

TWO SERMONS:  
THE ALMOST CHRISTIAN  
AND INTERCESSION  
EVERY CHRISTIANS DUTY

GEORGE WHITEFIELD



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*George Whitefield*



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## ABOUT THIS BOOK



**Two Sermons: The Almost Christian and Intercession Every Christian's Duty** presents two influential messages by George Whitefield that examine the nature of genuine faith and the responsibility of prayer. In *The Almost Christian*, Whitefield distinguishes true conversion from mere outward religion, urging self-examination and heartfelt devotion. *Intercession Every Christian's Duty* emphasizes prayer for others as an essential mark of Christian love and obedience. Together, these sermons reflect Whitefield's evangelical preaching, calling readers to sincere piety, active faith, and dependence on God's grace.



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## TITLE PAGE



**T**wo Sermons.

The Almost Christian, and Intercession Every Christian's  
Duty.

By the Reverend George Whitefield.

Elizabethtown: Printed by Shepard Kollock — 1794.

## THE ALMOST CHRISTIAN



### THE ALMOST CHRISTIAN.

**A**cts 26:28. Almost you persuade me to be a Christian.

These words contain the candid confession of King Agrippa. Because they connect closely to what came before, it will be helpful to briefly review the preceding verses. The chapter containing our text gives a remarkable account of the great apostle Paul describing his conversion from Judaism to Christianity, while making his defense before Festus and another Gentile governor. Our Lord had long before foretold that when the Son of Man was lifted up, His disciples would be brought before kings for His name's sake, as a testimony to them. This was a wise design, because Christianity was from the start a doctrine of the cross, and the rulers of the earth considered themselves too exalted to be taught by such humble messengers, or too comfortable to be disturbed by unwelcome truths. They would have remained strangers to Jesus Christ and Him crucified, had not the apostles — by being brought before them as criminals — gained the opportunity to preach the resurrection to them. Paul understood clearly that this was the main reason his Master permitted his enemies to arraign him at a public trial. In compliance with God's will, he did

not limit himself to a simple defense, but used the occasion to try to convert his judges. He did this with such power and clarity that Festus, unwilling to be convinced by the strongest evidence, cried out loudly: 'Much learning does make you mad.' The bold apostle, like a true follower of the holy Jesus, replied calmly: 'I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak forth the words of truth and soberness.' Seeing that King Agrippa was more moved by his words, and sensing in him a genuine desire to know the truth, Paul directed his appeal more specifically to him: 'The king knows of these things, before whom also I speak freely, for I am persuaded that none of these things are hidden from him.' Then, hoping to complete the king's conversion, Paul addressed him even more directly: 'King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe them.' At this, the king's emotions rose so strongly that he was compelled, right there in open court, to acknowledge that the prisoner's preaching had affected him, and he openly cried out: 'Paul, almost you persuade me to be a Christian.' These words, taken in context, give us a vivid picture of how the message of Christ is received in every age. Even today, ministers who preach with the power and spirit of Paul speak words of truth and soberness that their opponents cannot honestly deny or resist. Yet too many, like noble Festus, are either too proud to be taught or too attached to sensual pleasures, carelessness, or worldly ambitions to live by what they hear. To excuse themselves, they cry out that too much learning, too much study, or — stranger still — too much piety has made the preacher mad. Not everyone rejects the message — many gladly receive the word and acknowledge it as truth. But among those who do accept it, so few rise above the level of Agrippa, or go further than being almost Christians, that I feel

compelled to warn my hearers of the danger of remaining in such a state. From the words of the text, I will therefore address three things: 1. What it means to be an almost Christian. 2. What are the chief reasons why so many are no more than almost Christians. 3. I will consider the ineffectiveness, danger, absurdity, and unease that come with being only an almost Christian. 4. I will close with a general call for all to strive not only to be almost, but altogether Christians.

First, what does it mean to be an almost Christian?

