

"The Sins of Men Not Chargeable to God"

Part 3

by

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***"Let no man say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God';
for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt any man."
James 1:13***

In its most proper sense, to tempt a man to sin is to propose some motive that will compel or allure him to it. It is to entice him to sin by promises and rewards, or pressure him to it by warnings and punishment. God is infinitely free from this. Instead of proposing any motives to sin, he proposes the greatest motives possible against it! This is evident from his promises and warnings of eternal rewards and punishments. These are plainly the greatest motives possible.

It is the distinguishing privilege of man that he is capable of extending his view to eternity. Thus it is obvious that eternal motives are the only proper ones that should govern immortal souls--obvious because the uncertain fleeting time of life, when compared to eternity, is nothing. To let temporal motives counterbalance eternal ones does the most outrageous violence to reason that can be imagined.

It is proper to consider here the extensive influence of eternal motives. No one can reasonably pretend to be exempted from their influence, not even those who have only the light of nature. The apostle Paul assures us that even the heathen were accused by their conscience. It is very reasonable to suppose that the accusations of their conscience had some relation to a judge, and were attended with secret misgivings and rational forebodings of a future reckoning since innumerable sins had passed unpunished. In perfect justice the punishment deserved bears an exact proportion to the wickedness committed, and reason at least might have convinced them that the less they sinned in this world the better it would be for them in the next. Eternal suffering added to present misery is a horror which no temporal motive can equally balance, much less counterbalance.

How plainly God's threatenings are revealed deserves our serious attention. They are as plainly revealed as his promises. *"And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life"* (Matt. 25:46). We have many things derived from reason and experience that should confirm our belief in his threatenings. In particular, we have (1) God's attributes--his truth, holiness, and justice; (2) the nature of sin, which separates us from God, who is our only happiness; (3) the part of divine threatenings which we see fulfilled already; (4) examples of misery that are to be seen in the afflictions of life, and pains and terrors of death. If any person is inclined to doubt the eternity of future punishment unless he sees it, then he seeks a way of satisfaction that the nature of the thing does not allow. For though a man should see the place of punishment with his eyes, he could not see that it is eternal unless he saw the end of eternity, which is impossible. Thus a man can never have evidence of this merely by sight. God's word is surely the best evidence in the world.

Concerning eternal reward, our actions cannot merit it. Yet since it is offered to us on the most reasonable terms, that is, through the merits of another, then anyone who does not put forth greater diligence to attain it than he does to attain any earthly pleasure, must blame himself as the author of his own misery and acknowledge that God is infinitely free from the blame of it.

Even if God had proposed no other motive against sin, these eternal motives would make a strong argument for the apostle's doctrine. Had God permitted the course of life to proceed so that there should be vastly more pleasure in sin and trouble in duty than there really is, none of this could be proportionate to the rewards and punishments that are eternal. But it is still a further confirmation of the doctrine, that as God has proposed everlasting motives against sin in regards to the next world, so he is just as far from proposing any motives to it in this world. His ordering of events in the works of providence as well as of grace are manifestly calculated for restraining sin, thus producing numberless happy effects.

Other sinful men, it is true, lay before us many motives to sin. But we ought no more blame God for the evil actions of others than for our own. He is the author of neither, but in numberless instances he hinders and restrains both ours and theirs. In regards to his permission, his reasons for permitting what he permits are as holy as those for hindering what he hinders. To deny this is in effect pretending to know all the reasons a God of infinite knowledge can have for his actions, which is the most extravagant presumption imaginable.

We are obliged in justice to distinguish God's own actions from the actions of men. God's actions we are to vindicate, and for this end--that the more we consider them in the works of nature and providence, the more we may be satisfied that he is not the author of any temporal motives to sin, because he has annexed no pleasure to it. Regarding the actions of men, God has indeed added pleasure to them. That enjoyment is not sinful but is, on the contrary, our duty. These good objects, it is true, may be obtained by evil means and enjoyed in an evil manner, but that is no legitimate reflection on God's providence, as shall be made to appear more clearly afterwards.

