

George Whitefield

Sermon 4

The Great Duty of Family Religion

Joshua 24:15 "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

These words contain the holy resolution of pious Joshua, who having in a most moving, affectionate discourse recounted to the Israelites what great things God had done for them, in the verse immediately preceding the text, comes to draw a proper inference from what he had been delivering; and acquaints them, in the most pressing terms, that since God had been so exceeding gracious unto them, they could do not less, than out of gratitude for such uncommon favors and mercies, dedicate both themselves and families to his service. "Now therefore, fear the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and truth, and put away the Gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood." And by the same engaging motive does the prophet Samuel afterwards enforce their obedience to the commandments of God, 1 Sam. 12:24, "Only fear the Lord, and serve him in truth, with all your heart; for consider how great things he hath done for you." But then, that they might not excuse themselves (as too many might be apt to do) by his giving them a bad example, or think he was laying heavy burdens upon them, whilst he himself touched them not with one of his fingers, he tells them in the text, that whatever regard they might pay to the doctrine he had been preaching, yet he (as all ministers ought to do) was resolved to live up to and practice it himself: "Choose you therefore, whom you will serve, whether the Gods which your fathers served, or the Gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

A resolution this, worthy of Joshua, and no less becoming, no less necessary for every true son of Joshua, that is entrusted with the care and government of a family in our day: and, if it was ever seasonable for ministers to preach up, or people to put in practice family-religion, it was never more so than in the present age; since it is greatly to be feared, that out of those many households that call themselves Christians, there are but few that serve God in their respective families as they ought.

It is true indeed, visit our churches, and you may perhaps see something of the form of godliness still subsisting amongst us; but even that is scarcely to be met with in private houses. So that were the blessed angels to come, as in the patriarchal age, and observe our spiritual oeconomy [meaning not in dictionary, but oecumenical=ecumenical, so oeconomy may be same as economy] at home, would they not be tempted to say as Abraham to Abimilech, "Surely, the fear of God is not in this place?" Gen. 20:11.

How such a general neglect of family-religion first began to overspread the Christian world, is difficult to determine. As for the primitive Christians, I am positive it was not so with them: No, they had not so learned Christ, as falsely to imagine religion was to be confined solely to their assemblies for public worship; but, on the contrary, behaved with such piety and exemplary holiness in their private families, that St. Paul often styles their house a church: "Salute such a one, says he, and the church which is in his house." And, I believe, we must for ever despair of seeing a primitive spirit of piety revived in the world, till we are so happy as to see a revival of primitive family religion; and persons unanimously resolving with good old Joshua, in the words of the text, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

From which words, I shall beg leave to insist on these three things.

I. First, That it is the duty of every governor of a family to take care, that not only he himself, but also that those committed to his charge, "serve the Lord."

II. Secondly, I shall endeavor to show after what manner a governor and his household ought to serve the Lord. And,

III. Thirdly, I shall offer some motives, in order to excite all governors, with their respective households, to serve the Lord in the manner that shall be recommended.

And First, I am to show that it is the duty of every governor of a family to take care, that not only he himself, but also that those committed to his charge, should serve the Lord.

And this will appear, if we consider that every governor of a family ought to look upon himself as obliged to act in three capacities as a prophet, to instruct: as a priest, to pray for and with; as a king, to govern, direct, and provide for them. It is true indeed, the latter of these, their kingly office, they are not so frequently deficient in, (nay in this they are generally too solicitous) but as for the two former, their priestly and prophetic office, like Gallio, they care for no such things. But however indifferent some governors may be about it, they may be assured, that God will require a due discharge of these offices at their hands. For if, as the apostle argues, "He that does not provide for his own house," in temporal things, has denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel;" to what greater degree of apostasy must he have arrived, who takes no thought to provide for the spiritual welfare of his family!

But farther, persons are generally very liberal of their invectives against the clergy, and think they justly blame the conduct of that minister who does not take heed to and watch over the flock, of which the Holy Ghost has made him overseer: but may not every governor of a family, be in a lower degree liable to the same censure, who takes no thought for those souls that are committed too his charge? For every house is as it were a little parish, every governor (as was before observed) a priest, every family a flock; and if any of them perish through the governor's neglect, their blood will God require at their hands.

