

On Visiting the Sick

By John Wesley

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Sermon Title On Visting the Sick

Sermon Footnote (text of the 1872 edition)

Sermon Scripture "I was sick, and ye visited me." Matt. 25:36.

INTRO

1. It is generally supposed, that the means of grace and the ordinances of God are equivalent terms. We commonly mean by that expression, those that are usually termed, works of piety; viz. , hearing and reading the Scripture, receiving the Lord's Supper, public and private prayer, and fasting. And it is certain these are the ordinary channels which convey the grace of God to the souls of men. But are they the only means of grace? Are there no other means than these, whereby God is pleased, frequently, yea, ordinarily, to convey his grace to them that either love or fear him? Surely there are works of mercy, as well as works of piety, which are real means of grace. They are more especially such to those that perform them with a single eye. And those that neglect them, do not receive the grace which otherwise they might. Yea, and they lose, by a continued neglect, the grace which they had received. Is it not hence that many who were once strong in faith are now weak and feeble-minded? And yet they are not sensible whence that weakness comes, as they neglect none of the ordinances of God. But they might see whence it comes, were they seriously to consider St. Paul's account of all true believers: "We are his workmanship, created anew in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before prepared, that we might walk therein." (Eph. 2:10.)

2. The walking herein is essentially necessary, as to the continuance of that faith whereby we are already saved grace, so to the attainment of everlasting salvation. Of this cannot doubt, if we seriously consider that these are the very words of the great Judge himself: "Come, ye blessed children of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and ye gave me meat: Thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me." (Matt. 25:34.) "Verily, I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it to the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." If this does not convince you that the continuance in works of mercy is necessary to salvation, consider what the Judge of all says to those on the left hand: "Depart, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels: For I was hungry, and ye gave me no meat: Thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: Naked, and ye clothed me not: Sick and in prison, and ye visited me not. Inasmuch as ye have not done it unto one of the least of these neither have ye done it unto me." You see, were it for this alone, they must "depart" from God "into everlasting punishment."

3. Is it not strange, that this important truth should be so little understood, or, at least, should so little influence the practice of them that fear God? Suppose this representation be true, suppose the Judge of all the earth speaks right, those, and those only, that feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, relieve the stranger, visit those that are in prison, according to their power and opportunity, shall "inherit the everlasting kingdom." And those that do not shall "depart into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels".

4. I purpose, at present, to confine my discourse to one article of these, -- visiting the sick: A plain duty, which all that are in health may practise in a higher or lower degree; and which, nevertheless, is almost universally neglected, even by those that profess to love God. And touching this I would inquire, I. What is implied in visiting the sick? II. How is it to be performed? And, III. By whom?

I. First, I would inquire, What is the nature of this duty? What is implied in "visiting the sick?"

1. By the sick, I do not mean only those that keep their bed, or that are sick in the strictest sense. Rather I would include all such as are in a state of affliction, whether of mind or body; and that whether they are good or bad, whether they fear God or not.

2. "But is there need of visiting them in person? May we not relieve them at a distance? Does it not answer the same purpose if we send them help as if we carry it ourselves?" Many are so circumstanced that they cannot attend the sick in person; and where this is the real case it is undoubtedly sufficient for them to send help, being the only expedient they can use. But this is not properly visiting the sick; it is another thing. The word which we render visit, in its literal acceptation, means to look upon. And this, you well know, cannot be done unless you are present with them. To send them assistance is, therefore, entirely a different thing from visiting them. The former, then, ought to be done, but the latter not left undone. "But I send a physician to those that are sick; and he can do them more good than I can." He can, in one respect; he can do them more good with regard to their bodily health. But he cannot do them more good with regard to their souls, which are of infinitely greater importance. And if he could, this would not excuse you: His going would not fulfil your duty. Neither would it do the same good to you, unless you saw them with your own eyes. If you do not, you lose a means of grace; you lose an excellent means of increasing your thankfulness to God, who saves you from this pain and sickness, and continues your health and strength; as well as of increasing your sympathy with the afflicted, your benevolence, and all social affections.

3. One great reason why the rich, in general, have so little sympathy for the poor, is, because they so seldom visit them. Hence it is, that, according to the common observation, one part of the world does not know what the other suffers. Many of them do not know, because they do not care to know: they keep out of the way of knowing it; and then plead their voluntary ignorances an excuse for their hardness of heart. "Indeed, Sir," said person of large substance, "I am a very compassionate man. But, to tell you the truth, I do not know anybody in

the world that is in want." How did this come to pass? Why, he took good care to keep out of their way; and if he fell upon any of them unawares "he passed over on the other side."

