

On Dissipation

By John Wesley

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Sermon Number Sermon 79

Sermon Title On Dissipation

Sermon Footnote (text of the 1872 edition)

Sermon Scripture "This I speak -- that ye may attend upon the Lord without distraction." 1 Cor. 7:35.

I 1. Almost in every part of our nation, more especially in the large and populous towns, we hear a general complaint among sensible persons, of the still increasing dissipation. It is observed to diffuse itself more and more, in the court, the city, and the country. From the continual mention which is made of this, and the continual declamations against it, one would naturally imagine that a word so commonly used was perfectly understood. Yet it may be doubted whether it be or no. Nay, we may very safely affirm that few of those who frequently use the term understand what it means. One reason of this is, that, although the thing has been long among us, especially since the time of King Charles the Second (one of the most dissipated mortals that ever breathed,) yet the word is not of long standing. It was hardly heard of fifty years ago; and not much before the present reign. So lately has it been imported: And yet it is so in every one's mouth, that it is already worn threadbare; being one of the cant words of the day.

2. Another reason why it is so little understood may be, that among the numberless writers that swarm about us, there is not one (at least whom I have seen) that has published so much as a sixpenny pamphlet concerning it. We have, indeed, one short Essay upon the subject: But exceeding few have seen it, as it stands in the midst of a volume of Essays, the author of which is little known in the world. And even this is so far from going to the bottom of the subject that it only slightly glances over it; and does not so much as give us one definition of

dissipation (which I looked narrowly for) from the beginning to the end.

3. We are accustomed to speak of dissipation, as having respect chiefly, if not wholly, to the outward behaviour; to the manner of life. But it is within before it appears without: It is in the heart, before it is seen in the outward conversation. There must be a dissipated spirit, before there is a dissipated manner of life. But what is dissipation of spirit? This is the first and the grand inquiry.

4. God created all things for himself; more especially all intelligent spirits. (And indeed it seems that intelligence, in some kind or degree, is inseparable from spiritual beings; that intelligence is as essential to spirits as extension is to matter.) He made those more directly for himself, to know, love, and enjoy him. As the sun is the centre of the solar system, so (as far as we may compare material things with spiritual) we need not scruple to affirm that God is the centre of spirits. And as long as they are united to Him, created spirits are at rest: They are at rest so long, and no longer, as they "attend upon the Lord without distraction."

5. This expression of the Apostle (not to encumber ourselves at present with the particular occasion of his speaking it) is exceeding peculiar: Pros to euprosedron toi Kyrioi. The word which we render, attend upon, literally means sitting in a good posture for hearing. And therein St. Paul undoubtedly alluded to Mary sitting at the Masters feet. (Luke 10:39.) Meantime, Martha was cumbered with much serving: was distracted, dissipated; periespato. It is the very expression from whence St. Paul takes the word which we render, without distraction.

6. And even as much serving dissipated the thoughts of Martha, and distracted her from attending to her Lords words, so a thousand things which daily occur are apt to dissipate our thoughts, and distract us from attending to his voice who is continually speaking to our hearts: I mean, to all that listen to his voice. We are encompassed on all sides with persons and things that tend to draw us from our centre. Indeed, every creature, if we are not continually on our guard, will draw us from our Creator. The whole visible world, all we see, hear, or touch, all the objects either of our senses or understanding, have a tendency to

dissipate our thoughts from the invisible world; and to distract our minds from attending to him who is both the Author and end of our being.

7. This is the more easily done, because we are all by nature atheoi, Atheists, in the world; and that in so high a degree that it requires no less than an almighty power to counteract that tendency to dissipation which is in every human spirit, and restore the capacity of attending to God, and fixing itself on him. For this cannot be done till we are new creatures; till we are created anew in Christ Jesus; till the same power which made the world make us a "clean heart, and renew a right spirit within us."

8. But who is he that is thus renewed? He that believeth in the name of the Son of God. He alone that believeth on the Lord Jesus Christ is thus "born of God." It is by this faith alone, that he is "created anew in," or through, "Christ Jesus;" that he is restored to the image of God wherein he was created, and again centred in God; or, as the Apostle expresses it, "joined to the Lord in one spirit." Yet even then the believer may find in himself the remains of that carnal mind, that natural tendency to rest in created good, to acquiesce in visible things, which, without continual care, will press down his soul, and draw him from his Creator. Herein the world, the men that know not God, will never fail to join; at some times with design, and at other times perhaps without design: For their very spirit is infectious, and insensibly changes ours into its own likeness. And we may be well assured, the prince of this world, the devil, will assist them with all his might. He will labour with all his strength, and, what is far more dangerous, with all his subtlety, if by any means he may draw us away from our simplicity towards Christ; from our simple adherence to him; from our union with him, through whom we are also united in one spirit to the Father.

