

## On Family Religion

By John Wesley

### Sermon 94

(text from the 1872 edition - Thomas Jackson, editor)

*"As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."* Joshua 24:15

1. In the foregoing verses we read that Joshua, now grown old, "gathered the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and called for the elders of Israel, for their heads, for their judges and officers; and they presented themselves before the Lord." (Josh. 15:1) And Joshua rehearsed to them the great things which God had done for their fathers; (Josh. 15:2-13) concluding with that strong exhortation: "Now therefore fear the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side the flood, (Jordan) and in Egypt." (Josh. 15:14) Can anything be more astonishing than this? That even in Egypt, yea, and in the wilderness, where they were daily fed, and both day and night guided by miracle, the Israelites, in general, should worship idols, in flat defiance of the Lord their God! He proceeds: "If it seemeth evil to you to serve the Lord, choose ye this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods your fathers served on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land ye dwell: But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

2. A resolution this worthy of a hoary-headed saint, who had had large experience, from his youth up, of the goodness of the Master to whom he had devoted himself, and the advantages of his service. How much is it to be wished that all who have tasted that the Lord is gracious, all whom he has brought out of the land of Egypt, out of the bondage of sin, -- those especially who are united together in Christian fellowship, -- would adopt this wise resolution! Then would the work of the Lord prosper in our land; then would his word run and be glorified. Then would multitudes of sinners in every place stretch out their hands unto God, until "the glory of the Lord covered the land, as the waters cover the sea."

3. On the contrary, what will the consequence be, if they do not adopt this resolution? -- if family religion be neglected? -- if care be not taken of the rising generation? Will not the present revival of religion in a short time die away? Will it not be as the historian speaks of the Roman state in its infancy, -- *res unius aetatis?* -- "an event that has its beginning and end within the space of one generation?" Will it not be a confirmation of that melancholy remark of Luther's, that "a revival of religion never lasts longer than one generation?" By a generation, (as he explains himself) he means thirty years. But, blessed be God, this remark does not hold with regard to the present instance; seeing this revival, from its rise in the year 1729, has already lasted above fifty years.

4. Have we not already seen some of the unhappy consequences of good men's not adopting this resolution? Is there not a generation arisen, even within this period, yea, and from pious

parents, that know not the Lord? That have neither his love in their hearts, nor his fear before their eyes? How many of them already "despise their fathers, and mock at the counsel of their mothers!" How many are utter strangers to real religion, to the life and power of it! And not a few have shaken off all religion, and abandoned themselves to all manner of wickedness! Now, although this may sometimes be the case, even of children educated in a pious manner, yet this case is very rare: I have met with some, but not many, instances of it. The wickedness of the children is generally owing to the fault or neglect of their parents. For it is a general, though not universal rule, though it admits of some exceptions, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it."

**5.** But what is the purport of this resolution, "I and my house will serve the Lord?" In order to understand and practice this, let us,

I. First, inquire, what it is to "serve the Lord."

II. Secondly, Who are included in that expression, "my house." And,

III. Thirdly, What can we do, that we and our house may serve the Lord.

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## I.

**1.** We may inquire, First, what it is to "serve the Lord," not as a Jew, but as a Christian; not only with an outward service, (though some of the Jews undoubtedly went farther than this) but with inward, with the service of the heart, "worshipping him in spirit in truth." The first thing implied in this service is faith; believing in the name of the Son of God. We cannot perform an acceptable service to God, till we believe on Jesus Christ whom he hath sent. Here the spiritual worship of God begins. As soon as any one had the witness in himself; as soon as he can say, "The life that I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me;" he is able truly to "serve the Lord."

**2.** As soon as he believes, he loves God, which is another thing implied in "serving the Lord." "We love him because he first loved us;" of which faith is the evidence. The love of a pardoning God is "shed abroad in our hearts, by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us." Indeed this love may admit of a thousand degrees: But still every one, as long as he believes, may truly declare before God, "Lord, thou knowest that I love thee." Thou knowest that 'my desire is unto thee, and unto the remembrance of thy name.' "

**3.** And if any man truly love God, he cannot but love his brother also. Gratitude to our Creator will surely produce benevolence to our fellow-creatures. If we love Him, we cannot but love one another, as Christ loved us. We feel our souls enlarged in love toward every child of man. And toward all the children of God we put on "bowels of kindness, gentleness, longsuffering, forgiving one another," if we have a complaint against any, "even as God, for Christ's sake, hath forgiven us."

