SERMONS,

PREACHED IN

THE PARISH CHURCH OF GLASBURY,

BRECKNOCKSHIRE,

AND

ST. JAMES’S CHAPEL, CLAPHAM,

SURREY.

**BY**

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A NEW EDITION.

LONDON:

HAMILTON, ADAMS, AND CO., AND T. HATCHARD.

1854.

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SERMON II.

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THE LABOURERS STANDING IDLE AT THE ELEVENTH HOUR.

St. Matthew xx. 6.–About the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing idle, and saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle?

To make a right use of this question, we must consider it as addressed by the great God this very hour to ourselves. And thus considered, it reminds us that before we die we have all a work to perform, that some of us have long been standing idle, neglecting this work, and that this neglect ought to become at once a subject of our most serious concern. On these facts we may ground three questions, which are so simple, that a child may comprehend them; and yet so important, that he is the wisest man amongst us, who thinks of them the most.

I. The first is this—*What is the work which the great Lord of all has given us to do?* Under the figure of a householder, he calls upon us to work in his vineyard. And what is his vineyard? It is the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. This, whether in a suffering or a glorified state, he will have a scene of labour.

If we look at it in heaven, all is activity there. Come out of their great tribulation, they who have died in the Lord, rest from the earthly labours that wearied them; but they are not idle in heaven. They are ever before the throne of God, and “serve him day and night in his temple.”

The church below is not quiet. O what a constant striving, what an unceasing labouring is there! Not a soul can be found in it, that is not engaged in a work, compared with which the work of an angel is as nothing. We are sinners, brethren, immortal beings in a ruined condition; and it is in consequence of our ruin, that our labours are so many and so great. We have evils to repair, for which all the hosts of heaven could find no remedy, and obstacles to surmount, which all their united strength could not remove.

1. We have *a dreadful hell to escape.* We were born its heirs, and ever since we were born, our sins have been drawing us towards it, and making it more securely our own. Our firstconcern then is a deliverance, a refuge; our first business, an escaping for our life, a fleeing from the wrath to come; not merely a smiting on the breast with one sinner, or crying out with another, “What must I do to be saved?” but a laying hold of salvation, a casting of ourselves on him who “came into the world to save sinners.” A man whose habitation is in flames over his head, rests not satisfied with unavailing cries; he seeks a door, a way of escape. And look at the mariner as his vessel sinks in the waves. What is the one great object of his desires and struggles? It is the means of deliverance—a boat, a rope, a plank.

2. And then we have *a filthy heart to cleanse.* There is within each of us a swarm of living lusts, which are preying on us and defiling us. These are deeply seated in the soul. They were born and have grown with it. They cling to the soul, and the soul clings to them. They are its torment and its curse, but yet it loves them as it loves nothing else. Here then is a work before us—to discover, to mortify, to kill these lusts; to “cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit;” to labour on a heart that is “earthly, sensual, and devilish,” till grace has made it spiritual, heavenly, and divine.

3. And as though this were not enough, we have *a suffering world to aid.* It has pleased God to make his creatures the instruments of his goodness, to employ whatsoever his hands have formed in diffusing his benefits. The sun, moon, and stars, in their courses, not only declare his glory, but minister to our wants. The beasts of the field and the very plants of the ground are all useful. We too must be useful. It matters not how precious a soul we have to save, nor how polluted a heart to cleanse, nor how many burdens of grief to bear; we must think of the souls, and hearts, and burdens of others; we must labour to help them; we must “serve our generation according to the will of God.” True religion has its seat deep in the heart, and it loves the secrecy of its home; but it dares not hide itself in it. It has a labour of love to per­form in a ruined world. Into that world it goes, and strives to leave all it can reach there, holier and happier than it finds them.

4. But we must look higher than the worms of the dust;—we have *a great God to honour.* Why were we sent into the world? Why are we kept in the world? Merely to be defiled by its pollutions, and to be worn out by its cares? No. We have to glorify God in a world that dis­honours him; to praise him where he is blas­phemed; to let the light he has given us “so shine before men,” as to force those who hate him to do him reverence. Place an angel in hell, how would he act in that accursed place? Forget or disguise it as we may, our situation and our duty in this wicked world are nearly the same. We have to be faithful subjects in an army of rebels, to serve God in the dominions of Satan, to show ourselves his friends among his determined foes.

