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INATTENTION TO RELIGION

WONDERFUL.

BY THE REV. WM. J. M'CORD.

THE subject of religion is, in various ways, presented to the minds of men and pressed upon their attention. It is worthy their supreme regard, and it is surprising that it receives no more consideration from the mass of the human family. Long and often has this subject been unfolded and enforced; its claims have been confirmed by scripture authority; its demands strengthened by providential dispensations; and yet who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed? Isa. liii. 1. On this subject there is an astonishing apathy, a wonderful indifference. If we consider the magnitude of the interests involved; its intrinsic excellence; the shortness and uncertainty of the space allotted for embracing it; and the motives by which it is recommended and enforced; inattention to religion is a matter of surprise and wonder. This is the present theme of remark,—INATTENTION TO RELIGION WONDERFUL.

I. *It is wonderful, if we consider the magnitude of the interests involved.*

Could but a trifling loss be incurred by not attending to religion, then inattention might be excused. But there is nothing of trifling moment connected with it. Every thing is of the most serious concern:—

1. *All the great things of God are involved.* His honour and glory are concerned. His government has been abused; the penalty of his law has been incurred; his

favour forfeited; his wrath excited. In the plenitude of his mercy, he has provided for the restoration of man to his favour, in a way consistent with his honour and glory, his justice, truth, and holiness. He can bestow favour and forgive, while at the same time his law is honoured and his government sustained. He has given his Son to be a Saviour. The blood of Christ has been shed for the remission of sins. The benefits of redemption may be enjoyed by those who believe. The Spirit is promised to renew and sanctify. This ascension gift may be possessed by those who ask in faith. Inattention to religion slights all these great and solemn things. It pays no regard to the glory of God; it cares not for the honour of his government; it trembles not at his threatening; it fears not his angry frown; it places no adequate estimate on his favour; it seeks not to secure his benignant smile. Christ and his salvation it sets at nought; it prizes not the redemption he has purchased; it spurns to wash in the fountain of his blood; it treats with neglect and scorn the blessings which he offers. The Holy Spirit it resists, grieves, and offends. It likes not the seriousness which he begets; it would not be disturbed in its wayward course; its only desire is to be let alone. It cries peace and safety; and under its influence, the sinner folds his hands in carnal security, and composes himself to sleep over the yawning crater of a raging volcano. When he should hear the voice of God to-day, he quiets his conscience, saying, Yet a little sleep, a little slumber. Prov. vi. 9—11. Is it not wonderful?—Besides,

2. *The soul and its interests are involved.* If men will not be moved by a consideration of the great things of God, they should by the things which pertain to their own souls. Their souls are themselves, and whatever pertains to the soul, pertains to them; why then should they not be attentive to that which concerns themselves so intimately? It is the design of religion to save the soul, to save it from guilt and pollution, from a tormenting conscience in this world, and from unutterable woes in the world to come; for the soul shall never die. It must live, and think, and feel for ever. And who can tell how much it is capable of suffering? As are its capacities of enjoyment, so are its capacities of suffering. A way is provided for its rescue from the agonies of the lost, if timely application be made to the blood of sprinkling. Unspeakable joys are prepared, of which it may taste, if Jesus be embraced by

faith. On the one hand, there is happiness which tongue cannot express, and which the heart of man cannot conceive. On the other hand, there is misery which human language is impotent to describe, and of which no adequate conception can be formed. To be inattentive to religion is to be indifferent to these fearful realities, to the soul, to heaven and hell; and is not this a wonder?—

