

The Care of the Soul Urged as the One Thing Needful. (Luke 10:42)

by George Whitefield

The care of the soul is the one thing needful, and it is a matter of universal concern, of the highest importance, and of comprehensive nature.

Scripture: Psalm 49:1, Ecclesiastes 9:3, Jeremiah 23:20, Matthew 16:26, Luke 10:42, 2 Corinthians 6:2, Hebrews 3:7

Topics: "Soul Care", "Eternal Salvation"

Description

George Whitefield preaches about the importance of the soul's care, emphasizing the need to prioritize spiritual matters over worldly concerns. He uses the story of Mary and Martha to illustrate the significance of choosing the 'one thing needful,' which is the care of the soul. Whitefield urges the congregation to reflect on their own commitment to this essential task, warning against the dangers of neglecting the salvation of their souls. He passionately appeals to the unconcerned, the hesitant, and the devoted believers, encouraging them to seek divine grace and diligently pursue the 'one thing needful' for their eternal well-being.

Transcript

Luke 10:42, "But one thing is needful."

It was the amiable character of our blessed Redeemer, that "he went about doing good," this great motive, which animated all his actions, brought him to the house of his friend Lazarus, at Bethany, and directed his behavior there. Though it was a season of recess from public labor, our Lord brought the sentiments and the pious cares of a preacher of righteousness into the parlor of a friend; and there his doctrine dropped as the rain, and distilled as the dew, as the little happy circle that were then surrounding him. Mary, the sister of Lazarus, with great delight made one amongst them; she seated herself at the feet of Jesus, in the posture of an humble disciple; and we have a great deal of reason to believe, that Martha, his other sister, would gladly have been with her there; but domestic cares pressed hard upon her, and "she was cumbered with much serving," being, perhaps, too solicitous to prepare a sumptuous entertainment for her heavenly master and the train that attended him. Happy are they, who in a crowd of business do not lose something of the spirituality of their minds, and of the composure and sweetness of their tempers. This good woman comes to our Lord with too impatient a complaint; insinuating some little reflection, not only on Mary, but on himself too. "Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? Bid her,

therefore, that she help me." Our Lord, willing to take all opportunities of suggesting useful thoughts, answers her in these words, of which the text is a part, "Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things, but one thing is needful; and Mary, has chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her." Alas, Martha! The concerns of the soul are of so much greater importance than those of the body, that I cannot blame your sister on this occasion: I rather recommend her to your imitation, and caution you, and all my other friends, to be much on your guard, that in the midst of your worldly cares, you do not lose sight of what much better deserves your attention.

I shall consider these words, "One thing is needful," as a kind of aphorism, or wise and weighty sentence, which dropped from the mouth of our blessed Redeemer, and is evidently worthy of our most serious regard. I shall,

I. Consider what we are to understand by "The one thing" here spoken of.

II. Show you what is intended, when it is said to be the one thing NEEDFUL.

III. I will show how justly it may be so represented, or prove that it is, indeed, the one thing needful. And then conclude with some reflections.

My friends, the words which are now before us, are to this day, as true, as they were seventeen hundred years ago. Set your hearts to attend to them. O that you may, by divine grace, be awakened to hear them with a due regard, and be so impressed with the plain and serious things which are now to be spoken, as you probably would, if I were speaking by your dying beds, and you had the near and lively view of eternity!

FIRST, I am to consider, what we are to understand by the "one thing needful."