5. And after all, we have a *glorious heaven to win;* to gain possession of a world to which the spotless beings who inhabit it, have no claim, and from which we are distant as far as guilt can sever us; a world so blessed, that eternity only can unfold its happiness, and so pure, that one unholy thought would banish from it for ever the highest archangel there.

This is the work before us. Say not in your hearts that this is more than the Lord our God requires of us. Brethren, it is less. Put the question to the very lowest of the servants of God; ask him what it is that “his hand findeth to do.” He will tell you of sins to be mourned over, of trials to be endured, of enemies to be subdued, of graces to be attained, of many things to be achieved or borne, of which you have heard nothing today, and which perhaps have never entered your thoughts.

But judge for yourselves—which of the things now brought before you may a sinner leave un­done, and be safe when he dies? Hell, it is plain, must be escaped. May the heart then be left alone? “Without holiness,” says the scripture, “no man shall see the Lord and when “the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised,” this is one of the awful sayings which will echo through the skies, “He that is filthy, let him be filthy still.” And what if we turn away our eyes from a suffering world? The Lord will “turn away his face from us.” Nay, so great is his compassion for the wretched, that on the throne of his glory, he will make our forgetfulness of them the chief ground of our condemnation; “Verily, I say unto you, inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me.” “Depart from me, ye cursed.” And then shall we “go away into everlasting punishment.” May we venture to leave the great God without his honour? He tells us that he will “even send a curse” upon them that “give not glory to his name.” And if heaven be not won, no hope remains; the soul is lost; there is no home for it but the habitations of darkness.

Search the scriptures, brethren. In a concern of such moment as this, it matters but little what ministers say, or friends tell you, or your own hearts think; “God is the Judge.” He will “try every man’s work at the last,” and he will try it by the standard of his own word. Where then shall we go to learn what is required of us? Who shall decide the matter? our Bibles, or our neighbours? we, or our God?

II. Let us now pass on to a second enquiry—*Who are they that neglect the work which God has given them to do?* In a limited sense, we all neglect it; but this is not the point we have to ascertain. Who among us are altogether, in the full sense of the words, standing idle here?

In answer to this question, we need not say one word of the great mass of the worldly and careless. Their sad neglect of every thing which ought to occupy them, is as clear as it is tremen­dous. Let us go amongst those who profess to be spiritually employed, and endeavour to point out the idlers there. And these, in almost every case, are distinguished by one of these three marks. .

1. *They are more anxious about other things, than they are about this great work.* I do not say that they care nothing about it, or that it never gives them any concern; but their thoughts of it are occasional and slight; called forth perhaps by a sermon or an affliction, and passing away as soon as the affliction is over or the sermon forgotten. Other things affect them more, are more frequently the objects of their hopes and fears, and afford them greater plea­sure or pain. Even when the concerns of their souls are brought before them, and they are willing to give them some degree of attention, they find it hard to keep their minds fixed on them; heaven easily gives place to the world, and eternity, with all its fearful realities, is lost sight of in some passing thought about the cares, or sorrows, or pleasures of time.

Now if this be the case with us, if we are more “careful and troubled” about any one thing, or about all things together, than we are about heaven and hell, we are the men who are spiritual idlers. A sinner working for sal­vation is a man of one pursuit, one aim, one purpose. He has heard his Master say, “One thing is needful,” and he believes him. He can say with David, “One thing have I desired of the Lord;” and with Paul, “One thing I do.”

2. They also are strangers to this work, who *find no difficulty in it.*

Suppose, brethren, you had carried a heavy burden many a weary mile. Faint with your labour, you stand still for a while to rest. A fellow-traveller comes up to you, and while he affects to pity your weariness, he tells you that so much effort is very unnecessary; that he him­self has often borne the same burden now on your shoulders, without difficulty or toil. You find however in conversation with him, that he is utterly unacquainted with the weight of the load. Though no stronger than you, he speaks of it as light, while you feel it almost pressing you into the earth. Now what should you think of such a man? You would naturally say, “He deceives himself, or he wishes to deceive me. He has never carried this burden a yard.”

