



Directions for Leading a Christian Life

by Henry Venn

Updated into modern language by Elizabeth McBurney

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*To Jonathan Scott, Esq
November 6, 1765*

Dear Sir,

I am overjoyed to learn of your knowledge of Christ and your determination to live in His service. This connects us more closely than if we were brothers, for many times brothers will be separated, but all who love the Lord Jesus will dwell with Him forever. Love for Him and for your soul prompts me to lay before you a few hints gained from long service in the church of Christ, which, had I received on my entrance into it, might have preserved me from many hurtful mistakes.

Your Christian calling is a warfare, where no quarter can be given on either side. If you prove faithful to death, angels will receive your departing soul, eternal glory will be your crown, the armies of the saved will receive you with delight, and the Redeemer's presence will be your Heaven forevermore. Should you forsake Him, or hold secret sympathy with His foes, you must be punished, like them, with eternal infamy in Hell.

Your first "enemies" will probably be your former intimates, friends, and nearest relations, whose polite conversation and affection for you have been so pleasing. For until their understanding of sin, true religion, and humanity's chief good are formed from Scripture, as your own now is, they will despise your new way of life. Your corrupt nature will be tempted to join them—along with a subtle destroyer, long practiced in arts and wiles—to the ruin of your immortal soul.

In this perilous condition you have joined yourself (having been influenced by grace) to Christ as your

Leader and Commander. Under his banner, diligently using the means He in tender love commands, you should confidently expect both protection and victory.

These means are secret prayer, Bible study, public worship, hearing faithful preachers, Christian society, and much solitude.

Secret Prayer

Our Lord frequently practiced secret prayer at stated times, and all His illustrious saints have done the same. Indeed, stated times of prayer, where they can be had, are as necessary to make the soul flourish as stated meals to keep the body in health. To willfully neglect them is to walk contrary to the example of Christ and His saints, and such behavior will never reproduce their holiness in our own lives.

But when you do observe stated times of secret prayer, you will often find great stupidity of mind and not know what to pray for. You may feel that your faith is very weak or be oppressed by a swarm of idle thoughts. Do not, on this account, leave off your constant devotions or question whether they will profit your soul.

It is actually good for you to feel that you have no power to command your own thoughts, so that your own experience will confirm what the word of God and His people teach—that you are weak and poor, always standing in absolute need of the mercy of God, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Ghost.

On the contrary, beware of being elated with spiritual joy, which sometimes will flow into your soul. Should this experience lead you to think highly of

yourself, watch out: Carelessness first, and then a miserable fall, will follow, for self-exalting thoughts always defile the soul and grieve the Spirit of God.

Neither can any assurance as to future safety be justly built on what has passed in our own minds. Witness the noble confession Peter made of his faith in Christ one hour, and the astonishing reprimand he received the next: "Get behind me, Satan! You are an offense to me."

These sweet sensations of spiritual joy fulfill some of the precious promises made to believers in Christ and are designed to allure us, not to excite a conceit of anything good in ourselves.

Bible Study

To secret prayer you should add devout study of the Bible, because it is our infallible guide and the treasury of all truth necessary to salvation. But the riches laid up there will not be found by proud or careless minds: None possess them until they dig for them as for silver, longing to know the will of God, that they may do it.

To superficial readers, the Bible presents little more than a great number of duties that must be performed and sins that must be renounced, along with insupportable pains at failures in obedience. But earnest and devout readers discover much more: the tender heart of Christ, the efficacy of His blood to cleanse from all unrighteousness, and a variety of spiritual blessings, which are the present reward of being true-hearted in His service. I am at a loss for words to express how much solid knowledge and transformation of mind you will gain by persevering in prayer for wisdom and holiness, and for the true interpretation of God's Word, year after year. A pattern is plainly set before us in these memorable petitions from scripture: "I am a stranger on earth (very soon to leave it; therefore its riches and honors cannot profit me); hide not your commandments from me, which will enrich me forever! Open my eyes that I may see wondrous things in your law! Your hands have formed and fashioned me. Give me understanding, that I may know your law!"

May these prayers come from our hearts and ever dwell on our tongues!

Worship

Secret prayer and devout study of the Bible will prepare you to worship in the house of God. And here you must beware of a fatal error, common among those who love to hear the Gospel:

Assured that preaching the gospel is the appointed means to convert sinners, and knowing that they were themselves illuminated by good preaching, many Christians shamefully disparage public worship, as if all good to the soul were to come through the speaker and none from the congregation's calling, with one heart and voice, on the name of the Lord.

So while both minister and people should be abased before God in confessing sin and pleading for pardon, asking for more grace to serve the Lord, and with true compassion praying for all peoples—while this grand business should fill their souls, a total inattention is visible in many countenances.

Their entertainment seems to begin only when the preacher has taken his text. Gross ignorance! Impious indecency! Professed believers, can you imagine you shall ever receive profit in one means of grace while you pour contempt on another? Or that after passing through a time of divine worship without any exercise of repentance, love, and devotion, you can be fit to hear the words delivered from the pulpit? Be undeceived! You are seeking merely novelty and curiosity.

I would have you raise your expectations of the good you will receive from first praying with the congregation, as a child of God by faith in Christ Jesus, before you hear the pastors of His church. There is a necessity for this: It is intended to prepare and soften the ground for receiving the good seed and to open the heart for believing and obeying the truth.

