

The Necessity of forming a Firm Intention to Please God

William Law

Introduction

In chapter two of his 1728 classic, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, William Law explores why so many professing believers live lives which are indistinguishable from non-believers. He sees the primary cause not as ordinary human weakness or lack of God's empowerment, but rather as a lack of intention to please God. Law embarks on his subject by looking at the widespread practice of cursing in his day, which was very common among professing believers. Today, we might think of this or other issues, but the basic question remains the same: why do the lives of professing believers differ so little from the lives of non-believers? And Law's answer is as relevant now as it was in 1728 and reminds true disciples of Jesus Christ of the necessity of forming a firm intention to please God and living accordingly. Please read the following excerpts slowly and reflectively.

Now the reason of common swearing is this: it is because men have not so much as the intention to please God in all their actions....

It seems but a small and necessary part of piety to have such a sincere intention as this, and that he has no reason to look upon himself as a disciple of Christ who is not thus far advanced in piety....

It was this general intention that made the primitive Christians such eminent examples of piety and made the goodly fellowship of the saints and all the glorious army of martyrs and confessors. And if you will here stop and ask yourselves why you are not as pious as the primitive Christians were, your own heart will tell you that it is neither through ignorance or inability, but purely because you never thoroughly intended it....

And when you have this intention to please God in all your actions, as the happiest and best thing in the world, you will find in you as great an aversion to everything that is vain and impertinent in common life, whether of business or pleasure, as you now have to anything that is profane....

Now, who that wants this general sincere intention can be reckoned a Christian? And yet if it was among Christians, it would change the whole face of the world: true piety and exemplary holiness would be as common and visible as buying and selling, or any trade in life....

Let him but intend to please God in all his actions, as the happiest and best thing in the world, and then he will know that there is nothing noble in a clergyman but a burning zeal for the salvation of souls, nor anything poor in his profession but idleness and a worldly spirit....

You see two persons: one is regular in public and private prayer, the other is not. Now the reason for the difference is not this, that one has strength and power to observe prayer, and the other has not; but the reason is this, that one intends to please God in the duties of devotion, and the other has no intention about it. Now the case is the same, in the right or wrong use of our time and money. You see one person throwing away his time in sleep and idleness, in visiting and diversions, and his money in the most vain and unreasonable expenses. You see another careful of every day, dividing his hours by rules of reason and religion and spending all his money in works of charity. Now the difference is not owing this, that one has strength and power to do thus and the other has not; but it is owing to this, that one intends to please God in the right use of all his time and all his money, and the other has no intention about it.

Here, therefore, let us judge ourselves sincerely; let us not vainly content ourselves with the common disorders of our lives, the vanity of our expenses, the folly of our diversions, the pride of our habits, the idleness of our lives, and the wasting of our time, fancying that these are such imperfections as we fall into through the unavoidable weakness and frailty of our natures. But let us be assured that these disorders of our common life are owing to this, that we have not so much Christianity as to intend to please God in all the actions of our life as the best and happiest thing in the world. So that we must not look upon ourselves in a state of common and pardonable imperfection, but in such a state as wants the first and fundamental principle of Christianity, viz. an intention to please God in all our actions....

So that the fault does not lie here, that we desire to be good and perfect, but through the weakness of our nature fall short of it; but it is because we have not piety enough to intend to be as good as we can, or to please God in all the actions of our life. This we see is plainly the case of him that spends his time in sports when he should be at church; it is not his want of power, but his want of intention or desire to be there...

This doctrine does not suppose that we have no need of Divine grace, or that is in our own power to make ourselves perfect. It only supposes that through the want of sincere intention of pleasing God in all our actions, we fall into such irregularities of life as by the ordinary means of grace we should have power to avoid; and that we have not that perfection, which our present state of grace makes us capable of, because we do not so much as intend to have it. It only teaches us that the reason why you see no real mortification or self-denial, no eminent charity, no profound humility, no heavenly affection, no true contempt of the world, no Christian meekness, no sincere zeal, no eminent piety in the common lives of Christians, is this: because they do not so much as intend to be exact and exemplary in these virtues.