

Family Worship

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"As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."—Joshua 24:15.

"Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his!" We have said, my brethren, on a former occasion, that if we would die his death, we must live his life. It is true that there are cases in which the Lord shows his mercy and his glory to men who are already lying on the death-bed, and says to them, as to the thief on the cross, "Today shalt thou be with me in paradise." The Lord still gives the Church similar examples from time to time, for the purpose of displaying his sovereign power, by which, when he is pleased to do so, he can break the hardest hearts and convert the souls most estranged, to show that all depends on his grace, and that he hath mercy on whom he will have mercy. Yet these are but rare exceptions, on which you can not rely absolutely; and if you wish, my dear hearers, to die the Christian's death, you must live the Christian's life; your heart must be truly converted to the Lord, truly prepared for the kingdom, and, trusting only in the mercy of Christ, desirous of going to dwell with him. Now, my brethren, there are various means by which you can be made ready, in life, to obtain at a future day a blessed end. It is on one of the most efficacious of these means that we wish to dwell today. This mean is Family Worship; that is, the daily edification which the members of a Christian family may mutually enjoy. "As for me and my house," said Joshua to Israel, "we will serve the Lord." We wish, my brethren, to give you the motives which should induce us to make this resolution of Joshua, and the directions necessary to fulfill it.

WHAT ARE THE MOTIVES FOR FAMILY WORSHIP?

to bring glory to God

But, my brethren, if the love of God be in your hearts, and if you feel that, being bought with a price, you ought to glorify God in your bodies and spirits, which are his, where do you love to glorify him rather than in your families and in your houses? You love to unite with your brethren in worshipping him publicly in the church; you love to pour out your souls before him in your closets. Is it only in the presence of that being with whom God has connected you for life and before your children, that you can not think of God? Is it, then, only, that you have no blessings to ascribe? Is it, then, only, that you have no mercies and protection to implore? You can speak of every thing when with them; your conversation is upon a thousand different matters; but your tongue and your heart can not find room for one word about God! *You will not look up as a family to him who is the true Father of your family; you will not converse with your wife and your children about that Being who will one day, perhaps, be the only husband of your wife, the only Father of your children!* It is the Gospel that has formed domestic society; it did not exist before it; it does not exist without it; it would, therefore, seem to be the duty of that society, full of gratitude to the God of the Gospel, to be peculiarly consecrated to it; and yet, my brethren, how many couples, how many families there are, nominally Christian, and who even have some respect for religion, where God is never named! How many cases there are in which immortal souls that have been united have never asked one another who united them, and what their future destiny and objects are to be! How often it happens that, while they endeavor to assist each other in everything else, they do not even think of assisting each other in searching for the one thing needful, in conversing, in reading, in praying, with reference to their eternal interests! Christian spouses! is it in the flesh, and for time alone, that you are to be united? Is it not in the spirit, and for eternity also? Are you beings who have met by accident, whom another accident, death, is soon to separate? Do you not wish to be united by God, in God, and for God? Religion would unite your souls by immortal ties! But do not reject them; draw them, on the contrary, tighter every day, by worshipping together under the domestic roof. Voyagers on the same vessel converse of the place to which they are going; and will not you, fellow-travelers to an eternal world, speak together of that world, of the route which leads to it, of your fears and your hopes? "Many walk thus," says St. Paul, "of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the Cross of Christ;" but "our conversation is in heaven, from whence also we look for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ."

to protect your children from sin

But if it be your duty to be engaged with reference to God in your houses for your own sakes, ought you not to be so engaged for the sakes of those of your households whose souls have been committed to your care, and especially for your children? You are greatly concerned for their prosperity, for their temporal happiness; but does not this concern make your neglect of their eternal prosperity and happiness still more palpable? Your children are young trees entrusted to you; your house is the nursery where they ought to grow, and you are the gardeners. But oh! will you plant those tender and precious saplings in a sterile and sandy soil? Yet this is what you are doing, if there be nothing in your house to make them grow in the knowledge and love of their God and Savior. Are you not preparing for them a favorable soil, from which they can derive sap and life? What will become of your children in the midst of all the temptations that will surround them and draw them into sin? What will become of them in these troublous times, in which it is so necessary to strengthen the soul of the young man by the fear of God, and thus to give that fragile bark the ballast needed for launching it upon the vast ocean?

