**The Great Duty of Family Religion**by

**George Whitefield
(1714-1770)**

“As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.” [Joshua 24:15]

These words contain the holy resolution of Joshua, a most devout man of God, who reminded the Israelites in a most moving, affectionate speech what great things God had done for them. He then draws a proper inference from what he had been saying; and informs them, in the most pressing terms, that since God has been so very gracious to them, they could do no less, than out of gratitude for such special favors and mercies, dedicate both themselves and their families to his service. “Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD.” And by the same captivating motive the prophet Samuel later enforces their obedience to the commandments of God, 1 Sam. 12:24, listen, “Be sure to fear the LORD and serve him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things he has done for you.” But then, that they might not excuse themselves (as too many might be apt to do) by his giving them a bad example, or think he was laying heavy burdens on them, while he himself did not lift one finger to help, he tells them in the text, that whatever attention they might pay to the doctrine he had been preaching, yet he (as all ministers ought to do) was resolved to live up to and practice it himself: “Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”

This commendable resolution of Joshua, is absolutely necessary for every true son of Joshua, that is entrusted with the care and direction of a family in our day: and, if it was ever appropriate for ministers to preach, or for people to put family-religion into practice, it is never more so than in the present age; since it is greatly to be feared, that out of those many households that call themselves Christians, there are only a few that serve God in their respective families as they should.

It is indeed true, visit our churches, and you may perhaps see something of the form of godliness still surviving among us; but even that is scarcely to be found within our own homes. So that if the blessed angels were to come, as they did in the age of the patriarchs, and observe our spiritual condition at home, wouldn’t they be tempted to say as Abraham said to Abimilech, “There is surely no fear of God in this place.” [Genesis 20:11]

How and when such a general neglect of family-religion first began to spread over the Christian world, is difficult to determine. As for the early Christians, I am positive it was not so with them: No, they did not falsely believe that religion was to be confined solely to their public worship at church; but, on the contrary, behaved with such godliness and exemplary holiness in their private families, that the Apostle Paul often refers to their house as a church, saying, “Give my greetings to Nympha and the church in her house.” And, I believe, we must forever despair of seeing this spirit of holiness revived in the world, until we see a revival of genuine family religion; and persons unanimously resolving with Joshua, in the words of the text, “As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”

And from these words, I will insist on these three things:

**I. First, That it is the duty of every head of a family and household to take care, that not only he himself, but also that those committed to his charge, “serve the Lord.”**

**II. Secondly, I will endeavor to show “how” the head of the family and his household ought to serve the Lord. And,**

**III. Thirdly, I will offer some reasons, in order to stimulate all family leaders, with their respective households, to serve the Lord in the manner that will be recommended.**

**First, let me show you that it is the duty of every head of the family and household to take care, that not only he himself, but also that those committed to his charge, must serve the Lord.**

And this is apparent, if we consider that every head of a family must look upon himself as obliged to act in three capacities—as a prophet, to instruct: as a priest, to pray for and with; as a king, to govern, direct, and provide for them. It is indeed true, that the latter of these, their kingly office, is one in which they are not so frequently deficient in, (no in this they are usually too attentive) but as for the former two, their priestly and prophetic office, they often ignore such things. But however indifferent some family leaders may be about it, they may be assured, that God will require of them a proper discharge of these offices. For if, as the apostle argues, “If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever;” to what greater degree of apostasy must he have committed, who has no thought to provide for the spiritual welfare of his family!

But further, persons are generally very liberal in their criticisms of the minister, and think they rightly blame the conduct of that minister who is not careful to watch over the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made him overseer: but isn’t every head of a family, also liable to the same criticism, who gives no thought for those souls that are committed too his charge? For every house is as it were a little congregation, every family head (as we have observed) is a priest, every family is a flock; and if any of them perish through the neglect of the head of that family, then God will require their blood at his hands.

