

The Nature of True Devotion

Devotion is neither private nor public prayer; but prayers, whether private or public, are particular instances of devotion. Devotion, in the fullest sense of the word, signifies a life given, or wholly devoted, to God.

The devout man, therefore, is one who lives no longer to his own will or the way and spirit of the world, but to the sole will of God; who considers God in everything, who serves God in everything, who makes all the parts of his common life parts of piety, by doing everything in the name of God and under such rules as are conformable to His glory.

We readily acknowledge that God alone is to be the rule and measure of our prayers; that in them we are to look wholly unto Him and act wholly for Him; that we are to pray only in such a manner, for such things and such ends, as are suitable to His glory.

Now let anyone find out the reason he is to be strictly pious in his prayers, and he will find the same strong reason to be as strictly pious in all the other parts of his life. For there is not the least reason why we should make God the rule and measure of our prayers, why we should look wholly unto Him and pray according to His will, and yet not feel compelled to look wholly unto God and make Him the rule and measure of all the other actions of our lives.

For any ways of life or employment of our talents, whether of our parts, our time, or our money, that is not strictly according to the will of God, that is not for such ends as are suitable to His glory, are as great absurdities and failings as prayers that are not according to the will of God.

For there is no other reason why our prayers should be according to the will of God, why they should have nothing in

them but what is wise and holy and heavenly but that our lives may be of the same nature, full of the same wisdom, holiness, and heavenly tempers, that we may live unto God in the same spirit that we pray unto Him.

If it were not our strict duty to live by reason, to devote all the actions of our lives to God, if it were not absolutely necessary to walk before Him in wisdom and holiness and all heavenly conversation, doing everything in His name and for His glory, there would be no excellency or wisdom in the most heavenly prayers. Nay, such prayers would be absurdities; they would be like prayers for wings when we were not created to fly.

As sure, therefore, as there is any wisdom in praying for the Spirit of God, so sure is it that we are to make that Spirit the rule of all our actions; as sure as it is our duty to look wholly unto God in our prayers, so sure is it that it is our duty to live wholly unto God in our lives.

But we can no more be said to live unto God unless we live unto Him in all the ordinary actions of our lives, unless He be the rule and measure of all our ways, than we can be said to pray unto God unless our prayers look wholly unto Him. So that absurd ways of life, whether in labor or diversion, whether they consume our time or our money, are like absurd prayers, and are as truly an offense unto God.

It is for want of knowing, or at least considering this, that we see such a mixture of ridicule in the lives of many people. You see them strict as to some times and places of devotion, but when the service of the church is over, they are like those who seldom or never go there.

In their way of life, their manner of spending their time and money, their cares and fears, their pleasures and indulgences, their labor and diversions, they are like the rest of the world. This causes the loose part of the world to joke about

those who are devout because they see that their devotion goes no farther than their prayers—and that when those are over, they live no more unto God till the time of prayer returns again.

Rather, they live by the same humor and fancy and in as full an enjoyment of all the follies of life as other people. This is the reason they are the jest and scorn of careless and worldly people; not because they are truly devoted to God but because they appear to have no other devotion than that of occasional prayers.

Nothing is more absurd in itself than wise and sublime and heavenly prayers added to a life of vanity, where neither labor nor diversions, time nor money, are under the direction of the wisdom and heavenly tempers of our prayers. If we were to see a man pretending to act wholly with regard to God in everything he did, a man who would spend neither time nor money, nor take any labor or diversion but so far as he could act according to strict principles of reason and piety, and yet at the same time neglect all prayer, whether public or private, should we not be amazed at such a man, and wonder how he could have so much folly along with so much religion?

Yet this scenario is as reasonable as for any person to pretend to strictness in devotion, to be careful of observing times and places of prayer and yet letting the rest of his life, his time and labor, his talents and money, be disposed of without any regard to strict rules of piety and devotion. For it is as great an absurdity to suppose holy prayers and divine petitions, without a holiness of life suitable to them, as to suppose a holy and divine life without prayers.

The short of the matter is this: Either reason and religion prescribe rules and ends to all the ordinary actions of our lives, or they do not. If they do, then it is as necessary to govern all our actions by those rules as it is necessary to worship God.

It is interesting to note that there is not one command in all the Gospels for public worship. In fact, the frequent attendance at it is never so much as mentioned in all the New Testament.

However, the religion or devotion that is to govern the ordinary actions of our lives is to be found in almost every verse of Scripture. Our blessed Savior and His apostles are wholly taken up in doctrines that relate to common life.

They call us to renounce the world and to differ in every temper and way of life from the spirit and the way of the world: to renounce all its goods, to fear none of its evils, to reject its joys and have no value for its happiness; to live as pilgrims in spiritual watching, in holy fear, and heavenly aspiring after another life; to take up our crosses daily, to deny ourselves, to seek the blessedness of poverty of spirit; to forsake the pride and vanity of riches, to take no thought for the morrow, to live in the profoundest state of humility; to reject the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life; to bear injuries, to forgive and bless our enemies, and to love mankind as God loves them; to give up our whole hearts and affections to God and strive to enter through the strait gate into a life of eternal glory.

This is the common devotion that our blessed Savior taught in order to make it the common life of all Christians. Is it not therefore strange that people should place so much emphasis on attendance at public worship and yet neglect these common duties of our ordinary lives, which are commanded in every page of the Gospels?

If contempt of the world and heavenly affection is a necessary temper of Christians, it is necessary that this temper appear in the whole course of their lives, in their manner of using the world because it can have no place anywhere else.

If humility is a Christian duty, then the common life of a

Christian is to be a constant course of humility in all its kinds. If poverty of spirit is necessary, it must be the spirit and temper of every day of our lives.

If we are to relieve the naked, the sick and the prisoner, it must be the common charity of our lives, as far as we can render ourselves able to perform it. If we are to love our enemies, we must make our common life a visible exercise and demonstration of that love.

If contentment and thankfulness and the patient bearing of evil are duties to God, then they are the duties of every day and every circumstance of our lives. If we are to be wise and holy as newborn sons of God, we cannot otherwise be so, except by renouncing everything that is foolish and vain in every part of our common lives.

If we are to be new creatures in Christ, we must show that we are so by having new ways of living in the world. If we are to follow Christ, it must be not only during times of prayer—but in our common way of spending every day.

William Law (1686-1761) was a scholar, theologian and prolific writer whose works profoundly impacted numerous religious leaders, including John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield.