be no room for sin. I speak not of those unavoidable infirmities that cleave to the saints under their most conscionable walking with God ; but of wilful neglects, that lie heavy upon the conscience, when God awakens it.

2. *Whatever you do in the room of a present duty, is not acceptable to God.*—“Not acceptable,” did I say ? That is too soft a word : it is an offence to him ; it is disobedience and rebellion. Though it be a duty, yet because it is not that duty that God now requires, you sin in doing it. Not that I would have Christians live always distracting in fear, lest what they do should not be their present duty. My meaning is,—when we neglect a known duty, which we are convinced of. But if we use means to know our duty, and do act according to our present light in what we do, we may have peace, and hope for acceptance.

3. *If you do not now perform your present duty, you can never perform it.*—Unless you could recall time, and make that present again which is past. Time passes away, and represents a man to God as he was at that instant : what he is the next, is another thing ; but that hour, that day, week, or year, which thou hast spent in the neglect of thy duty, stands upon record against thee, is irrecoverable. You must account for that ; and, without a pardon, you cannot escape the judgment of God. Mis-spent time is the treasury of God’s wrath ; and what a fiery day of wrath will that make at last, when God shall put all together, and sum up the sins of every day of thy

life, and reckon with thee for all at once, in the great day of his wrath; so much for such an idle hour, and so much for such an idle hour; so much for such and such a day spent in an ale-house, tavern, or brothel-house; so much for such a year and such a year,—it may be, for many years,—spent in open profaneness and all manner of debauchery! As you fill up your time with sin, God fills it up with secret wrath, which will be revealed one day. Time carries along with it all the things, good or evil, that are done in that time,—the neglect of a present duty. Leave that time void of the duty that belongs to it, and there is no going back to fill it up. As, for instance, if your present duty be prayer, if you do not pray *now*, you can never pray *now*. You may pray afterwards; but that does not answer to the present *now*: you may do the same duty for substance at another time, but it does not bear the same date. That hour in which thou dost omit any duty proper to it, will witness against thee, when that part of thy life comes under examination: have a care that time does not carry an evil report of you to God. There is a voice in time: “Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night showeth knowledge.” (Psalm xix. 2.) Time past is present with God: he sees how it slips through thy fingers, how it is stained by thy sins. Time is ill-bestowed upon thee: it may provoke God to shorten thy days, and to cut thee off in the midst of thy years. (Psalm lv. 23.)

4. *You can have no trial of your spirit, nor of the truth of your state: it is impossible [that] you should ever prove your sincerity, but by a conscientious discharge of your present duty.*—The power of godliness lies much in this,—in having a respect to God in all our common actions. There can be no religion without this; and in this there is peace, true heart's ease: Psalm cxix. 45: בְּרִחְוָה in *ipsa latitudine* [“at liberty”]. When a man so walks that his conscience meets with nothing that offends it, that strikes against it, the way is broad enough, a plain path of duty; which is very satisfactory to conscience: but when the business is dark and doubtful, looks as much like sin as duty, a man cannot be at ease in this case. The way is very narrow; there is a grating upon the conscience; and after all the tricks, salvoes, and distinctions that may be used to justify what we do, we cannot have inward peace, whilst something always rubs against the conscience as we go.

5. *You cannot walk evenly with God, if you do not your present duty.*—One would wonder to see what broken forms of godliness some men rest in. They pick and choose, here a duty, and there another; this they will do, and this they will not do. Their religion is but a voluntary religion,—what they please, pure “will-worship.” (Col. ii. 23.) They will stint themselves, and stint God; so much he shall have, and no more. They draw up to themselves a scheme of religion, such as they think will serve the turn; and on they go in this round of duties: here they are now, and here you shall find them seven years hence. I am not against a method of practical godliness, provided it be comprehensive enough; but it is very dan-

gerous tying up ourselves to these narrow set-forms of practical holiness, which some men place all their religion in ; a step farther they will not go. Alas ! the providence of God may lead you to such duties which you thought not of, in doing or suffering for him. (John xxi. 18.) Therefore you should be in a readiness to comply with every call of God, standing complete in his whole will. Present obedience gives understanding for the future : " A good understanding have all they that do his commandments." (Psalm cxi. 10.) Let it be the purpose of your heart to walk before God " unto all well-pleasing ;" (Col. i. 10 ; ) and then your hearts will not reproach you while you live. (Job xxvii. 6.)

