

The Duty of Helping Others to Seek the Saints' Rest

~Other Speakers A-F: Richard Baxter:

Has God set before us such a wonderful possession as the saints' everlasting rest, and made us capable of such unimaginable happiness? Why, then, don't all of the children of this kingdom exert themselves more to help others to enjoy it? We see the glory of the kingdom, while others around us do not. We see the misery of those that are out of it, while others do not. And yet we will not seriously show them their danger and help to bring them into this eternal life. How few Christians there are who give themselves with all their might to save souls! Considering how important this duty is to the glory of God and the happiness of men, I will first show how to do it.

Our hearts must be moved by the misery of other people. We must be compassionate towards them. If we earnestly longed for their conversion, and sincerely desired the best for them; it would put us to work, and God would bless such effort.

We must take every opportunity that we can to instruct others in the way of salvation. Teach them their need of the Redeemer; how Christ mercifully bore their penalty on the cross. Teach them the privileges which believers have in Christ. Show them how wonderful heaven will be. Be sure to urge them to make use of all the ways God has provided for our help—such as hearing and reading the Bible, calling upon God in prayer, and having fellowship with other Christians. Persuade them to forsake sin, avoid temptations and evil companions.

Aim at the glory of God in another person's salvation. Don't do it for your own credit or to attract followers; but do it in obedience to Christ and out of tender love for other people's souls. Do it promptly too. That physician is no better than a murderer, who negligently delays treating a patient until he is dead or incurable. Let others perceive that it is your desire to help them; that you have no other motive in mind but their everlasting happiness. Say to them, "Friend, you know I have nothing to gain in this. The easiest way to please you and keep your friendship would be to say nothing and leave you alone; but love will not let me see you perish, and remain silent. I only seek your own happiness. You are the one who will gain if you come to Christ."

Do it plainly and faithfully. Don't play down the seriousness of their sins, nor give them false hopes. If you see their situation is dangerous, speak plainly. Say to them, "Friend, if you were 'in Christ,' you would be 'a new creature; old things' would be 'passed away, and all things' would 'become new' (2 Cor. 5:17). You would have new thoughts, new friends, and a new life." Thus you must deal honestly with people, if you ever intend to help them. It is not in pleasing people that you help them.

Do it seriously, enthusiastically, and effectively. Try to make people know that heaven and hell are not matters to be played with, or dismissed with a few careless thoughts. To avoid extremes, I advise you to do it with discretion. Choose the most appropriate time. Don't deal with people when they are angry or on the defensive. When the earth is soft the plough will enter. Take a person when he is in trouble, or when he is freshly moved by a sermon. Christian faithfulness requires us to watch for opportunities.

Let all your words be backed with the authority of God. Let sinners be convinced that you do not speak merely your own thoughts. They may reject your opinions even though they would not dare reject the words of the Almighty. Try to bring all of your conversation to a verdict. God usually blesses those whose hearts are set upon the conversion of their hearers and who therefore seek a decision.

Be sure your life witnesses as well as your words. Let people see you practicing what you seek to persuade them about. Let them see, by your attitude toward heaven and the world, that you do indeed believe what you would have them believe.

Besides privately witnessing, you should try to help people through the church. Use your influence to secure faithful ministers, for "how shall they hear without a preacher?" (Rom. 10:14). Many souls may be saved by the ministry which you have helped to secure for the church. What immense good might men of means do, if they would support the ministerial education of carefully chosen youth until they were ready for the ministry. You can also draw people to attend the services where faithful ministers preach the Gospel. Do your part to keep the church and its ministry in good repute, for no one will be affected much by that which he disdains. The apostle urged, concerning those who are over us in the Lord, "to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake" (1 Thess. 5:13).

CAUSES OF THE GROSS NEGLECT OF WITNESSING

If we know the causes we may more easily overcome them. One hindrance is sin. A person's own guilt makes him ashamed to witness. If a person is not excited about heavenly delights, why would he try to draw others enthusiastically to seek them?

Another hindrance is a secret lack of faith. If we truly believed that the unsaved would be eternally separated from God, how could we keep from speaking, or even avoid bursting into tears, when we look them in the face; especially when they are our dear friends? Were it not for this cursed unbelief, our own and our neighbors' souls would benefit from more active witnessing.