To set this matter in a true light, we may reflect on two different sorts of pleasures. First, the pleasures that are to be found in God himself; and second, those that are to be found in his creations. As to the former, it is plain that we cannot desire them too much nor enjoy them to excess. As to the latter, God himself is the author and has appointed them all for good ends. And it is here where we see the chief folly of sin; namely, that the pleasures after which men seek in the ways of sin are such as may actually be obtained in the way of duty; for it is certain that there is no pleasure in the world unique to sin. If it were otherwise, then the apostle would not have affirmed so generally that every creation of God is good and to be received (that is, enjoyed) with thanksgiving. This is affirmed by the apostle when he speaks of things sacrificed to idols. He shows that however they were abused to evil purposes, yet in themselves they were good and harmless. They were created by God and meant to be enjoyed in obedience and thanksgiving to him. The same may be said of all God's creation. Though they are too often sacrificed to men's lusts and idols, yet they are not thereby deprived of that natural goodness and usefulness with which God has endowed them, nor rendered incapable of being enjoyed in a lawful way.

We should consider here the proper tendency and natural use of all the pleasure in the creation. Some of God's creation give us pleasure only by the view and contemplation of them. It is obvious that the direct tendency is to excite love and esteem of the divine perfections there

manifested. This is one of the chief duties we owe more immediately to God. Others of his creation give pleasure not merely by the view of them, but by applying them to the subsistence of our bodily life. The direct tendency of that pleasure is to excite mankind to self-preservation. This is a duty we owe more immediately to ourselves, and it is legitimately enjoined by God. It would be a duty even if there were no pleasure in the means of it. But it is a double act of goodness on God's part, and consequently a double obligation on us, that he has both furnished us with these means and made them delightful as well as useful. There is no useless superfluous pleasure in nature. All tends either to promote life and health or, which is no insignificant means of health, innocent and comfortable refreshment.

It is evident, therefore, that when God makes these objects useful to men and at the same time pleasant, he is not only engaging men to perform their duty but bestowing a present reward for doing what he requires of them for their own good. The direct tendency, therefore, and proper use of all the pleasures in God's creation--whether in their contemplation or the enjoyment of them in any other way--is to awaken adoration of all God's perfections in general, but in particular his abundant goodness to us. Let us love him as a kind and bountiful father who provides for the diverse living inhabitants of the world as one large family; on whom the eyes of all things wait; and who opens his hand liberally, satisfying the desire of every living thing. Nothing can be more befitting than the apostle's reasoning with the heathens of Lystra that all the good and pleasure in the creation were witnesses for God, testifying of mankind's obligation to love and praise Him who filled their hearts with food and gladness (Acts 14:17).

What we commonly call unlawful pleasures are nothing else but pleasures that are in themselves lawful and useful. But they have been procured by wrong means or enjoyed in a wrong way, either obtained by injustice or abused by intemperance. But neither injustice nor intemperance have any real pleasure annexed to them. On the contrary, unless a man has a very unnatural temper of mind and body, injustice must be painful to the former as well as intemperance to the latter.

If this were duly considered, it might convince us not only that the pleasures in creation may be had in a course of obedience to the Creator, but also that this is incomparably the best way of enjoying them, even in regards to this life itself. To live righteously, soberly, and godly is the way to live joyfully even in this present world. Holiness and righteousness are one and the same disposition of mind best adjusted for the true enjoyment both of God and his creation. Injustice and intemperance argue an immoderate love of temporal pleasure. It causes painful impatience in desiring these objects; painful labor in pursuing them; anxiety in possessing them, because they are always liable to danger; causes nauseousness and loathing in using them because their pleasure is less in the enjoyment than in the expectation; further, little as it is, it is always decaying; and lastly, it causes manifest vexation in losing them. On the other hand, temperance enables a man to possess earthly objects without anxiety by being prepared to lose them, to enjoy them without loathing by using them with moderation, to seek them without impatience, and to lose them without despair.