Now in a few words, it is the "Care of the soul," opposed, as you see in the text, to the care, the excessive care of the body; to which Martha was gently admonished by our Lord. This is a general answer, and it comprehends a variety of important particulars, which is the business of our ministry often to open to you at large: The care of the soul, implies a readiness to hear the words of Christ, to seat ourselves with Mary at his feet, and to receive both the law and the gospel from his mouth. It supposes, that we learn from this divine teacher the worth of our souls, their danger, and their remedy; and that we become above all things solicitous about their salvation. That, heartily repenting of all our sins, and cordially believing the everlasting gospel, we receive the Lord Jesus Christ for righteousness and life, resting our souls on the value of his atonement, and the efficacy of his grace. It imports, the sincere dedication of ourselves to the service of God, and a faithful adherence to it, notwithstanding all oppositions arising from inward corruptions, or outward temptations; and a resolute perseverance in the way of gospel dependence, till we receive the end of our faith in our complete salvation. This is the "one thing needful," represented indeed in various scriptures by various names. Sometimes it is called "Regeneration," or "the new creature," because it is the blessed work of God's efficacious grace. Sometimes the "Fear of God," and sometimes "his love, and the keeping his commandments;" and very frequently in the new testament it is called "faith," or "receiving Christ, and believing on him," which therefore is represented as the "great work of God," John 6:20 the great thing which God in his glorious gospel requires, as well as by his spirit produces in us: each of these, if rightly understood and explained, comprehends all that I have said on this head. On the whole, we may say, that, as the body is one, though it has many members, and the soul is one, though it has many faculties, so in the present case, this real vital religion is "one thing," one sacred principle of divine life, bringing us to attend to the care of our souls, as of our greatest treasure. It is one

thing, notwithstanding all the variety of views in which it may be considered, and of characters under which it may be described. I proceed,

SECONDLY, To consider what may be intended in the representation which is here made of it, as the "one thing NEEDFUL."

Now I think it naturally includes these three particulars: it is a matter of universal concern; of the highest importance; and of so comprehensive a nature, that every thing which is truly worthy of our regard, may be considered as included in, or subservient to it. Let me a little illustrate each of these particulars.

1. The care of the soul may be called the "one thing needful," as it is matter of universal concern.

Our Lord, you see, speaks of it as needful in the general. He says not, for this or that particular person; or for those of such an age, station, or circumstance in life, but needful for all. And indeed, when discoursing on such a subject, one might properly introduce it with those solemn words of the psalmist, "Give ear, all ye people, hear, all ye inhabitants of the earth, both high and low, rich and poor, together," Psalm 49:1,2. For it is the concern of all, from the king that sits upon the throne, to the servant that grindeth at the mill, or the beggar that lieth upon the dunghill.

It is needful for us that are MINISTERS, for our own salvation is concerned: and woe, insupportable woe will be to our souls, if we think it enough to recommend it to others, and to talk of it in a warm, or an awful manner, in public assemblies, or in our private converse, while it does not penetrate our hearts, as our own greatest care. Our case will then be like that of the Israelitish lord in Samaria, 2 Kings 7:2, who was employed to distribute the corn when the siege was raised; though we see it with our eyes, and dispense it with our hands, we shall ourselves die miserably, without tasting the blessings we impart.

It is needful to all you that are our HEARERS, without the exception of one single person. It is needful to you that are RICH, though it may on some accounts be peculiarly difficult for you, even as difficult, comparatively speaking, as for a "Camel to go through the eye of a needle," Mat. 19:24, yet if it be neglected, you are poor in the midst of all your wealth, and miserable in all your abundance; a wretch starving for hunger, in a magnificent palace and a rich dress, would be less the object of compassion than you.

It is needful for you that are POOR; though you are distressed with so many anxious cares, "what you shall eat, and what you shall drink, and wherewithal you shall be clothed." Matt. 6:31. The nature that makes you capable of such anxieties as these, argues your much greater concern in the "bread which endures to eternal life," John 6:27, than in that by which this mortal body must be supported. It is needful for you that are ADVANCED IN YEARS; though your strength be impaired so that the "grasshopper is a burthen," Eccl. 12:5, and though you have by your long continuance in sin, rendered this great work so hard, that were it less important, one would in pity let you alone without reminding you of it; yes, late as it is, it must be done, or your hoary heads will be brought down to the grave with wrath, and sink under a curse aggravated by every year and by every day of your lives.

It is needful to you that are YOUNG, though solicited by so many gay vanities, to neglect it, though it may be represented as an unseasonable care at present, yet I repeat it, it is needful to you; immediately needful, unless you who walk so frequently over the dust of your brethren and companions, that died in the bloom and vigor of their days, have made some secret covenant with the grave for yourselves, and found out some wonderful method, hitherto unknown, or securing this precarious life, and of answering for

days and months to come, while others cannot answer for one single moment.

2. The care of the soul is "a matter of the highest importance;" beyond any thing which can be brought into comparison with it.

