

Why Do Christians Fail?

As Christians, we may wonder why the lives of even the better sort of people are strangely contrary to the principles of Christianity. But before I give a direct answer to this, I want to pose the question: Why is it that swearing is so common a vice among Christians? It is not so common among women as it is among men. But among men this sin is so common that more than two in three are guilty of it through the whole course of their lives—some constantly, others only now and then.

Why is it that two in three of the men are guilty of so gross and profane a sin as this? There is neither ignorance nor human infirmity to plead for it; it is against any express commandment and the most plain doctrines of our blessed Savior.

If we find the reason the generality of men live in this notorious vice, then we will have found the reason the generality of even the better sort of people live so contrary to Christianity.

The reason for common swearing is this: It is because men do not have the intention to please God in all their actions. For if a man has enough piety that he intends to please God in all the actions of his life as the happiest and best thing in the world, then he will never swear. It will be as impossible for him to swear while he feels this intention within himself as it is impossible for a man who intends to please his employer to go up and abuse him to his face.

It seems a small and necessary part of piety to have as sincere an intention as this; in fact, it seems he has no reason to look upon himself as a disciple of Christ who is not thus far advanced in piety. And yet it is purely for want of this degree of piety that you see such a mixture of sin and

folly in the lives of even the better sort of people.

It is for want of this intention that you see men who profess religion, yet live in swearing and sensuality; that you see clergymen given to pride and covetousness and worldly enjoyments. It is for want of this intention that you see women who profess devotion, yet live in all the folly and vanity of dress, wasting their time in idleness and pleasures, and in all such instances of state and equipage as their estates will reach.

For let a woman feel her heart full of this intention, and she will find it as impossible to flaunt or boast as to curse or swear; she will no more desire to shine at balls or assemblies or make a figure among those who are most finely dressed, than she will desire to dance upon a rope to please spectators: she will know that the one is as far from the wisdom and excellency of the Christian spirit as the other.

The Mark of a True Christian

It was this general intention that made the primitive Christians such eminent instances of piety, and made the goodly fellowship of the saints, and all the glorious army of martyrs and confessors. And if you will here stop and ask yourselves why you are not as pious as the primitive Christians were, your own heart will tell you that it is neither through ignorance nor inability, but purely because you never thoroughly intended it.

You observe the same Sunday worship that they did, and you are strict in it, because it is your full intention to be so. And when you as fully intend to be like them in their ordinary common life, when you intend to please God in all your actions, you will find it as possible as to be strictly exact in the service of the church.

And when you have this intention to please God in all your actions as the happiest and best thing in the world, you will

find in you as great an aversion to everything that is vain and impertinent in common life, whether of business or pleasure, as you now have to anything that is profane. You will be as fearful of living in any foolish way, either of spending your time, or your fortune, as you are now fearful of neglecting the public worship.

Who that lacks this general sincere intention can be reckoned a Christian? And yet if it were among Christians, it would change the whole face of the world! True piety and exemplary holiness would be as common and visible as buying and selling, or any trade in life.

Let a clergyman be thus pious, and he will converse as if he had been brought up by an apostle; he will think and talk no more of noble preferment than of noble eating or a glorious chariot. Let him intend to please God in all his actions, and then he will know that there is nothing noble in a clergyman but a burning zeal for the salvation of souls.

Again, let a tradesman have this intention, and it will make him a saint in his shop; his everyday business will be a course of wise and reasonable actions, made holy to God, by being done in obedience to His will and pleasure. He will buy and sell, and labor and travel, because by so doing he can do some good to himself and others.

But then, as nothing can please God but what is wise and reasonable and holy, so he will neither buy nor sell, nor labor in any other manner, nor to any other end, but such as may be shown to be wise and reasonable and holy. He will therefore consider, not what arts or methods or application will soonest make him richer and greater than his brethren; but he will consider what arts, what methods, what application can make worldly business most acceptable to God and make a life of trade a life of holiness, devotion and piety.

This will be the temper and spirit of every tradesman; he

cannot stop short of these degrees of piety whenever it is his intention to please God in all his actions. And on the other hand, whoever is not of this spirit and temper in his trade and profession clearly does not have this intention; and yet without it, who can be shown to be a follower of Jesus Christ?

We Have No Excuse

I have chosen to explain this matter by appealing to this intention because it makes the case so plain and because everyone who has a mind may see it in the clearest light and feel it in the strongest manner only by looking into his own heart. For it is as easy for every person to know whether he intends to please God in all his actions as for any servant to know whether this is his intention toward his master.

You see two persons: One is regular in public and private prayer, the other is not. Now the reason for this difference is not that one has strength and power to observe prayer and the other has not; it is that one intends to please God in the duties of devotion and the other has no intention about it.

The case is the same in the right or wrong use of our time and money. You see one person throwing away his time in sleep and idleness, in visiting and diversions, and his money in the most vain and unreasonable expenses. You see another careful of every day, dividing his hours by rules of reason and religion, and spending all his money in works of charity. The difference is not that one has strength and power to do thus, and the other has not; it is that one intends to please God in the right use of all his time and all his money, and the other has no intention about it.

Here, therefore, let us judge ourselves sincerely; let us not vainly content ourselves with the common disorders of our lives, the vanity of our expenses, the folly of our diversions, the pride of our habits, the idleness of our lives, and the wasting of our time, fancying that we fall into

such imperfections through the unavoidable weakness and frailty of our natures; but let us be assured that these disorders of our common life are owing to this, that we have not so much Christianity as to intend to please God in all the actions of our lives. We must not look upon ourselves in a state of pardonable imperfection but in a state that lacks the first and most fundamental principle of Christianity—an intention to please God in all our actions.

If anyone were to ask himself why there are any degrees of sobriety he neglects, any practices of humility he lacks, any method of charity he does not follow, any rules of redeeming time he does not observe, his own heart will tell him that it is because he never intended to be so exact in those duties. For whenever we fully intend it, it is as possible to conform to all this regularity of life as it is possible for a man to observe times of prayer.

It is not that we desire to be perfect but simply fall short of it due to the weakness of our nature; it is that we do not have enough piety to intend to be as good as we can or to please God in all the actions of our lives. We see this plainly in the case of him who spends his time in sports when he should be at church; it is not his lack of power but his lack of intention or desire to be there.

And the case is plainly the same in every other folly of human life. She who spends her time and money in the unreasonable ways and fashions of the world does not do so because she lacks power to be wise and religious in the management of her time and money but because she has no intention or desire of being so. When she feels this intention, she will find it as possible to act up to it as to be strictly sober and chaste, because it is her care and desire to be so.

This doctrine does not suppose that we have no need of divine grace or that it is in our own power to make ourselves perfect. It only supposes that through the want of a sincere

intention of pleasing God in all our actions we fall into irregularities of life that by the ordinary means of grace we should have power to avoid. It teaches us that the reason you see no real self-denial, no eminent charity, no profound humility, no heavenly affection, no true contempt of the world, no Christian meekness, no sincere zeal, no eminent piety in the common lives of Christians is that they do not intend to be exact and exemplary in these virtues.

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.