The ancient Epicureans were so sensible of this, that though they were reckoned patrons of vice because they placed happiness in pleasure, they nevertheless made temperance an ingredient of happiness because it gave pleasure a certain commendation. These and many other things serve to show that the pleasures men seek by a course of sin may be had--and may be had with advantage--in a course of duty.

We may add that there are many sins in which there is no real pleasure at all. This is evident in those sins which are a direct affront to the Creator. It cannot be alleged, without the greatest absurdity as well as impiety, that there is any pleasure annexed to the sins of profanity, blasphemy, mockery, censuring of God's laws, word, works, or the like. No person ever pretended that this common sin of cursing and swearing had any tendency to promote his health or increase his estate. The Author of nature is infinitely free from appending any pleasure to these unnatural practices. If men have in any way made them pleasant to themselves by habit, this only attests to their outrageous contempt of God, for which he never gave them any cause. Their contempt is so great that they take pleasure in expressing it.

The same consideration might be applied to sins against our neighbors, foremost of which are hatred, wrath, and malice. The words by which a man wrongs his neighbor's reputation by backbiting, or the actions by which he disturbs his neighbor's peace by contention, have no fitting tendency to promote a man's own peace or reputation, but the contrary. The same is true regarding those sins by which a man wrongs his neighbor's prosperity by injustice. As it is true that the pleasures of intemperance may be gained in a greater abundance by a life of sobriety, so the profits of injustice may be gained much more safely by a life of industry. Nor can anyone pretend to be under the necessity of employing injustice. For if a man be in such a condition (which however is very rare) that he can neither obtain the necessary means of sustenance by his own industry nor by the charity of others, then the benevolent laws of God make some things, in that case, just and lawful that would not otherwise be so.

This serves to prove that there is no pleasure in nature which is unique to sin. It is no less certain that there is no trouble which is unique to duty. Any man may be fully satisfied of this by taking a precise view of that which is true holiness. Loving God and our neighbor, which is the fulfilling of the law, is so far from having trouble added to it, that it is the most pleasant disposition of which the mind of man is capable. It is a demonstration of what the apostle John teaches, that God's commandments are not grievous. They are the exercises of heaven (where no trouble can enter), and are real foretastes of it as well as preparations for it.

The more we consider the antipathy men have to these duties, the more unaccountable it will appear. No man can allege that loving God tends to impair his health or waste his fortune, as the love of lusts and idols oftentimes do. If a man's charity to his neighbor at times impairs his own prosperity, yet it does not ruin it, but rather tends to secure it. And it is certain there have never been so many impoverished by charity as have been impoverished by debauchery and extravagance--or even by covetousness, which so frequently loses what it has by grasping at more. Faith and reliance on Christ Jesus do not cause such shameful disappointments as commonly flow from reliance on the world and the flesh. To be heavenly-minded does not eat away a man's flesh as worldly anxiety does. Temperance does not lead to diseases, nor industry to poverty, nor humility to contention, nor honesty to shame. Meekness and kindness do not make a man pine away as envy does. Nor will a man blush for being found true to his word and just in his dealings.

There are perhaps only two particular duties that may be raised in objection to this assertion: *repentance for sin*, and *suffering persecution for righteousness' sake*, when called to it. It cannot be denied that both sorrowing for sin and mortifying our corruptions carry with them trouble and discomfort when it comes to repentance. But that trouble is not the intrinsic fruit of duty and obedience but of sin; nor is it so tied to duty but that the pleasures of repentance cannot surpass it. Furthermore, the discomfort associated with repentance is not the fruit of obedience but of

disobedience, because had mankind continued in their duty there would have been no occasion for repentance. Nor is the trouble associated with this duty unique to it. For impenitent sinners have consciences which, like serpents in their breasts, can sting and often cause more uneasiness than the deepest humiliation can give a believing penitent. Faithless remorse was far more painful to Judas than goodly sorrow was to Peter.