3. *These interests are eternal.* If the neglect of God and his government, of Christ and his salvation, of the Spirit and his influences, were followed by consequences of but transient continuance, the course which men pursue would be less wonderful. Or if heaven were of limited duration; if its songs were, after a short period, to cease and its glories expire; if the spirits of the just were destined to cease to be, and all the happiness of heaven soon to be as if it had not been; then, too, the conduct of men might be less wondered at. Or if hell were not to be for ever; if, after the revolution of ages, its fires were to be extinguished; if its miserable inhabitants were to be annihilated and their sorrows to cease with their being; then too there would be less of madness and of wonder in the indifference of men to religious things. But God and Christ and the Spirit are *for ever*; heaven and hell are *for ever*; the soul is to be *for ever*. The triune God will for ever exist to reward and to punish; heaven and hell will for ever be, one the place of reward, the other of punishment; the soul will live for ever to be either rewarded or punished. Eternal interests are at stake, interests which cannot be estimated, and in comparison with which all the treasures of this world are as nothing; and yet men will give them no attention. How wonderful! Reader, this carelessness of yours—this heedlessness of duty and of destiny—fills heaven and hell with *astonishment*, and it should fill you with *alarm*!—

II. *Inattention to religion is wonderful, if we consider its intrinsic excellence.*

Religion is the one thing needful. It is more precious than rubies. Prov. iii. 15. It is the only thing which can prepare the soul to pass unscared through the dark valley and shadow of death, and to stand unalarmed before the tribunal of God. And this can prepare us for these solemn and fearful scenes; and it can also prepare us for all that may await us in our journey through this vale of tears. It nerves the mind for trial and sustains it in distress.

“Let cares, like a wild deluge come,
And storms of sorrow fall;”

sustained by the divine consolations of religion, we may meet the storm with composure; with the eye of faith fixed upon eternal mansions, we may ride above the billows, and experience the fulfilment of the promise, — When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. Isa. xliii. 2. O how many have passed through the furnace sustained by the presence of the Son of God! And they have confessed, and the world has confessed, that nothing but religion could have sustained them! Yet, notwithstanding its excellence, men give it not the attention which they confess it deserves. It possesses a value which none, who have not enjoyed it, can estimate or realize; for,

1. *It gives peace with God.* Without it, there is no peace between man and his Maker. God has claims, but man refuses to answer them or submit to them. God has laws, but man will not obey them. God threatens transgressors with vengeance, and to this man is exposed. What God commands, that man will not do. What God forbids, that he is quick to perform, and in that he delights. Of course there can be no peace, no fellowship. The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. Rom. viii. 7. But religion reconciles to God. It destroys the enmity of the carnal heart. It sheds abroad a Saviour's love by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us. Rom. v. 5. It restores the soul to that communion with God which was lost by the fall. It exalts us to heavenly places in Christ Jesus. Eph. i. 3. Being justified by faith, we have peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Rom. v. 1. If a man love me, saith Jesus, he will keep my words; and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him. John xiv. 23. Is it not desirable that God should dwell in our hearts? Is it not to be desired that there should be peace and love between him and our souls? And when religion promises all this, is it not strange that men neglect it?—

2. *Religion gives peace of conscience.* God hath made us so, that it is a part of our nature to reflect on the past and sit in judgment upon our own conduct. He has given

us conscience, which condemns us, or acquits, as we conform or not to the rules of right which we have been taught. Every one has some sense of right and wrong, and not always doing what he knows to be right, must sometimes feel self-condemned. To a greater or less degree, the whole family of man, bear about with them a consciousness of guilt. Hence the expedients to which the heathen resort to obtain the favour of their imaginary deities. There is no torture which they will not undergo, there is no penance which they will not endure, in the delusive expectation of obtaining peace of mind here and blessedness hereafter. Still, they are like the troubled sea; they have no rest. Isa. lvii. 20, 21. And the same disquietude of heart is seen in Christian lands. Where regenerating grace has not been experienced—where union with Christ does not exist—there sweet peace of conscience, like Noah's dove, can find no rest for the sole of her foot. The sinner may cry peace and safety—he may flatter himself that his sins are few and trifling; but he will have times of serious thought, when conscience will be aroused, when a sense of guilt will rest with oppressive weight upon his soul, and when he would give worlds for a well-grounded assurance that all is well. But such an assurance can only be found at the cross of Christ. It is the province of religion to speak peace to the soul. She is a messenger of peace. She purges the conscience. She purifies the heart. Under her benign influence, man may go forth cheered by a peaceful and approving conscience, cherishing the delightful assurance that his iniquities are forgiven and his sins covered. Rom. iv. 7. And when men know and feel that they have not peace of conscience; and when they know from the scriptures, and from the experience of thousands, that religion can set the conscience at rest; why is it that they are so unwilling to embrace it? Are they in love with *unrest*? Is a troubled bosom, a condemning conscience, their delight? But who loves wo and sorrow? Not one! Why, then, spurn religion, whose office it is to calm the troubled breast, and soothe the brow of care? Oh, reader, inattention to this subject is wonderful indeed!—