Parents! if your children do not meet with a spirit of piety in your houses, if, on the contrary, your pride consists in surrounding them with external gifts, introducing them into worldly society, indulging all their whims, letting them follow their own course, you will see them grow vain, proud, idle, disobedient, impudent, and extravagant! They will treat you with contempt; and the more your hearts are wrapped up in them, the less they will think of you. This is seen but too often to be the case; but ask yourselves if you are not responsible for their bad habits and practices; and your conscience will reply that you are; that you are now eating the bread of bitterness which you have prepared for yourself. May you learn thereby how great has been your sin against God in neglecting the means which were in your power for influencing their hearts; and may others take warning from your misfortune, and bring up their children in the Lord! Nothing is more effectual in doing this than an example of domestic piety. Public worship is often too vague and general for children, and does not sufficiently interest them; as to the worship of the closet, they do not yet understand it. A lesson learned by rote, if unaccompanied by any thing else, may lead them to look upon religion as a study, like those of foreign languages or history. Here, as everywhere, and more than elsewhere, example is more effectual than precept. They are not merely to be taught out of some elementary book that they must love God, but you must show them God is loved. If they observe that no worship is paid to that God of whom they hear, the very best instruction will prove useless; but by means of Family Worship, these young plants will grow "like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season: his leaf also shall not wither." Your children may leave the parental roof, but they will remember in foreign lands the prayers of the parental roof, and those prayers will protect them. "If any," says the Scripture, "have children or nephews, let them learn first to show piety at home. But if any provide not for his own, and especially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel."

to produce real joy in the home

And what delight, what peace, what real happiness a Christian family will find in erecting a family altar in their midst, and in uniting to offer up sacrifice unto the Lord! Such is the occupation of angels in heaven; and blessed are those who anticipate those pure and immortal joys? "Behold, how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard; that went down to the skirts of his garments; as the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion; for there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore." O what new grace and life piety gives to a family! In a house where God is forgotten, there is rudeness, ill-humor, and vexation of spirit. Without the knowledge and the love of God, a family is but a collection of individuals who may have more or less natural affection for one another; but the real bond, the love of God our Father in Jesus Christ our Lord, is wanting. The poets are full of beautiful descriptions of domestic life; but, alas! how different the pictures often are from the reality! Sometimes there is a want of confidence in the providence of God; sometimes there is love of riches; at others, a difference of character; at others, an opposition of principles. O how many troubles, how many cares there are in the bosoms of families.

Domestic piety will prevent all these evils; it will give perfect confidence in that God who gives food to the birds of the air; it will give true love toward those with whom we have to live; not an exacting, sensitive love, but a merciful love, which excuses and forgives, like that of God himself; not a proud love, but a humble love, accompanied by a sense of one's own faults and weakness; not a fickle love, but a love unchangeable as eternal charity. "The voice of rejoicing and salvation is in the tabernacle of the righteous."

to console during times of trial

And when the hour of trial comes, that hour which must come sooner or later, and which sometimes visits the homes of men more than once, what consolation will domestic piety afford! Where do trials occur if not in the bosoms of families? Where, then, ought the remedy for trials to be administered if not in the bosoms of families? How much a family where there is mourning is to be pitied if it has not that consolation! The various members of whom it is composed increase one another's sadness. But if, on the contrary, that family loves God, if it is in the habit of meeting to invoke the holy name of God, from whom comes every trial, as well as every good gift; then how will the souls that are cast down be raised up! The members of the family who still remain around the table on which is laid the Book of God, that book where they find the words of resurrection, life, and immortality, where they find sure pledges of the happiness of the being who is no more among them, as well as the warrant of their own hopes. The Lord is pleased to send down the Comforter to them; the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon them; an ineffable balm is poured upon their wounds, and gives them much consolation; peace is communicated from one heart to another. They enjoy moments of celestial bliss. "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." "O Lord, thou hast brought up my soul from the grave! Thine anger endureth but a moment: in thy favour is life; weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning."

