

Motives to Secret Prayer

With Answers to Objections Commonly Made To the Performance of
This Duty

By Thomas Boston

1. It is a piece of worship expressly commanded of God, and it is directly required by him, Eph. 6:18. 'Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints.' Will ye then counteract God's express command? If ye do, it will be at your peril.
2. Are you not engaged to this duty? Are not the vows of God upon you for the performance of it? Were ye not baptised in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, to worship them, and that in all parts of worship, of which prayer is a principal one? Have not some of you been admitted to the Lord's table, when ye professed to renew your baptismal engagements? And perhaps some of you have sick-bed vows on you to that purpose.
3. Have ye not secret sins, secret wants, and secret temptations? and shall ye not have secret prayers adapted to each, requesting of the Lord the pardon of your secret sins, the supply of your secret wants, and grace to resist and overcome your secret temptations?
4. This is your known duty; and therefore remember, that 'the servant that knew his master's will, but did it not, shall be beaten with double stripes.' Wherefore, I charge you, as you will answer to God at death and at judgment, and as you love your own souls, and would not eternally perish, to set about this necessary and important duty.

But some are ready to muster up a variety of objections against this duty; the chief of which I shall endeavour to obviate.

Object.1. I have no time for secret prayer, for my work and business. Ans.1. This is thy greatest work, even the salvation of thy soul, in comparison of which all thy other work is a mere trifle: and wilt thou take time for thy other work, and not for this work, that challenges thy utmost care and attention? 2. Fool's haste is no speed. To rise out of the bed, and to go immediately to secular work, is foolish cursed haste. How canst thou look for a blessing on thy work without prayer? 3. Rise the sooner every morning, that you may not be scrimped as to time for this exercise, as our blessed Lord did, Mark 1:35. 'And

in the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed.' How wilt thou answer to God at the great day, for spending that time in sleep, which thou shouldest spent in secret prayer? Daniel would not omit this exercise, though at the hazard of his life.

Object.2. We are so wearied with our work through the day, that we are not able to pray in the evening. Ans.1. What difference is there betwixt you and the beasts that take their ease when their work is done, without any more ado? 2. You will take your meat for your bodies, though ever so weary; and why will ye not think of and provide meat for your perishing souls? John 4:6, 32. 'Now Jacob's well was there. Jesus, therefore, being wearied with his journey, sat thus on the well: and it was about the sixth hour, But he said unto them, I have meat to eat that ye know not of.' 3. Notwithstanding ye may be tired, do what ye are able. We are not commanded to tell you to make your prayers short or long; but by no means to neglect secret prayer altogether, which is very dangerous. But I suppose, that when you say your body is not able to subsist with secret prayer, that yet if ye could gain a sixpence at that very time, you would spend twice much more time for that paltry gain; and yet slight the concerns of your souls, under this frivolous pretence.

Object. 3. We have no convenient place for secret prayer. Ans. Find out once a willing heart for this exercise, and I shall engage for it you shall find a place.

Object. 4. But there are prayers in our family, and I join therein; what needs more! Ans. Poor soul! hast thou no more to say of thyself to God, but what the master of the family says? Alas! thou knowest not thyself, and the dreadful case thou art in by nature; which if thou didst, thou wouldst not think of joining in prayer with others enough. Thou thinkest it sufficient that the master of the family pray for thee, and the other members of his family, and thou liest by without concerning thyself about duty for thyself; wilt thou think it enough, that he go to heaven for thee, and thou be shut out forever?

Object.5. But (says the master of the family) I pray with my family, and I hope that is enough for me. Ans. In this command in the text, Christ has not excepted thee, neither dare I. Again, dost thou so well discharge family prayer, that thou hast no escapes or failures to be matter of secret prayer? I tell you plainly, that God will not have his worship halved: he will have either the whole or nothing. Being conscientious in family-prayer, which is as discharge family-duty, the more wilt thou be inclined to the practice of secret duty. The false mother was dividing the child, not the true one.