If a minister failed in the public teaching of his congregation, and excuses himself by saying, that he had enough to do in working out his own salvation with fear and trembling, without concerning himself with that of others; would you not be apt to think such a minister, to be like the unjust judge, “One that neither feared God, nor regarded man?” And yet, odious as such a character would be, it is no worse than that head of a family deserves, who thinks himself obliged to care for his own soul, without paying any regard to the souls of his household. For (as was hinted above) every house is as it were a church, and every family head is concerned to secure, as much as is within his power, the spiritual prosperity of every one under his roof, just as the minister is obligated to look after the spiritual welfare of every individual person under his charge.

I don’t know what excuse men who neglect their duty in this matter, can plead for such an omission. Without a doubt it is not the example of the holy person Job, who clearly knew his responsibilities, as head of a family, with the souls under him, the scripture tells us, “When a period of feasting had run its course, Job would send [for his children] and have them purified. Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, ‘Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts.’ This was Job's regular custom.” Nor can the neglectful leader plead the practice of godly Joshua, whom, in the text, we find as much concerned for his household's welfare, as his own. Nor lastly, that of Cornelius, who feared God, not only himself, but with all his house: and if Christians had the same spirit of Job, Joshua, and the Gentile centurion, they would act as Job, Joshua, and Cornelius did.

All heads of families must ensure that they not only serve the Lord themselves, but likewise see to it that their respective households do so too. But how sad for those who not only neglect serving God themselves, but also make it their business to ridicule and scoff at anyone in their house that does—what will become of such a head? These wicked heads of families are not content with “not entering into the kingdom of heaven themselves; but hinder others that are willing to enter in.” Surely such men are agents of the devil himself. Surely their damnation does not sleep: for although God, is in his good providence, may allow such stumbling-blocks to be put in his children's way, and allow their greatest enemies to be those of their own households, for a test of their sincerity, and to increase their faith; yet we cannot but proclaim sorrow and misery against those heads of families through whom such offenses come. For if those that only take care of their own souls, can scarcely be saved, what will happen to such monstrous profane and wicked household heads that ignore the spiritual needs of those under their care?

But hoping that there are only a few of these type of family leaders, we now proceed to our

**Second point: To show in what way a family head and his household should serve the Lord.**

**1. The first thing I will mention, is READING THE WORD OF GOD.**

This is a duty incumbent on every individual. “Diligently study the Scriptures because . . . by them you possess eternal life,” is a teaching given by our blessed Lord to everyone: but much more so, should every head of a family consider that verse spoken directly to himself, because (as has already been proved) he ought to look on himself as a prophet, and therefore as a prophet, be compelled to instruct those under his charge in the knowledge of the word of God.

This we find was the order God gave to his chosen people Israel: for his representative Moses, says in Deut. 6:6-7, “These commandments,” that is, the very words of Scripture, “that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children,” that is, as it is widely understood, all members of a household, “Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.” From this we may infer, that the only reason, why so many neglect to diligently read the words of Scripture to their children is, because the words of Scripture are not in their hearts: for if they were, out of the abundance of the heart their mouth would speak.

Children, as well as other members of a household are, for the most part, very uninformed, and mere novices in the commands of God: and how will they know, unless someone teaches them? And what more proper way to teach them, than by the living Word of God, “which is able to make you wise for salvation?” And who is more appropriate to instruct them, than parents and other heads of households, who (as has been more than once observed) are obligated to feed them with spiritual, as well as with daily bread, day by day.

But if these things are true, then what a miserable condition are those unhappy household leaders in, who fail to feed those committed to their care with the sincere milk of the word, so that they might grow, and who neither search the Scriptures themselves, nor are they careful to explain them to others?

Such families must be either reluctant or unable to accomplish the Lord's will, because of the neglect of their leader to teach them! Wouldn’t one imagine that such neglected families have easily become converts to the Roman Catholic Church, where ignorance is thought to be the mother of devotion; and where those who read their Bibles are often condemned as heretics? And yet how many families there are among us, who are suffering from the neglect of the Word and godly leadership!