to influence society

And who can tell, my brethren, what an influence domestic piety might exert over society itself? What encouragements all men would have in doing their duty, from the statesman down to the poorest mechanic! How would all become accustomed to act with respect not only to the opinions of men, but also to the judgment of God! How would each learn to be satisfied with the position in which he is placed! Good habits would be adopted; the powerful voice of conscience would be strengthened: prudence, propriety, talent, social virtues, would be developed with renewed vigor. This is what we might expect both for ourselves and for society. "Godliness hath promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come."

HOW TO CONDUCT FAMILY WORSHIP

If you wish to profit by all the blessings of Family Worship, what are you to do? What measures are you to follow?

with true spirituality

And first, so far as it is in your power, let not these exercises of domestic piety be wanting in spirituality, truth, and life; let them not consist merely in reading certain passages, and repeating certain forms of prayer, in which the heart is not concerned. It would, perhaps, be better to have no Family Worship than to have such as this. These dead forms are still to be found in some families. But at the present day, when the Church is every where struggling to rise out of its ruins, and when the wind of which Ezekiel spoke is breathing every where upon the dry bones to impart life unto them, we must return to Family Worship and revive it, not in a state of languor and death, but in a state of life and strength. How shall we attain this object? *Let us perform the exercises of family piety, not merely as though it were a good work which we ought to accomplish, for then we might fall either into the error which we have just pointed out, or into pride; but let us perform them rather like miserable beings who want riches; as famished creatures, who want food to nourish that which is most noble in them.* Do it as a duty, if you choose; but do it rather on account of your own wants. The little child knows how to ask for a piece of bread, or even for its mother's milk; and do not we know how to go to God and ask of him his pure and spiritual milk? "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness; for they shall be filled."

with flexibility

We will give you another rule, my brethren: do not adhere too exclusively, too rigidly to any one particular form. First establish such a service in accordance with your own wants and those of your family; let there be entire liberty; let it be conducted one day in one manner, and the next in another, if you choose; let it be prolonged at one time and abridged at another. Perhaps it were better that this exercise should not, at first, embrace all the members of your household, but should have a smaller and more intimate sphere; this will make it more easy and edifying. Follow these various suggestions; the great matter is, that God be not forgotten under your roof. "Stand fast, therefore, in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage."

with the Word of God

In the first place, the Word of God should, of course be read, and sometimes, perhaps, other Christian books. In how many families that admirable Book, that Book of the nations, has been in all ages, and is still the most precious of treasures! In how many dwellings has the Bible diffused righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost, and submission to all authorities appointed by God! The various books which compose the Bible are almost all of a different nature from one another; it were difficult to have a greater variety in one volume, though the same Spirit of God is in each. This circumstance makes it remarkably appropriate for the nourishment of families; and hence so many poor and obscure families in Protestant countries, possessing that Book, do without any others, and by it are brought to the acquisition, not only of eternal life, but of a remarkable intellectual development. The child, the old man, the woman, and the full-grown man alike find something to interest them there, and to lead them to God. There is something for every situation in life. What abundant consolation have all troubled and afflicted but faithful souls derived always from the Psalms of the Royal Prophet! It is well to read throughout some book of the Scriptures, but it is not necessary to follow the order in which the different books are placed in the Sacred Volume. On the contrary, it is, perhaps, best to turn from the New Testament to the Old, and from the Old to the New; from one of the Prophets to one of the Epistles of the Apostles, and then to one of the historical books of the Old Testament. It is desirable that the person who reads should make some remarks on the passage read. You know how to speak about any other book that you read; is it only here that thoughts and words are wanting? Do you find nothing there that is applicable to the state of your heart, to the situation of your family, to the character of some one of your children? *Read that book always, not as a history of past times, but as a book written for you, addressed to you now; you will readily find circumstances and occasions which render it suitable.* Nevertheless, if nothing has been given to you, be content with asking the Holy Spirit to impart to every heart the fruits which he has promised for his word. "As the rain cometh down, and the snow, from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater; so shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth; it shall not return unto me void; but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereunto I sent it."

