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The Sermons of John Wesley - Sermon 99

The Reward of the Righteous

PREACHED BEFORE THE HUMANE SOCIETY

"Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." Matt. 25:34.

1. Reason alone will convince every fair inquirer, that God "is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him." This alone teaches him to say, "Doubtless there is a reward for the righteous;" "there is a God that judgeth the earth." But how little information do we receive from unassisted reason touching the particulars contained in this general truth! As eye hath not seen, or ear heard, so neither could it naturally enter into our hearts to conceive the circumstances of that awful day wherein God will judge the world. No information of this kind could be given but from the great Judge himself. And what an amazing instance of condescension it is, that the Creator, the Governor, the Lord, the Judge of all, should deign to give us so clear and particular an account of that solemn transaction! If the learned Heathen acknowledged the sublimity of that account which Moses gives of the creation, what would he have said, if he had heard this account of the Son of Man coming in his glory Here, indeed, is no laboured pomp of words, no ornaments of language. This would not have suited either the Speaker or the occasion. But what inexpressible dignity of thought! See him "coming in the clouds of heaven; and all the angels with him!" See him "sitting on the throne of his glory, and all the nations gathered before him!" And shall he separate them, placing the good on his right hand, and the wicked on his left "Then shall the King say:" -- With what admirable propriety is the expression varied! "The Son of Man" comes down to judge the children of men. "The King" distributes rewards and punishments to his obedient or rebellious subjects: -- "Then shall the King say to them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

2. "Prepared for you from the foundation of the world:" -- But does this agree with the common supposition that God created man merely to supply the vacant thrones of the rebel angels Does it not rather seem to imply, that he would have created man, though the angels had never fallen inasmuch as he then prepared the kingdom for his human children, when he laid the foundation of the earth.

3. "Inherit the kingdom;" -- as being "heirs of God, and joint heirs" with his beloved Son. It is your right; seeing I have purchased eternal redemption for all them that obey me: And ye did obey me in the days of your flesh. Ye "believed in the Father, and also in me." Ye loved the Lord your God; and that love constrained you to love all mankind. Ye continued in the faith that wrought by love. Ye showed your faith by your works. "For I was hungry, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and in prison, and ye came unto me."

4. But in what sense are we to understand the words that follow "Lord, when saw we thee hungry, and gave thee meat or thirsty, and gave thee drink" They cannot be literally understood; they cannot answer in these very words; because it is not possible they should be ignorant that God had really wrought by them. Is it not then manifest, that these words are to be taken in a figurative sense And can they imply any more, than that all which they have done will appear as nothing to them; will, as it were, vanish away, in view of what God their Saviour had done and suffered for them

5. But "the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it to

one of the least of these my brethren, ye did it unto me." What a declaration this! worthy to be had in everlasting remembrance. May the finger of the living God write it upon all our hearts! I would take occasion from hence, First, to make a few reflections on good works in general: Secondly, to consider in particular that institution for the promotion of which we are now assembled: And, in the Third place, to make a short application.

I. 1. And, First, I would make a few reflections upon good works in general.

I am not insensible, that many, even serious people, are jealous of all that is spoken upon this subject: Nay, and whenever the necessity of good works is strongly insisted on take for granted that he who speaks in this manner is but one remove from Popery. But should we, for fear of this or of any other reproach, refrain from speaking "the truth as it is in Jesus" Should we, on any consideration, "shun to declare the whole counsel of God" Nay, if a false prophet could utter that solemn word, how much more may the Ministers of Christ, "We cannot go beyond the word of the Lord, to speak either more or less!"

2. Is it not to be lamented, that any who fear God should desire us to do otherwise and that, by speaking otherwise themselves, they should occasion the way of truth to be evil spoken of I mean, in particular, the way of salvation by faith; which, on this very account, is despised, nay, had in abomination, by many sensible men. It is now above forty years since this grand scriptural doctrine, "By grace ye are saved through faith," began to be openly declared by a few Clergymen of the Church of England. And not long after, some who heard, but did not understand, attempted to preach the same doctrine, but miserably mangled it; wresting the Scripture, and "making void the law through faith."