Please do not misconstrue these remarks to mean that preaching Christ is not of the utmost importance, and something all Christians should value and attend to. It is the good seed, which, when it falls on good ground, brings forth fruit abundantly. Only remember to honor equally every ordinance of God: Esteem spiritual worship of Him, in His house, as no less profitable than the dispensing of His holy Word.

Christian Society

To secret prayer, study of the Bible, public worship, and hearing the Word, you should add time spent in the society of Christians engaged in the same warfare as yourself. This is commanded by our God and is of great advantage. We are social by nature, and our companions must be either infectious, if destitute of faith, or greatly improving, if we make a right choice.

Love for our Savior should give us a strong aversion to conversation and company that pour contempt on His excellence and precepts. And it is not

possible to consort with profane and voluptuous people, where business or office does not oblige us, and be guiltless.

The command is peremptory: Go from the presence of a man, as soon as you perceive the words of wisdom are not in him. The warning is merciful, and very alarming: A companion of fools shall be destroyed. And, lest worldly interests or a remaining love for the witty, enlivened conversation of profane people should convince us that we may sometimes associate with them and not be harmed, the salutary advice is: Be not deceived; evil communications corrupt good manners. Your society, therefore, must be with real, not nominal Christians, for one who walks with the wise will be wise.

But do not expect to find actual Christians as flawless as you would like to imagine them, nor view their lives with a severe eye. Judge your fellow-soldiers by what you know of yourself: Innate corruptions are very stubborn, and though besieged and doomed to death, make frequent sallies. It is extremely difficult to master a besetting sin, and such victory is seldom accomplished at once or without many falls.

Beware of the hypocrisy, natural to us all, of condemning others for the same things we find in ourselves. Alas! The very best people have abundant cause to think themselves vile. For believers in Christ, one and all, are polluted, imperfect, inconstant, impatient with each other's frailties, and scarcely able to be at peace among themselves, even though they all experience every day the tender compassions of their heavenly Father.

Don't be surprised if you meet with many hollow Christians, talkative and full of confidence on account of their supposed conversion and the knowledge they have attained in spiritual things. So it has been from the beginning.

Upright followers of the Lamb are few in every age. You will know them by their disclaiming all trust in their own spiritual attainments, by their tender fear of offending God, by their humility and meekness, by their generosity and compassion, and by the great benefit to be derived from their conversation.

Cultivate intimacy with people like this. They will build you up in your holy faith and will establish you in every good purpose. You will burn with desire to be like them, and on leaving their company, you will find a spirit of prayer springing up in your mind.

Solitude

But company, beyond a certain measure, is of bad consequence. Keeping much retired and by ourselves is most profitable for us all. Indeed, when our worldly business is attended to as it ought to be, and secret duties are punctually observed, there simply is not much time left for people in any stage of life to spend in company.

Those who imagine that praying at certain seasons, hearing the gospel, and then entering into a sort of general conversation about religion and religious people will be sufficient for their spiritual growth are grievously mistaken.

Unless we love to be much alone, and strive to allow time for it, how can we often and solemnly feel contrition for the follies of our innate depravity? How, with the blessed Mary, ponder in our hearts the sayings of our Lord? How can we enter deeply into His agony and death, which paid the price for our peace and eternal life? How consider the weight of the crown of glory laid up for the faithful? How feel the strength and multitude of our obligations to live in exemplary obedience?

The most distinguished saints, before they entered on any arduous work for the glory of God or the good of others, did not think that the purity of their intention or the promise of God's Spirit was sufficient without spending time alone in preparation—consider Moses, Elijah, Daniel, John the Baptist, and our Lord Himself.

When the church neglects the practice of solitude, many evils grow up: Popular teachers become puffed up and jealous of those they fear as their rivals. Professing Christians become errant Pharisees: They can talk, without humiliation, of man's total corruption; they can talk, without gratitude, of redemption by the blood of God. And this will be the case with us, unless we carefully balance solitude with society.

As to the many ignorant and immoral people in the world, you must expect their ridicule and censure and not let it irritate you. You could not be a servant of Christ if they approved of you: "If you were of the world, the world would love its own. But because you are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hates you."

Love will enable you to meekly receive contemptuous treatment and hard speeches against your faith, your conduct, and your friends. Do not be too eager to justify yourself, nor over-forward to make converts by much speaking: An irksome truth becomes only more so if unseasonably urged.

But in victory over pride, anger, and all wickedness—in steadfastly observing every rule of holy living laid down by our Savior, in courteous behavior to all, in calmly urging the Word of God when some favorable opportunity occurs—in these things you cannot exceed. Wait patiently, and you will by such irreproachable and wise conduct stop the mouth of prejudice and win some to come and live a Christian life as you do.

I wish you much of the presence and peace of God in your soul; in your practice and tempers, much steadiness and love; and a gracious answer to your prayers for your friends, relations, and fellow-sinners.

Taken from Letters of Henry Venn, (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust; first published 1835), 535.



The Rev. Henry Venn, M.A., (1724-1797) was educated at Cambridge University, where he was a Fellow of Queen's College. He was one of the earliest Evangelicals in the Church of England, in which he had a long and fruitful ministry. He deeply impacted a number of Anglican ministers of his generation, including Charles Simeon and John Newton.

Henry Venn's letter to Jonathan Scott, Esq., has been reprinted many times over the centuries as a valuable guide to practical Christian living.

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