with prayer

Another act of worship is, prayer in common, or together. It is true that there are good written prayers; but can you not pray to God aloud yourself? You know very well how to speak to a friend; why should you not know how to speak to God? Is he not your greatest and most intimate friend? How easy is it to approach him when it is in the name of Christ crucified that we come! "Thou art near, O Lord," says David. "While they are yet speaking," God has said, "I will hear." If you can pray in secret, can you not pray aloud? Do not be so anxious about what you shall say; "Prayer requires more of the heart than the tongue, more faith than reasoning." How can it be otherwise than salutary, when, for instance, a father or a mother prays aloud for the children who are present, and enters into detail respecting their sins before God, asking him to give his help and his grace. And how often a family is in a situation in which it is called upon to offer up prayer unto God, for deliverance, for assistance, for consolation! "Ye shall seek me and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart," saith the Lord.

with singing

A third act of worship which ought, if possible, to form part of domestic devotion, is singing. In these days man has associated singing with his occupations, and especially with his pleasures; but to praise God was certainly its primitive object. It is to this that the Royal Prophet consecrated it, and shall not we do likewise? If so many profane things are sung in some houses, why should we not sing to the honor of the God who has created and redeemed us? Still more, if sacred hymns are sometimes sung for the sake of the beauty of the sound, shall they not be sung with humility and fervor to celebrate the Lord? "Admonish one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord."

at the most convenient time

But some will perhaps say, At what time ought we thus to think of God and approach him together? I answer, whenever you choose, at the most convenient hour, when you will be least disturbed by your other business. This is generally in the evening; perhaps it were better, on account of the fatigue of the day, that it should be in the morning; and best of all both morning and evening. When you have eaten your morning meal, or even while you are eating it, could you not spend that time which is usually spent either in saying nothing or in talking of trifles, in reading a few words which would raise your thoughts to God, or in hearing them read? I am about to begin the day by the first function of the animal being; but wilt not thou, O my spiritual and immortal soul, do any thing or receive any thing now? I am about to feed my body with that which God has created; but do thou, O my soul, awake and receive thy food from the Creator! O God! thou art my portion forever! O God! thou art my God; early will I seek

thee! What a blessing, my brethren, will such a beginning bring down upon the whole day, and what a happy disposition of mind it will give you!

And to you, Christian parents, let the evening of the Lord's day, that season when the children of irreligious parents run to places of dissipation, be peculiarly precious and sacred. Instruct your household in the way of the Lord, and your instructions at that time will be particularly blessed, provided your children see that you are really in earnest in the work which you are performing.

with singleness of heart

To all this, my brethren, add the essential thing: a life in accordance with the sacredness of the worship which you offer unto God. Be not one man before the altar of God and another in the world, but be truly one man at all times. Let your behavior throughout the day be a living commentary upon what you have read, heard, or said in the hour of devotion. "Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves; for the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord; but He loveth him that followeth after righteousness."

CONCLUSION

Such is Family Worship. We would remind you, my dear hearers, of all the motives which ought to hasten its establishment in your families, and we entreat you, and particularly those of you who are husbands or wives, fathers or mothers, to put your hands to the plough.