Was a minister to disregard teaching his people publicly, and from house to house, and to excuse himself by saying, that he had enough to do to work out his own salvation with fear and trembling, without concerning himself with that of others; would you not be apt to think such a minister, to be like the unjust judge, "One that neither feared God, nor regarded man?" And yet, odious as such a character would be, it is no worse than that governor of a family deserves, who thinks himself obliged only to have his own soul, without paying any regard to the souls of his household. For (as was above hinted) every house is as it were a parish, and every master is concerned to secure, as much as in him lies, the spiritual prosperity of every one under his rood, as any minister whatever is obliged to look to the spiritual welfare of every individual person under his charge.

What precedents men who neglect their duty in this particular, can plead for such omission, I cannot tell. Doubtless not the example of holy Job, who was so far from imagining that he had no concern, as governor of a family, with any one's soul but his own, that the scripture acquaints us, "When the days of his children's feasting were gone about, that Job sent and sanctified them, and offered burnt-offerings, according to the number of them all; for Job said, It may be that my sons have sinned and cursed God in their hearts: thus did Job continually." Nor can they plead the practice of good old Joshua, whom, in the text, we find as much concerned for his household's welfare, as his own. Nor lastly, that of Cornelius, who feared God, not only himself, but with all his house: and were Christians but of the same spirit of Job, Joshua, and the Gentile centurion, they would act as Job, Joshua, and Cornelius did.

But alas! If this be the case, and all governors of families ought not only to serve the Lord themselves, but likewise to see that their respective households do so too; what will then become of those who not only neglect serving God themselves, but also make it their business to ridicule and scoff at any of their house that do? Who are not content with "not entering into the kingdom of heaven themselves; but shoe also that are willing to enter in, they hinder." Surely such men are factors for the devil indeed. Surely their damnation slumbereth not: for although God, in his good providence, may suffer such stumbling-blocks to be put in his children's way, and suffer their greatest enemies to be those of their own households, for a trial of their sincerity, and improvement of their faith; yet we cannot but pronounce a woe against those masters by whom such offenses come. For if those that only take care of their own souls, can scarcely be saved, where will such monstrous profane and wicked governors appear?

But hoping there are but few of this unhappy stamp, proceed we now to the

Second thing proposed: To show after what manner a governor and his household ought to serve the Lord.

1. And the first thing I shall mention, is **READING THE WORD OF GOD**. This is a duty incumbent on every private person. "Search the scriptures, for in them ye think ye have eternal life," is a precept given by our blessed Lord indifferently to all: but much more so, ought every governor of a family to think it in a peculiar manner spoken to himself, because (as hath been already proved) he ought to look upon himself as a prophet, and therefore agreeably to such a character, bound to instruct those under his charge in the knowledge of the word of God.

This we find was the order God gave to his peculiar people Israel: for thus speaks his representative Moses, Deut. 6:6-7, "These words," that is, the scripture words, "which I command thee this day, shall be in thy heart, and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children," that is, as it is generally explained, servants, as well as children, "and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thy house." From whence we may infer, that the only reason, why so many neglect to read the words of scripture diligently to their children is, because the words of scripture are not in their hearts: for if they were, out of the abundance of the heart their mouth would speak.

Besides, servants as well as children, are, for the generality, very ignorant, and mere novices in the laws of God: and how shall they know, unless some one teach them? And what more proper to teach them by, than the lively oracles of God, "which are able to make them wise unto salvation?" And who more proper to instruct them by these lively oracles, than parents and masters, who (as hath been more than once observed) are as much concerned to feed them with spiritual, as with bodily bread, day by day.

But if these things be so, what a miserable condition are those unhappy governors in, who are so far from feeding those committed to their care with the sincere milk of the word, to the intent they may grow thereby, that they neither search the scriptures themselves, nor are careful to explain them to others? Such families must be in a happy way indeed to do their Master's will, who take such prodigious pains to know it! Would not one imagine that they had turned converts to the Church of Rome, that they thought ignorance to be the mother of devotion; and that those were to be condemned as heretics who read their Bibles? And yet how few families are there amongst us, who do not act after this unseemly manner! But shall I praise them in this? I praise them not; Brethren, this thing ought not so to be.