4. How contrary to this is both the spirit and behaviour of even people of the highest rank in a neighbouring nation! In Paris, ladies of the first quality, yea, Princesses of the blood, of the Royal Family, constantly visit the sick, particularly the patients in the Grand Hospital. And they not only take care to relieve their wants, (if they need anything more than is provided for them,) but attend on their sick beds, dress their sores, and perform the meanest offices for them. Here is a pattern for the English, poor or rich, mean or honourable! For many years we have abundantly copied after the follies of the French; let us for once copy after their wisdom and virtue, worthy the imitation of the whole Christian world. Let not the gentlewomen, or even the countesses in England, be ashamed to imitate those Princesses of the blood! Here is a fashion that does honour to human nature. It began in France; but God forbid it should end there!"

5. And if your delicacy will not permit you to imitate those truly honourable ladies, by abasing yourselves in the manner which they do, by performing the lowest offices for the sick, you may, however, without humbling yourselves so far, supply them with whatever they want. And you may administer help of a more excellent kind, by supplying their spiritual wants; instructing them (if they need such instruction) in the first principles of religion; endeavouring to show them the dangerous state they are in, under the wrath and curse of God, through sin; and pointing them to the "Lamb of God, who taketh away the sins of the world." Beside this general instruction, you might have abundant opportunities of comforting those that are in pain of body, distress of mind; you might find opportunities of strengthening the feeble-minded, quickening those that are faint and weary; and of building up those that have believed, and encouraging them to "go on to perfection." But these things you must do in your own person; you see they cannot be done by proxy. Or suppose you could give the same relief to the sick by another, you could not reap the same advantage to yourself; you could not gain that increase in lowliness, in patience, in tenderness of spirit, in sympathy with the afflicted, which you might have gained, if you had

assisted them in person. Neither would you receive the same recompense in the resurrection of the just, when "every man shall receive his own reward, according to his own labour."

II

II. 1. I proceed to inquire, in the Second place, How are we to visit them? In what manner may this labour of love be most effectually performed? How may we do this most to the glory of God, and the benefit of our neighbour? But before ever you enter upon the work, you should be deeply convinced that you are by means sufficient for it; you have neither sufficient grace, nor sufficient understanding, to perform it in the most excellent manner. And this will convince you of the necessity of applying to the Strong for strength; and of flying to the Father of Lights, the Giver of every good gift, for wisdom; ever remembering, "there is a Spirit in man that giveth wisdom; and the inspiration of the Holy One that giveth understanding." Whenever, therefore, you are about to enter upon the work, seek his help by earnest prayer. Cry to him for the whole spirit of humility, lest if pride steal into your heart, if you ascribe anything to yourself, while you strive to save others you destroy your own soul. Before and through the work, from the beginning to the end, let your heart wait upon him for a continual supply of meekness and gentleness, of patience and longsuffering, that you may never be angry or discouraged at whatever treatment, rough or smooth, kind or unkind, you may meet with. Be not moved with the deep ignorance of some, the dullness, the amazing stupidity of others; marvel not at their peevishness or stubbornness, at their non-improvement after all the pains that you have taken; yea, at some of them turning back to perdition, and being worse than they were before. Still your record is with the Lord, and your reward with the Most High.

2. As to the particular method of treating the sick, you need not tie yourself down to any, but may continually vary your manner of proceeding as various circumstances may require. But it may not be amiss, usually, to begin with inquiring into their outward condition. You may ask whether they have the necessaries of life; whether they have sufficient food and raiment; if the weather be cold, whether they have

fuel; whether they have needful attendance; whether they have proper advice, with regard to their bodily disorder; especially if it be of a dangerous kind. In several of these respects you may be able to give them some assistance yourself; and you may move those that are more able than you, to supply your lack of service. You might properly say in your own case, "To beg I am ashamed;" but never be ashamed to beg for the poor; yea, in this case, be an importunate beggar; do not easily take a denial. Use all the address, all the understanding, all the influence you have; at the same time trusting in Him that has the hearts of all men in his hands.

3. You will then easily discern, whether there is any good office which you can do for them with your own hands. Indeed, most of the things which are needful to be done, those about them can do better than you. But in some you may have more skill, or more experience, than them; and if you have, let not delicacy or honour stand in your way. Remember his word, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these, ye have done it unto me;" and think nothing too mean to do for Him. Rejoice to be abased for his sake !