Some men walk very unevenly : there are so many gaps in their obedience ; they move from duty to duty *per saltum*, quite " leaping " over some, and lightly touching upon others, as if they had no great mind to any : they act grace so abruptly, that it gives no continued sense ; we know not where to find them. There are so many vacant spaces, so many blanks of omission, so many blots and blurs of commission : they drop a duty here, and another half-a-mile off ; [so] that you cannot say, " A man of God went this way." (1 Kings xiii. 12.) This is not even walking : their way is crooked, in and out ; sometimes they wander on the right hand, and sometimes on the left : they never touch upon the right path, unless it be in crossing the way from one sin to another ; which is rather to break through a duty than to perform it. Here is no beaten path of holiness, no continued track of godliness : they do not " always exercise " themselves to keep a good conscience. (Acts xxiv. 16.) They who are not frequent in duty, are never exact in duty ; their hearts cool so much between duty and duty, that there is no fervour of spirit left ; they are key-cold.\* Now and then they take up a Bible, read a little, dipping at a venture ; but are no way concerned in what they read ; they heed it not : now and then they hear a sermon, now and then pray, but without any life and spirit. They who pray but seldom, never pray well. *Actus perficit habitum* : " Frequent acts beget a habit, and frequent acts maintain it." We can never perfect holiness, but by a constant tenor in holiness, going on from day to day in the practice of it. Some trees,—though they bring not forth much fruit, yet that as is [brought forth], is the bigger and fairer. But it is not so in a Christian : the less you are in duty, the more lank and lean are your duties. As all graces grow up together in the heart, in an apt disposition to actual exercise, when occasion is given to draw them forth ; and as no grace in the heart grows up alone ; so no duty thrives in the life alone. One duty borrows strength from another, is bounded within another. As stones in a wall do bear up one another ; so a Christian is built up of many living stones, many graces, many duties. There is the same reason to do thy duty in one thing, as in another ; the same authority commands

\* " *Lifeless* : formerly a common expression, now perhaps obsolete. A *key*, on account of the *coldness* of the metal of which it is made, was formerly, and even yet is, employed to stop a bleeding of the nose."—JOHNSON'S " Dictionary."

both. Unless you "have respect unto *all* the commandments," (Psalm cxix. 6,) you truly respect none.

6. *You must begin somewhere, at some present duty: why not at this?*—It will be as difficult, nay, more difficult, to come to Christ to-morrow, than it is to-day: therefore "to-day hear his voice, and harden not your heart." (Psalm xciv. 7, 8.) Break the ice now, and by faith venture upon thy present duty, wherever it lies: do what you are now called to. You will never know how easy the yoke of Christ is, till it is bound about your necks, nor how light his burden is, till you have taken it up. While you judge of holiness at a distance, as a thing without you and contrary to you, you will never like it. Come a little nearer to it; do but take it in, actually engage in it; and you will find, religion carries meat in its mouth; it is of a reviving nourishing, strengthening nature. It brings that along with it, that enables the soul cheerfully to go through with it. "Enter in at the strait gate:" (Matt. vii. 13:) you cannot judge of the way on this side [of] the gate. Most men stick at the strait gate: beg of God to draw thee through; to lift thee over the threshold, and set thee in the narrow way. As narrow as it is, yet none who enter in at the strait gate by a true and thorough conversion, did ever perish in the way. God will lead thee and sustain thee, and carry thee on to the end of thy race: "Be thou strong therefore, and show thyself a man; and keep the charge of the Lord thy God, to walk in his ways, to keep his statutes, and his commandments, and his judgments, and his testimonies, as it is written in the law of Moses, that thou mayest prosper in all that thou doest, and whithersoever thou turnest thyself." (1 Kings ii. 2, 3.)

II. *How the well-discharge of our present duty may encourage us to hope in God for his help and assistance in all future duties.*

1. *It is promised.* (2 Chron. xv. 2.)—The cause of desertion is from ourselves. God shows mercy for his own sake, without any respect to any thing in us; but all acts of judgment and wrath take their rise from something in ourselves that provokes God to such severities. Therefore let us keep close to our present duty, and trust God, who has promised "never to leave us, nor forsake us." (Heb. xiii. 5, 6; Isai. xl. 31; Psalm lxxxiv. 11.) There is a special promise, to the seed of Abraham, of help and strength: (Isai. xli. 10:) but they who neglect their present duty, are greatly threatened. (Prov. i. 24—32; Psalm lii. 2—7.)