2. Pass we on now to the second means whereby every governor and his household ought to serve the Lord, **FAMILY-PRAYER**.

This is a duty, though as much neglected, yet as absolutely necessary as the former. Reading is a good preparative for prayer, as prayer is an excellent means to render reading effectual. And the reason why every governor of a family should join both these exercises together, is plain, because a governor of a family cannot perform his priestly office (which we before observed he is in some degree invested with) without performing this duty of family prayer.

We find it therefore remarked, when mention is made of Can and Abel's offering sacrifices, that they brought them. But to whom did they bring them? Why, in all probability, to their father Adam, who, as priest of the family, was to offer sacrifice in their names. And so ought every spiritual son of the second Adam, who is entrusted with the care of an household, to offer up the spiritual sacrifices of supplications and thanksgivings, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ, in the presence and name of all who wait upon, or eat meat at his table.

Thus we read our blessed Lord behaved, when he tabernacled amongst us: for it is said often, that he prayed with his twelve disciples, which was then his little family. And he himself has promised a particular blessing to joint supplications: "Wheresoever two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." And again, "If two or three are agreed touching any thing they shall ask, it shall be given them." Add to this, that we are commanded by the Apostle to "pray always, with all manner of supplication," which doubtless includes family prayer. And holy Joshua, when he set up the good resolution in the text, that he and his household would serve the Lord, certainly resolved to pray with his family, which is one of the best testimonies they could give of their serving him.

Besides, there are no families but what have some common blessings, of which they have been all partakers, to give thanks for; some common crosses and afflictions, which they are to pray against; some common sins, which they are all to lament and bewail: but how this can be done, without joining together in one common act of humiliation, supplication, and thanksgiving, is difficult to devise.

From all which considerations put together, it is evident, that family prayer is a great and necessary duty; and consequently, those governors that neglect it, are certainly without excuse. And it is much to be feared, if they live without family prayer, they live without God in the world.

And yet, such an hateful character as this is, it is to be feared, that was God to send out an angel to destroy us, as he did once to destroy the Egyptian first-born, and withal give him a commission, as then, to spare no houses but where they saw the blood of the lintel, sprinkled on the door-post, so now, to let no families escape, but those that called upon him in morning and evening prayer; few would remain unhurt by his avenging sword. Shall I term such families Christians or heathens? Doubtless they deserve not the name of Christians; and heathens will rise up in judgment against such profane families of this generation: for they had always their household gods, whom they worshipped and whose assistance they frequently invoked. And a pretty pass those families surely are arrived at, who must be sent to school to pagans. But will not the Lord be avenged on such profane households as these? Will he not pour out his fury upon those that call not upon his name?

3. But it is time for me to hasten to the third and last means I shall recommend, whereby every governor ought with his household to serve the Lord, CATECHIZING AND INSTRUCTING their children and servants, and bringing them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

That this, as well as the two former, is a duty incumbent on every governor of an house, appears from that famous encomium or commendation God gives of Abraham: "I know that he will command his children and his household after him, to keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment." And indeed scarce any thing is more frequently pressed upon us in holy writ, than this duty of catechizing. Thus, says God in a passage before cited, "Thou shalt teach these words

diligently unto thy children." And parents are commanded in the New Testament, to "bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." The holy Psalmist acquaints us, that one great end why God did such great wonders for his people, was, "to the intent that when they grew up, they should show their children, or servants, the same." And in Deut. 6 at the 20th and following verses, God strictly commands his people to instruct their children in the true nature of the ceremonial worship, when they should inquire about it, as he supposed they would do, in time to come. And if servants and children were to be instructed in the nature of Jewish rites, much more ought they now to be initiated and grounded in the doctrines and first principles of the gospel of Christ: not only, because it is a revelation, which has brought life and immortality to a fuller and clearer light, but also, because many seducers are gone abroad into the world, who do their utmost endeavor to destroy not only the superstructure, but likewise to sap the very foundation of our most holy religion.

Would then the present generation have their posterity be true lovers and honorers of God; masters and parents must take Solomon's good advice, and train up and catechize their respective households in the way wherein they should go.

