

"The Sins of Men Not Chargeable to God"

Part 4

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***

That God has proposed very rational temporal motives against sin is another further confirmation of our text. This will appear by considering that even in this life there are innumerable pleasures unique to holiness as well as innumerable troubles unique to wickedness. It is scarcely possible to enumerate and describe them fully, the subject being in effect inexhaustible. It is sufficient for our purpose to take a general view.

The word of God tells us that "the ways of wisdom are the ways of pleasantness and peace"; that "Christ's yoke is easy, and his burden light"; that "gladness is sown for the upright in heart"; that "the fruits of the Spirit are love, joy and peace"; that it is the privilege, and should be the practice, of believers to "rejoice evermore"; that the joy into which they have access is "a joy unspeakable and full of glory"; that their peace is a "perfect peace," and a peace that "passes all understanding."

Both the prophets and apostles employ the most beautiful images in nature to paint the greatness of these joys. They speak of the oil of joy, garments of praise, everlasting joy on their heads; the budding and blossoming of the rose; the time of the singing of birds; the joy of banquets and marriage feasts. They also represent the inanimate part of creation joining in the triumph of God's people, the mountains and hills breaking forth before them into singing, and all the trees of the fields clapping their hands, besides many other bright images whose scope is to show that a life of faith and holiness is the way to the greatest solid joy here as well as hereafter.

Even though many sincere believers do not attain to all these joys, it cannot weaken the force of the argument in view. They must impute their loss to the weakness of their faith and love. It is sufficient for our purpose to show that God proposes such motives to holiness in order that men may advance higher and higher. It is certain that all these joys have been attained by some good men, and are offered to all. Even those who have never experienced any of them may yet reasonably be persuaded of their reality by considering the nature of faith, and all the duties of the covenant of grace on the one hand and the promises of it on the other.

If we consider the nature and design of holiness, it is not merely a preparation for eternal happiness but an ingredient of it. The end of holiness is glory. It is a mirror of the disposition and employment of those who are already happy, and consequently has the closest resemblance to their eternal state. Nothing can be more evident in the nature of holiness than that the soul's true happiness must increase in proportion to its union with God, who is the infinite source of all happiness and joy.

The most welcome news we can conceive and the greatest gift we can desire are found only by faith in Christ. The love of God envisions infinite, benevolent perfection and beauty; it is all sufficient. To love our neighbor sincerely and graciously is so delightful a duty that all the pleasures of society, which even wicked men enjoy, are founded on some resemblance to it. Meekness, humility, and religious meditation yield serenity and tranquility of spirit. Meditation is one of the most valuable enjoyments in the world, and a great part of holiness consists in the most noble kind of it. Consider that all we can know is either something concerning God or his creation. Surely, then, the most noble view of the creation is in contemplating its relation to the Creator. All of creation manifests his glory. Therefore if we were accustomed to consider creation in that light, we would find a matter of spiritual joy wherever we looked. To all this we may add, that the well-grounded hope of eternal happiness, if duly improved, is a greater present pleasure than any earthly enjoyment whatsoever.

If we consider, on the other hand, the promises of the covenant of grace, it is plain that God promises to his people not only future happiness but also present peace, pardon of sin, strength to perform duty, his acceptance of it, communion with himself, comfort under affliction, answers to prayer, and (what comprehends numberless blessings) that he will make all things work together for their good and let nothing separate them from his love! These are the present encouragements God extends in encouraging us to holy duty; and surely, they are incomparably more important than any other motives which the devil or wicked men can offer against it.

Let us now take a short view of the present troubles that intrinsically flow from wickedness, many of which are unique to it. This will serve not only to vindicate God's holiness but to demonstrate his wisdom. In creating mankind he designed our bodies in such a fashion that the very things detrimental to our greatest interest should be at the same time inconsistent with our present happiness. And this surely is a very rational motive for avoiding them. It may even be that much of the distress attending sin is an absolute necessary consequence of it, and thus it is unavoidable that desires and passions which cannot be fully satisfied should be exceedingly tormenting. But it is no less certain that many of the troubles tied inseparably to sin are due to the good and wise plan of God, namely, that of making sin more hateful to us.