As Solomon says of wisdom, that "it is more precious than rubies, and that all things which can be desired are not to be compared with her," Prov. 3:15. So I may properly say of this great and most important branch of wisdom; whatever can be laid in the balance with it, will be found altogether lighter than vanity. This is strongly implied when it is said in the text, "one thing is needful;" one thing, and ONE THING ALONE is so. Just as the blessed God is said to be "only wise," 1 Tim. 1:17, and "only holy," Rev. 15:4. Because the wisdom and holiness of angels and men is as nothing, when compared with his. What seems most great and most important in life, what kings and senates, what the wisest and greatest of this world are employing their time, their councils, their pens, their labors upon, are trifles, when compared with this one thing. A man may subsist, he may in some considerable measure be happy, without learning, without riches, without titles, without health, without liberty, without friends, nay, though "the life be more than meat, and the body than raiment," Matt. 6:25, yet may he be happy, unspeakably happy, without the body itself. But he cannot be so, in the neglect of the one thing needful. I must therefore bespeak your regard to it in the words of Moses, "it is not a light thing, but it is your life," Deut. 32:47.

3. The care of the soul is of so comprehensive a nature, that "every thing truly worthy of our regard may be considered as included in it, or subservient to it.

As David observes, that "the commandment of God is exceeding broad," Psalm 119:96, so we may say of this one thing needful; or as Solomon very justly and emphatically expresses it, "to fear God and to keep his commandments is the whole duty of man," Eccl. 12:13. His whole duty, and his whole interest; and every thing which is wise and rational does in its proper place and connection make a part of it. We should judge very ill concerning the nature of this care, if we imagined, that it consisted merely in acts of devotion, or religious contemplation; it comprehends all the lovely and harmonious band of social and human virtues. It requires a care of society, a care of our bodies, and of our temporal concerns; but then all is to be regulated, directed, and animated by proper regards to God, Christ, and immortality. Our food and our rest, our trades and our labors, are to be attended to, and all the offices of humanity performed in obedience to the will of God, for the glory of Christ, and in a view of improving the mind in a growing meekness for a state of complete perfection. Name anything which has not reference at all to his, and you name a worthless trifle, however it may be gilded to allure the eye, or however it may be sweetened to gratify the taste. Name a thing, which, instead of thus improving the soul, has a tendency to debase and pollute, to enslave and endanger it, and you name what is most unprofitable and mischievous, be the wages of iniquity ever so great; most foul and deformed, be it in the eyes of men ever so honorable, or in their customs ever so fashionable. Thus I have endeavored to show you what we may suppose implied in the expression of "one thing being needful." I am now,

THIRDLY, To show you with how much propriety the care of the soul may be represented under this character, as the one thing needful, or as a matter of universal and most serious concern, to which every thing else is to be considered as subservient, if at all worthy of our care and pursuit.

There let me appeal to the sentiments of those who must be allowed most capable of judging, and to the evident reason of the case itself, as it must appear to every unprejudiced mind.

1. Let me argue "from the opinions of those who must be allowed most capable of judging in such an affair," and we shall quickly see that the care of the soul appears to them, the one thing needful.

Is the judgment of the blessed God "according to truth," how evidently and how solemnly is that judgment declared? I will not say merely in this or the other particular passage of his word, but in the whole series of his revelations to the children of men, and the whole tenor of his addresses to them. Is not this the language of all, from the early days of Job and Moses to the conclusion of the canon of scripture. Job 28:21, 23, 28, "If wisdom be hid from the eyes of all the living, surely God understandeth the way thereof, he knoweth the place thereof;" and if he does, it is plainly pointed out, for "unto man he still saith, behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to depart from evil, that is understanding." By Moses he declared to the Israelites, that "to do the commandments of the Lord would be their wisdom and their understanding in the sight of the nations, who should hear his statutes, and say, surely this is a wise and an understanding people," Deut. 4:6. When he had raised up one man on the throne of Israel, with the character of the wisest that ever lived upon the face of the earth, he chose to make him eminently a teacher of this great truth. And though now all that he spoke on the curious and less concerning subjects of natural philosophy is lost, "though he spoke of trees from the cedar to the hyssop, and of beasts, and of fowls, and of creeping things, and of fishes," 1 Kings 4:33, that saying is preserved in which he testifies, that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," Prov. 1:7,9,10, and those Proverbs, in almost every line of which, they who neglect God and their own souls, are spoken of as fools, as if that were the most proper signification of the word, while the religious alone are honored with the title of wise. But in this respect, as attesting this truth in the name of God and in his own, "a greater than Solomon is here."