3. Some of these, in order to exalt the value of faith, have utterly deprecated good works. They speak of them as not only not necessary to salvation, but as greatly obstructive to it. They represent them as abundantly more dangerous than evil ones, to those who are seeking to save their souls. One cries aloud, "More people go to hell by praying, than by thieving." Another screams out, "Away with your works! Have done with your works, or you cannot come to Christ!" And this unscriptural, irrational, heathenish declamation is called, preaching the gospel!

4. But "shall not the Judge of all the earth" speak, as well as "do right" Will not he "be justified in his saying, and clear when he is judged" Assuredly he will. And upon his authority we must continue to declare, that whenever you do good to any for his sake; when you feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty; when you assist the stranger, or clothe the naked; when you visit them that are sick or in prison; these are not splendid sins, as one marvellously calls them, but "sacrifices wherewith God is well pleased."

5. Not that our Lord intended we should confine our beneficence to the bodies of men. He undoubtedly designed that we should be equally abundant in works of spiritual mercy. He died "to purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of" all "good works;" zealous, above all, to "save souls from death," and thereby "hide a multitude of sins." And this is unquestionably included in St. Paul's exhortation: "As we have time, let us do good unto all men;" good in every possible kind, as well as in every possible degree. But why does not our blessed Lord mention works of spiritual mercy He could not do it with any propriety. It was not for him to say, "I was in error, and ye convinced me; I was in sin, and you brought me back to God." And it needed not; for in mentioning some he included all works of mercy.

6. But may I not add one thing more (only he that heareth, let him understand:) Good works are so far from being hindrances of our salvation; they are so far from being insignificant, from being of no account in Christianity; that, supposing them to spring from a right principle, they are the perfection of religion. They are the highest part of that spiritual building whereof Jesus Christ is the foundation. To those who attentively consider the thirteenth chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians, it will be undeniably plain that what St. Paul there describes as the highest of all Christian graces, is properly and directly the love of our neighbour [1 Cor. 13]. And to him who attentively considers the whole tenor both of the Old and New Testament, it will be equally plain, that works springing from this love are the highest part of the religion therein revealed. Of these our Lord himself says, "Hereby is my Father glorified, that ye bring forth much fruit." Much fruit! Does not the very expression imply the excellency of what is so termed Is not the tree itself for the sake of the fruit By bearing fruit, and by this alone, it attains the highest perfection it is capable of, and answers the end for which it was planted. Who, what is he then, that is called a Christian, and can speak lightly of good works

II. 1. From these general reflections, I proceed to consider that institution in particular, for the promotion of which we are now assembled. And in doing this, I shall, First, observe the rise of this institution; Secondly, the success; and, Thirdly, the excellency of it: After which you will give me leave to make a short application.

(I.) On the First head, the rise of this institution, I may be very brief, as a great part of you know it already.

1. One would wonder (as an ingenious writer observes) that such an institution as this, of so deep importance to mankind, should appear so late in the world. Have we anything wrote upon the subject, earlier than the tract published at Rome in the year 1637 And did not the proposal then sleep for many years Were there any more than one or two attempts, and those not effectually pursued, till the year 1700 By what steps it has been since revived and carried into execution, we are now to inquire.

2. I cannot give you a clearer view of this, than by presenting you with a short extract from the Introduction to the "Plan and Reports of the Society," published two years ago: --

"Many and indubitable are the instances of the possibility of restoring to life persons apparently struck with sudden death, whether by an apoplexy, convulsive fits, noxious vapours, strangling, or drowning. Cases of this nature have occurred in every country. But they were considered, and neglected, as extraordinary phenomena from which no salutary consequence could be drawn.

3. "At length, a few benevolent gentlemen in Holland conjectured, that some at least might have been saved, had proper means been used in time; and formed themselves into a Society, in order to make a trial. Their attempts succeeded far beyond their expectations. Many were restored who must otherwise have perished. And they were, at length, enabled to extend their plan over the Seven Provinces.

"Their success instigated other countries to follow their example. In the year 1768, the Magistrates of Health at Milan and Venice issued orders for the treatment of drowned persons. The city of Hamburgh appointed a similar ordinance to be read in all the churches. In the year 1769, the Empress of Germany published an edict, extending its directions and encouragements to every case that afforded a possibility of relief. In the year 1771, the Magistrates of Paris founded an institution in favour of the drowned.

