

SERMONS

ON

IMPORTANT SUBJECTS,

BY THE LATE REVEREND AND PIOUS

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

THE FIFTH EDITION.

TO WHICH ARE NOW ADDED,
THREE OCCASIONAL SERMONS,
NOT INCLUDED IN THE FORMER EDITIONS;
MEMOIRS AND CHARACTER OF THE AUTHOR;
AND
TWO SERMONS ON OCCASION OF HIS DEATH,

By the Rev. Drs. Gibbons and Finley.

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SERMON XXI.

THE ONE THING NEEDFUL.

Luke x. 41, 42. *And Jesus answered and said unto her Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things; but one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.*

For what are we placed in this world? Is it to dwell here always? You cannot think so, when the millions of mankind that have appeared upon the stage of time are so many instances of the contrary. The true notion therefore of the present state is, that it is a state of preparation and trial for the eternal world; a state of education for our adult age. As children are sent to school, and youth bound out to trades, to prepare them for business, and qualify them to live in the world, so we are placed here to prepare us for the grand business of immortality, the state of our maturity, and to qualify us to live for ever. And is there a heaven of the most perfect happiness, and a hell of the most exquisite misery, just before us, perhaps not a year or even a day distant from us? And is it the great design, the business and duty of the present state, to obtain the one and escape the other? Then what are we doing? What is the world doing all around us? Are they acting as it becomes candidates for eternity? Are they indeed making that the principal object of their most zealous endeavours, which is the grand design, business and duty of the present state? Are they minding this at all adventures whatever else they neglect? This is what we might expect from them as reasonable creatures, as creatures that love themselves, and have a strong innate desire of happiness. This a stranger to our world might charitably presume concerning them. But, alas! look upon the conduct of the world around you, or look nearer home, and where you are more nearly interested, upon your own conduct, and you will see this is not generally the case. No; instead of pursuing the one thing needful, the world is all in motion, all bustle and hurry, like ants upon a mole-hill, about other affairs. They are in a still higher degree than officious Martha, *careful and troubled about many things*. Now to recall you from this endless variety of vain pursuits, and direct your endeavours to the proper object, I can think of no better expedient than to explain and inculcate upon you the admonition of Christ to Martha, and his commendation of Mary upon this head.

Martha [lived] in a village near Jerusalem, called Bethany with her brother and sister, Lazarus and Mary. And what is remarkable concerning this little family is, that they were all lovers of Jesus: and their love was not without returns on his side; for we are expressly told that *Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus*. What a happy family is this! but O how rare in the world! This was a convenient place of retirement to Jesus, after the labours and fatigues of his ministry in the city, and here we often find him. Though spent and exhausted with his public services, yet when he gets into the circle of a few friends in a private house, he cannot be idle, he still instructs them with his heavenly discourse; and his conversation is a constant sermon. Mary, who was passionately devout, and eager for instruction, would not let such a rare opportunity slip, but sits down at the feet of this great Teacher, which was the posture of the Jewish pupils before their masters,¹ and eagerly catches every word from his lips; from which dropped knowledge sweeter than honey from the honey-comb. Though she is solicitous for the comfort of her heavenly guest, yet she makes no great stir to provide for him an elegant or sumptuous entertainment; for she knew his happiness did not consist in luxurious eating and drinking: it was his *meat and his drink to do the will of his Father*; and as for the sustenance of his body, plain food was most acceptable to him. He was not willing that any should lose their souls by losing opportunities of instruction, while they were making sumptuous provision for him. Mary was also so deeply engaged about her salvation, that she was nobly careless about the little decencies of entertainments. The body and all its supports and gratifications appeared of very small importance to her when compared with the immortal soul. O! if that be but fed with the words of eternal life, it is enough. All this she did with Christ's warm approbation, and therefore her conduct is an example worthy of our imitation: and if it were imitated, it would happily reform the pride, luxury, excessive delicacy, and multiform extravagance which have crept in upon us under the ingratiating names of politeness, decency, hospitality, good economy, and I know not what. These guilty superfluities and refinements render the life of some a course of idolatry to so sordid a god as their bellies; and that of others, a course of busy, laborious, and expensive trifling. But to return:

Martha, though a pious woman, yet, like too many among us, was too solicitous about these things. She seemed more concerned to maintain her reputation for good economy and hospitality, than to improve in divine

¹ Hence St. Paul's expression, that he was brought up at the feet of Gamaliel.

knowledge at every opportunity; and to entertain her guest rather as a gentleman than as a divine teacher and the Saviour of souls. Hence, instead of sitting at his feet with her sister, in the posture of a humble disciple, she was busy in making preparations; and her mind was distracted with the cares of her family. As moderate labour and care about earthly things is lawful, and even a duty, persons are not readily suspicious or easily convinced of their guilty excesses in these labours and cares. Hence Martha is so far from condemning herself on this account, that she blames her devout sister for not following her example. Nay, she has the confidence to complain to Christ himself of her neglect, and that in language too that sounds somewhat rude and irreverent. "Carest thou not that my sister hath left me to serve alone?" Art thou so partial as to suffer her to devolve all the trouble upon me while she sits idle at thy feet?