For if we inquire what it was that our Lord Jesus Christ judged to be the one thing needful, the words of the text contain as full an answer as can be imagined; and the sense of them is repeated in a very lively and emphatical manner, in that remarkable passage wherein our Lord not only declares his own judgment, but seems to appeal to the conscience of all, as obliged by their own secret convictions to subscribe to the truth of it. "What is a man profited, is he gain the whole world, and lost his own soul; or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" Matt. 16:26. If it were once lost, what would he not be willing to give to redeem it? But it depends not on the words of Christ alone. Let his actions, his sufferings, his blood, his death, speak what a value he set on the souls of men. Is it to be imagined, that he would have relinquished heaven, have dwelt upon earth, have labored by night and by day, and at last have expired on the cross, for a matter of light importance? Or can we think that he, in whom "dwell all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, and all the fullness of the Godhead bodily," Coloss. 2:3,9, was mistaken in judgment so deliberately formed, and so solemnly declared?

If after this, there were room to mention human judgment and testimonies, how easy would it be to produce a cloud of witnesses in such a cause, and to show that the wisest and best of men in all ages of the world have agreed in this point, that amidst all the diversities of opinion and profession, which succeeding generations have produced, this has been the unanimous judgment, this the common and most solicitous care of those whose characters are most truly valuable, to secure the salvation of their own souls, and to promote the salvation of others.

And let me beseech you seriously to reflect, what are the characters of those who have taken the liberty, most boldly and freely to declare their judgment on the contrary side? The number of such is comparatively few; and when you compare what you have observed of their temper and conduct, I will not say with what you read of holy men of old, but with what you have yourselves seen in the faithful, active, and zealous servants of Christ, in these latter ages, with whom you have conversed; do you on the whole

find, that the rejecters and deriders of the gospel, are in other respects so much more prudent and judicious, so much wiser for themselves, and for others, that are influenced by them, as that you can be in reason obliged to pay any great deference to the authority of a few such names as these, in opposition to those to whom they are here opposed?

But you will say, and you will say it too truly, Though but a few may venture in words to declare for the neglect of the soul and its eternal interest, that the greater part of mankind do it in their actions. But are the greater part of mankind so wise, and so good, as implicitly to be followed in matters of the highest importance? And do not multitudes of these declare themselves on the other side, in their most serious moments? When the intoxications of worldly business and pleasures are over, and some languishing sickness forces men to solitude and retirement; what have you generally observed to be the affect of such a circumstance? Have they not then declared themselves convinced of the truth we are now laboring to establish? Nay, do we not sometimes see, that a distemper which seizes the mind with violence, yet does not utterly destroy its reasoning faculties, fixes this conviction on the soul in a few hours, nay, sometimes in a few moments? Have you never seen a gay, thoughtless creature, surprised in the giddy round of pleasures and amusements, and presently brought not only to seriousness, but terror and trembling, by the near views of death? Have you never seen the man of business and care interrupted, like the rich fool in the parable, in the midst of his schemes for the present world? And have you not heard one and the other of them owning the vanity of those pleasures and cares, which but a few days ago were every thing to them? Confessing that religion was the one thing needful, and recommending it to others with an earnestness, as if they hoped thereby to atone for their own former neglect? We that are ministers, frequently are witnesses to such things as these, and I believe few of our hearers are entire strangers to them.