An almost Christian, considered in his duty to God, is someone who wavers between two opinions — torn between Christ and the world, trying to serve both God and wealth, and to reconcile light with darkness, Christ with Belial. He has some interest in religion, but he is very careful not to go too far in it. His deceptive heart is always whispering: spare yourself, do yourself no harm. He prays that God's will may be done on earth as it is in heaven, but his obedience is selective. He fondly hopes that God will overlook the things he willfully does wrong, even though an inspired apostle has told him that whoever offends in one point is guilty of all. Above all, he relies heavily on outward religious observances, and on that basis considers himself righteous while looking down on others — even though he may be just as much a stranger to genuine spiritual life as anyone else. In short, he is fond of the form of religion but never experiences its power in his heart. Year after year he attends and participates in the means of grace, but like Pharaoh's lean cows, he is never the better for it — and is often worse.

Considered in his dealings with his neighbor, the almost Christian is strictly honest with everyone — but this honesty does not come from love for God or genuine care for others. It comes only from self-interest: he knows that dishonesty would damage his reputation and hurt his prospects in the world.

He is someone who relies heavily on being negatively good — content with the knowledge that he has not harmed anyone. Yet he reads in the Gospel that the unprofitable servant was cast into outer darkness, and the barren fig tree was cursed and withered not for bearing bad fruit, but for bearing no fruit at all.

He does not object to charitable giving in public, provided it is not asked too often. But he has no acquaintance with the personal acts of visiting the sick and imprisoned, clothing the naked, and privately feeding the hungry. He assumes these duties belong only to the clergy, though his own conscience tells him that nothing but pride keeps him from practicing such humble acts of love. And Jesus Christ Himself, in the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew, condemns people to everlasting punishment not for fornication, drunkenness, or extortion, but for neglecting these very acts of charity. 'When the Son of Man shall come in His glory, He shall set the sheep on His right hand, and the goats on His left.' 'And then He shall say to those on His left hand: Depart from Me, you cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the Devil and his angels. For I was hungry, and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty, and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger, and you did not take Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick and in prison, and you did not visit Me.' 'Then they also shall say: Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not help You?' 'Then He shall answer them: Truly I say to

you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these My brothers, you did not do it to Me. And these shall go away into everlasting punishment.' I have quoted this whole passage in full because our Savior places such particular weight on it. And yet it is so little regarded that, judging by the practice of many Christians, one might be tempted to think these verses did not exist in the Bible.

But let us continue our description of the almost Christian. Considered in relation to himself: just as he is strictly honest with his neighbor, he is also strictly sober in his own conduct — but both his honesty and sobriety spring from the same false self-interest. It is true that he does not plunge into the same excesses as others, but this is not out of obedience to God. It is because his constitution cannot handle excess, or more likely because he fears damaging his reputation or impairing his ability to conduct his affairs. Though he is careful enough to avoid intemperance for these reasons, he always pushes right up to the edge of what is permissible. He is not a drunkard, but he has no real Christian self-denial. He cannot believe that our Savior is strict enough a master to forbid every indulgence, and by reasoning this way he remains as cut off from genuine religion as if he lived in open debauchery. When it comes to forming his principles as well as his conduct, he takes his cues from the world rather than from God's Word. He cannot accept that the way to heaven is as narrow as some claim, so he measures himself not by what Scripture requires, but by what some respected person does, or by whatever best suits his own desires. Because of this, he is not only cautious himself but also quick to interfere with young believers whose hearts are set toward heaven. He constantly plays the Devil's role, urging them to spare

themselves — even when they are doing nothing more than what Scripture plainly requires. The result is that he neither enters the kingdom of God himself, nor allows those who are trying to enter to do so.

That is how the almost Christian lives. I cannot claim to have described him fully, but from these broad strokes of his character, if your conscience has done its proper work and made a personal application of what has been said, I fear that some of you may recognize features of his portrait — ugly as it is — that resemble your own. And I sincerely hope that, seeing this, you join with the apostle in the words that immediately follow our text, and wish yourselves to be not only almost, but altogether Christians.

Second, I move on to consider why so many are no more than almost Christians.