Come now to the case before us. Some of you say, “Why is religion made so much of? Why cannot we do our duty and go to heaven, without the continued praying and striving, on which this or that minister dwells so often? We are told of the difficulties of religion, but we find little or no difficulty in it. It gives us no trouble. We are able to attend to all its duties without the least care or effort.” Is this your language, bre­thren? Then be assured that you could not tell us in plainer terms, that you are standing idle in the church of God; that, in your case, the salvation of the soul is not even begun; that you have never yet taken one step towards heaven. Diffi­culty, insufficiency, helplessness—these are some of the very first things of which a really converted sinner is conscious, and all his life long the sense, the feeling of them never goes off. And to what does it lead him? To the earnestness, the striving, the prayer, which you despise. The man sees that he has much to do before his soul can be saved, and he feels that he can do nothing. He finds himself in the situation of a traveller who has many rugged wilds to tra­verse before he can reach his home, many a long hill to climb, and many a dreary valley to cross; and yet without the power of moving a single step. You need not be told what follows. In such a situation, a man must pray, must be going to the Holy Spirit every hour for strength, must live every moment in Christ. All the days of his life, his language will be, “Lord, help me. Lord, save me. Hold thou up my goings in thy paths. Take not thine Holy Spirit from me.” And what will be his language as he enters heaven? “Not by works of righteousness which I have done, but according to his mercy, he hath saved me.” “Not unto me, not unto me, O Lord, but unto thy name be the praise.”

3. But there are idlers of another class—*those whom the difficulty of this work keeps from attempting it.*

The eyes of these men have been opened. They know what is to be done; they are not ignorant of the obstacles which must be overcome in doing it. Perhaps they have felt them. There may have been a time, when they actually set about the work of their salvation; but they began it in their own strength, and when difficulties arose, that strength at once gave way, and they were discouraged. They are now at rest. They un­derstand something of the gospel; they are will­ing to hear it; they are sometimes impressed by it; now and then they are ready to make a feeble effort to secure its mercies; but this is all. There is no earnestness, no striving, no wrestling, about them. Their religion is a body without a soul, a machine without a spring. They go on for years hearing, reading, thinking about heaven, but doing nothing, attempting nothing. And why? It is useless, they say. The work is more than they can ever perform. If they are ever saved, it must be by the mercy of One who can make excuses for their weakness, and not call them to a strict account for their sloth. Or perhaps they have learned a different language;—“It is in vain for us to pray and strive. We can do nothing. We must wait till God moves us.”

In either case, the truth is clear. The mixture of sloth and despondency which we find in these men, stamps their character—they are standing idle. For in what does true religion consist? Surely this is a part of it—a knowledge of the re­medy provided for our disease—a calling in to our aid of the strength provided for our weakness—a discovery of the suitableness, the all-sufficiency, the abounding grace of Jesus Christ. Hope in him is as much a part of it, as distrust of self. It may indeed be a fluctuating, perhaps a feeble hope, but still real, operative, constraining. What says the mere pretender to godliness? “I must stand still. I must wait for the Spirit.” But what says the true disciple of Christ? He thinks of his glorified Lord, and says, “What wait I for? My hope is in him.” “I am nothing but weakness; but he is the Lord Jehovah, and in him is everlasting strength. He has told me that his grace is suffi­cient for me, and never yet have I tried it but it has carried me over every difficulty, beaten down under me every enemy, overcome every temptation, restrained every sin, made me happy in every trouble. I know that of myself I can do nothing, but I know also that I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.” And then this determined believer presses onwards to heaven, as though he would “take it by force.”

All these then are manifestly and altogether standing idle—the great multitude of the openly careless, and, among those who make some pretensions to religion, such as experience no anxiety, no difficulty, no hope; in other words, the worldly-minded, the self-sufficient, and the desponding.