4. "In the year 1773, Dr. Cogan translated the 'Memoirs of the Society at Amsterdam,' in order to inform our countrymen of the practicability of recovering persons apparently drowned; And Mr. Hawes uniting with him, these gentlemen proposed a plan for a similar institution in these kingdoms. They were soon enabled to form a Society for this excellent purpose. The plan is this: --

"I. The Society will publish, in the most extensive manner possible, the proper methods of treating persons in such circumstances.

"II. They will distribute a premium of two guineas among the first persons who attempt to recover anyone taken out of the water as dead. And this reward will be given, even if the attempt is unsuccessful, provided it has been pursued two hours, according to the method laid down by the Society.

"III. They will distribute a premium of four guineas, where the person is restored to life.

"IV. They will give one guinea to any that admits the body into his house without delay, and furnishes the necessary accommodations.

"V. A number of medical gentlemen, living near the places where these disasters commonly happen, will give their assistance gratis."

(II.) Such was the rise of this admirable institution. With what success it has been attended, is the point which I purpose, in the next place, very briefly to consider.

And it must be allowed to be not only far greater than those who despised it had imagined, but greater than the most sanguine expectations of the gentlemen who were immediately engaged in it.

In the short space, from its first establishment in May, 1774, to the end of December, eight persons, seemingly dead, were restored to life.

In the year 1775, forty-seven were restored to life: Thirty-two of them, by the direct encouragement and assistance of the gentlemen of this Society; and the rest, by medical gentlemen and others, in consequence of their method of treatment being generally known.

In the year 1776, forty-one persons were restored to life by the assistance of this Society. And eleven cases of those who had been restored elsewhere were communicated to them.

So the number of lives preserved and restored, in two years and a half, since their first institution, amounts to one hundred and seven! Add to these those that have been since restored; and out of two hundred and eighty-four persons, who were dead, to all appearance, no less than an hundred and fifty-seven have been restored to life. Such is the success which has attended them in so short a time! Such a blessing has the gracious providence of God given to this infant undertaking!

(III). 1. It remains only to show the excellency of it. And this may appear from one single consideration: This institution unites together in one all the various acts of mercy. The several works of charity mentioned above are all contained in this. It comprises all corporeal (if I may so speak) and all spiritual benefits; all the instances of kindness which can be shown either to the bodies or souls of men. To show this beyond all contradiction, there needs no studied eloquence, no rhetorical colouring,

but simply and nakedly to relate the thing as it is.

2. The thing attempted, and not only attempted, but actually performed,(so has the goodness of God prospered the labours of these lovers of mankind!) is no less, in a qualified sense, than restoring life to the dead. Is it any wonder, then, that the generality of men should at first ridicule such an undertaking that they should imagine the persons who aimed at any such thing must be utterly out of their senses. Indeed, one of old said, "Why should it be thought a thing incredible with you, that God should raise the dead" Cannot He, who bestowed life at first, just as well bestow it again. But it may well be thought a thing incredible, that man should raise the dead; for no human power can create life. And what human power can restore it. Accordingly, when our Lord (whom the Jews at that time supposed to be a mere man) came to the house of Jairus, in order to raise his daughter from the dead, upon the first intimation of his design, "they laughed him to scorn." "The maid," said he, "is not dead, but sleepeth." "This is rather to be called sleep than death; seeing her life is not at an end; but I will quickly awaken her out of this sleep."

3. However, it is certain, she was really dead, and so beyond all power but that of the Almighty. But see what power God has now given to man! To his name be all the praise! See with what wisdom he has endued these sons of mercy! teaching them to stop the parting soul, to arrest the spirit just quitting the breathless clay, and taking wing for eternity! Who hath seen such a thing. Who hath heard such things. Who hath read them in the annals of antiquity. Sons of men, "can these dry bones live" Can this motionless heart beat again. Can this clotted blood flow any more. Can these dry, stiff vessels open to give it passage. Can this cold flesh resume its native warmth, or those eyes again see the sun. Surely these are such things (might one not almost say, such miracles) as neither we, of the present generation, nor our fathers had known!