The first reason I will mention is this: so many people start out with a false understanding of religion that, though they live in a Christian country, they do not actually know what Christianity is. This may seem like a hard thing to say, but experience sadly confirms it. Some place religion in belonging to a particular denomination, others in moral living, and most in a set routine of religious duties and performances. Very few — very few indeed — recognize it for what it truly is: a thorough inward transformation of the heart, a divine life, a real participation in Jesus Christ, a union of the soul with God, which the apostle describes by saying, 'He that is joined to the Lord is one spirit.' This is why so many even of the most knowledgeable church members, when you begin to discuss the essence, the life, the soul of religion — that is, our new birth in Jesus Christ — admit they know nothing about it and cry out with Nicodemus: 'How can this thing be?' No wonder so many

are only almost Christians, when so many do not know what Christianity is. No wonder so many settle for the outward form, when they are complete strangers to the power of godliness, and content themselves with the shadow when they know so little of the substance. This is one reason why so many are almost, and so few are altogether, Christians.

A second reason why so many are no more than almost Christians is a servile fear of other people. There are many who, though they have been stirred to a sense of the spiritual life and have tasted and felt the powers of the world to come, have allowed all those good impressions to fade away because of a base, sinful fear of being thought strange or being looked down on. They have some regard for Jesus Christ, but like Nicodemus, they would come to Him only by night. They are willing to serve Him, but they would do it secretly, for fear of the Jews. They have a desire to see Jesus, but they cannot press through the crowd — for fear of being mocked and ridiculed by those they used to dine with. Our Savior spoke prophetically about such people: 'How can you love Me, who receive honor from one another?' Have they never read that the friendship of this world is enmity with God? And that our Lord Himself has warned: 'Whoever shall be ashamed of Me, or of My words, in this wicked and adulterous generation, of him shall the Son of Man be ashamed, when He comes in the glory of His Father, and of His holy angels.' No wonder so many are no more than almost Christians, when so many love the praise of men more than the honor that comes from God.

A third reason why so many are no more than almost Christians is a controlling love of money. This was the sad condition of the eager young man in the Gospel, who came running to

our Lord and knelt before Him, asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. Our Lord replied: 'You know the commandments — do not kill, do not commit adultery, do not steal.' The young man answered: 'All these I have kept from my youth.' But when our Lord continued: 'Yet you lack one thing — go, sell all that you have, and give to the poor,' the young man was grieved by this and went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. Poor young man! He had a real desire to be a Christian and to inherit eternal life, but he thought the price too high if it required giving up his entire estate. And in just the same way, many today — young and old alike — come running to worship our Lord in public and kneel before Him in private, asking what they must do to inherit eternal life. But when they discover they must give up their attachment to wealth and follow Him wholeheartedly, they cry: 'The Lord pardon us in this thing — we pray, have us excused.'

But is heaven so trivial in their estimation as to be worth less than a little earthly gold? Is eternal life so cheap a prize as not to deserve the temporary surrender of a few passing riches? Surely not. Yet however inconsistent such behavior is, this excessive love of money is clearly the common and deadly reason why so many are no more than almost Christians.

Nor is a controlling love of pleasure any less common, or any less deadly, a reason why so many are no more than almost Christians. There are thousands upon thousands who have no great attachment to money and would gladly be true disciples of Jesus Christ if simply parting with their wealth could make them so. But when they are told that our Lord has said that whoever will come after Him must deny himself, they go away sorrowful — like the pitiful young man mentioned before — because they love sen-

sual pleasures too much. They may, like Herod, send for Christ's ministers and hear them gladly. But touch them in their Herodias — tell them they must part with some particular cherished pleasure — and like wicked Ahab they cry out: 'Have you found us, O our enemy?' Speak to them of the necessity of self-discipline, fasting, and self-denial, and they find it as hard to hear as if you were telling them to cut off a right hand or pluck out a right eye. They cannot believe our Lord requires so much of them — even though an inspired apostle commanded us to mortify our members which are upon earth, and even Paul himself, after converting millions and nearing the end of his race, still declared it was his daily practice to keep under his body and bring it into subjection, lest after preaching to others, he himself should be a castaway.