The two great sources of our sinful actions are *unruly desires and bitter passions*, and they are also the great source of our troubles. As to the former, it was already observed how they entangle men's minds in an almost constant train of perplexities, painful impatience, superfluous agitation, anxiety, loathing, grief, and vexation. Bitter and malicious passions are even worse. They tend to make us enemies to our fellowmen, and them to us. In and of themselves, bitter passions are the greatest enemies of all. When they exert themselves with vigor, they are like furious storms and tempests filling the soul with disorder and confusion, making it like troubled waters that cannot rest. When they cannot be satisfied, they frequently rack and harass men's breasts with pains beyond description, and sometimes with such violence as does physical harm, thus ruining soul and body at once.

When bitter passions are gratified and obtain their end, if they give any joy at all it is but the joy of devils, and such pleasures as reside in hell--pleasure in the misery of others. Bitter passions have also been known to give rise to a thousand anguished wishes that they had been restrained. Sometimes one passionate word or action proves the beginning of a long chain of confusion, strife, contention, and all that embitters human life. This would be vastly more tolerable and pleasant than it is, were it not for the fact that the furies in man's own heart not only lead him to misery,

but to anticipate it, and thus to torment him before the time.

It would take too long to enumerate even the most remarkable disadvantages that attend wickedness--such as comfortless affliction, unsatisfying prosperity, dismal fears of death, foreboding thoughts of judgment and eternity, and remorse of conscience. Every vice seems to have some way of punishing itself. Pride makes every affront almost a torment. Envy hinders a man from relishing his own enjoyment until he sees his neighbor's misery. Impiety makes those thoughts and discourses of God, which otherwise would be captivating, uneasy and perplexing. While men entertain such plagues in their souls, it is of little importance to their peace and happiness that all is right without when all is wrong within. In the midst of magnificent buildings, sumptuous feasts, elegant clothing, and all the other fantastic pageantry he can desire, the slave of sin is still likened to a painted sepulcher--outwardly bright and beautiful, inwardly full of filth and rottenness. And from all this it is evident, that God is so far from even being the author of any temporal motives to sin that he has, on the contrary, so ordered matters that even in this life the rational motives against sin are incomparably superior to any that can be adduced for it.

Beside the troubles attached to sin (the proper tendencies of which are certainly to restrain it), we may also observe several principles God has implanted in human nature, as well as established in the order of providence, that have a very fundamental tendency to the same good end and are effective in numberless instances.

God has given us the faculty of reason by which, no doubt, men avoid many sinful actions; and if we were more diligent in its use, we would hate every sin. We are justly obliged to thank God for this ability, and to blame our own sinfulness and not him for our voluntary abuse or neglect of it. If a poor man receives a gift of a thousand dollars, everyone will concur that he is obliged to acknowledge his benefactor for all the good things he purchases by that money, and to blame only himself if he worsens his situation and squanders away any part of it. And, indeed, if we narrow our focus into the nature of sin, we shall find that every sin is an abuse of some good gift of God, a gift in itself good and which might have been improved to excellent purposes.

God has implanted a conscience in mankind. It is God's agent, which gives such an indelible sense of the difference between moral good and evil, that they who cherish sin most in themselves cannot but oftentimes hate it in others. For example, a man abhors his own corruptions when he sees them in his nearest friends or his own children. Thus they who are most addicted to pride, oppression, treachery, or ingratitude do frequently condemn these sins when practiced by others. And though this natural conscience is far from hindering every sin, yet certainly it hinders and restrains a great many. It is a principal means God employs in keeping the world from running into chaos.

Furthermore, God has implanted in man a thirst for complete happiness, and this is the spring for his actions. Since the faculty of reason shows where that thirst may be satisfied, the direct tendency of both, if duly improved, would lead the soul to the eternal fountain of all good. God has also implanted several principles that should tend to promote our love to him and his creation, such as delight in the contemplation of things that are most perfect and excellent. This delightful duty should energize us to contemplate those perfections of God that are unchangeable and infinite. As to loving our neighbor, there is a sympathy in human nature which makes a man feel in some degree the miseries of others, unless he has acquired an abnormal temper of mind (which is, in no small degree, itself a misery). Beside all this, God has laid a very rational

foundation for universal friendship by making all mankind spring from one family, so that they are all united by the ties of blood. He has taken care also to cement them together by their very necessities; for it is plain that of all earthly creatures, men have most need of mutual help and of society in order to promote their subsistence and comfort.

