

THE
WORKS
OF
THE REV. JOHN NEWTON

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LOMBARD STREET, LONDON.

CONTAINING
AN AUTHENTIC NARRATIVE, &C., LETTERS ON RELIGIOUS SUBJECTS, CARDIPHONIA,
DISCOURSES INTENDED FOR THE PULPIT,
SERMONS PREACHED IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF OLNEY,
A REVIEW OF ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY, OLNEY HYMNS, POEMS,
MESSIAH, OCCASIONAL SERMONS, AND TRACTS.

TO WHICH ARE PREFIXED
MEMOIRS OF HIS LIFE, &c.

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LETTER I.

ON TRUST IN THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD, AND BENEVOLENCE TO HIS POOR.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

THE more I think of the point you proposed to me, the more I am confirmed to renew the advice I then gave. There is doubtless such a thing as christian prudence; but, my friend, beware of counterfeits. Self-love, and the evil heart of unbelief, will endeavour to obtrude upon us a prudence so called, which is as opposite to the former as darkness to light. I do not say that, now you have a wife, and the prospect of a family, you are strictly bound to communicate with the poor in the same proportion as formerly. I say, you are not bound; for every thing of this sort should proceed from a willing mind. But if you should tell me, the Lord has given you such a zeal for his glory, such a concern for the honour of the gospel, such a love to his members, such a grateful sense of his mercies (especially by granting you, in this late instance of your marriage, the desire of your heart), and such an affiance in his providence and promises, that you find yourself very unwilling to be one sixpence in the year less useful than you was before, I could not blame you, or dissuade you from it. But I do not absolutely advise it; because I know not the state of your mind, or what measure of faith the Lord has given you. Only this I believe, that when the Lord gives such a confidence, he will not disappoint it.

When I look among the professors, yea, among the ministers of the gospel, there are few things I see a more general want of, than such a trust in God as to temporals, and such a sense of the honour of being permitted to relieve the necessities of his people, as might dispose them to a more liberal distribution of what they have at present in their power, and to a reliance on him for a sufficient supply in future. Some exceptions there are. Some persons I have the happiness to know, whose chief pleasure it seems to be, to devise liberal things. For the most part, we take care, first, to be well supplied, if possible, with all the necessaries, conveniences, and not a few of the elegancies of life; then to have a snug fund laid up against a rainy day, as the phrase is (if this is in an increasing way, so much the better), that when we look at children and near relatives, we may say to our hearts, "Now they are well provided for." And when we have gotten all this, and more, we are, perhaps, content, for the love of Christ, to bestow a pittance of our superfluities, a tenth or a twentieth part of what we spend or hoard up for ourselves, upon the poor. But, alas! what do we herein more than others? Multitudes, who know nothing of the love of Christ, will do thus much, yea, perhaps, greatly exceed us, from the mere feelings of humanity.

But it may be asked, Would you show no regard to the possibility of leaving your wife or children unprovided for? Quite the reverse. I would have you attend to it very much, and behold the scriptures show you the more excellent way. If you had a little money to spare, would you not lend it to me if I assured you it should be repaid when wanted? I can point out to you better interest and better security than I could possibly give you: Prov. xix. 17, "He that hath pity upon the

poor, lendeth unto the Lord; and that which he hath given will he pay him again.” What think you of this text? Is it the word of God or not? Is he worthy of belief, or not? Is he able to make good his word, or is he not? I dare stake all my interest in your friendship (which I should be very loath to forfeit), that if you act upon this maxim, in a spirit of prayer and faith, and with a single eye to his glory, you shall not be disappointed. Read over Mat. vi. 26-34. Shall we confine that reasoning and those promises to the primitive times? Say not, “If the Lord would make windows in heaven, this thing might be.” He has more ways to bless and prosper those who trust in him, than we are able to point out to him. But I tell you, my friend, he will sooner make windows in heaven, turn stones into bread, yea, stop the sun in his course, than he will suffer those who conscientiously serve him, and depend upon him, to be destitute.