Object. 6. Some women that have children to nurse and wait on, think that frees them for this duty. Ans. It is a sad observation of many women, who, while they are unmarried, and are not involved in the cares and troubles of a family, have some profession and practice of religion; but as soon as they get a house to manage, and have the care of young children especially, they cast off all religion, as if they had no more concern therein. But surely the very sight of the child whom thou hast conceived in sin, and brought forth in iniquity, should remind thee of thy original guilt and corruption, and incite thee to apply to the blood and Spirit of Christ for pardon and cleansing, and be a powerful spur to thee to set about this great duty of secret prayer. And remember, that the welfare of thy own soul, and that of the child, is more than that of the child's bodily welfare, which deserves but the second care in comparison of the other. I would not have you by any means to cast off the care of the young one's temporal welfare; but thou mayst so observe times and seasons, as thou mayst take time for this duty morning and evening, though it be not immediately after thou risest, or before thou art rocking the cradle, or suckling the child. Alas! it had been telling many, that they had the womb that never bare, and the paps that never gave suck.

Object.7. God knows the heart, and what needs so much ado about praying in secret, as if God knew not what we wanted, or what we would be at, till we sit down on our knees, and tell him? Ans. God knows the heart of such an objector to be a graceless heart, and his end to be destruction, Matt. 7:15, 20; and his heart to be a foolish atheistical heart, that will not call upon God, Psalm 14:1. 'The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God. They are corrupt; they have done abominable works; there is none that doeth good.' Again, what is this but to argue God's command to be foolish? He bids you pray, and you say it is needless. O daring presumption! Though the Lord not only knows your heart, but has a mind to give blessings to poor sinners, he will have you seek them by prayer: 'For these things,' says he, 'will I be inquired of by the house of Israel, that I may do it for them,' Ezek. 36:37. God never confers signal mercies on his people, without first pouring out on them the Spirit of faith and prayer, and determines them to seek ardently the very thing he has a mind to grant them. And this method is for the glory of his name, and for our real benefit.

Object.8. Age and infirmity will not suffer me to go about that duty. Ans. Will it suffer you to do your business in the world, and will it not suffer you to manage your soul's business, which is of infinitely greater importance? It would seem, that the nearer we draw to the grave, the more active we should be in preparing for it. It were good that old people would mind heaven more, and the world less, as they have so short a time to stay here. The concerns of

the other world should mainly engross their care and attention, and they should then redouble their diligence in improving their span of time, and doing that which perhaps they too much neglected in the days of health and vigour. 'The hoary head is a crown of glory, if it be found in the way of righteousness,' Prov. 16:31; 'But the sinner being an hundred years old shall be accursed,' Isa. 65:20. Let this sound an alarm to all the old sinners among you, that ye may yet apply to the merciful Redeemer, who sets even some to work in the vineyard at the eleventh hour. It is sad to be tottering under the miseries and infirmities of old age, and yet to have no prospect of a happy landing. Fly then to Christ, thou old decrepit sinner, while his call reaches thee, lest thou speedily perish without remedy.

Object.9. I am too young to mind secret prayer. Ans. You are too old never to have entered on God's service. Remember that Josiah, when he was but eight years old, began to seek the Lord God of his father David. Obadiah, Ahab's steward, feared the Lord greatly from his youth. John Baptist was sanctified from the womb; and so was the prophet Jeremiah. Timothy knew the Holy Scriptures from a child. You can never begin to be religious too soon. None ever repented that they sought to seek him sooner. You are as liable to death as the oldest person here, have a soul as precious as theirs, and as much need to mind your best and eternal interests as they. Up then and be doing, without putting off a moment longer.