But some men would presume to be wiser than this great apostle, and map out for us what they falsely imagine to be an easier road to happiness. They flatter us with the idea that we can reach heaven without doing violence to our sensual desires, and enter the narrow gate without striving against our fleshly inclinations. And this is another reason why so many are only almost, and not altogether, Christians.

The fifth and last reason I will give for why so many are only almost Christians is an unstable and fickle character.

Many a minister and sincere Christian has wept over promising converts who seemed to begin well in the Spirit, only to fall away and end shamefully in the flesh. And this was not due to wrong beliefs, nor to a fear of what others think, nor to love of money or pleasure — but simply to an unstable and fickle character. Such people treated religion as a novelty — something that pleased them for a time, but once their curiosity was satisfied, they

set it aside. Like the young man who came to see Jesus wrapped only in a linen cloth, they followed Him for a season, but when temptation came and seized hold of them, they lacked the resolve to stand firm and fled away with nothing. At first, like a tree planted by a stream, they grew and flourished for a time — but having no root in themselves, no inward principle of holiness and devotion, they withered like Jonah's gourd: dried up, cut down, and gone. Their good intentions were like the violent but brief movements of a body just beheaded — forceful at first, but not lasting. In short, they set out well on their journey to heaven, but finding the road either narrower or longer than they expected, they gave up through sheer unsteadiness of character, and so returned, like a dog to its vomit, or like a washed sow to her wallowing in the mud.

I tremble to pronounce the fate of such unstable professors — those who, having put their hands to the plow, shamefully look back for lack of a little more resolve. How can I repeat to them that dreadful warning: 'If any man draw back, My soul shall have no pleasure in him.' And again: 'It is impossible' — or at the very least exceedingly difficult — 'for those who have been once enlightened, and have tasted the good gift of God's Holy Spirit, and the powers of the world to come, if they fall away, to be renewed again unto repentance.' Yet despite the Gospel's severity toward those who fall away, many who began well have, through fickleness of character — God grant that none of us here may ever be such — joined the number of those who turn back unto destruction. And this is the fifth and last reason I will give for why so many are only almost, and not altogether, Christians.

Third, I now move to consider the folly of being no more than an almost Christian.

The first proof of the folly of such a course is this: it is not enough for salvation. Such people are almost good — but being almost on target is really to miss it entirely. God requires us to love Him with all our hearts, with all our souls, and with all our strength. He loves us too deeply to permit any rival, because to whatever extent our hearts are empty of God, to that same extent they must be unhappy. The Devil, like the false mother who came before Solomon, would have our hearts divided — as she would have had the child split in two. But God, like the true mother, will have all or nothing. 'My son, give Me your heart' — your whole heart — is God's universal call to all, and if this is not done, we can never expect divine mercy.

People may play the hypocrite, but at the great day of judgment God will strike them down — as He did Ananias and Sapphira through the mouth of His servant Peter — for pretending to offer Him all their hearts while keeping back the greater part. They may fool their fellow human beings for a time, but He who enabled Elijah to cry out, 'Come in, wife of Jeroboam,' when she came in disguise to inquire about her sick son, will also see through every disguise and artful pretense. And if their hearts are not wholly with Him, He will assign them their portion with hypocrites and unbelievers.

What makes a halfway devotion even less excusable is that it is not only insufficient for our own salvation, but deeply harmful to that of others.

An almost Christian is one of the most dangerous creatures in the world. He is a wolf in sheep's clothing — one of those false prophets our Lord warns us against in the Sermon on the Mount, who try to convince people that the road to heaven is broader than it really is. As noted before, such people neither enter the kingdom of God themselves, nor allow those who are trying to enter to do so. These are the people who spread a lukewarm, halfhearted spirit throughout the world — who hang out false lights and thereby shipwreck unsuspecting souls on their voyage toward eternity. These are greater enemies to the cross of Christ than unbelievers themselves, for everyone is on guard against an open unbeliever, but an almost Christian, through his subtle hypocrisy, draws many away after him and must therefore expect to receive the greater condemnation.