I am aware but of one objection, that can, with any show of reason, be urged against what has been advanced; which is, that such a procedure as this will take up too much time, and hinder families too long from their worldly business. But it is much to be questioned, whether persons that start such an objection, are not of the same hypocritical spirit as the traitor Judas, who had indignation against devout Mary, for being so profuse of her ointment, in anointing our blessed Lord, and asked why it might not be sold for two hundred pence, and given to the poor. For has God given us so much time to work for ourselves, and shall we not allow some small pittance of it, morning and evening, to be devoted to his more immediate worship and service? Have not people read, that it is God who gives men power to get wealth, and therefore that the best way to prosper in the world, is to secure his favor? And has not our blessed Lord himself promised, that if we seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, all outward necessities shall be added unto us?

Abraham, no doubt, was a man of as great business as such objectors may be; but yet he would find time to command his household to serve the Lord. Nay, David was a king, and consequently had a great deal of business upon his hands; yet notwithstanding, he professes that he would walk in his house with a perfect heart. And, to instance but one more, holy Joshua was a person certainly engaged very much in temporal affairs; and yet he solemnly declares before all Israel, that as for him and his household, they would serve the Lord. And did persons but redeem their time, as Abraham, David, or Joshua did, they would no longer complain, that family duties kept them too long from the business of the world.

III. But my Third and Last general head, under which I was to offer some motives, in order to excite all governors, with their respective households, to serve the Lord in the manner before recommended, I hope, will serve instead of a thousand arguments, to prove the weakness and folly of any such objection.

1. And the first motive I shall mention is the duty of GRATITUDE, which you that are governors of families owe to God. Your lot, every one must confess, is cast in a fair ground: providence hath given you a goodly heritage, above many of your fellow-creatures, and therefore, bout of a principle of gratitude, you ought to endeavor, as much as in you lies, to make every person of your respective households to call upon him as long as they live: not to mention, that the authority, with which God has invested you as parents and governors of families, is a talent committed to your trust, and which you are bound to improve to your Master's honor. In other things we find governors and parents can exercise lordship over their children and servants readily, and frequently enough can say to one, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; to a third, Do this, and he doeth it. And shall this power be so often employed in your own affairs, and never exerted in the things of God? Be astonished, O heavens, at this!

Thus did not faithful Abraham; no, God says, that he knew Abraham would command his servants and children after him. Thus did not Joshua: no, he was resolved not only to walk with God himself, but to improve his authority in making all about him do so too: "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." Let us go and do likewise.

2. But Secondly, If gratitude to God will not, methinks LOVE AND PITY TO YOUR CHILDREN should move you, with your respective families, to serve the Lord.

Most people express a great fondness for their children: nay so great, that very often their own lives are wrapped up in those of their offspring. "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb?" says God by his Prophet Isaiah. He speaks of it as a monstrous thing, and scarce credible; but the words immediately following, affirm it to be possible, "Yes, they may forget" and experience also assures us they may. Father and mother may both forsake their children: for what greater degree of forgetfulness can they express towards them, than to neglect the improvement of their better part, and not bring them up in the knowledge and fear of God?

It is true indeed, parents seldom forget to provide for their children's bodies, (though, it is to be feared, some men are so far sunk beneath the beasts that perish, as to neglect even that) but then how often do they forget, or rather, when do they remember, to secure the salvation of their immortal souls? But is this their way of expressing their fondness for the fruit of their bodies? Is this the best testimony they can give of their affection to the darling of their hearts? Then was Delilah fond of Samson, when she delivered him up into the hands of the Philistines? Then were those ruffians well affected to Daniel, when they threw him into a den of lions?

3. But Thirdly, If neither gratitude to God, nor love and pity to your children, will prevail on you; yet let a principle of COMMON HONESTY AND JUSTICE move you to set up the holy resolution in the text.

This is a principle which all men would be thought to act upon. But certainly, if any may be truly censured for their injustice, none can be more liable to such censure, than those who think themselves injured if their servants withdraw themselves from their bodily work, and yet they in return take no care of their inestimable souls. For is it just that servants should spend their time and strength in their master's service, and masters not at the same time give them what is just and equal for their service?