Jesus turns upon her with just severity, and throws the blame where it should lie. *Martha, Martha!* There is a vehemence and pungency in the repetition, *Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things.* "Thy worldly mind has many objects, and many objects excite many cares and troubles, fruitless troubles and useless cares. Thy restless mind is scattered among a thousand things, and tossed from one to another with an endless variety of anxieties. But let me collect my thoughts and cares to one point, a point where they should all terminate: *one thing is needful*; and therefore, dropping thy excessive care about many things, make this one thing the great object of thy pursuit. This one thing is what thy sister is now attending to, while thou art vainly careful about many things; and therefore, instead of blaming her conduct, I must approve it. She has made the best choice, for she *hath chosen that good part which shall not be taken away from her.* After all thy care and labour, the things of this vain world must be given up at last, and lost for ever. But Mary hath made a wiser choice; the portion she hath chosen shall be hers for ever; it shall never be taken away from her."

But what does Christ mean by this *one thing* which alone is needful?

I answer, We may learn what he meant by the occasion and circumstances of his speaking. He mentions this one thing in an admonition to Martha for excessive worldly cares and the neglect of an opportunity for promoting her salvation; and he expressly opposes this one thing to the many things which engrossed her care; and therefore it must mean something different from and superior to all the pursuits of time. This one thing is that which Mary was so much concerned about while attentively listening to his instruction. And what can that be but salvation as the end,

and holiness as the means, or a proper care of the soul? This is that which is opposite and superior to the many cares of life;—this is that which Mary was attending to and pursuing: and I may add, this is that good part which Mary had chosen, which should never be taken away from her; for that good part which Mary had chosen seems intended by Christ to explain what he meant by the one thing needful. Therefore the one thing needful must mean the salvation of the soul, and an earnest application to the means necessary to obtain this end above all other things in the world. To be holy in order to be happy; to pray, to hear, to meditate, and use all the means of grace appointed to produce or cherish holiness in us; to use these means with constancy, frequency, earnestness, and zeal; to use them diligently whatever else be neglected, or to make all other things give way in comparison of this; this I apprehend is the one thing needful which Christ here intends: this is that which is absolutely necessary, necessary above all other things, and necessary for ever. The end, namely, salvation, will be granted by all to be necessary, and the necessity of the end renders the means also necessary. If it be necessary you shall be for ever happy, and escape everlasting misery, it is necessary you should be holy; for you can no more be saved without holiness than you can be healthy without health, see without light, or live without food. And if holiness be necessary, then the earnest use of the means appointed for the production and improvement of holiness in us must be necessary too; for you can no more expect to become holy without the use of these means, than to reap without sowing, or become truly virtuous and good by chance or fatality. To be holy in order to be happy, and to use all the means of grace in order to be holy, is therefore the one thing needful.

But why is this concern which is so complex called one thing?

I answer: Though salvation and holiness include various ingredients, and though the means of grace are various, yet they may be all taken collectively and called one thing; that is, one great business, one important object of pursuit, in which all our endeavours and aims should centre and terminate. It is also said to be one, in opposition to the many things that are the objects of a worldly mind. This world owes its variety in a great measure to contradiction and inconsistency. There is no harmony or unity in the earthly objects of men's pursuits, nor in the means they use to secure them. Riches, honours and pleasures generally clash. If a man will be rich he must restrain himself in the pleasures of gratifying his eager appetites, and perhaps use some mean artifices that may stain his honour. If he would be honourable, he must often be prodigal of his riches, and abstain from some sordid pleasures. If he would have the full enjoyment of sensual pleasures, he must

often squander away his riches, and injure his honour to procure them. The lusts of men as well as their objects, are also various and contradictory. Covetousness and sensuality, pride and tranquillity, envy and the love of ease, and a thousand jarring passions, maintain a constant fight in the sinner's breast. The means for gratifying these lusts are likewise contrary; sometimes truth, sometimes falsehood, sometimes indolence, sometimes action and labour are necessary. In these things there is no unity of design, nor consistency of means; but the sinner is properly distracted, drawn this way and that, tossed from wave to wave; and there is no steadiness or uniformity in his pursuits. But the work of salvation is one, the means and the end correspond, and the means are consistent one with another; and therefore the whole, though consisting of many parts, may be said to be one.