3. *Religion prepares us for all the events and vicissitudes of life, and throws a charm over all the things of time.* We live in a world of changes. There is nothing immutable around us. To-day we may possess wealth and honour, the lips of the multitude may be filled with our praise, and all whom we meet may bow with respect and admi-

ration ; to-morrow we may be fallen so low that none will do us reverence. To-day we may be in health ; to-morrow languish and die. One day we may enjoy the caresses of friends ; the next they may be our enemies, or be cut down by the hand of death. Though the storms of sorrow have not fallen upon us and caused us to shed bitter tears, yet we may not be ever shielded from the blasts which others feel. Sooner or later we may be in the deep waters, with all the billows flowing over our souls. What then can sustain us ? In vain then will be our resort to earthly sources of comfort. In vain then shall we look to philosophy for support. In vain shall we look to any thing but the religion of Jesus Christ. This can sustain us then. Many have proved its power in such times of need. And when all are subject to these changes and vicissitudes—when all need the support of religion as they pursue the journey of life and especially in the hour of death—how shall we restrain our wonder at their inattention to it ?

But many think religion a *gloomy* thing ; and if they embrace it, they must cease to smile, and go mourning all their days. But it is not necessarily so. True religion is not so at all. It gives peace with God ; and what is there in peace with God to render us gloomy ? It gives peace of conscience ; and what is there in peace of conscience to make us unhappy ! So far from rendering its votaries unhappy, true religion just prepares us to use the things of this world so as to enjoy them and derive satisfaction and pleasure from them. It teaches us to regard all our blessings as coming directly from God ; and when we can thus receive them, and feel that he is our Father and we his children—heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ, Rom. viii. 17—what is there to prevent our taking delight in them ? And when we can commit ourselves to the guardian care of God at night, and go forth in the day with a conscious sense of his presence and blessing, what is there to mar our happiness ? Nothing. No ; religion throws a charm around the path of life ; consecrates the things of this world to the enjoyment of the people of God, opens a pathway to heaven, and gives a “title clear to mansions in the skies.” She supports in life, sustains in death, and introduces to immortal bliss. She possesses intrinsic excellence ; her worth cannot be told. Yet men heed it not. They give it little or no attention. Instead of hearing to-day her gentle voice, they harden their hearts and refuse to listen to her entreaties. She standeth in the top of high

places, by the way in the places of the paths. She crieth at the gates, at the entry of the city, at the coming in at the doors: unto you, O men, I call; and my voice is to the sons of men. O ye simple, understand wisdom: and ye fools, be ye of an understanding heart. Hear; for I will speak of excellent things; and the opening of my lips shall be right things. For my mouth shall speak truth: and wickedness is an abomination to my lips. All the words of my mouth are in righteousness; there is nothing froward or perverse in them. They are all plain to him that understandeth, and right to them that find knowledge. Receive my instruction, and not silver; and knowledge rather than choice gold. For wisdom is better than rubies; and all the things that may be desired are not to be compared to it. Prov. viii. 1—11. Yet men will not attend; and this is wonderful!—

III. *Inattention to religion is wonderful, if we consider the shortness and uncertainty of the space allotted for attending to it.*

Were our probation to continue for ages, and were there no uncertainty respecting its close, there would be more reason in putting off to some future day, the concerns of the soul. But even then, duty and interest would both demand immediate attention to the one thing needful. Not the *fear of death*, but the *claims of God*, should induce us to become pious. And these claims would be as valid and as urgent, were we sure of living a thousand years, as they are now; and we should regard them accordingly. But we are sure that we cannot stay here a thousand years, nor a hundred years. We know not how long we can stay, nor how soon we may be removed. These considerations should lead us to attend to the calls and claims of God, and they render it astonishing that we can neglect them.—For,

1. *Life is short.*

“Our days are as the grass,
Or like the morning flower!
When blasting winds sweep o’er the field,
It withers in an hour.”