4. Consider, I entreat you, how many miracles of mercy (so to speak) are contained in one! That poor man, who was lately numbered with the dead, by the care and pains of these messengers of God, again breathes the vital air, opens his eyes, and stands up upon his feet. He is restored to his rejoicing family, to his wife, to his (late) helpless children, that he may again, by his honest labour, provide them with all the necessaries of life. See now what ye have done, ye ministers of mercy! Behold the fruit of your labour of love! Ye have been an husband to the widow, a father to the fatherless. And hereby ye have given meat to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothes to the naked: For hungry, thirsty, and naked these little ones must have been, had not you restored him that prevents it. You have more than relieved, you have prevented, that sickness which might naturally have arisen from their want of sufficient food to eat, or raiment to put on. You have hindered those orphans from wandering up and down, not having a place where to lay their head. Nay, and very possibly you have prevented some of them from being lodged in a dreary, comfortless prison.

5. So great, so comprehensive is the mercy which you have shown to the bodies of your fellow-creatures! But why should their souls be left out of the account. How great are the benefits you have conferred on these also! The husband has now again an opportunity of assisting his wife in things of the greatest moment. He may now again strengthen her hands in God, and help her to run with patience the race that is set before her. He may again join with her in instructing their children, and training them up in the way wherein they should go; who may live to be a comfort to their aged parents, and useful members of the community.

6. Nay, it may be, you have snatched the poor man himself, not only from the jaws of death, but from sinking lower than the waters, from the jaws of everlasting destruction. It cannot be doubted, but some

of those whose lives you have restored, although they had been before without God in the world, will remember themselves, and not only with their lips, but in their lives, show forth his praise. It is highly probable, some of these (as one out of ten lepers) "will return and give thanks to God," real, lasting thanks, by devoting themselves to his honourable service.

7. It is remarkable, that several of those whom you have brought back from the margin of the grave, were intoxicated at the very time when they dropped into the water. And at that very instant (which is frequently the case) they totally lost their senses. Here therefore was no place for, no possibility of, repentance. They had not time, they had not sense, so much as to cry out, "Lord, have mercy!" So they were sinking through the mighty waters into the pit of destruction! And these instruments of divine mercy plucked them at once out of the water, and out of the fire; by the same act, delivered them from temporal and from eternal death!

8. Nay, one poor sinner (let it never be forgotten!) was just coming down from the ship, when (overtaken by the justice and mercy of God) her foot slipped, and she fell into the river. Instantly her senses were lost, so that she could not call upon God. Yet he had not forgotten her. He sent those who delivered her from death; at least from the death of the body. And who knows but she may lay it to heart, and turn from the error of her ways Who knows, but she may be saved from the second death, and, with her deliverers, "inherit the kingdom"

9. One point more deserves to be particularly remarked. Many of those who have been restored to life (no less than eleven out of the fourteen that were saved in a few months) were in the number of those that are a reproach to our nation, -- wilful self murderers. As many of the desperate men who attempt this horrid crime are men who have had a liberal education, it is pity but they would consider those fine words, not of a poor narrow-souled Christian, but of a generous Heathen, nay, a Roman! Let them calmly consider that beautiful passage: --

*Proxima deinde tenent maesti loca, qui sibi letum
Insontes peperere manu, lucemque perosi
Projecere animas. Quam vellent aethere in alto
Nunc et pauperiem, et duros perferre labores!
Fata obstant, tristisque palus inamabilis unda
Alligat, et novies Styx interfusa coerces.*

[Then crowds succeed, who, prodigal of breath,
Themselves anticipate the doom of death;
Though free from guild, they cast their lives away,
And sad and sullen hate the golden day.
O with what joy the wretches now would bear
Pain, toil, and woe, to breathe the vital air!
In vain! By fate for ever are they bound
With dire Avernus, and the lake profound;
And Styx, with nine wide channels, roars around!
Mr. Pitt's Virgil.]

Fata obstant! But in favour of many, we see God has overruled fate. They are brought back over the unnavigable river. They do behold the upper skies. They see the light of the sun. O let them see the light of Thy countenance! And let them so live their few remaining days on earth, that they may live with Thee for ever!