Some instances we have had of ministers, who have seemed to transgress the bounds of strict prudence in their attention to the poor. But if they have been men of faith, prayer, and zeal; if they did it, not from a caprice of humour, or a spirit of indolence, but from such motives as the scripture suggests and recommends, I believe their families have seldom suffered for it. I wish you to consult, upon this head, what Mrs. Alleine says, in the affecting account she has given of that honoured and faithful servant of God, her husband, Joseph Alleine. Besides, you know not what you may actually save in a course of years by this method. The apostle, speaking of some abuses that obtained in the church of Corinth, says, “For this cause many are sick among you.” If prudence should shut up the bowels of your compassion (which trust it never will), the Lord might quarto an apothecary upon your family, which would perhaps, cost you twice the money that would have sufficed to refresh his people, and to commend your ministry and character.

But if, after all, prudence will be heard, I counsel you to do these two things. First, Be very certain that you allow yourselves in nothing superfluous. You cannot, I trust, in conscience think of laying out one penny more than is barely decent, unless you have another penny to help the poor. Then, secondly, Let your friends, who are in good circumstances, be plainly told, that, though you love them, prudence, and the necessary charge of a family, will not permit you to entertain them; no, not for a night. What! say you shut my door against my friends? Yes, by all means, rather than against Christ. If the Lord Jesus was again upon earth in a state of humiliation, and he, and the best friend you have, standing at your door, and your provision so strait, that you could not receive both, which would you entertain? Now, he says of the poor, “Inasmuch as you did it to the least of these my brethren, you did it unto me.” Your friends have houses of their own, and money to pay at an inn, if you do not take them in; but the poor need relief. One would almost think that passage, Luke xiv. 12, 13, 14, was not considered as a part of God’s word; at least I believe there is no one passage so generally neglected by his own people. I do not think it unlawful to entertain our friends; but if these words do not teach us, that it is in some respects our duty to give a preference to the poor, I am at a loss to understand them.

I was enabled to set out upon the plan I recommend to you, at a time when my certain income was much too scanty for my own provision, and before I had the

expectation or promise of assistance from any person upon earth. Only I knew that the Lord could provide me with whatever he saw needful; and I trusted, that if he kept me dependent upon himself, and desirous to live for his service only, he assuredly would do so. I have as yet seen no cause to repent it. I live upon his promise; for as to any present ways or means, every thing here below is so uncertain, that I consider myself in the same situation with the birds of the air, who have neither storehouse nor barn. Today I have enough for myself, and something to impart to them that need; as to futurity, the Lord must provide, and for the most part I can believe he will. I can tell you, however, that now and then my heart is pinched; unbelief creeps in, and self would much rather choose a strong box, or what the world calls a certainty, than a life of absolute dependence upon the providence of God. However, in my composed hours I am well satisfied. Hitherto he has graciously taken care of me; therefore may my heart trust in him, and not be afraid.

Consider, my friend, the Lord has done well for you likewise. He has settled you, peaceably in a good and honourable interest; he has now answered your prayers, in giving you a partner, with whom you may take sweet counsel, one that will help and strengthen you in your best desires. Beware, therefore, of that reasoning which might lead you to distrust the Lord your God, or to act as if you did. You complain that there is too much of an expensive taste among some persons in your congregation. If you set yourself to discountenance this, and should at the same time too closely shut up your hands, they will be ready to charge you with being governed by the same worldly spirit, though in another form. If you have been hitherto tender and bountiful to the poor, and should make too great and too sudden an alteration in this respect, if the blame should not fall upon you, it probably would upon your wife, who, I believe, would be far from deserving it. If the house which had been open to the poor in former times, should be shut against them, now you live in it, would it not lead the people's thoughts back? Would it not open the mouths of those who do not love your ministry, to say, That, notwithstanding all your zeal about doctrines, you know how to take care of your own interest, as well as those whom you have thought indifferent and lukewarm in the cause of the gospel? Would it not? But I forbear. I know you need no such arguments. Yet consider how many eyes are upon you, watching for your halting. Now, at your first setting out, is the proper time seriously to seek the Lord's direction, that you may, from the beginning, adopt such a plan as may be most for your own comfort, the honour of your character as a minister, the glory of him who has called you, and the edification of your people. It is easier to begin well, than to make alterations afterwards. I trust the Lord will guide and bless you in your deliberations. And, for my own part, I am not in the least afraid, that you will ever have cause to blame me for the advice I have given, if you should be disposed to follow it.

I have given you my opinion freely, and perhaps with an appearance of more strictness than is necessary. But I would apply our Lord's words in another case to this: "All men cannot receive this saying; he that is able to receive it, let him receive it." If the Lord has given you this confidence in his word, you are happy. It is better than the possession of thousands by the year.

I am, &c.