It may also be called the one thing needful, to intimate that this is needful above all other things. It is a common form of speech to say of that which is necessary above all other things, that it is the one or only thing necessary: so we may understand this passage. There are what we call the real necessities of life; such as food and raiment; there are also necessary callings and necessary labours. All these are necessary in a lower sense; necessary in their proper place. But in comparison of the great work of our salvation, they are all unnecessary; if we be but saved, we may do very well without them all. This is so necessary, that nothing else deserves to be called necessary in comparison of it.

This shows you also, not only why this is called one thing, but why or in what sense it is said to be necessary. It is of absolute and incomparable necessity. There is no absolute necessity to our happiness that we should be rich or honourable; nay, there is no absolute necessity to our happiness that we should live in this world at all, for we may live infinitely more happy in another. And if life itself be not absolutely necessary, then much less are food, or raiment, or health, or any of those things which in a lower sense we call the necessities of life. In comparison of this, they are all needless. I add farther, this one thing may be said to be necessary, because it is necessary always, or for ever. The necessities of this life we cannot want long, for we must soon remove into a world where there is no room for them; but holiness and salvation we shall find needful always: needful under the calamities of life; needful in the agonies of death; needful in the world of spirits; needful millions of ages hence; needful to all eternity; and without it we are eternally undone. This is a necessity indeed! a necessity, in comparison of which all other necessities are but superfluities.

I hope by this short explication I have cleared the way through your understandings to your hearts, and to your hearts I would now address myself. However solemnly I may speak upon this interesting subject, you will have more reason to blame me for the deficiency, than for the excess of my zeal and solemnity. I hope I have entered this sacred place to-day with a sincere desire to do some service to your immortal souls before I leave it. And may I not hope you have come here with a desire to receive some advantage? If not, you may number this seeming act of religion among the sins of your life; you have come here to-day to sin away these sacred hours in hypocrisy, and a profane mockery of the great God. But if you are willing to receive any benefit, hear attentively: hear, that your souls may live,

My first request to you is,² that you would make this passage the test of your characters, and seriously inquire whether you have lived in the world as those that really and practically believe that this is the one thing of absolute necessity. Are not all the joys of heaven and your immortal souls worth the little pains of seriously putting this short question to your consciences? Review your life, look into your hearts, and inquire, has this one thing lain more upon your hearts than all other things together? Has this been, above all other things, the object of your most vehement desires, your most earnest endeavours, and eager pursuit? I do not ask whether you have heard or read that this one thing is necessary, or whether you have sometimes talked about it. I do not ask whether you have paid to God the compliment of appearing in his house once a week, or of performing him a little lip-service morning and evening in your families, or in your closets, after you have served your selves and the world all the rest of your time, without one affectionate thought of God. Nor do I inquire whether in a pang of horror after the commission of some gross sin, you have tried to make your conscience easy by a few prayers and tears, of which you form an opiate to cast you again into a dead sleep in sin; I do not ask whether you have performed many actions that are materially good, and abstained from many sins. All this you may have done, and yet have neglected the one thing needful all your lives.

But I ask you, whether this one thing needful has been habitually uppermost in your hearts, the favourite object of your desires, the prize of your most vigorous endeavours, the supreme happiness of your souls, and

² Many of the following sentiments, as to the substance of them, are borrowed from Mr. Baxter's excellent discourse, entitled A SAINT OR A BRUTE: and I know no better pattern for a minister to follow in his address to sinners, than that flaming and successful preacher.