2. *Present grace is a pledge of future grace.*—To him that hath, more shall be given: (Luke xix. 17, 26:) where God begins a good work, he will finish it. (Heb. xii. 2; Phil. i. 6. So Psalm xxv. 3, 10, 14; Matt. x. 19, 20; Judges xiii. 23.) "The Lord is faithful, who shall establish you, and keep you from evil." (2 Thess. iii. 3.)

3. *The experience of the saints confirms this.*—See Psalm xviii. 26, 30—32. It was some such thing as this that David had. (Psalm cxix. 56.)

4. *The saints made this an argument in prayer.*—See Psalm xxxviii. 20—22; cxix. 30, 31, 94, 121, 173; xxv. 21.

5. *A conscientious discharge of our present duty fits and disposes our minds to the next duty.*—As there is a concatenation of sins, so of duties; as one sin leads to another, so one duty leads to another: the breach of one commandment is virtually the breach of all. (James ii. 10; 1 John iv. 20.) As there is a “revolting more and more,” (Isai. i. 5,) a “proceeding from evil to evil,” (Jer. ix. 3,) “waxing worse and worse;” (2 Tim. iii. 13;) so a godly man goes from grace to grace, from faith to faith, from strength to strength. (Job xvii. 9.) Therefore “in all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.” (Prov. iii. 6.) A man cannot act his faith upon God for future preservation, but in the discharge of his present duty. “Commit the keeping of thy soul to Him in well-doing,” (1 Peter iv. 19,) and then you will “find grace to help in time of need.” (Heb. iv. 16.)

6. *By the well-discharge of our present duty, we may attain assurance of salvation.* (Col. iii. 23, 24.)—It is Paul’s motive to Timothy, when he stirs him up to his present duty. (2 Tim. iv. 1, 2, 5, 8.) As if he had said, “I am Paul the aged, who have one foot in the grave; (verse 6;) but you are a young man, Timothy. You are putting on your armour; but I am putting off mine. ‘I have finished my course,’ and ‘kept the faith:’ I have discharged the duty of my place, and by that means gained assurance of my salvation. ‘Henceforth is laid up for me,’” &c. He dates his full assurance from that time, as the happy result of a well-spent life; and exhorts Timothy to tread in his steps, to “make full proof of his ministry:” “Fight on, Timothy, and fear nothing, that in the end of thy days thou mayest have a comfortable sight of that crown of righteousness which I am sure of.” Therefore let us all, “by patient continuance in well-doing, wait [seek] for eternal life.” (Rom. ii. 7.)

These are the scripture-grounds of hope for the time to come, that God will help us, and stand by us, and “strengthen us with might in our inward man,” giving us a sufficiency of grace answerable to all the occasions [that] we may have for it.

**OBJECTION.** “May not saints fail in future duties?”

**ANSWER.** They may and do fail; and when it is so, their former neglects have no small influence upon their present miscarriage. But though they may fall, yet God “upholdeth them with his hand,” that they do not fall utterly; (Psalm xxxvii. 23, 24;) God gives them a heart that cannot totally depart from him. (Jer. xxxii. 40.)

#### APPLICATION.

You see how “the way of the Lord is strength to the upright.” (Prov. x. 29.) He that is a doer of the word, is like a house built upon a rock, which may be shaken, but will never fall. (Matt. vii. 24, 25.) “In the fear of the Lord is strong confidence.” (Prov. xiv. 26.) A saint, when he relies upon God for help to perform his present duty, does not say, as Samson did, “Strengthen me only this once;” (Judges xvi. 28;) but promises to “trust in God at all times” hereafter, (Psalm lxii. 8,) to come again and again for help, as often as

there is need. Every single act of faith implies an universal trust reposed in God for all things at all times. He that doth not trust God for every thing, cannot trust in him for any thing; because there is the same reason for one act of faith as for another. You must bear upon God's infinite power, wisdom, and grace, in every act of faith. God is always the same in himself: if you can believe in him now, why not for ever? What should discourage you hereafter, that may not be objected now? You have nothing now to object; therefore conclude with David, that "goodness and mercy shall follow thee all the days of thy life." (Psalm xxiii. 6.) He that hath "delivered, will deliver." (1 Sam. xvii. 37.) Not that the doing a present duty does merit assistance for the future; but God, for our encouragement in well-doing, hath graciously promised it. This is a great motive to quicken us to our present duty.