Furthermore, as it is deeply harmful to ourselves and to others, this halfway commitment is also the greatest expression of ingratitude toward our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Did He come down from heaven and shed His precious blood to purchase our hearts, only to receive half of them? How can we say we love Him when our hearts are not wholly His? How can we call Him our Savior when we will not sincerely seek to please Him, and so let Him see the fruit of His suffering and be satisfied?

Imagine that one of us had purchased a slave at great expense — someone who had been trapped in the most terrible misery and torment, and would have remained there forever if we had not shown compassion. And suppose that slave later became rebellious and refused to give us even half his service — how loudly we would condemn such base ingratitude! Yet this is precisely how you behave, O man, when you acknowledge that you have been re-

deemed from infinite and unavoidable misery and punishment by the death of Jesus Christ — and yet refuse to give yourself wholly to Him. Are we really going to treat God, our Maker, in a way we would never tolerate being treated by a fellow human being? God forbid. No.

Now I come to my final point: a word of exhortation urging you to be not only almost, but altogether Christians. Let us despise such base and treacherous treatment of our King and Savior — indeed, our God. Let us not spend our whole lives taking some steps toward heaven, only to plunge ourselves into hell at last. Let us give God our whole hearts and stop wavering between two opinions. If the world is god, then serve it. If pleasure is god, then serve it. But if the Lord — He is God — then let us, oh let us, serve Him alone! Why should we hold out any longer? Why should we be so in love with slavery as to refuse to renounce the world, the flesh, and the Devil — the spiritual chains that bind our souls down and keep them from rising to God? What are we afraid of? Is God not able to reward our complete obedience? If He is — as the almost Christian's halfhearted service seems to grant — then why will we not serve Him fully? For whatever reason we do this much, why not do more? Or do you think that being only half religious will make you happy, while going further will make you miserable? This, my brothers and sisters, is pure delusion — for what is it but this halfway devotion, this wavering between God and the world, that makes so many seemingly well-meaning people complete strangers to the comforts of religion? They take just enough religion to trouble their conscience about their sins, and pursue their sins just enough to deprive themselves of religion's comforts. But if they would sincerely leave everything behind in their hearts and

give themselves wholly to God, they would then — and only then — experience the indescribable pleasure of a mind at peace with itself. They would enjoy that peace of God which, even in this life, surpasses all understanding — a peace they had never known before. It is true that if we devote ourselves entirely to God, we will face contempt — but that is because contempt is what we need to heal our pride. We must give up some pleasures — but only because those pleasures make us unfit for spiritual ones, which are infinitely better. We must give up love of the world — but only so that we may be filled with the love of God. And when that love has once enlarged our hearts, we will, like Jacob serving for his beloved Rachel, think nothing too hard to endure, no hardship too great to bear, because of the love we will then have for our dear Redeemer. So easy, so delightful are the ways of God even in this life. But when we finally lay aside these bodies and our souls are filled with all the fullness of God — what heart can imagine, what tongue can express, with what unspeakable joy and satisfaction we will then look back on our sincere and wholehearted service. Do you think, my dear hearers, that we will regret having done too much — or rather, do you not think we will be ashamed that we did so little, and blush that we were so reluctant to give everything to God, when He intended one day to give us Himself?

Let me close, then, by urging you, my brothers and sisters, always to keep before you the immeasurable happiness of knowing and enjoying God. And consider this: every degree of holiness you neglect, every act of devotion you pass by, is a jewel taken from your crown — a degree of blessedness lost in the vision of God. If you will only always think and act this way, you will no longer spend your energy trying to bargain between God and the world.

Instead, you will be daily striving to give yourselves more and more to Him — always watchful, always praying, always reaching for greater purity and love. In this way you will be constantly preparing yourself for a fuller sight and enjoyment of that God, in whose presence there is fullness of joy, and at whose right hand there are pleasures forevermore. Amen! Amen!