A lack of compassion is a further cause of neglect. Unlike the Good Samaritan, we pass by the wounded man. What difference does it make that the sinner, wounded by sin and enslaved by Satan, does not want your help? His misery cries aloud just the same. If God had not heard the cry of our misery before He heard the cry of our prayers, we would have stayed in sin's slavery ourselves. You will pray to God for the conversion of other people; why not talk to them about it, if you desire it? And if you do not desire it, why do you pray for it?

We are also hindered from witnessing by a desire to be popular. We are so eager to please people that it makes us neglect our duty to them. He is a foolish and unfaithful medical doctor who will let a sick man die for fear of troubling him. If our friends are mentally ill, we do not let them hurt themselves, even if stopping them causes them to dislike us. And yet when they are beside themselves so far as salvation is concerned, rushing madly on to damnation; we will not stop them for fear of displeasing them. How can we "love the praise of men more than the praise of God"? (John 12:43). If we "seek to please men, we shall not be the servants of Christ" (Gal. 1:10).

It is common to be hindered by sinful bashfulness. When we should shame men out of their sins, we are ourselves ashamed of our duty. Sinners do not blush to swear, be drunk, or neglect the worship of God; and yet we blush to talk with them about it. It is wrong to be shy in emergencies. Shall we be too bashful to shout, "Fire!" when we discover the auditorium is in flames? It is not a work to be ashamed of, to obey God in persuading people to turn from their sins to Christ.

A lazy and impatient spirit hinders us also. Sometimes witnessing makes people our enemies. Besides, it seldom succeeds instantly, but needs follow-up. Therefore we need patience. What if God had been as impatient with us as we are with others?

With many, pride is a hindrance. They would be glad to be the one who might lead a distinguished person to Christ, but they overlook the poor masses, as if the souls of all were not alike to God. These men fail to consider how low Christ stooped to us!

With others it is ignorance of the duty that hinders them from doing it. Either they don't know it is a duty, or they figure it is not their duty. If this be your case, reader, I hope you are now aware of your duty and will act accordingly. Do not excuse yourself by saying, "This will make us all preachers." Every good Christian is a teacher and must minister to others in the name of the Lord. Every man is a physician, when a regular medical doctor is not available and when the injury is so small that anyone can give first aid. Similarly, every man must be a teacher. Do not give up before trying. Cannot God give you success?

Here are some REASONS FOR WITNESSING. Consider what Christ did towards the saving of souls. He thought them worth His blood; and shall we not think them worth our breath? Will you not do a little where Christ has done so much? It was God's argument to the Israelites to be kind to strangers, because they themselves had been "strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deut. 10:19). So should you pity those who are strangers to Christ, because you were once strangers to Him yourself.

We have had, in the days of our ignorance, our friends in sin whom we encouraged in their evil ways. Does it not become us to do as much to save others as we have done to destroy them? The devil is tempting them day and night; their inner lusts are still working for their ruin; their worldly friends are increasing their contempt for holiness. If no one will be diligent in helping them to heaven, what will become of them?

My own experience is, that when I have been near death, my conscience has accused me more for neglect of this duty than for any other sin. Every uninformed, unsaved neighbor would come to my memory, to whom I never made known their danger. Conscience would remind me how I had been with the unsaved at various times and had opportunity to speak with them about Christ, but did not. The Lord grant that I may better obey conscience while I have time, that it may have less about which to accuse me at death.

Consider the HAPPY RESULTS of this work when it is faithfully done. You may be instrumental in saving souls,

for whom Christ came down and died, and in whom the angels of God rejoice. Such souls will bless you here and hereafter. Say to yourself, as the lepers of Samaria said, "We do not well—this day is a day of good tidings, and we hold our peace" (2 Kings 7:9).

PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL OPPORTUNITIES TO WITNESS

Physicians, for example, have a special advantage in that they are with people in sickness and danger. The ear is more open, and the heart less stubborn, than in the time of health. Men look upon their physician as a person in whose hands is their life, or, at least, who may do much to help them. Therefore, they will regard his advice seriously. You that are of this honorable profession, do not think this to be a work outside of your calling, as if it belonged only to ministers. Help to prepare your patients for heaven. Teach them both how to live and die, and point them to the remedy for their souls as you do for their bodies. Thank God that many of the chief physicians of our day are good witnesses for the Lord Jesus Christ.