4. These little labours of love will pave your way to things greater importance. Having shown that you have a regard for their bodies, you may proceed to inquire concerning their souls. And here you have a large field before you; you have scope for exercising all the talents which God has given you. May you not begin with asking, "Have you ever considered, that God governs the world; -- that his providence is over all, and over you in particular? -- Does any thing then befall you without his knowledge, -- or without his designing it for your good? He knows all you suffer; he knows all your pains; he sees all your wants. He sees not only your affliction in general, but every particular circumstance of it. Is he not looking down from heaven, and disposing all these things for your profit? You may then inquire, whether he is acquainted with the general principles of religion. And afterwards, lovingly and gently examine, whether his life has been agreeable thereto: whether he has been an outward, barefaced sinner, or has had a form of religion. See next, whether he knows anything of the power; of worshipping God "in spirit and in truth." If he does not, endeavour to explain to him, "without holiness no man shall see the Lord;" and

"except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." When he begins to understand the nature of holiness, and the necessity of the new birth, then you may press upon him "repentance toward God, and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ."

5. When you find any of them begin to fear God, it will proper to give them, one after another, some plain tracts, as the "Instructions for Christians," "Awake, thou that sleepest," and the "Nature and Design of Christianity." At the next visit you may inquire, what they have read -- what they remember, -- and what they understand. And then will be the time to enforce what they understand, and, if possible, impress it on their hearts. Be sure to conclude every meeting with prayer. If you cannot yet pray without a form, you may use some of those composed by Mr. Spinckes, or any other pious writer. But the sooner you breakthrough this backwardness the better. Ask of God, and he will open your mouth.

6. Together with the more important lessons, which you endeavour to teach all the poor whom you visit, it would be a deed of charity to teach them two things more, which they are generally little acquainted with, -- industry and cleanliness. It was said by a pious man, "Cleanliness is next to godliness." Indeed the want of it is a scandal to all religion; causing the way of truth to be evil spoken of. And without industry, we are neither fit for this world, nor for the world to come. With regard to both, "whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might."

III

III. 1. The Third point to be considered is, By whom is this duty to be performed? The answer is ready: By all that desire to "inherit the kingdom" of their Father, which was "prepared forth from the foundation of the world." For thus saith the Lord, "Come, ye blessed; -- inherit the kingdom; -- For I was sick, and ye visited me." And to those on the left hand, "Depart, ye cursed; -- for I was sick, and ye visited me not." Does not this plainly imply, that as all who do this are "blessed", and shall "inherit the kingdom;" so all who do it not are "cursed," and shall "depart into everlasting fire?"

2. All, therefore, who desire to escape everlasting fire, and to inherit the everlasting kingdom, are equally concerned, according to their power, to practise this important duty. It is equally incumbent on young and old, rich and poor, men and women, according to their ability. None are so young, if they desire to save their own souls, as to be excused from assisting their neighbours. None are so poor, (unless they want the necessaries of life,) but they are called to do something, more or less, at whatever time they can spare, for the relief and comfort of their afflicted fellow-sufferers.

3. But those "who are rich in this world," who have more than the conveniences of life, are peculiarly called of God to this blessed work, and pointed out to it by his gracious Providence. As you are not under a necessity of working for your bread, you have your time at your own disposal! You may, therefore, allot some part of it every day for this labour of love. If it be practicable, it is far best to have a fixed hour; (for any time, we say, is no time;) and not to employ that time in any other business, without urgent necessity. You have likewise a peculiar advantage over many, by your station in life. Being superior in rank to them, you have the more influence on that very account. Your inferiors, of course, look up to you with a kind of reverence. And the condescension which you show in visiting them, gives them a prejudice in your favour, which inclines them to hear you with attention, and willingly receive what you say. Improve this prejudice to the uttermost for the benefit of their souls, as well as their bodies. While you are as eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame, a husband to the widow, and a father to the fatherless, see that you still keep a higher end in view, even the saving of souls from death, and that you labour to make all you say and do subservient to that great end.

4. "But have the poor themselves any part or lot in this matter? Are they any way concerned in visiting the sick? What can they give to others, who have hardly the conveniences, or perhaps necessities, of life for themselves?" If they have not, yet they need not be wholly excluded from the blessing which attends the practice of this duty. Even those may remember that excellent rule, "Let our conveniences give way to our neighbour's necessities; and our necessities give way to our neighbour's extremities." And few are so poor, as not to be able

sometimes to give "two mites;" but if they are not, if they have no money to give, may they not give what is of more value? Yea, of more value than thousands of gold and silver. If you speak "in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth," may not the words you speak be health to the soul, and marrow to the bones? Can you give them nothing? Nay, in administering to them the grace of God, you give them more than all this world is worth. Go on, go on, thou poor disciple of a poor Master! Do as he did in the days of his flesh! Whenever thou hast an opportunity, go about doing good, and healing all that are oppressed of the devil; encouraging them shake off his chains, and fly immediately to Him Who sets the prisoners free, and breaks The iron bondage from their necks. Above all, give them your prayers. Pray with them; pray for them; and who knows but you may save their souls alive?