the principal object of your concern above all things in the world? Sirs, you may now hear this question with stupid unconcern and indifference; but I must tell you, you will find another day how much depends upon it. In that day it will be found, that the main difference between true Christians and the various classes of sinners is this:—God, Christ, holiness, and the concerns of eternity, are habitually uppermost in the hearts of the former; but, to the latter, they are generally but things by the by; and the world engrosses the vigour of their souls, and is the principal concern of their lives. To serve God, to obtain his favour, and to be happy for ever in his love, is the main business of the saint, to which all the concerns of the world and the flesh must give way; but to live in ease, in reputation, in pleasure, or riches, or to gratify himself in the pursuit and enjoyment of some created good, this is the main concern of the sinner. The one has made a hearty resignation of himself, and all that he is and has, to God, through Jesus Christ: he serves him with the best, and thinks nothing too good for him. But the other has his exceptions and reserves: he will serve God willingly, provided it may consist with his ease, and pleasure, and temporal interest; he will serve God with a bended knee, and the external forms of devotion; but, with the vigour of his spirit, he serves the world and his flesh. This is the grand difference between a true Christian and the various forms of half-Christians and hypocrites. And certainly this is a difference that may be discerned. The tenor of a man's practice, and the object of his love, especially of his highest love and practical esteem, must certainly be very distinguishable from a thing by the by, and from the object of a languid passion, or mere speculation. Therefore, if you make but an impartial trial, you have reason to hope you will make a just discovery of your true character: or if you cannot make the discovery yourselves, call in the assistance of others. Ask not your worldly and sensual neighbours, for they are but poor judges, and they will flatter you in self-defence; but ask your pious friends whether you have spoke and acted like persons that practically made this the one thing needful. They can tell you what subject you talked most seriously about, what pursuit seemed to lie most upon your hearts, and chiefly to exhaust your activity. Brethren, I beseech you, by one means or other, to bring this matter to an issue, and let it hang in suspense no longer. Why are you so indifferent how this matter stands with you? Is it because you imagine you may be true Christians, and obtain salvation, however this matter be with you? But be not deceived: no man can serve two masters, whose commands are contrary; and *ye cannot serve God and mammon*, with a service equally devoted to both. *If any man love the world*, with supreme

affection, *the love of the Father is not in him.* 1 John ii. 15. *Be not deceived, God is not mocked; whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he reap; if you sow to the flesh, of the flesh you shall reap corruption: A miserable harvest indeed! But if you sow to the Spirit, you shall of the Spirit reap everlasting life.* Gal. vi. 7, 8. Therefore you may be sure that *if you live after the flesh, you shall die*; and that you can never enjoy the one thing needful unless you mind and pursue it above all other things.

But I shall not urge you any farther to try yourselves by this test. I take it for granted the consciences of some of you have determined the matter, and that you are plainly convicted of having hitherto neglected the one thing needful. Allow me then honestly to expose your conduct in its proper colours, and tell you what you have been doing while you were busy about other things, and neglecting this one thing needful.

1. However well you have improved your time for other purposes, you have lost it all, unless you have improved it in securing the one thing needful. The proper notion of time is, that it is a space for repentance. Time is given us to prepare for eternity. If this is done, we have lived long enough, and the great end of time and life is answered, whatever else be undone. But if this be undone, you have lived in vain, and all your time is lost, however busily and successfully you have pursued other things. Though you have studied yourselves pale, to furnish your minds with knowledge; though you have spent the night and the day in heaping up riches, or climbing up to the pinnacle of honour, and not lost an hour that might be turned to your advantage, yet you have been most wretchedly fooling away your time, and lost it all, if you have not laid it out in securing the one thing needful. And, believe me, time is a precious thing. So it will appear in a dying hour, or in the eternal world, to the greatest spendthrift among you. Then, O for a year, or even a week, or a day, to secure that one thing which you are now neglecting! And will you now waste your time, while you enjoy it! Shall so precious a blessing be lost! By this calculation, how many days, how many years, have you lost for ever? For is not that lost which is spent in crossing the end for which it was given you? Time was given you to secure an eternity of happiness, but you have spent it in adding sin to sin, and consequently in treasuring up wrath against the day of wrath. And is not your time then a thousand times worse than lost? Let me tell you, if you continue in this course to the end, you will wish a thousand times, either that you had never had one hour's time given you, or that you had made a better use of it.

2. Whatever else you have been doing, you have lost your labour with your time, if you have not laboured above all things for this one thing needful. No doubt you have been busy about something all your life; but you might as well have been idle; you have been busy in doing nothing. You have perhaps toiled through many anxious and laborious days, and your nights have shared in the anxieties and labours of your days. But if you have not laboured for the one thing necessary, all your labour and all the fruits of it are lost. Indeed God may have made use of you for the good of his church, or of your country, as we make use of thorns and briers to stop a breach, or of useless wood for firing to warm our families; but as to any lasting and solid advantage to yourselves, all your labour has been lost.

But this is not all. Not only your secular labour is lost, but all your toil and pains, if you have used any in the duties of religion, they are lost likewise. Your reading, hearing, praying, and communicating; all your serious thoughts of death and eternity, all your struggles with particular lusts and temptations, all the kind offices you have done to mankind, all are lost, since you have performed them by halves with a lukewarm heart, and have not made the one thing needful your great business and pursuit. All these things will not save you; and what is that religion good for which will not save your souls? What do those religious endeavours avail which will suffer you to fall into hell after all? Certainly such religion is vain.