It is true, some men may think they have done enough when they give unto their servants food and raiment, and say, "Did not I bargain with thee for so much a year?" But if they give them no other reward than this, what do they less for their very beasts? But are not servants better than they? Doubtless they are: and however masters may put off their convictions for the present, they will find a time will come, when they shall know they ought to have given them some spiritual as well as temporal wages; and the cry of those that have mowed down their fields, will enter into the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth.

4. But Fourthly, If neither gratitude to God, pity to children, nor a principle for common justice to servants, are sufficient to balance all objections; yet let that darling, that prevailing motive of SELF-INTEREST turn the scale, and engage you with your respective households to serve the Lord.

This weighs greatly with you in other matters: be then persuaded to let it have a due and full influence on you in this: and if it has, if you have but faith as a grain of mustard-seed, how can you avoid believing, that promoting family-religion, will be the best means to promote your own temporal, as well as eternal welfare? For "Godliness has the promise of the life that now is, as well as that which is to come."

Besides, you all, doubtless wish for honest servants, and pious children: and to have them prove otherwise, would be as great a grief to you, as it was to Elisha to have a treacherous Gehazi, or David to be troubled with a rebellious Absalom. But how can it be expected they should learn their duty, except those set over them, take care to teach it to them? Is it not as reasonable to expect you should reap where had not sown, or gather where you had not strawed?

Did Christianity, indeed, give any countenance to children and servants to disregard their parents and masters according to the flesh, or represent their duty to them, as inconsistent with their entire obedience to their father and master who is in heaven, there might then be some pretense to neglect instructing them in the principles of such a religion. But since the precepts of this pure and undefiled religion, are all of them holy, just, and good; and the more they are taught their duty to God, the better they will perform their duties to you; methinks, to neglect the improvement of their souls, out of a dread of spending too much time in religious duties, is acting quite contrary to your own interest as well as duty.

5. Fifthly and Lastly, If neither gratitude to God, love to your children, common justice to your servants, nor even that most prevailing motive self-interest, will excite; yet let a consideration of the terrors of the Lord persuade you to put in practice the pious resolution in the text. Remember, the time will come, and that perhaps very shortly, when we must all appear before the judgment-seat of Christ; where we must give a solemn and strict account how we have had our conversation, in our respective families in this world. How will you endure to see your children and servants (who ought to be your joy and crown of rejoicing in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ) coming out as so many swift witnesses against you; cursing the father that begot them, the womb that bare them, the paps which they have sucked, and the day they ever entered into your houses? Think you not, the damnation which men must endure for their own sins, will be sufficient, that they need load themselves with the additional guilt of being accessory to the damnation of others also? O consider this, all ye that forget to serve the Lord with your respective households, "lest he pluck you away, and there be none to deliver you!"

But God forbid, brethren, that any such evil should befall you: no, rather will I hope, that you have been in some measure convinced by what has been said of the great importance of FAMILY-RELIGION; and therefore are ready to cry out in the words immediately following the text, "God forbid that we should forsake the Lord;" and again, ver. 21, "Nay, but we will (with our several households) serve the Lord."

And that there may be always such a heart in you, let me exhort all governors of families, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, often to reflect on the inestimable worth of their own souls, and the infinite ransom, even the precious blood of Jesus Christ, which has been paid down for them. Remember, I beseech you to remember, that you are fallen creatures; that you are by nature lost and estranged from God; and that you can never be restored to your primitive happiness, till by being born again of the Holy Ghost, you arrive at your primitive state of purity, have the image of God restamped upon your souls, and are thereby made meet to be partakers of the inheritance with the saints in light. Do, I say, but seriously and frequently reflect on, and act as persons that believe such important truths, and you will no more neglect your family's spiritual welfare than your own. No, the love of God, which will then be shed abroad in your hearts, will constrain you to do your utmost to preserve them: and the deep sense of God's free grace in Christ Jesus, (which you will then have) in calling you, will excite you to do your utmost to save others, especially those of your own household. And though, after all your pious endeavors, some may continue unreformed; yet you will have this comfortable reflection to make, that you did what you could to make your families religious: and therefore may rest assured of sitting down in the kingdom of heaven, with Abraham, Joshua, and Cornelius, and all the godly householders, who in their several generations shone forth as so many lights in their respective households upon earth. Amen.