But do you say, 'This is so strange a thing'? What, my brethren! Is it not more strange that a family professing to be Christian, professing to have a firm hope for eternity, should advance toward that eternity without giving any sign of that hope, without any preparation, without any conversation, perhaps, alas! without any thought concerning it? Ah! this is very strange!

Do you say, 'This is a thing of very little repute or glory, and to which a certain degree of shame is attached'? And who, then, is the greatest: that father who, in former and happier days, was the high priest of God in his own house, and who increased his paternal authority and gave it a divine unction by kneeling down with his children before his Father and the Father of them all; or that worldly man in our days, whose mind is engaged only in vain pursuits, who forgets his eternal destiny and that of his children, and in whose house God is not? O what a shame is this!

But perhaps you say, 'Different times have different customs; those things were well enough then, but all has changed now'? *It is precisely because all has changed that we must make haste and raise up the family altar in the midst of families, lest the feeble tie that still holds back these families should be broken, and they drag both Church and State into ruin.* It is not when the disease has spread with great violence that remedies become useless; and before a man's life is despaired of, the most powerful preservatives are given to him.

Thus, then, do you, who, by the grace of God, are well disposed, and have made good resolutions, make an attempt, and be not discouraged; make another still; resort to prayer; ask God to guide you himself, to sustain you, and give you success; ask Jesus Christ to be with you; for "where two or three are gathered together in his name there is he in the midst of them."

But, my brethren, if you wish to erect an altar unto God in your house, you must, first of all, erect one in your own heart. And is there one there? I ask you, my brethren, Is there one? Ah! could I draw back the veil, could I now penetrate into the hearts of those who listen to me, what would I see? Or, rather, O Lord! what must thou see in our hearts—thou, from whom nothing is veiled, and before whom all things are naked and visible!

In your heart, my dear hearer, I see an altar erected to pleasure and worldliness; there you offer up your morning sacrifice; there you sacrifice, especially in the evening; and the incense arising from it intoxicates and bewilders you even at night.

In your heart, my dear hearer, I see an altar erected to the good gifts of this world, to riches, to mammon.

In yours, my dear hearer, I see an altar consecrated to yourself. You are the idol whom you worship, whom you exalt above everything else, for whom you wish for all things, and at the foot of whom you would fain see all the

world kneel.

My brethren, is there an altar in your hearts erected to the only living and true God? Are you the temple of God, and does God's Spirit dwell within you? So long as there is no altar erected to God in your souls, there can be none in your houses; "For what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? and what concord hath Christ with Belial? and what agreement hath the temple of God with idols?"

Be converted, then, in your hearts! Die to the world, to sin, to yourselves even, and live to God in Jesus Christ our Lord. Immortal souls, Christ hath redeemed you at a great price! He gave his whole life on the cross for you. Learn, then, "that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again." "Wherefore come out from among idols, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty."

O happy is that family, my brethren, which has embraced that God who says, "I will dwell in them, and walk in them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people"! Happy for time, and happy for eternity! How can you hope to meet with those whom you love near Christ in heaven, unless with them you seek Christ on earth? How shall you assemble as a family there, if you have not as a family attended to heavenly things here below? But as to the Christian family which shall have been united in Jesus, it will, without doubt, meet around the throne of the glory of him whom it will have loved without having seen. It will only change its wretched and perishable dwelling for the vast and eternal mansions of God. Instead of being a humble family of the earth, united to the whole family of heaven by the same ties, it will have become an innumerable and glorious family. It will surround the throne of God with the hundred and forty-four thousand, and will say, as it said on earth, but with joy and glory, "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power."

O, my brethren, if but one father or mother would now resolve to meet together in the presence of the Lord, if one single person not yet bound by domestic ties were to resolve to raise an altar unto God in his house when he shall be so bound, and would, in some future day, so act that abundant blessings would descend upon him and his, I would give thanks unto God for having spoken!

Dear hearer! may the Lord so affect your heart that you may now exclaim, "As for me and my house we will serve the Lord!" Amen.