Once more, what if to the testimony of the dying, we could add that of the dead? What if God were to turn aside the veil between us and the invisible world, and permit the most careless sinner in the assembly to converse for a few moments with the inhabitants of it? If you were to apply yourself to a happy Spirit, that trod the most thorny road to paradise, or passed through the most fiery trial, and to ask him, "was it worth your while to labor so much, and to endure so much for what you now possess?" Surely if the blessed in heaven were capable of indignation, it would move them to hear that it should be made a question. And, on the other hand, if you could inquire of one tormented in that flame below, though he might once be "clothed in purple and fine linen, and fare sumptuously every day," Luke 16:19. If you could ask him, "whether his former enjoyments were an equivalent for his present sufferings and despair?" What answer do you suppose he would return? Perhaps an answer of so much horror and rage, as you would not be able so much as to endure. Or if the malignity of his nature should prevent him from returning any answer at all, surely there would be a language even in that silence, a language in the darkness, and flames, and groans of that infernal prison, which would speak to your very soul what the word of God is with equal certainty, though less forcible conviction, speaking to your ear, that "one thing is needful." You see it is so in the judgment of God the Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ, of the wisest and best of men, of many, who seemed to judge most differently of it, when they come to more deliberate and serious thought, and not only of the dying, but of the dead too, of those who have experimentally known both worlds, and most surely know what is to be preferred. But I will not rest the whole argument here; therefore,

2. I appeal to the evident reason of the case itself, as it must appear to every unprejudiced mind, that the care of the soul is indeed the one thing needful.

I still consider myself as speaking not to atheists, or to deists, but to those who not only believe the existence and providence of God, and a future state of happiness and misery, but likewise who credit the truth of the Christian revelation, as many undoubtedly do, who live in a fatal neglect of God, and their own souls. Now on these principles, a little reflection may be sufficient to convince you, that it is needful to the present repose of your own mind; needful, if ever you would secure eternal happiness, and avoid eternal misery, which will be aggravated, rather than alleviated by all your present enjoyments.

1. The care of the soul is the one thing needful, because, "without it you cannot secure the peace of your own mind, nor avoid the upbraidings of your conscience."

That noble faculty is indeed the vicegerent of God in the soul. It is sensible of the dignity and worth of an immortal spirit, and will sometimes cry out of the violence that is offered to it, and cry so loud, as to compel the sinner to hear, whether he will or not. Do you not sometimes find it yourselves? When you labor most to forget the concerns of your soul, do they not sometimes force themselves on your remembrance? You are afraid of the reflections of your own mind, but with all your artifice and all your resolution can you entirely avoid them? Does not conscience follow you to your beds, even if denied the opportunity of meeting you in your closets, and, though with an unwelcome voice, there warn you, "that your soul is neglected, and will quickly be lost." Does it not follow you to your shops and your fields, when you are busiest there? Nay, I will add, does it not sometimes follow you to the feast, to the club, to the dance, and perhaps, amidst all resistance, to the theater too? Does, it not sometimes mingle your sweetest draughts with wormwood, and your gayest scenes with horror? So that you are like a tradesman, who, suspecting his affairs to be in a bad posture, lays by his books and his papers, yet sometimes they will come accidentally in his way. He hardly dares to look abroad for fear of meeting a creditor or an arrest: and if he labors to forget his cares and his dangers, in a course of luxury at home, the remembrance is sometimes awakened, and the alarm increased, by those very extravagancies in which he is attempting to lose it. Such probably is the case of your minds, and it is a very painful state; and while things are thus within, external circumstances can no more make you happy, than a fine dress could relieve you under a violent fit of the stone. Whereas, if this great affair were secured, you might delight in reflection, as much as you now dread it; and conscience, of your bitterest enemy, would become a delightful friend, and the testimony of it your greatest rejoicing.

2. The care of the soul is the one thing needful, "because without this your eternal happiness will be lost."

A crown of everlasting glory is not surely such a trifle as to be thrown away on a careless creature, that will not in good earnest pursue it. God doth not ordinarily deal thus, even with the bounties of his common providence, which are comparatively of little value. As to these, the hand of the diligent generally makes rich, and he would be thought distracted, rather than prudent, who should expect to get an estate merely by wishing for it, or without some resolute and continued application to a proper course of action for that purpose. Now, that we may not foolishly dream of obtaining heaven, in the midst of a course of indolence and sloth; we are expressly told in the word of God, that "the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force," Matt. 11:12, and are therefore exhorted to "strive," with the greatest intenseness, and eagerness of mind, as the word properly signifies, "to enter in at the strait gate," for this great and important reason, "because many shall another day seek to enter in, and shall not be able," Luke 13:24. Nay, when our Lord makes the most gracious promises to the humble petitioner, he does it in such a manner as to exclude the hopes of those who are careless and indifferent. "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you, Matt. 7:7. If, therefore, you do not ask, seek, and knock, the door of mercy will not be opened, and eternal happiness will be lost. Not that heaven

is to be obtained by our own good works: no, no; for having done all, we must account ourselves unprofitable servants.