9. But nothing is more certain than this, -- that though he may tempt the strongest believer to give up his simplicity toward Christ, and scatter his thoughts and desires among worldly objects; yet he cannot force even the weakest: For the grace of God is still sufficient for him. The same grace which at first united him to God is able to continue that happy union, in spite of all the rage, and all the strength, and all the

subtlety of the enemy. God has never left himself without witness that he has power to deliver them that trust in him, as out of every temptation that can assault them, so out of this in particular. He has still a little flock who do in fact, "attend upon him without distraction;" who, cleaving to him with full purpose, are not dissipated from him, no, not for a moment; but "rejoice evermore, pray without ceasing, and in everything give thanks."

10. But so far as any one yields to this temptation, so far he is dissipated. The original word properly signifies to disperse, or scatter. So the sun dissipates, that is, scatters, the clouds; the wind dissipates, or scatters, the dust; and, by an easy metaphor, our thoughts are said to be dissipated, when they are irregularly scattered up and down. In like manner, our desires are dissipated, when they are unhinged from God, their proper centre, and scattered to and fro among the poor, perishing, unsatisfying things of the world. And, indeed, it may be said of every man that is a stranger to the grace of God, that all his passions are dissipated, -- Scatter'd o'er all the earth abroad, Immeasurably far from GOD.

11. Distraction, in St. Paul's sense, is nearly allied to, or rather the same with, dissipation: Consequently, to attend upon the Lord without distraction, is the same as to attend upon the Lord without dissipation. But whenever the mind is unhinged from God, it is so far dissipated or distracted. Dissipation then, in general, may be defined, "the uncentring the soul from God." And whatever uncentres the mind from God does properly dissipate us.

12. Hence we may easily learn what is the proper, direct meaning of that common expression, -- a dissipated man. He is a man that is separated from God; that is disunited from his centre, whether this be occasioned by hurry of business, by seeking honour or preferment, or by fondness for diversions, for silly pleasures, so called, or for any trifle under the sun. The vulgar, it is true, commonly confine this character to those who are violently attached to women, gaming, drinking; to dancing, balls, races, or the poor, childish diversion of "running foxes and hares out of breath." But it equally belongs to the serious fool who forgets God by a close attention to any worldly employment, suppose it

were of the most elegant or the most important kind. A man may be as much dissipated from God by the study of the mathematics or astronomy, as by fondness for cards or hounds. Whoever is habitually inattentive to the presence and will of his Creator, he is a dissipated man.

13. Hence we may likewise learn that a dissipated life is not barely that of a powdered beau, of a petit-maitre, a gamester, a woman-hunter, a playhouse-hunter, a fox-hunter, or a shatter-brain of any kind; but the life of an honourable statesman, a gentleman, or a merchant, that is "without God in the world." Agreeably to this, a dissipated age (such as is the present, perhaps beyond all that ever were, at least, that are recorded in history) is an age wherein God is generally forgotten. And a dissipated nation (such as England is at present in a superlative degree) is a nation, a vast majority of which have not God "in all their thoughts."

14. A plain consequence of these observations is, (what some may esteem a paradox,) that dissipation, in the full, general meaning of the word, is the very same thing with ungodliness. The name is new; but the thing is, undoubtedly almost as old as the creation. And this is, at present, the peculiar glory of England, wherein it is not equalled by any nation under heaven. We therefore speak an unquestionable truth when we say, there is not on the face of the earth another nation (at least, that we ever heard of) so perfectly dissipated and ungodly; not only so totally "without God in the world," but so openly setting him at defiance. There never was an age that we read of in history, since Julius Caesar, since Noah, since Adam, wherein dissipation or ungodliness did so generally prevail, both among high and low, rich and poor.

15. But still, blessed be God! -- All are not lost: There be who faith Prefer, and piety to God! There are some, I trust more than seven thousand, yea, or ten times that number, in England, who have not yet bowed either their knee or their heart to the god of this world; who, cleaving close to the God of heaven, are not borne away by the flood, by the general, the almost universal, torrent of dissipation or ungodliness. They are not of the mind of gentle Crispus, -- Qui nunquam direxit brachia contra Torrentem, -- "who never attempted to swim against the stream." They dare swim against the stream. Each of them can truly

say, Nec me, qui caetera, vincit Impetus, et rapido contrarius evehor orbi. [The following is Addison's translation of this quotation from Ovid: -- "I steer against their motions; nor am I Borne back by all the current of the sky." -- Edit.] If they cannot turn the tide back, they can at least bear an open testimony against it. They are therefore free from the blood of their ungodly countrymen: It must be upon their own head.

16. But by what means may we avoid the being carried away by the overflowing stream of dissipation? It is not difficult for those who believe the Scripture to give an answer to this question. Now, I really believe the Bible to be the Word of God; and on that supposition I answer, The radical cure of all dissipation is, the "faith that worketh by love." If, therefore, you would be free from this evil disease, first, "continue steadfast in the faith;" in that faith which brings "the Spirit of adoption, crying in your heart, Abba, Father;" whereby you are enabled to testify, "The life which I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God; who loved me, and gave himself for me." By this faith you "see him that is invisible, and set the Lord always before you." Next, "building yourselves up in your most holy faith, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto everlasting life." And as long as you walk by this rule, you will be superior to all dissipation.