5. You that are old, whose feet are ready to stumble upon the dark mountains, may not you do a little more good before you go hence and are no more seen? O remember, Tis time to live, if you grow old Of little life the best to make, And manage wisely the last stake! As you have lived many years, it may be hoped you have attained such knowledge as may be of use to others. You have certainly more knowledge of men, which is commonly learned by dear-bought experience. With what strength you have left, employ the few moments you have to spare, in ministering to those who are weaker than yourselves. Your grey hairs will not fail to give you authority, and add weight to what you speak. You may frequently urge, to increase their attention, Believe me, youth; for I am read in cares, And groan beneath the weight of more than threescore years. You have frequently been a sufferer yourself; perhaps you are so still. So much the more give them all the assistance you can, both with regard to their souls and bodies, before they and you go to the place whence you will not return.

6. On the other hand, you that are young have several advantages that are almost peculiar to yourselves. You have generally a flow of spirits, and a liveliness of temper, which, by the grace of God, make you willing to undertake, and capable of performing, many good works, at which others would be discouraged. And you have your health and strength of body, whereby you are eminently qualified to assist the sick and those that have no strength. You are able to take up and carry the crosses,

which may be expected to lie in the way. Employ then your whole vigour of body and mind in ministering to your afflicted brethren. And bless God that you have them to employ in so honourable a service; like those heavenly "servants of his that do his pleasure," by continually ministering to the heirs of salvation.

7. "But may not women, as well as men, bear a part in this honourable service?" Undoubtedly they may; nay, they ought; it is meet, right, and their bounden duty. Herein there is no difference; "there is neither male nor female in Christ Jesus." Indeed it has long passed for a maxim with many, that "women are only to be seen, not heard." And accordingly many of them are brought up in such a manner as if they were only designed for agreeable playthings! But is this doing honour to the sex? or is it a real kindness to them? No; it is the deepest unkindness; it is horrid cruelty; it is mere Turkish barbarity. And I know not how any woman of sense and spirit can submit to it. Let all you that have it in your power assert the right which the God of nature has given you. Yield not to that vile bondage any longer. You, as well as men, are rational creatures. You, like them, were made in the image of God; you are equally candidates for immortality; you too are called of God, as you have time, to "do good unto all men." Be "not disobedient to the heavenly calling." Whenever you have opportunity, do all the good you can, particularly to your poor, sick neighbour. And every one of you likewise "shall receive your own reward, according to your own labour."

8. It is well known, that, in the primitive Church, there were women particularly appointed for this work. Indeed there was one or more such in every Christian congregation under heaven. They were then termed Deaconesses, that is, servants; servants of the Church, and of its great Master. Such was Phebe, (mentioned by St. Paul, Rom. 16:1,) "a Deaconess of the Church of Cenchrea." It is true, most of these were women in years, and well experienced in the work of God. But were the young wholly excluded from that service? No: Neither need they be, provided they know in whom they have believed; and show that they are holy of heart, by being holy in all manner of conversation. Such a Deaconess, if she answered her picture, was Mr. Law's Miranda. Would anyone object to her visiting and relieving the sick and poor, because she was a woman; nay, and a young one too? Do any of you that are

young desire to tread in her steps? Have you a pleasing form, an agreeable address? So much the better, if you are wholly devoted to God. He will use these, if your eye be single, to make your words strike the deeper. And while you minister to others, how many blessings may redound into your own bosom! Hereby your natural levity may be destroyed; your fondness for trifles cured; your wrong tempers corrected; your evil habits weakened, until they are rooted out; and you will be prepared to adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in every future scene of life. Only be very wary, if you visit or converse with those of the other sex, lest your affections be entangled, on one side or the other, and so you find a curse instead of a blessing.

9. Seeing then this is a duty to which we are called, rich and poor, young and old, male and female, (and it would be well parents would train up their children herein, as well as in saying their prayers and going to church,) let the time past suffice that almost all of us have neglected it, as by general consent. O what need has every one of us to say, "Lord, forgive me my sins of omission!" Well, in the name of God, let us now from this day set about it with general consent. And I pray, let it never go out of your mind that this is a duty which you cannot perform by proxy; unless in one only case, -- unless you are disabled by your own pain or weakness. In that only case, it suffices to send the relief which you would otherwise give. Begin, my dear brethren, begin now; else the impression which you now feel will wear off; and, possibly, it may never return! What then will be the consequence? Instead of hearing that word, "Come, ye blessed! -- For I was sick, and ye visited me;" you must hear that awful sentence, "Depart, ye cursed! -- For I was sick, and ye visited me not!"

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