**2. We now move on to the second way in which every head of a family and his household ought to serve the Lord, and that is by FAMILY-PRAYER.**

This is a duty, though as much neglected, yet as absolutely necessary as the former. Reading the Word is a good preparation for prayer, because prayer is an excellent means to make the reading effectual. And the reason why every head of a family should join both of these exercises together, is plain, because a head of a family cannot perform his priestly office without performing this duty of family prayer.

We find it noted, when mention is made of Cain and Abel offering sacrifices, that they brought them. But to whom did they bring them? Why, in all probability, to their father Adam, who, as priest of the family, was to offer sacrifice in their names. And so ought every spiritual son of the second Adam, who is entrusted with the care of a household, to offer up the spiritual sacrifices of supplications and thanksgivings, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ, in the presence and name of all who wait upon, or eat food at his table.

This is exactly how our blessed Lord acted, when he lived among us: for it is often said, that he prayed with his twelve disciples, which was then his little family. And he himself has promised a particular blessing to united prayer: “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” And again, “I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.” Add to this, that we are commanded by the Apostle to “pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests,” which without a doubt includes family prayer. And holy Joshua, when he made the excellent resolution in the text, that he and his household would serve the Lord, certainly resolved to pray with his family, which is one of the best testimonies they could give of their serving the Lord.

Besides, every family have been partakers of some common blessings, to give thanks for; some common crosses and afflictions, which they are to pray against; some common sins, which they all must grieve over and deplore: but it is difficult to understand how this can be done, without joining together in one common act of humiliation, prayer, and thanksgiving.

From all we know and have experienced, it is evident, that family prayer is a great and necessary duty; and consequently, those family heads that neglect it, are certainly without excuse. And it is just as much to be feared, if they live without family prayer, then that they live without God in the world.

The lack of family prayer is such a serious condition, that those who fail to lead their families in prayer, must realize that if God was to send out an angel to destroy us, as he once did to destroy the Egyptian firstborn, commanding the angel, as he did back then, to spare only the houses where they saw the blood sprinkled on the doorpost, so now, if God gave the command to let no families escape, except those that called on him in united prayer; few would remain unhurt by his avenging sword. Will I term such families Christians or heathens? Doubtless they do not deserve the name of Christians; and heathens will rise up in judgment against such profane families of this generation: for the heathens always had their household gods, whom they worshipped and whose assistance they frequently called upon. And it is a terrible thought that those families who call themselves “Christians” have come to a point where they must be sent to learn from the pagans. But will not the Lord punish such profane households as these? Will he not pour out his fury upon those that fail to call on his name?

**3. The third and last way every head of a family must with his household serve the Lord, is by TEACHING AND INSTRUCTING their children and other household members, bringing them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.**

This, as well as the former two, is a duty incumbent upon every head of a house, and this appears from that famous statement God made of Abraham: “I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just.” And surely nothing is more frequently impressed on us in the Bible, than this duty of teaching the principles of Christianity. God says in a passage we have cited before, “Impress these words on your children.” And parents are commanded in the New Testament, to “bring up their children in the training and instruction of the Lord.” The Psalmist reminds us, that the one great reason why God did such great wonders for his people, was, for the expressed purpose that when they grew up, they would explain to their children, or other members of their household, these great miracles that God did for his people.” And in Deuteronomy, chapter six, verse 20 and following, God strictly commands his people to instruct their children in the true nature of the ceremonial worship, when they would ask about it, as he supposed they would do, in time to come. And if household members and children were to be instructed in the nature of Jewish rites, how much more ought they now to be initiated and grounded in the doctrines and first principles of the gospel of Christ: not only, because it is a revelation, which has brought life and immortality to a fuller and clearer light, but also, because many seducers have gone out into the world, doing their utmost to destroy not only the superstructure, but also to demolish the very foundation of our most holy religion.

If the present generation wants to ensure their descendants truly love and honor God; then heads of households and parents must heed Solomon’s good advice, and train and teach their households in the way they should go.