17. How exactly does this agree (though there is a difference in the expression) with that observation of pious Kempis! "Simplicity and purity are the two wings which lift the soul up to heaven. Simplicity is in the intention, purity in the affection." For what is this but (in the Apostle's language) simple "faith working by love?" By that simplicity you always see God, and by purity you love him. What is it, but having (as one of the ancients speaks) "the loving eye of the soul fixed upon God?" And as long as your soul is in this posture, dissipation can have no place.

18. It is with great judgment, therefore, that great and good Bishop Taylor, in his "Rules of Holy Living and Dying," (of whom Bishop Warburton, a person not very prone to commend, used to say, "I have no conception of a greater genius on earth than Dr. Jeremy Taylor,") premises to all his other rules those concerning purity of intention. And has he not the authority of our Lord himself so to do? who lays it down

as an universal maxim, "If thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light." Singly aim at God. In every step thou takest, eye Him alone. Pursue one thing: Happiness in knowing, in loving, in serving God. Then shall thy soul be full of light: Full of the light of the glory of God; of his glorious love, shining upon thee from the face of Jesus Christ.

19. Can anything be a greater help to universal holiness, than the continually seeing the light of his glory? It is no wonder, then, that so many wise and good men have recommended, to all who desire to be truly religious, the exercise of the presence of God. But in doing this, some of those holy men seem to have fallen into one mistake: (Particularly, an excellent writer of our own country, in his letters concerning "The Spirit of Prayer:") They put men, wholly unawakened, unconvinced of sin, upon this exercise, at their very entrance into religion; whereas this certainly should not be the first, but rather one of the last things. They should begin with repentance; the knowledge of themselves; of their sinfulness, guilt, and helplessness. They should be instructed next, to seek peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Then let them be taught to retain what they have received; to "walk in the light of his countenance;" yea, to "walk in the light, as he is in the light," without any darkness at all; till "the blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth" them "from all sin."

20. It was from a full conviction of the absolute necessity there is of a Christian's setting the Lord always before him that a set of young gentlemen in Oxford, who, many years ago, used to spend most of their evenings together, in order to assist each other in working out their salvation, placed that question first in their scheme of daily self-examination: "Have I been simple and recollected in all I said or did?" Have I been simple? -- That is, setting the Lord always before me, and doing everything with a single view of pleasing him? -- Recollected? -- that is, quickly gathering in my scattered thoughts; recovering my simplicity, if I had been in any wise drawn from it by men, or devils, or my own evil heart? By this means they were preserved from dissipation, and were enabled, each of them, to say, "By the grace of God, this one thing I do: (at least, it is my constant aim:) I see God, I love God, I serve God. I glorify him with my body and with my spirit."

21. The same thing seems to be intended by two uncommon words which are frequently found in the writings of those pious men who are usually styled Mystics. I mean, Introversion, and Extroversion. "Examine yourselves," says St. Paul to the Corinthians, and in them to the Christians of all ages; "know ye not that Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?" that is, unbelievers, unable to bear the touchstone of God's word. Now, the attending to the voice of Christ within you is what they term Introversion. The turning the eye of the mind from him to outward things they call Extroversion. By this your thoughts wander from God, and you are properly dissipated: Whereas by introversion you may be always sensible of his loving presence; you continually hearken to whatever it pleases your Lord to say to your heart: And if you continually listen to his inward voice, you will be kept from all dissipation.

22. We may, Lastly, learn hence, what judgment to form of what is frequently urged in favour of the English nation, and of the present age; namely, that, in other respects, England stands on a level with other nations, and the present age stands upon a level with any of the preceding: Only it is allowed we are more dissipated than our neighbours; and this age is more dissipated than the preceding ages. Nay, if this is allowed, all is allowed. It is allowed that this nation is worse than any of the neighbouring nations; and that this age is worse, essentially worse, than any of the preceding ages. For as dissipation or ungodliness is the parent of all sin; of all unrighteousness; of unmercifulness, injustice, fraud, perfidy; of every possible evil temper, evil word, or evil action; so it, in effect, comprises them all. Whatsoever things are impure, whatsoever things are of evil report, whatsoever things are unholy; if there be any vice; all these are included in ungodliness, usually termed dissipation. Let not, therefore, any lover of virtue and truth say one word in favour of this monster: Let no lover of mankind once open his mouth to extenuate the guilt of it. Abhor it, as you would abhor the devil, whose offspring and likeness it is! Abhor it, as you would abhor the extinction of all virtue, and the universal prevalence of an earthly, sensual, devilish spirit; and flee from it as you would flee (if you saw it open before you) from the lake of fire burning with brimstone!

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