And now, my hearers, do you believe this, or do you not? If you do, will you, dare you still go on in the same course? If you do not believe it, let me reason the matter with you a little. You will not believe that all the labour and pains you have taken all your life have been quite lost: no, you now enjoy the fruits of them. But show me now, if you can, what you have gotten by all that stir you have made, that will follow one step beyond the grave, or that you can call your own tomorrow? Where is that sure immortal acquisition that you can carry with you into the eternal world? Were you to die this hour, would it afford you any pleasure to reflect that you have lived a merry life, and had a satiety of sensual pleasures, or that you have laboured for riches and honours, and perhaps acquired them? Will this reflection afford you pleasure or pain? Will this abate the agony of eternal pain, or make up for the loss of heaven, which you wilfully incurred by an over-eager pursuit of these perishing vanities?

Do you not see the extravagant folly, the distracted frenzy of such a conduct? Alas! while you are neglecting the one thing needful, what are you doing but spending your time and labour in laborious idleness, honourably debasing yourselves, delightfully tormenting yourselves, wisely befooling

yourselves, and frugally impoverishing and ruining yourselves for ever? A child or an idiot riding upon a staff, building their mimic houses, or playing with a feather, are not so foolish as you in your conduct, while you are so seriously pursuing the affairs of time, and neglecting those of eternity. But,

3. This is not all: all your labour and pains have not only been lost while you have neglected this one thing, but you have taken pains to ruin yourselves, and laboured hard all your lives for your own destruction. To this you will immediately answer, "God forbid that we should do anything to hurt ourselves; we were far from having any such design." But the question is not, what was your design? but, what is the unavoidable consequence of your conduct, according to the nature of things, and the unchangeable constitution of heaven? Whatever you design in going on in sin, *the wages of sin is death*, eternal death. You may indulge the carnal mind, and walk after the flesh, and yet hope no bad consequence will follow: but God has told you that *to be carnally minded is death*, and that if you live after the flesh you shall die. The robber on the highway has no design to be hanged; but this does not render him a jot safer. Therefore, design what you will, it is certain you are positively destroying yourselves while your labours about other things hinder you from pursuing the one thing needful. And does not this thought shock you, that you should be acting the part of enemies against yourselves, the most pernicious and deadly enemies to yourselves in the whole universe? No enemy in the whole universe could do you that injury without your consent which you are doing to yourselves. To tempt you to sin is all the devil can do; but the temptation alone can do you no injury; it is consenting to it that ruins you; and this consent is your own voluntary act. All the devils in hell could not force you to sin without your consent, and therefore all the devils in hell do not injure you as you do yourselves. God has not given them so much power over you as he has given you over yourselves; and this power you abuse to your own destruction.

O! in what a distracted state is the world of the ungodly! If any other men be their enemy, how do they resent it! But they are their own worst enemies, and yet never fall out with themselves. If another occasion them a disappointment in their pursuits, defraud them of an expected good, or lay schemes to make them miserable, what sullen grudge, what keen revenge, what flaming resentments immediately rise in their breasts against him! And yet they are all their lives disinheriting themselves of the heavenly inheritance, laying a train to blow up all their own hopes, and heaping a mountain of guilt upon themselves to sink them into the bottomless pit: and

all this while they think they are the best friends to themselves, and consulting their own interest. As for the devil, the common enemy of mankind, they abhor him, and bless themselves from him; but they are worse to themselves than devils, and yet never fall out with themselves for it.

This, sinners, may seem a harsh representation of your conduct, but, alas! it is true. And if it be so shocking to you to hear it, what must it be to be guilty of it! And, O! think what must be the consequences of such a conduct, such unnatural suicide!

4. If you have hitherto neglected the one thing needful, you have unmanned yourselves, acted beneath and contrary to your own reason, and in plain terms behaved as if you had been out of your senses. If you have the use of your reason, it must certainly tell you for what it was given to you. And I beseech you tell me what was it given to you for but to serve the God that made you, to secure his favour, to prepare for your eternal state, and to enjoy the supreme good as your portion? Can you once think your reason, that *divinæ particula auræ*, was given you for such low purposes as the contrivances, labour, and pursuits of this vain life, and to make you a more ingenious sort of brutes? He was master of an unusual share of reason who said, "There is very little difference between having reason and having none, if we had nothing to do with it but cunningly to lay up for our food, and make provision for this corruptible flesh, and had not another life to mind." Therefore I may safely affirm that you have cast away your reason, and acted as if you were out of your wits, if you have not employed your rational powers in the pursuit of the one thing needful. Where was your reason when your dying flesh was preferred to your immortal spirits! Was reason your guide when you chose the trash of this perishing world, and sought it more than the favour of God and all the joys of heaven? Can you pretend to common sense, when you might have had the pardon of sin, sanctifying grace, and a title to heaven secured to you ere now? But you have neglected all, and instead of having a sure title to heaven, or being prepared for it, you are fitted for destruction, and nothing else; and are only awaiting for a fever or a flux, or some other executioner of divine vengeance, to cut the thread of life, and let you sink to hell by your own weight. Thither you gravitate under the load of sin as naturally as a stone to the centre; and you need no other weight to sink you down. What have you done all your life to make a wise man think you truly reasonable? Is that your reason, to be wise to do evil, while to do good you have no knowledge; or to be ingenious and active about the trifles of time, while you neglect that

