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COLLECTION OF SERMONS  
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NOW LIVING,  
IN THE UNITED STATES,  
O F  
DIFFERENT DENOMINATIONS  
IN THE  
CHRISTIAN CHURCH.

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# S E R M O N   X X X I X .

SEEKING A COMPETENCY IN THE  
WISDOM OF PROVIDENCE.

B Y

JOHN WITHERSPOON, D. D. L. L. D.

Col. N. C. P.

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PROVERBS XXX. 8.

*Give me neither poverty, nor riches; feed me with  
food convenient for me.*

**I** PROCEED now to consider the second branch of the prophet's prayer, which regards his outward condition, or circumstances, in the present world. On this subject he expresses himself thus: *Give me neither poverty nor riches.*

Do not think, my brethren, that this is a subject of little importance; or that it is unconnected with the spiritual life. On the contrary, there are few things of more moment, than to have our desires of temporal blessings limited and directed in a proper manner. Not only is worldly mindedness the everlasting ruin of those who are entirely under its dominion; but even good men are liable

to many temptations from the same quarter. They may hurt their own peace, give offence to others, or lessen their usefulness by a sinful excess in their attachment to the world, or by a criminal negligence in not giving a prudent and proper attention to it. Be not surpris'd that I have mention'd the *last* of these as well as the *first*, for the prophet prays for deliverance from the temptation arising from both extremes. Idleness and sloth are as contrary to true religion, as either avarice or ambition; and the habit when once taken, is perhaps more difficult to remove.

In order to treat this subject with the greater distinctness, I shall *First* shew you what we may learn in general from this prayer: *Secondly*, explain the particular object of the prophet's desire; and in the *last place*, make applications of what may be said by recommending it to your choice.

I. In the first place then, we may learn in general from this request, that it is lawful to pray for temporal blessings. It is not unworthy of a Christian, whose conversation is in heaven, to ask of God, what is necessary to his support and preservation in the present life. If I were to mention all the examples of this in scripture, I should transcribe a great part of the Bible. Though inferior in their nature and value to spiritual blessings, they are necessary in their place; and it is upon this footing they are expressly put by our Saviour. *Your heavenly Father knoweth that ye*

*have need of all these things.* They are needful to the prolonging of our natural life till we finish our work, and are fitted for our reward. Therefore, tho' miracles are a kind of suspension of the laws of nature, and the ordinary course of providence; yet we find God sometimes working a miracle to supply the wants of his servants. It had been no more difficult for God to have kept Elijah from hungering, than to have made the eagles fetch him provision; or to have made, as in another case, a barrel of meal, or a cruise of oil, the lasting and sufficient support of a whole family. But he chooses rather to supply the wants of his people, than cause them to cease, that he may keep their dependance constantly in their view, and that a sense of their necessities may oblige them to have continual recourse to him for relief.

Again, we may here learn, that God is the real and proper giver of every temporal, as well as of every spiritual blessing. A sentiment this, of the utmost consequence, to be engraven upon the heart. We have here an instance out of many, in which truths known and confessed by all, have notwithstanding little hold upon the mind. How few are truly sensible of their continual obligations to the God of life? Consider, I beseech you, that whatever you possess of any kind, it is the gift of God. He holdeth your soul in life, and guards you by his providence in your going out and in your coming in. He covereth your table and fil-

leth your cup. Have you riches? It is by the blessing of the God of heaven—*The blessing of the Lord, saith the psalmist, it maketh rich. But thou shalt remember the Lord thy God, for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth.* Have you credit and reputation? It is God that hideth you from the stripes of tongues. *Thou shalt be hid from the scourge of the tongue, neither shalt thou be afraid of destruction when it cometh.* Have you friends? It is he that giveth you favor in their sight. Have you talents and parts? It is the *inspiration of the Almighty* that giveth thee understanding.

II. Let us now explain the particular tenor of this petition, and point out the object of the prophet's desire; *Give me neither poverty nor riches.* It is plain we are not to suppose the prophet, in any degree, refusing submission to the will of God, by his thus making choice of a particular state of life—Doubtless he resolved to be at God's disposal, and believed that he was able to sanctify to him a state of the highest prosperity, or of the deepest adversity. It was no distrust on God, but self-denial and diffidence of his own strength that suggested this prayer. Therefore, in adjusting his desires and expectations, he pitches upon that state that appeared to him liable to the fewest snares. Thus our blessed Saviour, though it is his will that we should fear no enemy when going out in divine strength, yet teaches us to pray—*Lead us not into temptation.*

Poverty and riches are here mentioned as the two extremes; in neither of which we should wish to be placed, but in a safer middle between the two; so as, if it please God, we may neither be urged by pressing necessity, nor over-loaded with such abundance as we may be in danger of abusing.

