

Devotional Thoughts :: Enjoyment of the Pleasures of the Present Life

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To a Friend.

Dear Sir,

Though I truly love you, and have no reason to doubt of the reality of your friendship to me; yet I cannot but apprehend, that notwithstanding our mutual regard, and my frequent attempts to be witty (if I could) for your diversion, there is something in most of my letters (which I cannot, dare not wholly suppress) that disgusts and wearies you, and makes you less inclined to keep up a frequent intercourse than you would otherwise be. Rather than lose you quite, I will in general spare you as much as I can; but at present you must bear with me, and allow me full scope. You have given me a challenge, which I know not how to pass over; and since you so far justify my preaching, as to condescend to preach (in your way) yourself, permit me for this time to preach again, and to take some passages in your letter for my text.

In the present debate I will accept your compliment, and suppose myself to be, as you say, a man of sense. You allow, then, that all the sense is not on your side. This, indeed, you cannot deny; for whatever becomes of me, it is needless to tell you, that Hale, Boyle, and other great names I could mention, were men of as great penetration and judgment, had as good opportunities and took as much pains to be informed of the truth, as any of the advocates for infidelity can pretend to. And you cannot, with any modesty or consistence, absolutely determine that they had not as good grounds for thinking themselves right, as you can have for concluding they were wrong.

But, declining the advantage of human authority, I am content the point should rest between you and me. And here I beg you to observe, that I have one evident advantage over you in judging, namely, that I have experienced the good and evil on both sides, and you only on one. If you were to send me an inventory of your pleasures; how charmingly your time runs on, and how dexterously it is divided between the coffee-house, play-house, the card-table, and tavern, with intervals of balls, concerts, &c.; I could answer, that most of these I have tried and tried again, and know the utmost they can yield, and have seen enough of the rest, most heartily to despise them all. Setting religion entirely out of the question, I profess I had rather be a worm to crawl upon the ground, than to bear the name of Man upon the poor terms of whiling away my life in all insipid round of such insignificant and unmanly trifles. I will return your own expression,--I believe you to be a person of sense; but, alas! how do you prostitute your talents and capacity, how far do you act below yourself, if you know no higher purpose of life than these childish dissipations, together with the more serious business of rising early and sitting up late to amass money, that you may be able to enlarge your expenses! I am sure, while I lived in these things I found them unsatisfying and empty to the last degree; and the only advantage they afforded (miserable are they who are forced to deem it an advantage) was, that they often relieved me from the trouble and burden of thinking. If you have any other pleasures than these, they are such as must be evil and inconvenient even upon your own plan; and therefore my friendship will not allow me to bring them into the account. I am willing to hope you do not stoop still lower in pursuit of satisfaction. Thus far we stand upon even ground. You know all that a life of pleasure can give, and I know it likewise.

On the other hand, if I should attempt to explain to you the source and streams of my best pleasures--such as a comfortable assurance of the pardon of my sins, an habitual communion with the God who made heaven and earth, a calm reliance on the Divine Providence, the cheering prospect of a better life in a better world, with the pleasing foretastes of heaven in my own soul; should I, or could I, tell you the pleasure I often find in reading the Scripture, in the exercise of prayer, and in that sort of preaching and conversation which you despise;--I doubt not but you would think as meanly of my happiness as I do of yours. But here lies the difference, my dear friend; you condemn that which you have never tried. you know no more of these things than a blind man does of colors; and, notwithstanding all your flourishes, I defy you to be at all times able to satisfy yourself that things may not possibly be as I have represented them.

Besides, what do I lose upon my plan, that should make me so worthy of your pity? Have you a quicker relish in the prudent use of temporal comforts? Do you think I do not eat my food with as much pleasure as you can do, though perhaps

with less cost and variety? Is your sleep sounder than mine? Have not I as much satisfaction in social life? It is true, to join much with the gay, fluttering tribe, who spend their days in laugh and sing-song, is equally contrary to my duty and inclination. But I have friends and acquaintance as well as you.

Among the many who favor me with their esteem and friendship, there are some who are persons of sense, learning, wit, and (what perhaps may weigh as much with you) of fortune and distinction. And if you should say, "Aye, but they are all enthusiasts like yourself," you would say nothing to the purpose; since, upon your maxim, that "happiness is according to opinion," it cannot be an objection, but the contrary, to have my acquaintance to my own taste. Thus much for the brighter side of your situation ;--or let me add one thing more: I know you have thoughts of marriage: do you think, if you should enter into this relation, your principles are calculated to make you more happy in it than I am? You are well acquainted with our family life. Do you propose to know more of the peace and heart-felt joy of domestic union than I have known, and continue to know to this hour? I wish you may equal us ; and if you do, we shall still be as before, but upon even ground, I need not turn Deist, to enjoy the best and the most that this life can afford.

But I need not tell you, that the present life is not made up of pleasurable incidents only. Pain, sickness, losses, disappointments, injuries, and affronts with men, will, more or less, at one time or other, be our lot. And can you bear these trials better than I? You will not pretend to it. Let me appeal to yourself: How often do you toss and disquiet yourself, like a wild bull in a net, when things cross your expectations? As your thoughts are more engrossed by what you see, you must be more keenly sensible of what you feel. You cannot view these trials as appointed by a wise and heavenly Father in subservience to your good; you cannot taste the sweetness of his promises, nor feel the secret supports of his strength, in an hour of affliction; you cannot so cast your burden and care upon him, as to find a sensible relief to your spirit thereby; nor can you see his hand engaged and employed in effecting your deliverance. Of these things you know no more than of the art of flying; but I seriously assure you, and I believe my testimony will go farther with you than my judgment, that they are realities, and that I have found them to be so. When my worldly concerns have been most thorny and discouraging, I have once and again felt the most of that peace which the world can neither give nor take away. However, I may state the case still lower. You do pretty well among your friends; but how do you like being alone? Would you not give something for that happy secret, which could enable you to pass a rainy day pleasantly, without the assistance of business, company, or amusement? Would it not mortify you greatly to travel for a week in an unfrequented road, where you should meet with no lively incidents to recruit and raise your spirits? Alas! what a poor scheme of pleasure is yours, that will not support an interval of reflection!

What you have heard is true; I have a few friends who meet at my house once a fortnight, and we spend an hour or two in worshipping the God who made us. And can this move your indignation, or your compassion? Does it shew a much nobler spirit, a more refined way of thinking, to live altogether without God in the world? If I kept a card-assembly at those times, it would not displease you. How can you, as a person of sense, avoid being shocked at your own unhappy prejudice? But I remember how it was once with myself, and forbear to wonder. May He who has opened my eyes, open yours! He only can do it. I do not expect to convince you by any thing I can say as of myself; but if He be pleased to make use of me as his instrument, then you will be convinced. How should I then rejoice! I should rejoice to be useful to any one, but especially daily to you, whom I dearly love. May God shew you your true self, and your true taste; then you will attentively listen to what you disdain to hear of,--his goodness in providing redemption and pardon for the chief of sinners, through him who died upon the cross for sins not his own. Keep this letter by you at my request; and when you write, tell me that you receive it in good part; and that you still believe me to be.

&c.

John Newton