great work for which you were created and redeemed! Can you be wise and yet not consider your latter end? Nay, can you pretend to so much as common sense, while you sell your eternal salvation for the sordid pleasures of a few flying years? Have you common sense, when you will not keep yourselves out of everlasting fire? What can a madman do worse than wilfully destroy himself? And this you are doing every day.

And yet these very persons are proud of their madness, and are apt to fling the charge of folly upon others, especially if they observe some poor weak creatures, though it be but one in five hundred, fall into melancholy, or lose their reason for a time, while they are groaning under a sense of sin, and anxious about their eternal state; then what a clamour against religion and preciseness, as the ready way to make people run mad! then they even dare to publish their resolution that they will not read and pore so much upon these things, lest it should drive them out of their senses. O miserable mortals! is it possible they should be more dangerously mad than they are already? Do you lay out your reason, your strength, and time in pursuing vain shadows, and in feeding a mortal body for the grave, while the important realities of the eternal world, and the salvation of your immortal souls are forgotten or neglected? Do you sell your Saviour with Judas for a little money, and change your part in God and heaven for the sordid pleasures of sin, which are but for a season? and are you afraid of seriously reflecting upon this course, that you may reform it, for fear such thoughts should make you mad? What greater madness than this can you fear? Will you run from God, from Christ, from mercy, from the saints, from heaven itself, for fear of being mad? Alas! you are mad in the worst sense already. Will you run to hell to prove yourselves in your senses? He was a wise and good man who said, "Though the loss of a man's understanding is a grievous affliction, and such as I hope God will never lay upon me, yet I had a thousand times rather go distracted to Bedlam with the excessive care about my salvation, than to be one of you that cast away the care of your salvation for fear of being distracted, and will go among the infernal Bedlams into hell for fear of being mad." Distraction in itself is not a moral evil, but a physical, like those disorders of the body from which it often proceeds, and therefore is no object for punishment; and had you no capacity of understanding you would have a cloak for your sin; but your madness is your crime, because it is voluntary, and therefore you must give an account for it to the Supreme Judge.

It would be easy to offer many more considerations to expose the absurdity and danger of your conduct in neglecting the one thing necessary;

but these must suffice for the present hour. And I only desire you to consider farther, if this be a just view of the conduct of such as are guilty of this neglect, in what a miserable, pitiable condition is the world in general. I have so often tried the utmost energy of my words upon you with so little success as to many, that I am quite grown weary of them. Allow me therefore for once to borrow the more striking and pungent words of one now in heaven; of one who had more success than almost any of his contemporaries or successors in the important work of “converting sinners from the error of their way and saving souls from death I mean that incomparable preacher, Mr. Baxter, who sowed an immortal seed in his parish of Kidderminster, which grows and brings forth fruit to this day. His words have, through the divine blessing, been irresistible to thousands; and O that such of you, my dear hearers, whose hearts may have been proof against mine, may not be so against his also!

“Look upon this text of scripture,” says he, “and look also upon the course of the earth, and consider of the disagreement; and whether it be not still as before the flood, that “all the imaginations of man’s heart are evil continually.” Gen. vi. 5. Were it possible for a man to see the affections and notions of all the world at once, as God seeth them, what a pitiful sight it would be! What a stir do they make, alas, poor souls! for they know not what! while they forget, or slight, or hate the one thing needful. What a heap of gadding ants should we see, that do nothing but gather sticks and straws! Look among persons of every rank, in city and country, and look into families about you, and see what trade it is they are most busily driving on, whether it be for heaven or earth! And whether you can discern by their care and labours that they understand what is the one thing necessary! They are as busy as bees; but not for honey, but in spinning such a spider’s web as the besom of death will presently sweep down. Job viii. 14. They labour hard, but for what? *For the food that perisheth*, but not for that *which endureth to everlasting life*. John vi. 27. They are diligent seekers; but for what? Not first for God, his kingdom and righteousness, but for that which they might have had as an addition to their blessedness. Matt. vi. 33. They are still doing; what are they doing? Even undoing themselves by running-away from God, to hunt after the perishing pleasures of the world. Instead of providing for the life to come, they are making *provision for the flesh to fulfil its lusts*. Rom. xiii. 14. Some of them hear the word of God, but presently choke it *by the deceitfulness of riches, and the cares of this life*. Luke viii. 14. They *are careful and troubled about many things*; but the one thing that should be all to them is cast by as if it were nothing. Providing for