III. 1. Permit me now to make a short application. But to whom should I direct this Are there any here who are unhappily prejudiced against that Revelation which breathes nothing but benevolence; which contains the richest display of God's love to man, that ever was made from the foundation of the world Yet even to you I would address a few words; for, if you are not Christians, you are men. You too are susceptible of kind impressions: You have the feelings of humanity. Has not your heart too glowed at that noble sentiment; worthy the heart and the lips of the highest Christian, --

Homo sum: Humani nihil a me alienum puto!

[This quotation from Terence is thus translated by Colman: -- "I am a man; and all calamities That touch humanity come home to me." -- Edit.]

Have not you also sympathized with the afflicted How many times have you been pained at human misery When you have beheld a scene of deep distress, has not your soul melted within you

And now and then a sigh you stole, And tears began to flow.

But is it easy for anyone to conceive a scene of deeper distress than this Suppose you are standing by, just when the messenger comes in, and the message is delivered, "I am sorry to tell you, but you must know it; your husband is no more! He was making haste out of the vessel, and his foot slipped. It is true, after a time, his body was found; but there it lies, without any signs of life." In what a condition are now both the mother and the children! Perhaps, for a while, stupid, overwhelmed, silent; staring at each other; then bursting out into loud and bitter lamentation! Now is the time to help them, by assisting those who make it their business so to do. Now let nothing hinder you from improving the glorious opportunity! Restore the husband to his disconsolate wife, the father to his weeping children! It is true, you cannot do this in person; you cannot be upon the spot. But you may do it in an effectual manner by assisting those that are. You may now, by your generous contribution, send them the help which you cannot personally give. O shut not up your bowels of compassion towards them! Now open your hearts and your hands! If you have much, give plenteously; if not, give a little, with a willing mind.

2. To you who believe the Christian Revelation, I may speak in a still stronger manner. You believe, your blessed Master "left you an example, that you might tread in his steps." Now, you know his whole life was one labour of love. You know "how he went about doing good," and that without intermission; declaring to all, "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work." Is not that, then, the language of your heart --

Thy mind throughout my life be shown, While list'ning to the wretches' cry, The widows' and the orphans' groan, On mercy's wings I swiftly fly, The poor and helpless to relieve, My life, my all, for them to give.

Occasions of doing this can never be wanting; for "the poor ye have always with you." But what a peculiar opportunity does the solemnity of this day furnish you with, of "treading in his steps," after a manner which you did not before conceive Did he say to the poor afflicted parent, (doubtless to the surprise of many,) "Weep not" And did he surprise them still more, when he stopped her flowing tears by restoring life to her dead son, and "delivering him to his mother" Did he (notwithstanding all that "laughed him to scorn") restore to life the daughter of Jairus How many things of a nearly resembling sort, "if human we may liken to divine," have been done, and continue to be done daily, by these lovers of mankind! Let every one then be ambitious of having a share in this glorious work! Let every one (in a stronger sense than Mr. Herbert meant)

Join hands with God, to make a poor man live!

By your generous assistance, be ye partakers of their work, and partakers of their joy.

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[John Wesley](#)

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Table of Contents

[Español](#)

[What is Wesleyanism?](#)

[John Wesley](#)

[The Journal of John Wesley](#)

[The Life of John Wesley by John Telford](#)

[A Compendium of Natural Philosophy](#)

[The New Testament - John Wesley's Translation](#)

[Translating Wesley's Writings into Late 20th-Century American General English](#)

[The Sermons of John Wesley \(1872 Edition\)](#)

[A Plain Account of Christian Perfection](#)

[John Wesley's Notes on the Bible](#)

[John Wesley the Methodist](#)

[The Letters of John Wesley](#)

[John Wesley - Evangelist](#)

[Covenant Service - Directions for Renewing Our Covenant With God](#)

[A Christian Library](#)

[An Address to the Clergy](#)

[Charles Wesley](#)

[Arminianism](#)

[Noncanonical Literature](#)

[Sermons, Essays & Books](#)

[Holiness Classics Library](#)

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[Conferences](#)

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