But perhaps some will say, where is the middle? How shall we be able to determine what we ought to desire, since there is so immense a distance, and so many intermediate degrees between the extremity of want, and the countless treasures of the wealthy?

But, my brethren, if we do not hearken to the illusive calls of ambition, avarice and lust, it is by no means difficult to apprehend the meaning of the prophet, and apply it to persons of every rank. Regard, no doubt, is to be had to the various stations in which God hath thought fit to place us. This difference of station requires supplies of the conveniencies of life, suited to the part we are bound to act. That manner of life which would be decent and liberal in one station, would be reckoned mean and fordid in another. Therefore what would be plenty and fulness to persons in inferior stations, would be extreme poverty to persons placed, and called to act, in higher and more exalted spheres. But after we have taken in the consideration of every difference that may happen on this score, there is something in the prayer that belongs in common to *persons of all stations*, name-

ly, that we should be modest in our desires after temporal good things, and take care not to ask only to gratify a sensual inclination, but for what is really necessary or useful to us. The last is reasonable and allowable, the other is unreasonable, and justly condemned by the apostle James. *Ye ask and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.*

But the first part of this request is explained by the last, contained in the words, *feed me with food convenient for me.* That we may be able to enter into the true spirit of this petition, I shall just compare it with some other scriptural forms of prayer on the same subject, and then endeavor to point out what I take to be the chief instruction intended to be conveyed to us by it.

As to the scripture forms of prayer for temporal provision, the precedence is undoubtedly due to that excellent form left us by our Saviour, in which we find this petition, *Give us this day our daily bread.* You may next attend to the prayer put up by Jacob in ancient times. *And Jacob vowed a vow, saying, if God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then shall the Lord be my God.* It is more than probable that the apostle Paul alludes to Jacob's expression, in his excellent advice to all Christians. *But godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into this*

*world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out; and having food and raiment, let us be therewith content. But they that will be rich, fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition—for the love of money is the root of all evil, which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.*

It is obvious to remark, that all these prayers and this apostolic counsel run in the same strain. They all begin and are founded upon a regard to God, and a mind rightly disposed towards him: *If the Lord, says Jacob, will be with me—Remove, says Agur in my text, far from me vanity and lies.* Our Saviour begins his prayer with petitions for the glory of God, with which the happiness of our souls is inseparably connected; and the apostle maintains *godliness* as the great source of contentment with our portion in this life.

We may further observe, that there is the same method observed in all these prayers. The expressions vary a little, but the request is the same. Jacob wishes for the divine protection, with food to eat, and raiment to put on. Agur for food convenient for him; and in the Lord's prayer we ask for our daily bread. There is no specifying of any particulars—no mention made of this or the other quantity of provision. Their desires are summed up in this general request, and the quantity and quality wholly referred to the good pleasure of

God. It is certain that God hath sometimes granted to his own people, riches in great abundance; and, at the same time, has given his blessing to enjoy them, and honored the possessors, by enabling them to glorify him in the use and application of them. But the direct desire of riches, I do not think, hath any warrant from precept or example in his word. And when they are bestowed as a blessing, and not a curse, it is commonly on those who, by their superior concern about the better part, shew that they will put them to their proper use, as in the case of Solomon, recorded in the first book of Kings. *In Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, ask what I shall give thee. And he said, give thy servant an understanding heart. And the speech pleased the Lord, that Solomon had asked this thing. And God said, because thou hast asked this thing, and hast not asked for thyself long life, neither hast asked riches for thyself, nor hast asked the life of thine enemies, but hast asked for thyself understanding, to discern judgment: Behold I have done according to thy words; lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart, so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee. And I have also given thee that which thou hast not asked, both riches and honor.*

Now this I take to be the main instruction intended to be given us with respect to our prayers for temporal mercies; that we should not pretend to set bounds to God, but leave the measure of them to his determination.

For further explaining this truth, and, at the same time, recommending it to your regard, be pleased to attend to the following observations.