the flesh and minding the world is the employment of their lives. They labour with a canine appetite for their trash; but to holiness they have no appetite, and are worse than indifferent to the things that are indeed desirable. They have no covetousness for the things which they are commanded *earnestly to covet*. 1 Cor. xii. 31. They have so little hunger and thirst after righteousness, that a very little or none will satisfy them. Here they are pleading always for moderation, and against too much, and too earnest, and too long; and all is too much with them that is above stark naught, or dead hypocrisy; and all is too earnest and too long that would make religion seem a business, or engage them to seem serious in their own profession, or put them past jest in the worship of God and the matters of their salvation. Let but their children or servants neglect their worldly business, (which I confess they should not do,) and they shall hear of it with both their ears; but if they sin against God, or neglect his word or worship, they shall meet with more patience than Eli's son did: a cold reproof is usually the most; and it is well if they be not encouraged in their sin; it is well if a child or servant that begins to be serious for salvation be not rebuked, derided, and hindered by them. If on their days of labour they oversleep themselves, they shall be sure to be called up to work, (and good reason,) but when do they call them up to prayer? when do they urge them to consider or converse upon the things that concern their everlasting life? The Lord's own day, which is appointed to be set apart for matters of this nature, is wasted in idleness or worldly talk. Come at any time into their company and you may talk enough, and too much of news, or other men's matters, of their worldly business, sports, and pleasures, but about God and their salvation they have so little to say, and that so heartlessly, and on the by, as if they were things that belonged not to their care and duty, and no whit concerned them. Talk with them about the renovation of the soul, the nature of holiness, and the life to come, and you will find them almost as dumb as a fish. The most understand not matters of this nature, nor much desire or care to understand them. If one would teach them personally, they are too old to be catechised or to learn, though not too old to be ignorant of the matters they were made for and preserved for in the world. They are too wise to learn to be wise, and too good to be taught how to be good, though not too wise to follow the seducements of the devil and the world, nor too good to be the slaves of Satan and the despisers and enemies of goodness. If they do anything which they call serving God, it is some cold and heartless use of words to make themselves believe that for all their sins they shall be saved; so that God will call that a serving their sins and abominations,

which they will call a serving of God. Some of them will confess that holiness is good, but they hope God will be merciful to them without it; and some do so hate it, that it is a displeasing irksome thing to them to hear any serious discourse of holiness; and they detest and deride those as fanatical, troublesome precisians that diligently seek the one thing necessary: so that if the belief of the most may be judged by their practices, we may confidently say, that they do not practically believe that ever they should be brought to judgment, or that there is any heaven or hell to be expected; and that their confession of the truth of the scriptures and the articles of the Christian faith are no proofs that they heartily take them to be true. Who can be such a stranger to the world as not to see that this is the case of the greatest part of men? And, which is worst of all, they go on in this course against all that can be said to them, and will give no impartial, considerate hearing to the truth, which would recover them to their wits, but live as if it would be a felicity to them in hell to think that they came thither by wilful resolution, and in despite of the remedy.”

This, sinners, is a true representation of your case, drawn by one that well knew it and lamented it. And what do you now think of it yourselves? What do you think will be the consequence of such a course? Is it safe to persist in it? or shall I be so happy as to bring you to a stand? Will you still go on, troubling yourselves with many things? or will you resolve for the future to mind the one thing needful above all? I beseech you to come to some resolution. Time is on the wing, and does not allow you to hesitate in so plain and important an affair. Do you need any farther excitements? Then I shall try the force of one consideration more contained in my text, and that is Necessity.