4. One thing more is implied in "serving the Lord," namely, the obeying him; the steadily walking in all his ways, the doing his will from the heart. Like those, "his servants" above, "who do his pleasure, who keep his commandments, carefully avoid whatever he has forbidden, and zealously do whatever he has enjoined; studying always to have conscience void of offense toward God and toward man.

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## II.

"I and my house will serve the Lord," will every real Christian say. But who are included in that expression, "my house?" This is the next point to be considered.

1. The person in your house that claims your first and nearest attention, is, undoubtedly, your wife; seeing you are to love her, even as Christ hath loved the Church, when he laid down his life for it, that he might "purify it unto himself, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing." The same end is every husband to pursue, in all his intercourse with his wife; to use every possible means that she may be freed from every spot, and may walk unblamable in love.

2. Next to your wife are your children; immortal spirits whom God hath, for a time, entrusted to your care, that you may train them up in all holiness, and fit them for the enjoyment of God in eternity. This is a glorious and important trust; seeing one soul is of more value than all the world beside. Every child, therefore, you are to watch over with the utmost care, that, when you are called to give an account of each to the Father of Spirits, you may give your accounts with joy and not with grief.

3. Your servants, of whatever kind, you are to look upon as a kind of secondary children: These, likewise, God has committed to your charge, as one that must give account. For every one under your roof that has a soul to be saved is under your care; not only indented servants, who are legally engaged to remain with you for a term of years; not only hired servants, whether they voluntarily contract for a longer or shorter time; but also those who serve you by the week or day: For these too are, in a measure, delivered into your hands. And it is not the will of *your* Master who is in heaven, that any of these should go out of your hands before they have received from you something more valuable than gold or silver. Yea, and you are in a degree accountable even for "the stranger that is within your gates." As you are particularly required to see that he does "no manner of work" on the Lord's day, while he is within your gates; so, by parity of reason, you are required to do all that is in your power to prevent his sinning against God in any other instance.

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## III.

Let us inquire, in the Third place, What can we do that all these may "serve the Lord?"

1. May we not endeavour, First, to *restrain* them from all outward sin; from profane swearing; from taking the name of God in vain; from doing any needless work, or taking any pastime, on the Lord's day? This labour of love you owe even to your visitants; much more to your wife, children, and servants. The former, over whom you have the least influence, you may restrain by argument or mild persuasion. If you find that, after repeated trials, they will not yield either to one or the other, it is your bounden duty to set ceremony aside, and to dismiss them from your house. Servants also, whether by the day, or for a longer space, if you cannot reclaim, either by reasoning added to your example, or by gentle or severe reproofs, though frequently repeated, you must, in anywise, dismiss from your family, though it should be ever so inconvenient.

2. But you cannot dismiss you wife, unless for the cause of fornication, that is adultery. What can then be done, if she is habituated to any other open sin? I cannot find in the Bible that a husband has authority to strike his wife on any account, even suppose she struck him first, unless his life were in imminent danger. I never have known one instance yet of a wife that was mended thereby. I have heard, indeed, of some such instances; but as I did not see them, I do not believe them. It seems to me, all that can be done in this case is to be done partly by example, partly by argument of persuasion, each applied in such a manner as is dictated by Christian prudence. If evil can ever be overcome, it must be overcome by good. It cannot be overcome by evil: We cannot beat the devil with his own weapons. Therefore, if this evil cannot be overcome by good, we are called to suffer it. We are then called to say, "This is the cross which God hath chosen for me. He surely permits it for wise ends; 'let him do what seemeth him good.' Whenever he sees it to be best, he will remove this cup from me." Meanwhile continue in earnest prayer, knowing that with God no word is impossible; and that he will either in due time take the temptation away, or make it a blessing to your soul.

3. Your children, while they are young, you may restrain from evil, not only by advice, persuasion, and reproof, but also by *correction*; only remembering, that this means is to be used last, -- not till all other have been tried, and found to be ineffectual. And even then you should take the utmost care to avoid the very appearance of passion. Whatever is done should be done with mildness; nay, indeed, with kindness too. Otherwise your own spirit will suffer loss, and the child will reap little advantage.