Men of wealth and authority also have excellent advantages for witnessing. Did you not receive all your honor and riches from God? Doesn't Christ say, "Unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required?" (Luke 12:48). Use your influence to help your subordinates. Visit in their homes; see whether they worship God in their families. Don't look down on them. Remember, "God is no respecter of persons" (Acts 10:34). Let people see that you excel others, not alone in honor and wealth, but in compassion and diligence in God's work. You are already an exceptional person, and if you show yourself to be a faithful witness of Christ, I admit that you will be even more unusual; but in this case you will be exceptional in godly character. You will be a "millionaire" in ministering, a "billionaire" in blessings. You will indeed be a special person, for few of the mighty and noble are called (1 Cor. 1:26).

As for ministers of the gospel, it is the very purpose of their calling to help others to heaven. Be sure to make it the main goal of your studies and preaching. He is the able, skillful minister, that is best skilled in the art of winning souls. That is the best sermon that is best in instructing, convincing, persuading, and consequently, of winning people to Christ. Preach with seriousness and enthusiasm, as men who believe what they preach. Learn of Paul, not only to teach your people "publicly," but "from house to house" (Acts 20:20). See whether they worship God in their families, and teach them how to do it. If any be ignorant, it may be your fault as much as theirs. Be not asleep while the wolf is prowling. Don't pussyfoot with any. Some will not tell their people plainly of their sins, because these people are distinguished or devoutly religious; as if none but the poor and the wicked should be dealt with plainly. Study and pray, and pray and study, until you become "a workman that needs not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth," (2 Tim. 2:15), that your people may not be ashamed nor weary in hearing you. Let your behavior teach men as well as your beliefs.

Aim after unity and peace. Minister in a peaceful and loving way. It is as hard to maintain in your people a heavenly attitude amid quarreling, as it is to keep a candle lit in a fierce storm.

I would also persuade all whom God has entrusted with the care of children to give themselves to this great work of helping others to the heavenly rest. God plainly commands it. "These words, which I command you this day, shall be in your heart—and you shall teach them diligently unto your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise up" (Deut. 6:6-7). "Train up a child in the way he should go—and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Prov. 22:6). Bring up your children "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4). Joshua resolved, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Josh. 24:15). And God himself says of Abraham, "I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord" (Gen. 18:19).

Consider how near your children are to you. They are part of yourself. If they prosper when you are dead, you view it as if you lived and prospered in them. Should you not feel the same way about their everlasting rest? God has made your children your charge. You have a greater influence on your own family than any minister does. The things you must teach them are contrary to the interests and desires of their flesh. They have hereditary diseases bred in their nature. May the Lord make you realize what an important and challenging responsibility you have toward your children.

Consider what sorrow you prepare for yourself if you neglect your children. If you and your children die in your sins, how will they cry out against you in hell. What an addition to your misery will their cries be. On the other hand, think what a comfort you may have if you are faithful in this duty. The greatest joy will be when you shall say, "Lord, here am I, and the children you have given me;" and shall joyfully live with them forever. Consider also how much the welfare of the church and state depends on this duty. Good laws will not reform us, if reformation does not begin at home.

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Think about the advantages you have in promoting the salvation of your children. They are with you while they are tender and flexible. You have a twig to bend, not an oak. None in the world have such an interest in their welfare as you have, and you have the greatest authority over them. Their whole dependence is upon you for their support. You know their disposition and interests. You are with them and have many opportunities to influence them. Especially you, mothers, who are with your children more, while young, than their fathers are. What you suffer to bring them into the world! What care you take of their bodies. Will you not be at as much pains for the saving of their souls?

I conclude with this earnest request to all Christian parents who read these lines, that they be faithful to the great trust God has given them. If you cannot do what you would like for your children, then at least do what you can. Both the church and the state, the city and the nation, groan under the neglect of this important responsibility. Your children are like Moses in the bulrushes, ready to perish if they don't receive help. If you are not willing to do it, now that you know it to be so great a duty; you are rebels, and not true subjects of Jesus Christ. If you are willing, but don't know how; I will add a few words of direction to help you.

Lead your children, by your own example, to prayer and reading of the Bible. Keep their consciences tender. Teach them gracious speech. Watch over their behavior. Get them Bibles and Christian books, and see that they read them. Examine them often as to what they learn. Especially spend the Lord's day in this work, instead of sports and idleness. Show them the meaning of what they read. Instruct them out of the Holy Scriptures. Keep them out of evil company, and acquaint them with Christian friends. Especially show them the necessity and pleasure of serving God.