In the order of providence, God has so ordained that most kinds of wickedness are generally associated with outward shame and punishment. Of all who practice the greatest wickedness, there are few who dare to defend it openly, taking instead all precautions to hide it. Thus when men are *truly* persecuted for righteousness' sake, they generally are first accused of wickedness; and, as a general rule, slander and false accusations pave the way for persecution. Nevertheless the divine ordinance of magistrates represents the special wisdom and goodness of providence, and in numberless instances it is everywhere an effectual deterrent to evildoers.

Beside the present shame and punishment that so frequently attends sin, God has added other powerful restraints to it by the shortness and insignificance of the pleasures gained thereby. This appears primarily from the shortness and uncertainty of human life itself. But this is not the only uncertainty; for though we could be sure of the longest life, those pleasures are still liable to a thousand dangers, which all the precautions human prudence can suggest are not always capable to prevent. Consider that all the pleasures of sin are pleasures which we must part with at death, and that we are not even certain we can retain them until then! Then however much men idolize such pleasure, it is at its height very inconsiderable. And little as it is, it is naturally fading away. Because man's pursuit of sinful pleasures is attended with much toil, and the enjoyment of them attended with much trouble, it is plain that when he offends God for the sake of such decaying, uncertain, toilsome, and troublesome vanities, he may be said in a very legitimate sense *to offend him without cause*.

But what deserves our particular consideration on this subject is the shortness of life. Men are often very inconsistent in their peevish complaints about it. Sometimes they seem to begrudge the fact that life is too short for the great business of it, and yet they *live* as though they think it too long for that business by the way they delay doing it. It is obvious that if our present life were much longer, then future rewards and punishments, by being more distant, would have a weaker influence. It was so before the flood; yet the event came to pass. As matters are ordered at present, the pleasures of sin and the troubles associated with holy duty are so uncertain and short-lived, that it is unaccountable how rational creatures are seduced to wickedness in order to obtain the pleasures and avoid the troubles.

To all this we may add that mankind has naturally some sense of justice and gratitude; and in this realm God has given the greatest motives to inspire us to duty and restrain us from sin. Reason teaches that we do justly when we give to every man what is his own; so it is to God we owe ourselves and all we have. He has made manifest, in his works and word, such glorious perfections as justly deserve the highest esteem, and particularly such goodness as deserves the profoundest gratitude. Among these are his long-suffering and abundant goodness in providence, constantly returning good for evil. This has the most rational tendency imaginable to melt our hearts with sorrow for sin and to kindle in us the greatest indignation against it.

But nothing can have a more powerful tendency to do this than his mysterious mercy in the work of redemption--the love of God in Christ who died for us. And after that blessed redemption had been finished for us, with what tenderness and earnestness does God press it upon us in his word. This makes it unaccountable that men who have his word should yield to those unworthy

thoughts of God which our text rebukes. He not only freely offers us redemption, but earnestly pleads for us to embrace it. He bewails our unwillingness, stretches out his hands to us all day long, and stands knocking at the door of our hearts. God condescends to reason with us--that though our sins are as scarlet, they can be white as snow. He fervently reasons with us (like an affectionate father with his disobedient children), asking why we spend our money for that which is not bread. He draws us to himself with bands of love, swears to us he does not delight in the death of a sinner, asks us why we will not come to him that we might have life, beseeches us to be reconciled to him, and promises to keep us as a seal on his hand, to count us as his own jewels, and to keep us as the apple of his eye.

Surely these and like expressions of infinite condescension have the most intrinsic tendency possible to deter men from offending God and ruining themselves. This is plainly the design of them, and in many instances it is the happiest effect of them. Whatever use men make of them, these manifestations God gives of himself in his word, with the other manifestations of himself in his works, together constitute a complete proof of the apostle's doctrine, and show that God can call heaven and earth to witness that he is infinitely free from the blame of men's sin and misery; that if they perish, the blood of their souls must be upon themselves; and that their ruin is the fruit of their own doings and not of his.

This is part four 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 5.