Remember necessity, the most pressing, absolute necessity, enforces this care upon you. One thing is needful, absolutely needful, and needful above all other things. This, one would think, is such an argument as cannot but prevail. What exploits has necessity performed in the world! What arts has it discovered as the mother of invention! what labours, what fatigues, what sufferings has it undergone! What dangers has it encountered! What difficulties has it overcome! Necessity is a plea which you think will warrant you to do anything and excuse anything. Reasoning against necessity is but reasoning against a hurricane; it bears all before it. To obtain the necessities of life, as they are called, how much will men do and suffer! Nay, with what hardships and perils will they not conflict for things that they imagine necessary, not to their life but to their ease, their honour, or pleasure! But what is this necessity when compared to that which I am

now urging upon you? In comparison of this, the most necessary of those things are but superfluities; for if your ease, or honour, or pleasure, or even your life in this world be not absolutely necessary, as they cannot be to the heirs of immortality, then certainly those things which you imagine necessary to your ease, your honour, your pleasure, or mortal life, are still less necessary. But O! to escape everlasting misery, and to secure everlasting salvation, this is the grand necessity! This will appear necessary in every point of your immortal duration; necessary when you have done with this world for ever, and must leave all its cares, enjoyments, and pursuits behind you. And shall not this grand necessity prevail upon you to work out your salvation, and make that your great business, when a far less necessity, a necessity that will last but a few years at most, set you and the world around you upon such hard labours and eager pursuits for perishing vanities? All the necessity in the world is nothing in comparison of that which lies upon you to work out your salvation; and shall this have no weight? If you do not labour or contrive for *the bread that perisheth*, you must beg or starve; but if you will not labour for the bread that endureth unto everlasting life, you must burn in hell for ever. You must lie in prison if your debts with men be not paid; but, O! what is it to the prison of hell, where you must be confined for ever if your debts to the justice of God be not remitted, and you do not obtain an interest in the righteousness of Christ, which alone can make satisfaction for them! You must suffer hunger and nakedness unless you take care to provide food and raiment; but you must suffer eternal banishment from God and all the joys of his presence, if you do not labour to secure the one thing needful. Without the riches of this world you may be rich in faith, and heirs of the heavenly inheritance. Without earthly pleasures you may have joy unspeakable and full of glory in the love of God, and the expectation of the kingdom reserved in heaven for you. Without health of body you may have happiness of spirit; and even without this mortal life you may enjoy eternal life. Without the things of the world you may live in want for a little while, but then you will soon be upon an equality with the greatest princes. But without this one thing needful you are undone, absolutely undone. Though you were as rich as Croesus, you *are wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked*. Your very being becomes a curse to you. It is your curse that you are a man, a reasonable creature. It had been infinitely better for you if you had been a toad or a snake, and so incapable of sin and of immortality, and consequently of punishment. O then let this grand necessity prevail with you!

I know you have other wants, which you should moderately labour to provide for, but O how small and of how short continuance! If life and all should be lost, you may more than find all in heaven. But if you miss at this one thing, all the world cannot make up the loss.

Therefore to conclude with the awakening and resistless words of the author I before quoted, “Awake, you sluggish, careless souls! your house over your head is in a flame! the hand of God is lifted up! If you love yourselves, prevent the stroke. Vengeance is at your backs, the wrath of God pursues your sin, and wo to you if he finds it upon you when he overtaketh you. Away with it speedily! up and begone; return to God; make Christ and mercy your friends in time, if you love your lives! the Judge is coming! for all that you have heard of it so long, yet still you believe it not. You shall shortly see the majesty of his appearance and the dreadful glory of his face; and yet do you not begin to look about you, and make ready for such a day? Yea, before that day, your separated souls shall begin to reap as you have sowed here. Though now the partition that stands between you and the world to come do keep unbelievers strangers to the things that most concern them, yet death will quickly find a portal to let you in: and then, sinners, you will find such doings there as you little thought of, or did not sensibly regard upon earth. Before your friends will have time enough to wrap up your pale corpse in your winding-sheet, you will see and feel that which will tell you to the quick, that one thing was necessary. If you die without this one thing necessary, before your friends can have finished your funerals, your souls will have taken up their places among devils in endless torments and despair, and all the wealth, and honour, and pleasure that the world afforded you will not ease you. This is sad, but it is true, Sirs; for God hath spoken it. Up therefore and bestir you for the life of your souls. Necessity will awake even the sluggard. Necessity, we say, will break through stone walls. The proudest will stoop to necessity: the most slothful will bestir themselves in necessity: the most careless will be industrious in necessity: necessity will make men do anything that is possible to be done. And is not necessity, the highest necessity, your own necessity, able to make you cast away your sins, and take up a holy and heavenly life? O poor souls! is there a greater necessity for your sin than of your salvation, and of pleasing your flesh for a little time than of pleasing the Lord and escaping everlasting misery?” O that you would consider what I say! and the Lord give you understanding in all things. Amen.