4. But some will tell you, "All this is lost labour: A child need not be corrected at all. Instruction, persuasion, and advice, will be sufficient for any child without correction; especially if gentle reproof be added, as occasion may require." I answer, There may be particular instances, wherein this method may be successful. But you must not, in anywise, lay this down as an universal rule; unless you suppose yourself wiser than Solomon, or, to speak more properly wiser than God. For it is God himself, who best knoweth his own creatures, that has told us expressly, "He that spareth the rod, hateth his son: But he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes." (Prov. 13:24) And upon this is grounded that plain commandment, directed to all that fear God, "Chasten thy son while there is hope, and let not thy soul spare for his crying." (Prov. 19:18)

5. May we not endeavour, Secondly, to *instruct* them? To take care that every person who is under our roof have all such knowledge as is necessary to salvation? To see that our wife, servants, and children be taught all those things which belong to their eternal peace? In order to this you should provide that not only your wife, but your servants also, may enjoy all the public means of instruction. On the Lord's day in particular, you should so forecast what is necessary to be done at home, that they may have an opportunity of attending all the ordinances of God. Yea, and you should take care that they have some time every day for reading, meditation, and prayer; and you should inquire whether they do actually employ that time in the exercises for which it is allowed. Neither should any day pass without family prayer, seriously and solemnly performed.

6. You should particularly endeavour to instruct your children, early, plainly, frequently, and patiently. Instruct them *early*, from the first hour that you perceive reason begins to dawn. Truth may then begin to shine upon the mind far earlier than we are apt to suppose. And whoever watches the first openings of the understanding, may, by little and little, supply fit matter for it to work upon, and may turn the eye of the son, toward good things, as well as toward bad or trifling ones. Whenever a child begins to speak, you may be assured reason begins to work. I know no cause why a parent should not just then begin to speak of the best things, the things of God. And from that time no opportunity should be lost, of instilling all truths as they are capable of receiving.

7. But the speaking to them early will not avail, unless you likewise speak to them *plainly*. Use such words as little children may understand, just such as they use themselves. Carefully observe the few ideas which they have already, and endeavour to graft what you say upon them. To take a little example: Bid the child look up; and ask. "What do you see there?" "The sun." "See, how bright it is! Feel how warm it shines upon you hand! Look, how it makes the grass green! But God, though you cannot see him, is above the sky, and is a deal brighter than the sun! It is he, it is God that makes the grass and the flowers grow; that makes the trees green, and the fruit to come upon them! Think what he can do! He can do whatever he pleases. He can strike me or you dead in a moment! But he loves you; he loves to do you good. He loves to make you happy. Should not you then love *him*? And he will teach you how to love him."

8. While you are speaking in this, or some such manner, you should be continually lifting up your heart to God, beseeching him to open the eyes of their understanding, and to pour his light upon them. He, and he alone, can make them to differ herein from the beasts that perish. He alone can apply your words to their hearts; without which all your labour will be in vain. But whenever the Holy Ghost teaches, there is no delay in learning.

9. But if you would see the fruit of your labour, you must teach them not only early and plainly, but *frequently* too. It would be of little or no service to do it only once or twice a week. How often do you feed their bodies? Not less than three times a day. And is the soul of less value than the body? Will you not then feed this as often? If you find this a tiresome task, there is certainly something wrong in your own mind. You do not love them enough; or you do not love

Him who is your Father and their Father. Humble yourself before him! Beg that he would give you more love; and love will make the labour light.

**10.** But it will not avail to teach them both early, plainly, and frequently, unless you *persevere* therein. Never leave off, never intermit your labour of love, till you see the fruit of it. But in order to this, you will find the absolute need of being endued with power from on high; without which, I am persuaded, none ever had, or will have, patience sufficient for the work. Otherwise, the inconceivable dullness of some children, and the giddiness or perverseness of others, would induce them to give up the irksome task, and let them follow their own imagination.

**11.** And suppose, after you have done this, after you have taught your children from their early infancy, in the plainest manner you could, omitting no opportunity, and persevering therein, you did not presently see any fruit of your labour, you must not conclude that there will be none. Possibly the "bread" which you have "cast upon the waters" may be "found after many days." The seed which has long remained in the ground may, at length, spring up into a plentiful harvest. Especially if you do not restrain prayer before God, if you continue instant herein with all supplication. Meantime, whatever the effect of this be upon others, your reward is with the Most High.

**12.** Many parents, on the other hand, presently see the fruit of the seed they have sown, and have the comfort of observing that their children grow in grace in the same proportion as they grow in years. Yet they have not done all. They have still upon their hands another task, sometimes of no small difficulty. Their children are now old enough to go to school. But to what school is it advisable to send them?

**13.** Let it be remembered, that I do not speak to the wild, giddy, thoughtless world, but to those that fear God. I ask, then, for what end do you send your children to school? "Why, that they may be fit to live in the world." In which world do you mean, -- this or the next? Perhaps you thought of this world only; and had forgot that there is a world to come; yea, and one that will last for ever! Pray take this into your account, and send them to such masters as will keep it always before their eyes. Otherwise, to send them to school (permit me to speak plainly) is little better than sending them to the devil. At all events, then, send your boys, if you have any concern for their souls, not to any of the large public schools, (for they are nurseries of all manner of wickedness) but private school, kept by some pious man, who endeavours to instruct a small number of children in religion and learning together.