And surely if I could say no more as to the fatal consequences of your neglect, than this, that eternal happiness will be lost, I should say enough to impress every mind, that considers what ETERNITY means. To fall into a state of everlasting forgetfulness, might indeed appear a refuge to a mind filled with the apprehension of future misery. But O how dreadful a refuge is it! Surely it is such a refuge, as a vast precipice, (from which a man falling would be dashed to pieces in a moment) might appear to a person, pursued by the officers of justice, that he might be brought out to a painful and lingering execution. If an extravagant youth would have reason to look round with anguish, on some fair and ample paternal inheritance, which he had sold or forfeited merely for the riot of a few days: how much more melancholy would it be for a rational mind to think that its eternal happiness is lost for any earthly consideration whatever? Tormenting thought! "Had I attended to that one thing which I have neglected, I might have been, through the grace of God in Christ Jesus, great and happy beyond expression, beyond conception: not merely for the little span of ten thousand thousand ages, for ever. A line reaching even to the remotest star would not have been able to contain the number of ages, nor would millions of years have been sufficient to figure them down; this is eternity, but I have lost it, and am now on the verge of being. This lamp, which might have outlasted those of the firmament, will presently be extinguished, and I blotted out from amongst the works of God, and cut off from all the bounties of his hand." Would not this be a very miserable case, if this were all? And would it not be sufficient to prove this to be the better part, which, as our Lord observes, can "never be taken away?" But God forbid that we should be so unfaithful to him, and to the souls of men, as to rest in such a representation alone. I therefore add once more,

3. The care of the soul is the one thing needful, because "without it, you cannot avoid a state of eternal misery, which will be aggravated, rather than alleviated by all your present enjoyments."

Nothing can be more evident from the word of the God of truth. It there plainly appears to be a determined case, which leaves no room for a more favorable conjecture or hope. "The wicked shall be turned into hell, even all the nations that forget God," Psalm 9:17. "They shall go away into everlasting punishment, Matt. 25:46, into a state where they shall in vain seek death, and death shall flee from them. Oh! brethren, it is a certain, but an awful truth, that your souls will be thinking and immortal beings, even in spite of themselves. They may indeed torment, but they cannot destroy themselves. They can no more suspend their power of thought and perception, than a mirror its property of reflecting rays that fall off its surface. Do you suspect the contrary? Make the trial immediately. Command your minds to create from thinking but for one quarter of an hour, or for half that time, and exclude every idea and every reflection. Can you succeed in that attempt? Or rather, does not thought press in with a more sensible violence on that resistance; as an anxious desire to sleep, makes us so much the more wakeful. Thus will thought follow you beyond the grave, thus will it, as an unwelcome guest, force itself upon you, when it can serve only to perplex and distress the mind. It will for ever upbraid you, that notwithstanding all the kind expostulations of God and man, notwithstanding all the keen remonstrances of conscience, and the pleadings of the blood of Christ, you have gone on in your folly, till heaven is lost, and damnation incurred; and all, for what for a shadow and a dream?

Oh think not, sinners, that the remembrance of your past pleasures, and of your success in your other cares, whilst that of the one thing needful was forgotten, think not that this will ease you minds. It will rather torment them the more. "Son, remember that thou in thy life-time receivedst thy good things." Bitter remembrance! Well might the heathen poets represent the unhappy spirits in the shades below, as

eagerly catching at the water of forgetfulness, yet unable to reach it. Your present comforts will only serve to give you a livelier sense of your misery, as having tasted such degrees of enjoyment; and to inflame the reckoning, as you have misimproved those talents lodged in your hands for better purposes. Surely, if these things were believed, and seriously considered, the sinner would have no more heart to rejoice in his present prosperity, than a man would have to amuse himself with the curiosities of a fine garden, through which he was led to be broken upon the rack.