Has conscience, brethren, placed you in either of these classes? Has it said to you as you have heard any one of them described, “Thou art the man?” Then do not try to silence its voice. Do not treat the neglect of which it accuses you, as a thing of small moment. Go on with me to ask one question more—

III. *In what light ought we to view this neglect?*

It is plain that God regards it as a very serious matter. He makes it now a subject of enquiry and reproof; and what will he make it, when he cones in the end to take account of his servants? That is no trifle, which the vast mind of an infi­nite God deems important; that is no light thing, which ruins an immortal soul. A very little consideration will show us, that the neglect of the great work of salvation, is a neglect which ought to excite surprise, grief, and alarm.

1. It is a matter of *surprise;* for consider *the place in which you are thus idle.* “Why stand ye here idle?” said the householder; “here, in the market-place; here, where there is so much to be done, and your services have so often been called for?” The labourers had an excuse. No man, they said, had hired them. But we have no excuse. We have all been called to our labour. It is not in the heart of a heathen land that we are idle; it is not in a country buried in popish darkness; it is not in a parish where hell and heaven are seldom mentioned, where there is no sound to be heard but that of “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace. You are living in Christian England, in a land of Bibles and churched. You are in a Christian parish. You have long had ministers to warn you. They have come to you as messengers from God. One after another, they have besought you “to flee from the wrath to come;” and when you would not hear, they have besought you again, and have pointed out to you the way of escape which sovereign mercy has opened. And you, brethren, are motionless; no nearer heaven, than you were in the morning of life; and no more labouring to attain it, than the darkest heathen.

2. This neglect is a matter of *grief* also. Think of *the time which you have lost.* It is with some of you the eleventh hour of life. Old age plainly tells you this. And how has your long day been past? Painful as the question is, put it closely to yourselves; force conscience to give you a faithful answer to it. Go back to your infancy; bring before you the days of your youth; retrace the years of your manhood; look at your life from the earliest period which memory can reach, to the present hour;—what is it? A dream, a blank. What have you done in it? Nothing. What have you left undone? Every thing which a dying sinner would wish to have accomplished.

Consider too *how actively and happily these years which you have lost, have been employed by others.* While these labourers were standing idle till the eleventh hour, others, at different periods of the day, had been called into the vineyard, and were now at work there. And what has been passing around you, while you have been leaving the great business of life neglected? The Lord, at different times, has laid his hand of mercy on some who were once, like yourselves, thoughtless and idle: and where are they now? Where are the companions of your childhood, and the friends of your youth? Some of them are rejoicing in heaven; and others, whilst you are sinking under the ills of life, are rejoicing on earth; praising God in their troubles, and even blessing him for them; longing for the very death of which you can hardly bear to think, and thirsting to see that Saviour before whom perhaps you dread to stand. O how blessed is the state of thousands of your fellow-sinners, while yours is becoming sadder and darker every hour!

And why is this? Have these men robbed you of your birthright? Have they exhausted the pardoning love of Christ? Have their once hard hearts worn out the softening, and purifying, and comforting power of the Holy Ghost? Have they filled all the mansions of heaven? No. The way to pardon and peace has been as open for you, as for them; it is as open still: but the difference lies here—while you have trifled, they have prayed; while you have only heard of Christ, they have sought him; while you have laboured for today and tomorrow, they have laboured for eternity. And they have not laboured in vain; through grace, they have won the glorious heaven at which they aimed. But what have you won? What is the fruit of all your toils in the hard and cruel bondage in which the world has kept you? One word will describe it all; it is vanity. Nay, it is less, it is worse than vanity. This is the sum of it—“vexation of spirit,” bitterness of soul.

3. But we must not stop here. Bad as the past appears, the future is worse. There is cause for *alarm* in the mournful neglect of which you have been guilty. Look forward to its *consequences.* In the concerns of the soul, neglect is ruin, idleness is destruction. The man who says to his soul, “Take thine ease,” will find ease gone from him for ever, when his soul is required of him. He may say, “I have done no harm.” These loiterers in the market-place had done no harm, yet they were reproved. The unprofitable servant in another parable had done no harm; he had been upright and honest; but he was cast “into outer darkness, where there is weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth.”