My days, said Job, are swifter than a post: they flee away, they see no good. They are passed away as the swift

ships: as the eagle that hasteth to the prey. Job ix. 25, 26.

“A span is all that we can boast,
An inch or two of time:
Man is but vanity and dust
In all his flower and prime.”

We live a few days, or it may be years, and then go hence to be here no more. Yet on these few days, or years, depends our everlasting destiny. We have but a little while to prepare for a future state. Were we to improve it all, we should not be too well prepared. And yet even this little space is spent in trifles light as air, in comparison with the greatest of all subjects. Men seem anxious so to fill up the moments between the cradle and the grave as to exclude religion entirely. This is strange indeed!—

2. *Life is frail and uncertain, as well as short.* At the longest it is short; and then its continuance is full of uncertainty. We know not what shall be on the morrow. Jas. iv. 14. Hence the caution, Boast not thyself of to-morrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth. Prov. xxvii. 1. The rose of health, now blooming on our cheek, may fade away before to-morrow's dawn. Every thing pertaining to human life is uncertain. We can make no calculations for the future which may not be disappointed. How unwise, then, to defer till to-morrow, or to the uncertain future, the most precious of all interests! Yet we see men every where acting this unwise part. This is wonderful! Well is it said,—

“How short and hasty is our life!
How vast our soul's affairs!
Yet senseless mortals vainly strive
To lavish out their years!”

3. But again; *not only is life short and uncertain, but this is our only probation.* When life is ended, our destiny is sealed. There is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither we are going. Eccl. ix. 10. There is no state of trial beyond the gates of death. It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment. Heb. ix. 27. In the future state no offers of salvation will be extended to us. There no mes

sages of mercy will come. There the Spirit's influences will not be felt. If death finds us unprepared, so shall we be for ever ; for,

“In that lone land of deep despair,
No Sabbath's heavenly light shall rise ;
No God regard your bitter prayer,
No Saviour call you to the skies.”

Ah, what would then be given for one of the days of the Son of man ! What bitter regrets may then be expressed for privileges abused, mercies slighted, calls and warnings unheeded ! And do men know that this is their only probation ? Do they believe the characters they here form must abide with them for ever ? Can they be sensible that death may at any moment hurry them away to the retributions of eternity, and introduce them to a state of being which shall never end and never change ? Religion proclaims these fearful truths ; she is continually urging them upon the attention of men ; yet how unconcerned they go upon the brink of death ! The scheme of redemption is wonderful ; the angels desire to look into it ; but it scarcely exceeds in wonder the conduct of men in reference to their spiritual interests. Though God speaks from his throne, saying, To-day, if ye will hear, harden not your hearts, yet they stop their ears, and rush carelessly on in the way to ruin ! And this they do when they know the shortness and uncertainty of life, and that this is their only probation. Surely this is wonderful !—

IV. *Inattention to religion is wonderful, if we consider the motives by which it is enforced and recommended.*

These motives are the most weighty and powerful ; and they press upon us with overwhelming authority. For,

1. *Religion is urged upon the attention of men by all the claims and authority of God.* He has a right to their love, their hearts, their service ; and he now commandeth all men every where to repent. Acts xvii. 30. To neglect religion is to disregard his authority, and expose ourselves to the wo denounced on those who strive with their Maker. Isa. xlv. 9.

2. *Religion is enforced by all that has been done for our salvation.* And what has been done ? or rather, what has not been done ? What more could have been done ? I am

far from believing that in any case all is done that God could do, were he disposed to do more; but I know that more has been done than we could have had it in our hearts to ask, and infinitely more than we deserve. Fix your mind, reader, upon one prominent thing which has been done for our redemption. Go to the cross of Christ, hear the expiring groans of the Son of God; see his blood poured out for the remission of sins; witness there an exhibition of love sufficient to melt a heart of adamant; then remember how men treat this Saviour, see how regardless they are of his invitations, how indifferent to his religion, and can you restrain your wonder? or can you fail to be *self-condemned* for your own life of impiety?