There are some kinds of melancholy in which human nature takes pleasure. Surely the noblest and most rational of these is sorrow for the unworthy actions by which we have lost the chief perfection of our nature--*the image of God*. We have made unbecoming returns to his infinite kindness. We have forfeited his inestimable favor, presence, and friendship. It is no surprise then that such a sorrow as this should have something of a sublime pleasure in it, since it is plainly an exercise of loving God. In addition, we should consider that that gospel repentance, to which we are obliged, is to be joined with hope in God's mercy through the merits of his Son. Thus by the exercise of love to God and hope in his mercy, those who have experienced this melting of heart find such satisfaction in it that they desire more of it. Not that repentance can merit it, but that it is a means of it.

Neither is trouble unique to the mortifying of corruption in regards to repentance. Even a wicked man often cannot gratify one corruption without subduing another. The corruptions of nature are full of contradictions and inconsistencies, so that the soul enslaved by them is made a Babel of confusion. The love of riches, the love of honor and pleasure, pride, covetousness, vanity, and luxury all crowd in upon us with a thousand different challenges. They are justly compared by Solomon to the daughters of the leech, ever crying "give, give," and to the grave, which never says "enough." It is not easy to mortify our corruptions; satisfying them is absolutely impossible.

Now concerning the other duty to which objections have been raised, namely, suffering for righteousness' sake (when called to it), there is no trouble unique to it either. This will appear by reflecting on what was hinted at before, that we are obliged in justice to distinguish carefully between God's actions and those of mankind. The same reasons which prove we cannot blame God for our own sins prove also that we cannot blame him for the sins of others. God is infinitely free from blame in regards to those evil inclinations of wicked men which drive them to persecute others--others more righteous than themselves. Therefore it is the height of injustice for men to blame God for the persecutions they suffer. (For, after all, the best men know that they suffer infinitely less than they deserve.) God is so far from being the author of persecutions that in numberless instances he entirely prevents and hinders them in a very remarkable manner, and always restrains evil men by overruling them for the good of those who love him.

Why does God not hinder all, or some, persecutions? This we are not competent to judge. Yet we may know much about many persecutions by their visible effects. There are few events by which godly religion has reaped more benefits. The evil ends of persecution have been overruled by Providence to the promoting of those very ends against which evil men designed them--such as the propagating and confirming of the truth; promoting the power of godliness; the trial, exercise, triumph, and splendor of grace in the saints of God. Besides all this, it is plain that whatever trouble good men may suffer for the testimony of a good conscience, there are others who suffer the same without that testimony. Therefore suffering persecution is not a legitimate objection to holiness, unless it were true that we are secured from trouble by wickedness. But this is patently false, for it is evident that men suffer much oftener by sin than by loving God. And with the justice of magistrates, the special judgments of Providence, and the inherent effect of sin, it is certain that all that some men have ever suffered for righteousness is incomparably less than

what others have suffered for wickedness.

It might be objected that, besides persecution, there are in even the ordinary course of living several duties of a holy life that expose men to various injuries and affronts, duties such as meekness, humility, forgiveness, and the like. In answer to this we should reflect that these duties are misunderstood if they are imagined to hinder self-defense. When these holy duties are practiced, they are aids and not hindrances. But if at times they expose men to injuries, the contrary vices are no security against them, for even the vain-glorious are oftentimes affronted as well as the humble. Proud oppressors generally have far more enemies than the meek and the just. The like may be said of many other sins and duties when compared.

There is nothing more certain than this: (1) as there is no pleasure unique to sin, so there is no trouble unique to duty; (2) as the pleasures which are sometimes obtained by sin do not in themselves have a necessary or direct tendency to excite it, so the troubles that sometimes attend holiness are troubles which holiness itself has no natural tendency to produce. From all this it is apparent that since God is the author of eternal motives against sin, he cannot be the author of temporal motives to it.

This is part three of Sermon I in *Sermons and Essays: by the Late Rev. Mr. John M'Laurin*, published from his manuscripts by John Gillies (Philadelphia: W. W. Woodward, 1811). **Note:** The text has been paraphrased for easier reading and clarity.

The reader will find this sermon continued in Part 4.