Object.10. I cannot pray. Ans. The truth is thou wilt not pray, Psalm 10:4. If thou hadst a will to the duty, thou wouldst soon learn. But if thou wouldst learn to pray, go to God that he may teach thee, as Christ taught the disciples; and consider the absolute need thou hast of divine instruction in this matter. Use the one talent, and God will increase it. Wherefore set about this weighty duty, and neglect it not. Think seriously with yourselves, whether those who are now in hell, and when they lived neglected secret prayer like you, would do so still if they were in the world again. I scarce think they would. Pray now, therefore, lest ye repent your neglect, when it will be too late, and ye are tormented in the lake of fire and brimstone. Again, think with yourselves how you will get this criminal neglect digested on a death-bed, when ye are ready to leap into eternity, without having once prayed for God's mercy through Christ to your souls; and how you will get it digested before the awful tribunal of God, when he will drive you from his blessed presence for ever. Think with yourselves how precious time is, and what a sad business it is to spend it in pursuing the world and lying vanities, and neglecting communion with God, wherein lies the life of the soul. What! will ye delay it yet awhile? O do it not! for delays are dangerous. Will ye be so foolish as to venture all on two or three

words on a sick-bed or death-bed? Perhaps you will not get one, but may be hurried away in a moment. Consider the awful passage, Prov. 1:24-28.

'Because I have called and ye refused, I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded; but ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof: I also will laugh at your calamity, I will mock when your fear cometh; when your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind; when distress and anguish cometh upon you. Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me.'

Exhort. 2. Be frequent in this duty, morning and evening at least, and at other times when your conveniency will allow, and go not only to it now and then. Consider,

1. God's express command, which ties you to pray always continually, and without ceasing. This does not mean, that you should do nothing but pray, or spend your whole time in this exercise. No; but denotes frequency, and embracing every opportunity that offers for so delightful and profitable a duty. It says you should be always in a praying frame, never having your minds so much engrossed in worldly concerns, as to be indisposed to call upon God in prayer.

2. Frequency in this duty is a good sign of a good frame and an excellent mean to maintain and preserve it. They who are not frequent in this exercise, do thereby show that their frame and disposition is not spiritual, but carnal, much under the conduct of sense, and attachment to sensible things. Whereas, if a person were frequent in this duty, it would be a token of a heart weaned from the world, and much conversant in the things of God.

3. It is dangerous to grow slack and remiss in this duty, as mournful experience has testified in the case of many. They who having been for years frequently employed in this heavenly exercise do at last turn and then bow a knee before him, do thereby declare they have lost the life and relish of the power of religion, and are in the high road to apostacy. There are not wanting instances of such having returned with the dog to his vomit, and with the sow that washed to her wallowing in the mire. Others have been made signal monuments of judgment, and set up as beacons to backsliders. And some who have had the root of the matter in them, have had such a storm raised in their consciences, as has made them a terror to themselves, and all around them; and it has cost them much and sore wrestling with God ere they recovered the light of his countenance. For the Lord's sake, then, and your own soul's sake,

be frequent in this exercise, and grown not remiss therein, lest ye feel the vengeance of God's temple.

Exhort. 3. To parents and masters of families. I beseech and entreat you, by the mercies of God, by the love ye bear to the Lord Jesus, and the regard ye have to the souls of your children and servants, not only to pray in secret yourselves, but by all the means that are competent to you, by command, advice, exhortation, to stir them up to this duty of secret prayer. For motives consider,

1. It was the practice of John the Baptist, yea, and of Christ himself, the great Prophet of the church, Luke 11:1. Thus this duty comes recommended by the best authority, and the most excellent approved patterns. Christ taught and urges his disciples to pray, and for that end gave them an excellent directory, suited to their then state; and which ye would do well to make your rule in instructing your children and servants.

2. God expressly commands it, Deut. 6:7. 'Thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.' Thus they were to be daily employed in this duty, not only to let their children know what they were bound to do, but to press them to the performance of it. And this command being of moral obligation, is equally incumbent upon you that are Christian parents and masters of families; and ye have far superior advantages for this exercise than the Israelites had, a small part of the bible having been then written; whereas ye have the whole of it among your hands.