O that every one of you would go home from this sermon, and set upon your present duty! You that are masters of families, take up Joshua's resolution, and say every one of you in the presence of God this day, that "I and my house will serve the Lord." (Joshua xxiv. 15.) Fly all appearance of evil; declare against every thing that looks like sin; let there be no lying, swearing, drunkenness, or any sort of profaneness, countenanced by you. Be zealous reprovers in your own gates, and walk within your houses with a perfect heart. Live in a continual fear of offending God; beg of him upon your knees to put you into such a daily exercise of grace as may be most suitable to your present circumstances. Grace will help you at every turn. If you thrive in your calling, grace will teach you to give God the praise, and to be thankful: if you sink and go backwards, grace will teach you quietly to submit; how to bear with cheerfulness all disappointments and losses [that] you meet with; how to receive evil, as well as good, from God. (Job ii. 10.) Truly a man without grace is a burden to himself and to every body else: he knows not how to receive good or evil, is in danger to be undone by one as well as the other. The prosperity of the wicked "slays them:" (Prov. i. 32:) "their table becomes a snare to them; and that which should have been for their welfare, a trap." (Psalm lxi. 22.) They will run themselves a-ground, one way or other, and come to nothing at last: God will "turn their way upside down," and bring confusion upon them. (Psalm cxlvi. 9.) But "verily there is a reward for the righteous." (Psalm lviii. 11.)

What I am pressing you to, is your present duty; what is past cannot be recalled. Your present duty is to repent of past sins, and to walk with God in your callings for the time to come. Be upright in your way; admit nothing into your particular callings that is inconsistent with the principles of your general calling, as you are Christians. So carry yourselves, every one of you, that all that deal with you may know you are a real Christian. Were there a greater savour of grace and of the power of godliness in your shops; did you buy and sell in the fear of God, doing all things in faith, as to the Lord, as in his sight, conversing with others in the fear of God; what



a comely sight would this be! what a sermon would this be! You would be living "epistles" of that, seen and "read of all men;" (2 Cor. iii. 1, 2;) and such sermon-notes, gathered out of the lives of professors may make deeper impressions than those that are gathered out of the mouths of preachers. Godliness, exemplified in practice, shows itself more clearly in the thing, than it is possible for us to do in words. Words convey notions of things to our ears; but a holy life holds forth the things themselves to our eyes. Nothing is so like a man as himself. Godliness in practice is godliness itself, extant in the thing, in its own substance and nature; it is visible grace; it is the very matter and subject of our sermons, standing forth in the lives of professors.

I wish we had more of this divinity walking about our streets, more of these living "epistles," seen and "read of all men." These are the books that will convince gainsayers, and provoke them to real holiness. You hear good sermons, and read good books; but doctrines without examples edify little. You do not see and read *that* in the men of this generation, that agrees with gospel-principles. The truth is,—saints are not so visible, so legible, as they should be: we can hardly spell out any thing that savours of true Christianity. It would pose a discerning Christian, to pick out grace out of the lives of some professors: it is couched under such sinful mixtures, is in such a worldly dress, that it does not look like itself. Hence it is, that many real saints go for hypocrites in this world; are suspected by good men, and hated by bad men, upon this account. Let your light shine out more: away with the bushel that keeps-in the light; and take the lantern of prudence, that only keeps out the wind. Christian prudence will direct us in the right performance of our duty; but true Christian prudence never takes us quite off from our present duty. That is hellish policy, not Christian prudence, that distinguishes a man quite out of his duty, and pretends to give sufficient reason for it, too. But God will catch that man in his own craftiness, and turn his wisdom into foolishness.

There can be no reason given against a present duty. If it be duty, and thy duty now, reason cannot countermand it: you may go to hell, with all your reasons, in a wilful neglect of it. But if God incline your hearts every day to make conscience of your present duty, you will be always found in a holy frame, and the blessing of God will be upon you. You will "flourish like the palm-tree, and grow like a cedar in Lebanon; bringing forth fruit in old age." You will always "be fat and flourishing; to show that the Lord is upright." (Psalm xcii. 12—15.)