3. *Religion is urged upon our attention by all the solemn and fearful realities of the eternal world.* Heaven and hell are not fables; and all the joys of heaven combine their influence to draw us to the cross. Does beauty please us? There is beauty in heaven, and glory there; yet we are not ravished by its attractions. Do we desire happiness? There is happiness in heaven, happiness unalloyed and eternal; yet it moves us not to seek after God. Nor do the woes of hell awaken us to serious and enquiring thought. Though its fires flash upon us with lurid glare, yet we are not so alarmed as to turn from the way of transgressors. Heaven with its joys attracts us not; nor does hell with its woes alarm. We hear these things as idle tales; they pass by us unheeded as the whistling wind! And that men, endowed with immortality, hastening to the bar of God, destined to live for ever in heaven or hell, should be so inattentive to a subject enforced by such motives, is wonderful!

4. *Religion is pressed upon our attention by the most interesting earthly considerations.* It sweetens the cares of life and adds to its pleasures; it supports in trial, consoles in affliction, and prepares for death. The sooner it is embraced the better. The earlier we attend to its demands, the easier shall we find it to cease to do evil and learn to do well. The longer we delay, the more and the greater shall we find the difficulties which conspire to keep us from the cross. Our feelings may become callous; our consciences be seared; our tenderest susceptibilities become incapable of being impressed and excited by the most terrific exhibitions of truth. In a word, our hearts may be hardened by delay. Hence the impressiveness of the exhortation, To-day—To-day, if ye will hear his voice,

harden not your hearts. **TO-DAY**, sinner, **TO-DAY**! By refusing to hear, the heart is hardened. By deferring the work of repentance, the heart is hardened. Procrastination is the thief of time not only, it is also the *murderer of souls*! Oh how many, by listening to its voice, have perished for ever! They would not hear the gospel call to-day; they deferred the all-important work till to-morrow; and when to-morrow came, their cry was still to-morrow; and thus on, till the thread of life was severed, and they fell—into perdition! Yet succeeding generations tread in the footsteps of those who have gone before them; one after another falls into the burning lake, and the *living take no warning*! What strange infatuation! Wonderful! wonderful!! We may cease to wonder at any thing and every thing else. Here is a wonder exceeding every other. And the world is full of wonders! Every man who is inattentive to religion, indifferent and careless, is a *wonder to God, angels, and men*—AND TO DEVILS TOO! He is a wonder to three worlds, heaven, earth, and hell! And he will hereafter be a *wonder to himself*!

In conclusion, I remark,

1. *This subject affords a forcible illustration of the depravity of man.* None but a depraved creature could be indifferent to a matter so vastly important. It is sin which has rendered man so careless about the most mighty concerns. It is sin which prepares him to trifle with the soul and eternity. It is sin which rejects the Saviour, grieves the Spirit, and keeps the motives of the gospel from having their appropriate influence upon the heart. And this sin must be repented of, and be forgiven, or the sinner is for ever undone! He must come to Christ, or perish; he must hear the gospel call, or die! Yes, reader, *you* must hear this call, or die!

2. *If you ever intend to hear the voice of God, you should hear it TO-DAY!* It is the Holy Ghost who says, **TO-DAY**, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts. No time like the present. Of no other time are you certain. Behold, *now* is the accepted time; behold, **NOW** is the day of salvation. 2 Cor. vi. 2. Another day you may never see. Another call you may never have. If you hear *not to-day*, you may never hear at all. To-morrow has ruined multitudes; it may be your ruin! If you hear not to-day, you may perish to-morrow! Let this sound be

ever in your ears, IF I HEAR NOT TO-DAY, *and believe and obey*, I MAY PERISH TO-MORROW!! O hear to-day, embrace the Saviour, and live!

“Now from the cross a voice of peace
Bids Sinai’s awful thunder cease:
O sinner, while ’tis called to-day,
That voice of saving love obey!”

THE END,