3. God commends the practice in Abraham, Gen. 18:19. 'I know him,' says Jehovah, 'that he will command his children, and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment.' Thus, if thou make conscience of this duty, thou wilt tread in the steps of the father of the faithful, and receive tokens of the divine approbation, by the Lord's blessing thy family, and prospering thy outward concerns, and be an example to others to excite them to their duty. This will be the ready way to have dutiful and affectionate children, and obedient and careful servants.

4. Consider the engagements which thou tookest on thee at the baptism of the children, to train them up in the good and holy ways of the Lord; to inform them of their natural depravity, impotency, and aversion to what is good, of the method of salvation by the obedience and death of Christ; and to press

them to yield themselves to the Lord, by taking hold of his covenant by faith. Thou became then engaged to instruct them in the principles of our holy religion, to show them their duty to God and man, and to observe his ordinances and commandments. And canst thou fulfil these thy engagements, unless thou be at pains to instruct them, and especially to stir them up to the practice of secret prayer.

5. Their souls are committed to thy charge; and if they perish through thy neglect, their blood will be required at thy hand. Ah! my friends, Papists and others will rise up in judgment against you, who take more pains on their children, to breed them up in their false and corrupt doctrines, and their idolatrous and superstitious courses, than ye to instruct them in the pure doctrines and precepts of religion. If thou now neglect their religious education and instruction, thy lost children and servants shall curse the day that ever they saw thy face, who tookest no more care of them than of thy beasts. Oh! let this melancholy consideration excite and stir thee up to thy duty now, lest thy children and servants rise up in judgment against thee, and be dreadful addition to thy condemnation.

What shall we do then? may ye say.

1. As soon as they can speak perfectly, give them a few words to speak to God upon their knees every morning and evening, and see that they do so. Let these words consist of a short confession of sin, an acknowledgment of God's goodness in preservation, and an application for pardon through the blood of Jesus.

2. When they advance father in years, give them the help of a form, composed chiefly in scripture words, and particularly that which Christ taught his disciples. And be sure to vary and enlarge any form you give them, for time to time; and in a little time, by reading the bible, and duly considering their own case and wants, they will be able to pray without a set form; for it is often observed, that where young ones make conscience of practising the helps that are given them, and take pleasure in the duty, the Holy Spirit strikes in with his assistance, and lays suitable matter of prayer before them; so that even some very young persons have been found to pray with great fluency and fervour, to the admiration of those who happened to overhear them.

3. Pray frequently with your children; which will be an excellent means to instruct them both as to the matter and manner of the duty, and have a powerful influence upon them to induce them to pray for themselves. And

indeed I must say, if parents made more conscience of this practice, in praying with their children, the young ones would not discover such aversion to the duty as many do; nor would there be such a numerous fry of young prayer-less sinners among us, who, though they have not learned to pray, yet are great proficient in speaking vain and idle words, and in cursing and swearing.

4. Furnish them daily with proper materials of prayer, which ye can extract from the Lord's word, your own observation of the state and temper of your souls, the disposition and inclination of your children, the sins and vanities they are most addicted to, your knowledge of their peculiar wants and desires, and what appears to be suitable to their circumstances and situation.

5. Carefully observe, whether they perform this duty or not; that you may encourage them when they do well, and check and rebuke them when they neglect it. Show them that you are influenced by a regard to the command and authority of God, and are actuated with a hearty zeal and concern for the salvation of their souls, in all you do in this matter, whether respecting the encouragements and advices you give them, or the rebukes and chastisements you administer to them, in case of non-compliance, neglect, or careless performance of the duty enjoined. This will have no small influence upon them to comply with your instructions and directions, and by degrees conquer their aversion to the exercise; and you may come, through the divine blessing, to see the happy fruit of your labours and endeavours.