**14.** "But what shall I do with my girls?" By no means send them to a large boarding-school. In these seminaries too the children teach one another pride, vanity, affectation, intrigue, artifice, and, in short, everything which a Christian woman ought not to learn. Suppose a girl were well inclined, yet what would she do in a crowd of children, not one of whom has any thought of saving her soul in such company? Especially as their whole conversation points another way, and turns upon things which one would wish she would never think of. I never yet knew a pious, sensible woman that had been bred at a large boarding-school, who did not aver, one might as well send a young maid to be bred in Drury-Lane.

**15.** "But where, then, shall I send my girls?" If you cannot breed them up yourself, (as my mother did, who bred up seven daughters to years of maturity) send them to some mistress that truly fears God; one whose life is a pattern to her scholars, and who has only so many that she can watch over each as one that must give account to God. Forty years ago I did not know such a mistress in England; but you may now find several; you may find such a mistress, and such a school, at Highgate, at Deptford, near Bristol, in Chester, or near Leeds.

**16.** We may suppose your sons have now been long enough at school, and you are thinking of some business for them. Before you determine anything on this head, see that your eye be single. Is it so? Is it your view to please God herein? It is well if you take him into your account! But surely, if you love or fear God yourself, this will be your first consideration, -- "In what business will your son be most likely to love and serve God? In what employment will he have the greatest advantage for laying up treasure in heaven?" I have been shocked above measure in observing how little this is attended to, even by pious parents! Even these consider only how he may get most money; not how he may get most holiness! Even these, upon this glorious motive, send him to a heathen master, and into family where there is not the very form, much less the power of religion! Upon this motive they fix him in a business which will necessarily expose him to such temptations as will leave him not a probability, if a possibility, of serving God. O savage parents! Unnatural, diabolical cruelty. -- if you believe there is another world.

"But what shall I do?" Set God before your eyes, and do all things with a view to please him. Then you will find a master, of whatever profession, that loves, or at least fears, God; and you will find a family wherein is the form of religion, if not the power also. Your son may nevertheless serve the devil if he will; but it is probable he will not. And do not regard, if he get less money, provided he get more holiness. It is enough, though he have less of earthly goods, if he secure the possession of heaven.

**17.** There is one circumstance more wherein you will have great need of the wisdom from above. Your son or you daughter is now of age to marry, and desires your advice relative to it. Now you know what the world calls a *good match*, -- one whereby much money is gained. Undoubtedly it is so, if it be true that money always brings happiness: But I doubt it is not true; money seldom brings happiness, either in this world or the world to come. Then let no man deceive you with vain words; riches and happiness seldom dwell together. Therefore, if you are wise, you will not seek riches for your children by their marriage. See that your eye be single in this also: Aim simply at the glory of God, and the real happiness of your children, both in time and eternity. It is a melancholy thing to see how Christian parents rejoice in selling their son or their daughter to a wealthy Heathen! And do you seriously call this a *good match*? Thou fool, by parity of reason, thou mayest call hell a *good lodging*, and the devil a *good master*. O learn a better lesson from a better Master! "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness," both for thyself and thy children; "and all other things shall be added unto you."

**18.** It is undoubtedly true, that if you are steadily determined to walk in this path; to endeavour by every possible means, that you and your house may thus serve the Lord; that every member of your family may worship him, not only in form, but in spirit and in truth; you will have need

to use all the grace, all the courage, all the wisdom which God has given you; for you will find such hinderances in the way, as only the mighty power of God can enable you to break through. You will have all the *saints of the world* to grapple with, who will think you carry things too far. You will have all the powers of darkness against you, employing both force and fraud; and, above all, the deceitfulness of your own heart; which, if you will hearken to it, will supply you with many reasons why you should be a *little more* conformable to the world. But as you have begun, go on in the name of the Lord, and in the power of his might! Set the smiling and the frowning world, with the prince thereof, at defiance. Follow reason and the oracles of God; not the fashions and customs of men. "Keep thyself pure." Whatever others do, let you and your house "adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour." Let you, your yoke-fellow, your children, and your servants, be all on the Lord's side; sweetly drawing together in one yoke, walking in all his commandments and ordinances, till every one of you "shall receive his own reward, according to his own labour!"