But I will enlarge no farther on these things. Would to God that the unaccountable stupidity of men's minds, and their fatal attachment to the pleasures and cares of the present life, did not make it necessary to insist on them so frequently and so copiously!

I now proceed to the reflections which naturally arise from hence, and shall only mention two.

1. How much reason have we to lament the follow of mankind in neglecting the one thing needful.

If religion be indeed the truest wisdom, then surely we have the justest reason to say with Solomon, "the folly and madness is in men's hearts," Eccl. 9:3. Is it the one thing needful? Look on the conduct of the generality of mankind, and you would imagine they thought it the one thing needless: the vainest dream, and the idlest amusement of the mind. God is admonishing them by ordinances, and providences, sometimes by such as are most awful, to lay it to heart;" he speaks once, yea twice, (yes a multitude of times) but man regards not, Job 33:14. They profess perhaps to believe all that I have been saying, but act as if the contrary were self-evident; they will risk their souls and eternity for a thing of nought, for that, for the sake of which they would not risk so much as a hand, or a finger, or a joint, no, nor perhaps a toy that adorns it. Surely this is the wonder of angels, and perhaps of devils too, unless the observation of so many ages may have rendered it familiar to both. And can we, my Christian brethren, behold such a scene with indifference? If some epidemical madness had seized our country, or the places where we live, so that as we went from one place to another, we every where met with lunatics, and saw amongst the rest, some perhaps of the finest genius, in the most eminent stations in life, amusing themselves with others; surely were we ever so secure from the danger of infection or assault, the sight would cut us to the heart. A good-natured man would hardly be able to go abroad, or even be desirous to live, if it must be amongst so many sad spectacles. Yet these poor creatures might, notwithstanding this, be the children of God, and the higher their frenzy rose, the nearer might their complete happiness be. But alas! the greater part of mankind are seized with a worse kind of madness, in which they are ruining their souls; and can we behold it with indifference? The Lord awaken our compassion, our prayers, and our endeavors, in dependence on divine grace, that we may be instrumental in bringing them to their mind, and making them wise indeed, that is, wise to salvation!

2. How necessary is it that we should seriously inquire, how this one thing needful is regarded by us!

Let me entreat you to remember your own concern in it, and inquire ÷ Have I thought seriously of it? Have I seen the importance of it? Has it lain with a due and abiding weight on my mind? Has it brought me to Christ, that I might lay the stress of these great eternal interests on him? And am I acting in the main of my life, as one that has these convictions? Am I willing, in fact, to give up other things, my interests, my pleasures, my passions to this? Am I conversing with God and with man, as one that believes these things; as one that has deliberately chosen the better part, and is determined to abide by that choice?

Observe the answer which conscience returns to these inquiries, and you will know your own part in that more particular application, with which I shall conclude.

1. Let me address those that are entirely unconcerned about the one thing needful.

Brethren, I have been stating the case at large, and now I appeal to your consciences, are these things so, or are they not? God and your own hearts best know for what the care of your soul is neglected; but be it what it will, the difference between one grain of sand and another, is not great, when it comes to be weighed against a talent of gold. Whatever it is, you had need to examine it carefully. You had need to view that commodity on all sides, of which you do in effect say, For this will I sell my soul; for this will I give up heaven, and venture hell, be heaven and hell whatever they may. In the name of God, brethren, is this the part of a man, of a rational creature? To go on with your eyes open towards a pit of eternal ruin, because there are a few gay flowers in the way: or what if you shut your eyes, will that prevent your fall? It signifies little to say, I will not think of these things, I will not consider them: God has said, "In the last days they shall consider it perfectly," Jer. 23:20. The revels of a drunken malefactor will not prevent nor respite his execution. Pardon my plainness; if it were a fable or a tale, I would endeavor to amuse you with words, but I cannot do it where souls are at stake.

2. I would apply to those who are, in some sense, convinced of the importance of their souls, and yet are inclined to defer that care of them a little longer, which, in the general, they see to be necessary.

