

The Snare of Service

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The main business and the principal concern of the Christian should be that of thanking, praising and adoring that blessed One who has saved him with an everlasting salvation, and who, to secure that salvation, left Heaven's glory and came down to this sin-cursed earth, here to suffer and die the awful death of the cross, that His people might be "delivered from this present evil world" (Gal.1:4). "Praise is comely for the upright" (Psa.33:1). But to see the upright praising God is something which Satan cannot endure, and he will employ every art and device to turn aside the happy Christian from such blissful occupation.

Our great enemy is very, very subtle in the methods and means he uses. He cares not what the object may be as long as it serves to engross the believer and hinder his giving to Christ that consideration (Heb.3:1) and adoration (Rev.5:12) which are His due. Satan's aim is gained if he can occupy the believer with perishing sinners rather than the Lord of glory. The tactics which the devil uses with the saints are the same he uses so successfully with the unsaved. What is the chief thing he employs to shut out Christ from the vision of the lost (2 Cor.4:4)? Is it not getting them occupied with their own deeds and doings? Assuredly it is. In like manner he deals with God's people: he seeks to get them engaged in "service" as a substitute for communing with Christ. It is the dragon posing as an angel of light, stirring up the feverish nature and restless energy of the flesh, to find some outlet that appears to be pleasing to God.

Above we have said that the great aim and chief exercise of the Christian should be that of worshipping and adoring his blessed and wondrous Savior, which is, really, heaven begun on earth. Yet, let it be pointed out, this ought not to terminate at the lips, our very lives ought to show forth His praise (1 Pet.2:9), our daily walk ought to be pleasing and honoring unto Him (1 Cor.10:31), our every act needs to be brought into conformity to His holy will (Prov.3:6). To these statements many, perhaps all, Christians will assent. But do they perceive what is necessarily involved? We fear not. It involves a life's task. And what is that? This: a constant searching of the Scriptures with a prayerful and earnest desire to find out what is pleasing to Him, a holy determination to discover the details of His revealed mind. This is the service to which God has called each of His people: to serve Him, to take His yoke upon them, to submit to His rule over them, to be in all things in subjection to His holy will. But, we say again, the learning of what His will really is, in all its fulness, is a life's task which requires and calls for the utmost attention in the cultivation of our own soul's garden. "Exercise thyself unto godliness" (1 Tim.4:7). "Take heed unto thyself" (1 Tim.4:16). "Keep thyself pure" (1 Tim.5:22). "Study to show thyself approved unto God" (2 Tim.2:15). These are some of the exhortations of Holy Writ which much need to be taken to heart by God's dear people in these hustling, bustling days. But, alas, they are unheeded by many.

And what is one of the chief causes of hindrance? What is it that in these times so often prevents the child of God from "taking heed" unto himself? This: he is far too much engrossed in attempting to "take heed" for others. The woman who has spent much of the day in attending to domestic duties, the man who has been toiling for his daily bread, instead of spending the evening quietly in spiritual devotions, prayerfully studying God's Word, giving "attendance to reading" (1 Tim.4:13), and thus feeding his soul, removing the world's stains acquired through the day, and conversing with his family upon the things of God, has a round of religious meetings which he must attend, numerous church duties which he must perform. So it is with many on the holy Sabbath. Instead of that being, as God has designed, chiefly a day of rest, only too often it becomes the busiest of the whole week. No wonder that so many are little better than nervous wrecks! And all because of departing from God's arrangements.

It is greatly to be feared that when the saints shall stand before the judgment-seat of Christ "that everyone may receive the things done in the body" (2 Cor.5:10) that many of the redeemed will have to make the sad lament, "they made me keeper of the vineyards; mine own vineyard have I not kept" (S. of S. 1:6). Note carefully the first word, it is not, "He made me keeper of the vineyards." No, His yoke is "easy" and His burden is "light" (Matt.11:30); but "they." Ah, it is the Egyptian taskmasters who spur on the people of God to engage in works in which the Lord has never called them to do. Martha is not alone in being "cumbered" (weighted down) with "much serving" (Luke 10:40).

The witness of our lives is far more weighty than that of our lips. If we spent more time in secret communings with Christ, people would take knowledge of us that we had “been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13). If we were more diligent and painstaking to find out and to put into practice the precepts and commands which God has recorded in His Word for the regulation of our lives; if, in consequence, we were really walking with Him, filled with that peace which passeth all understanding, rejoicing in the Lord; then instead of our going to the people and pressing upon all and sundry the precious things of Christ—thus disobeying Him who has bidden His disciples, “Give not that which is holy unto the dogs” (Matt.7:6)—some, at least, would come to us and ask “a reason of the hope” that is “in us” (1 Pet.3:15).

But, as we have said above, the restless energy of the flesh longs to find some outlet, and our hearts are only too eagerly inclined to substitute service toward others for personal dealing with God for ourselves. It calls for less exercise of soul to memorize a few texts for the purpose of quoting them to someone else than it does to measure myself by the Scriptures, confess my sad failures and beg God to write His Word upon my heart. Ah, it is a comforting sop for our conscience to persuade ourselves that, though our walk is so far from being what it should be, yet we can “do our duty” in warning the wicked, or engage in some form of “Christian service.” Yes, and Satan will whisper in our ears, ‘You have been *faithful* there,’ and instead of being humbled and chastened before God for our miserable failures to live to Christ, our evil hearts are puffed up by the devil’s flatteries that we have, at least, faithfully preached Christ.

Let not the reader conclude from what has been said that the writer is opposed to either public worship or the Christian’s being engaged in any good works for the benefit of others. Not so, though we would earnestly warn against any attempt to worship with those who are not walking with God, or engaging in works which are not really glorifying to Him. Our main design has simply been to show the need of putting *first things first*. Our first great need is not seeking to minister to others, but ourselves being ministered unto by the Lord. Our highest privilege is not that of being engaged in service for Christ, but of enjoying daily communion with Him. Our first obligation is not that of being concerned over the welfare of our neighbors, but making our own calling and election sure. Our first great task is not to serve our fellowmen, but to serve our God by studying His Word, learning His will, and then doing it. Our first circle of responsibility is not towards strangers and distant acquaintances, but our own home. Our chief ambition should not be the proclamation of Christ with our lips, but the preaching of Him by our lives.

If we have not learned to worship God in the secret place, we cannot do so in public assembly. If we are not ourselves really following Christ, walking and communing with Him, it is but mockery to speak of Him to others. If we preach Him in words but deny Him in our works, then we are only a stumblingblock to those who hear us. If our “service” for Christ is robbing us of the time so urgently needed for the cultivation of our personal “vineyard,” then it is a snare and a curse to us. Then “take heed unto thyself,” “lay aside” every weight (Heb.12:1) which hinders you from running the race which God “has set before” us. As a well known hymn says, “Take time to be holy,” or, better still, as a Scripture says, “The kingdom of God is...righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he that in these things serveth Christ is acceptable to God, and approved of men” (Rom.14:17,18).