**I am aware of only one objection, that can be made against what has been stated as the duties of heads of households; which is, that such a practice will take up too much time, and cause families to neglect some of their worldly business.**
But this objection must be questioned, whether persons that speak such a shameful thing, are not of the same hypocritical spirit as the traitor Judas, who was annoyed with the devotion of Mary, for being so liberal with her expensive perfume, in anointing our blessed Lord, and asked, “Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages.” God has given us so much time to work for ourselves, and will we not allow some small pittance of it to be devoted to his more immediate worship and service? Haven’t people read, that it is God who gives men power to get wealth, and therefore that the best way to prosper in the world, is to please him? And hasn’t our blessed Lord himself promised, that if we seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, then all our outward necessities will be given to us as well?

Abraham, no doubt, as a wealthy man had many demands of business in his life, surely as much or more than those objectors may have had; but yet he found time to command his household to serve the Lord. David was a king, and consequently had a great deal of business upon his hands; yet in spite of all these requirements, he professes that he walked in his house with a perfect heart. And, one more example, holy Joshua was a person definitely engaged in many worldly affairs; and yet he solemnly declares before all Israel, that as for him and his household, they would serve the Lord. And if persons would only redeem their time, as Abraham, David, or Joshua did, they would no longer complain, that family duties kept them from accomplishing the business of the world.

**III. My Third and Last major point, is to offer some motives, to stimulate all heads, with their respective households, to serve the Lord.

1. The first motive I will mention is the duty of GRATITUDE, which you that are heads of families owe to God.**

Your situation in life, every one must confess, is one of great blessing: the providence of God has given you a wonderful heritage, above many of your fellow-creatures, and therefore, out of a principle of gratitude, you should endeavor, as much as you possibly can, to make every person in your households to call upon the Lord as long as they live: not to mention, that the authority, with which God has endowed you as parents and heads of families, is a talent committed to your trust, and which you must use to your Master's honor. In other things we find heads of households and parents readily exercise lordship over their children and other members of their households, and frequently say to one, “Go, and he goes; and to another, Come, and he comes; to a third, Do this, and he does it.” And will this power be so often employed in your own affairs, and never exerted in the things of God?

God says, that he knew Abraham would command his servants and children after him. Joshua was resolved not only to walk with God himself, but to exercise his authority in making everyone in his household do so too: “As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” Let us go and do likewise.

**2. But Secondly, If gratitude to God will not move you, I think LOVE AND PITY TO YOUR CHILDREN should move you, and your respective families, to serve the Lord.**

Most people express a great fondness for their children: so great, that very often their own lives are wrapped up in those of their offspring. “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne?” says God by his Prophet Isaiah. He speaks of it as a monstrous thing, and impossible; but the words immediately following, affirm it to be possible, “Though she may forget” and experience also assures us they may indeed forget. Father and mother may both forsake their children: for what greater degree of forgetfulness can they express towards them, than to neglect the improvement of their souls, and not bring them up in the knowledge and fear of God?

It is indeed true, parents seldom forget to provide for their children's bodies, (though, it is to be feared, some men are so far sunk beneath the beasts that perish, as to neglect even that) but then how often do they forget, or rather, when do they remember, to secure the salvation of their immortal souls? But is this their way of expressing their fondness for the fruit of their bodies? Is this the best testimony they can give of their affection to the darling of their hearts? Was Delilah fond of Samson, when she delivered him up into the hands of the Philistines? Was King Darius so attached to Daniel, when he had him thrown him into a den of lions?

**3. But Thirdly, If neither gratitude to God, nor love and pity to your children, will move you; maybe the principle of COMMON HONESTY AND JUSTICE will cause you to make the holy resolution of the text.**

This is a principle which all men would be expected to act upon. But certainly, if any could be truly criticized for their injustice, no one can be more liable to such criticism, than those leaders who think themselves wronged if those under them fail to carry out their assigned earthly tasks, and yet they in return have no concern for their eternal souls. For is it fair that those under our authority should spend their time and strength serving us, and we as masters will not at the same time give them what is just and equal for their service?