I know you that are young, are under peculiar temptations to do this; though it is strange that the death of so many of your companions, should not be an answer to some of the most specious and dangerous of those temptations. Methinks, if these were the least degree of uncertainty, the importance is too weighty to put matters to the venture. But here the uncertainty is great and apparent. You must surely know, that there are critical seasons of life for managing the concerns of it, which are of such a nature, that if once left, they may never return: here is a critical season: "Now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation," 2 Cor. 6:2. "today, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts," Heb. 3:7,8. This language may not be spoken tomorrow. Talk not of a more convenient season; none can be more convenient; and that to which you would probably refer it, is least of all so, a dying time. You would not choose then to have any important business in hand; and will you of choice refer the greatest business of all to that languishing, hurrying, amazing hour? If a friend were then to come to you with the balance of an intricate account, or a view of a title to an estate, you would shake your fainting head, and lift up your pale trembling hand, and say, perhaps, with a feeble voice, "Alas, is this a time for these things?" And is it a time for so much greater things than these? I wish you knew, and would consider, into what a strait, we that are minister are sometime brought, when we are called to the dying beds of those who have spent their lives in the neglect of the one thing needful. On the one hand, we fear, lest if we palliate [sugarcoat] matters, and speak smooth things, we shall betray and ruin their souls; and on the other, that if we use a becoming plainness and seriousness, in warning them of their danger, we shall quite overwhelm them, and hasten the dying moments, which is advancing by such swift steps. O let me entreat you for our sakes, and much more for your own, that you do not drive us to such sad extremities; but if you are convinced, as I hope some of you may now be, that the care of the soul is that needful thing we have represented, let the conviction work, let it drive you immediately to the throne of grace; from thence you may derive that wisdom and strength, which will direct you in all the intricacies which entangle you, and animate you in the midst of difficulty and discouragement.

3. I would in the last place address myself to those happy souls, who have in good earnest attended to the one thing needful.

I hope, that when you see how commonly it is neglected, neglected indeed, by many, whose natural capacities, improvements, and circumstances in life, appear to you superior to your own; you will humbly acknowledge, that it was distinguishing grace which brought you into this happy state, and formed you to this most necessary care. Bless the Lord, therefore, who hath given you that counsel, in virtue of which you can say, "He is your portion." Rejoice in the thought, that the great concern is secured: as it is natural for us to do, when some important affair is dispatched, which has long lain before us, and which we have been inclined to put off from one day to another, but have at length strenuously and successfully attended. Remember still to endeavor to continue acting on these great principles, which at first determined your choice; and seriously consider, that those who desire their life may at last be given them for a prey, must continue on their guard, in all stages of their journey through a wilderness, where daily dangers are still surrounding them. Being enabled to secure the great concern, make yourselves easy as to others of smaller importance. You have chosen the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; other things, therefore, shall be added unto you: and if any which you desire should, not be added, comfort yourselves with this thought, that you have the good part, which can never be taken away. And, not to enlarge on these obvious hints, which must often occur, be very solicitous that others may be brought to a care about the one thing needful. If it be needful for you, it is so for your children, your friends, your servants. Let them, therefore, see your concern in this respect for them, as well as for yourselves. Let parents especially attend to this exhortation; whose care for their offspring often exceeds in other respects, and falls in this. Remember that your children may never live to enjoy the effects of your labor and concern to get them estates and portions: the charges of their funerals may, perhaps, be all their share of what you are so anxiously careful to lay up for them. And O think what a sword would pierce through your very heart, if you should stand by the corpse of a beloved child with this reflection: "This poor creature has done with life, before it learnt its great business in it; and is gone to eternity, which I have seldom been warning it to prepare for, and which, perhaps, it learned of me to forget."

On the whole, may this grand care be awakened in those by whom it has been hitherto neglected: may it be revived in each of our minds. And that you may be encouraged to pursue it with greater cheerfulness, let me conclude with this comfortable thought, that in proportion to the necessity of the case, through the merits of Christ Jesus, is the provision which divine grace has made for our assistance. If you are disposed to sit down at Christ's feet, he will teach you by his word and Spirit. If you commit this precious jewel, which is your eternal all, into his hand, he will preserve it unto that day, and will then produce it richly adorned, and gloriously improved to his own honor, and to your everlasting joy.

Which God of his infinite mercy grant, &c.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/george-whitefield/the-care-of-the-soul-urged-as-the-one-thing-needful-luke-1042/>

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