1. Consider that God, infinitely wise, as well as gracious, is certainly the best judge of what is most fit and convenient for us. We know so little of ourselves, that we really know not how we should behave, if placed in particular circumstances, until we are tried. The world has actually seen many examples of those, who were loud in their accusations of others, behaving worse when placed in the same stations. And, indeed, I should naturally expect, that an impatient, envious, disobedient subject would, if raised to power, be a cruel, insolent, unjust oppressor; that a petulant, peevish, obstinate servant would make a capricious, severe, unreasonable master.

If we were to carve out our own lot, and to have all our own desires gratified, there is great reason to presume, we would throw ourselves into the most disagreeable circumstances with regard to our souls, and probably consult but ill for our peace and comfort in this world.

Let me put a few questions to every one that secretly murmurs at his state. Are you sure, that if you were advanced to a place of power and trust, you would be able to carry with prudence, resolution and integrity? Are you sure, that if you were supplied with riches in great abundance, you would not allow yourselves to wander in pleasure, or to

swell in pride? Are you sure, that if you were raised to high rank, surrounded by flatterers, and worshipped by servants, you would, in that standing, behave with humility and condescension; or that pressed on all hands by business, company, or amusements, *you would still religiously save your time for converse with God?*

A life of piety in an exalted station, is a continual conflict with the strongest opposition. What says experience upon this subject? Solomon did not wholly, and to the end, resist the temptation of riches and dominion. In the whole compass of history, sacred and profane, I do not remember any example of a man's behaving better in point of morals, in a prosperous, than an afflicted state, excepting one that hath this appearance, viz. Cicero, the Roman orator. His conduct in prosperity was full of dignity, and seemed wholly directed to the public good; whereas in adversity, it was to the last degree mean and abject—But probably the reason of this was, that pride, or rather vanity, was his ruling passion, and the great motive to his illustrious actions; and when he fell into adversity, this disposition had no scope for its exercise.

Christians, the Lord knoweth our frame, and is well acquainted with what we are able to bear, and consequently what state of life will be upon the whole most convenient for us. It is, therefore, our interest, as well as duty, to refer ourselves en-

tirely to him; and leave him to choose for us. This is not only the doctrine of scripture, but so agreeable to reason and good sense, that it has been acknowledged by several of the Heathen Philosophers, who have expressed themselves in terms perfectly similar to those of the inspired writings. The prayer which Socrates taught his pupil Alcibiades, is very remarkable; that he should beseech the Supreme God to give him what was good for him, though he should not ask it; and to withhold from him whatever would be hurtful, though he should be so foolish as to pray for it.

2. As God is certainly the best judge of what is good for us, so resignation to him is a most acceptable expression both of our worship and obedience. Single duties are particular acts; resignation is the very *habit* of obedience. The wisdom and goodness of God are acknowledged in the most authentic manner, when his holy and sovereign Providence is humbly submitted to, and cordially approved. Every impatient complaint is an impeachment of Providence; every irregular desire is an act of rebellion against God. Therefore a submissive temper must be highly pleasing to God, and is the way to glorify him in the most unexceptionable manner. The rather indeed, as it is impossible to attain this temper, but by sincerely laying hold of the covenant of peace, which is ordered in all things and sure. This teaches

us the grounds of submission. This procures for us the grace of submission. This stains the pride of all human glory. This changes the nature of our possessions to us, and us to them. This spiritualizes a worldly mind, and makes us know, in our own experience, that all the paths of the Lord to his own people, are mercy and peace.

3. Such a temper of mind will greatly contribute to our own inward peace. It will be an effectual preservative from all unrighteous courses, and unlawful, or even dishonorable means of increasing our worldly substance, and consequently save us from the troubles or dangers to which men expose themselves by such practices. It will preserve us from perplexing anxiety, and many uneasy fears for futurity. It will bring us the near and sure way to the greatest of all earthly blessings—a contented mind.

Such will be the sweet and delightful effects of depending upon God, and leaving it to him to furnish our supplies as he sees most convenient for us. Whoever can pray with the prophet—*give me neither poverty nor riches, feed me with food convenient for me*—may be fully assured, that his desire shall be gratified, as it is perfectly agreeable to the will of God.

I conclude with reading to you our Saviour's exhortation on this subject—*Therefore, I say unto you, take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or*

*what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment? Behold the fowls of the air; for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are not ye much better than they? But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.*