And these consequences are as near as they are certain. Where are you standing? Whither have “the few and evil days” of your life brought you? There may be a span, a few short steps, between death and some of your fellow-sinners, but you are on the very brink of the grave, on the borders of eternity. And is this a situation for repose? Is this a time for stupid unconcern, for silly trilling? for wearing out the little strength which is left you, in caring, and grieving, and planning for the world? for a world which you are on the point of leaving for ever, and which you have often wished you had never seen?

O my aged brethren, you who have been spending a long life in vanity and all your years in trouble, let me implore you not to rest satisfied with unavailing regrets about the past; look forward to that which is before you. Think of increasing infirmities, of an opening grave, of a descending Judge, of a dark eternity. A night is closing round you, in which no man can work. Think of it, and as you think of it, hear the very same voice that said to you in the morning of life, “Son, go work today in my vineyard,” now saying to you, “Why stand ye here all the day idle?”

What is your answer? Do you say, “What answer can we make? Our sins are so many, our bad habits so confirmed, our minds so weak, our souls so completely dead, there is no help, no hope for us. What grace can change an old man’s heart? What mercy can save an old man’s soul?” Brethren, are you really anxious to have your heart changed? Are you heartily willing to have your immortal spirit saved? Then turn once again to this parable. At the eleventh hour, these labourers were admitted into the vineyard; at the eleventh hour, they began their work; and when the evening came, they had their reward. Here then is encouragement for you. Here thenis a warrant for assuring you that your day of salvation is not yet ended; that there is grace which can renew, and mercy which can save, and goodness which can bless you; that all the unsearchable riches of Christ are yet within your reach. But you must be in earnest. There must be no hesitation, no delay. The work is too great, the time is too short, to admit of it. If you are ever saved, you must be saved promptly, quickly; just as a brand is saved from the flames which are already surrounding it; you must be “snatched from the burning.”

There is in fact only one thing which men in your situation can do—cast yourselves on the Lord Jesus Christ, as those who feel that without him they can do nothing. Make him at once your hope, and your only hope. “His blood cleanseth from all sin;” his grace is sufficient for every sinner; his righteousness is “unto all and upon all them that believe;” “he is able to save them to the uttermost, that come unto God by him.” Believe these gracious declarations; and then instead of ending your days with the com­plaint of despairing Israel, “Woe unto us, for the day goeth away, for the shadows of the evening are stretched out!” every trembling sin­ner amongst you may take up the language of the happy Simeon, bless God and say, “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace according to thy word, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation.”

To those who are indeed *the servants of God,* this scripture is not useless. You are in the vineyard of Christ; you have been there perhaps for many years; but how came you there? What­ever were the outward means which led you thither, or whatever the time when they were made effectual, it was “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,” which separated you from an un­godly world, and made you labourers for heaven. It is the same grace that keeps you from for­saking the work which you have begun. You are working out your salvation, solely because God in his mercy continues to “work in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.”

“Where is boasting then? It is excluded.” The pride of your hearts can find nothing to rest in. The simple question, “Who made thee to differ?” lays it low. And what a crowd of feelings rise up one after another in its place! Wonder, joy, love, praise, and perhaps, stronger than all, self-abasement, shame! To be idle in the market-place is sad, but we have often stood idle in the vineyard. Amidst the weighty cares, the awful realities, which occupy the church of Christ, we have been taken up with lying vani­ties, the trifles of an hour. We need pardon for the past, as much as the guiltiest of our brethren; and grace for the future, as much as the weakest. Let us seek them. And while seeking them, let us look forward to the time when our present labours will come to an everlasting end. “The time is short,” brethren. A few more toils and conflicts will bring us to the evening of our wearisome day. We shall rest then from its “heat and burden.” We shall stand in the presence of the great Lord of the vineyard. Before his Father and his holy angels, he will give us the reward which his own blood has purchased, his own labours have prepared, and his own power secured. And who can estimate its worth? It is so great, that while it puts honour on the un­worthy sinners who receive it, it brings glory to the exalted Being who bestows it. It is nothing less than “the joy of our Lord,” a share in that rest, that blessedness, which satisfy an infinite God