It is true, some men who have household servants, may think they have done enough when they give their servants food and clothing, and say, “Didn’t I bargain with you for so much a year?” But if they give them no other reward than this, then they only give them what they give to their animals? But aren’t servants better than animals? Doubtless they are: and however masters may put off their convictions for the present, they will find a time will come, when they will know they ought to have given them some spiritual as well as temporal wages; and the cry of those that have mowed their fields, will enter into the ears of the Lord God.

**4. But Fourthly, If neither gratitude to God, pity to children, nor a principle for common justice to servants, are sufficient to balance all objections; then let the prevailing motive of SELF-INTEREST turn the scale, and engage you with your respective households to serve the Lord.**

This weighs greatly with you in other matters: be persuaded to let it have a complete and full influence on you in this: and if it has, even if you only have faith as small as a grain of mustard-seed, then how can you avoid believing, that promoting family-religion, will be the best means to promote your own temporal, as well as eternal welfare? For “godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.”

Besides, everyone of you, without a doubt, desire honest servants, and godly children: and to have them prove otherwise, would be as great a grief to you, as it was to Elisha to have a treacherous Gehazi, or David to be troubled with a rebellious Absolom. But how can they be expected to learn their duty, unless someone cares enough to take the time to teach them? Isn’t it just as reasonable to expect that you should reap where have not sown, or gather where you had not scattered seed?

If Christianity taught children and servants to disregard their earthly parents and masters, and only to show obedience to their father and master who is in heaven, then there might then be some excuse to neglect instructing them in the principles of such a religion. But since the teachings of this pure and undefiled religion, are all holy, just, and good; and the more they are taught their duty to God, the better they will perform their duties to you; I think, to neglect the improvement of their souls, out of a dread of spending too much time in religious duties, is acting quite contrary to your own interest as well as duty.

**5. Fifthly and Lastly, If neither gratitude to God, love to your children, common justice to your servants, nor even that most prevailing motive self-interest, will motivate you; then let a consideration of the terrors of the Lord persuade you to put in practice the holy resolution in the text.**

Remember, the time will come, and that perhaps very shortly, when we must all appear before the judgment-seat of Christ; where we must give a solemn and strict account of all of our discussions and interactions with our respective families in this world. How will you endure to see your children and servants (who ought to be your joy and crown of rejoicing in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ) standing up as many witnesses against you; cursing the father that gave them life, the womb that bore them, the breasts which they have sucked, and the day they ever entered into your houses? Do not think for a moment that the damnation which men must endure for their own sins, will be sufficient, for there is also the additional guilt of being accessory to the damnation of others. O consider this, all you that forget to serve the Lord with your respective households, “lest he remove you, and there is no one to deliver you!”

But God forbid, brethren, that any such evil should happen to you: no, rather I will hope, that you have been in some measure convinced by what has been said of the great importance of FAMILY-RELIGION; and therefore are ready to cry out in the words immediately following the text, “Far be it from us to forsake the LORD;” and again, verse 21, “No! We will (with our households) serve the LORD.”

And that there may be always such a heart in you, let me exhort all heads of families, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, often to reflect on the immeasurable worth of their own souls, and the infinite ransom, even the precious blood of Jesus Christ, which has been paid out for them. Remember, I beg you to remember, that you are fallen creatures; that you are by nature lost and estranged from God; and that you can never be restored to your original happiness, until by being born again by the Holy Spirit, you arrive at your original intended state of purity, and have the image of God restamped upon your souls, and are thereby made ready to be partakers of the inheritance with the saints that live in the eternal light.

Please, seriously and frequently reflect on, and act as persons that believe such important truths, and then you will no longer neglect yours and your family's spiritual welfare. No, the love of God, which will then be shed abroad in your hearts, will constrain you to do your utmost to preserve them: and the deep sense of God's free grace in Christ Jesus, (which you will then have) in calling you, will excite you to do your utmost to save others, especially those of your own household. And though, after all your devout endeavors, some may continue unreformed; yet you will have this comfortable reflection to make, that you did what you could to make your families holy: and therefore may rest assured of sitting down in the kingdom of heaven, with Abraham, Joshua, and Cornelius, and all the godly householders, who in their several generations shone forth as many lights in their respective households upon earth. Amen.