## INTERCESSION EVERY CHRISTIAN'S DUTY



### INTERCESSION EVERY CHRISTIAN'S DUTY.

Thessalonians 5:25. Brethren, pray for us.

**1** If we ask why there is so little genuine love among Christians — why the very mark by which everyone should know we are disciples of the holy Jesus has almost disappeared from the Christian world — we will find it is largely due to the neglect, or halfhearted practice, of that most God-like part of private prayer: intercession, or pleading with God for His grace and mercy on behalf of others.

Some neglect the duty of praying for others because they rarely remember to pray for themselves. But even good people who are faithful in praying to their Father in heaven are often so self-focused and narrow in their approach to the throne of grace that they fail to expand their prayers for the welfare of their fellow Christians as they should. Because of this, they fall short of that Christian love — that genuine affection for their brothers and sisters — which their sacred calling requires them to pursue. And

without that love, the apostle tells us, even if they gave everything they owned to the poor and surrendered their bodies to be burned, it would profit them nothing.

Since this is so, I will use the words of our text — though they were originally written in a more limited context — to address three things: 1. That it is every Christian's duty to pray for others, as well as for himself. 2. Who we are to pray for, and how this duty should be carried out. And 3. I will offer some motivations to stir all Christians to abound in the great duty of intercession.

First, I will show that it is every Christian's duty to pray for others, as well as for himself.

Prayer is a duty rooted in natural religion — even the pagans never neglected it, though many who claim the Christian name among us do. Prayer is so essential to Christianity that you might as reasonably expect to find a living man without breath as a true Christian without the spirit of prayer and supplication. No sooner was Paul converted than the Lord Almighty said: 'Behold, he prays.' And so it is with every child of God — prayer has rightly been called the natural cry of the newborn soul.

In the heart of every true believer there is a heavenly pull, a divine attraction, that draws him to converse with God just as surely as a magnet draws iron.

A deep awareness of their own weakness and of Christ's fullness, along with a strong conviction of their natural sinfulness and their need for renewing grace, keeps them crying out day and night to their Almighty Redeemer. They cry that the divine image — lost

in Adam — may, through His powerful intercession and the transforming work of His Spirit, be begun, carried on, and fully perfected in both their souls and bodies.

Sincere Christians are this earnest, this persistent, in praying for themselves. But because they do not feel as vivid, lasting, or deep a sense of their brothers' and sisters' needs, they are for the most part too careless and lacking in their prayers for others. Yet if the love of God were truly shed abroad in our hearts, and if we loved our neighbors in the way that the Son of God loved us and commanded us to love, we could not help but be just as persistent in praying for their spiritual and physical welfare as for our own. We would desire and seek just as earnestly for others to share in the benefits of Christ's death and passion as we do for ourselves.

Let no one think this is some rare or unusually high level of devotion that most people cannot reach — it is nothing of the sort. If we are all commanded to love our neighbor — that is, every person — and even to lay down our lives for the brothers, then it is the duty of all to pray for their neighbors as much as for themselves. By every possible act and expression of love and affection toward others at all times, we should show our readiness to lay down our lives for them, should God ever call us to do so.

Our blessed Savior has given us an example in everything, and especially in this. In that most divine, most perfect, and incomparable prayer recorded in John 17, which He offered just before His passion, we find very few petitions for Himself, but many for His disciples' welfare. And in the perfect form of prayer He gave us, He taught us to say not 'my' Father, but 'our Father' — reminding us

that whenever we approach the throne of grace, we ought to pray not for ourselves alone, but for all our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Intercession is therefore certainly a duty that rests on all Christians.

Second, who we are to intercede for, and how this duty is to be carried out, is what I take up next.

First, our intercession must be universal. The apostle says: 'I will that prayers, supplications, and intercessions be made for all men.' For as God's mercy extends over all His works, and as Jesus Christ died to redeem a people out of every nation and language, we should pray that all people may come to a knowledge of the truth and be saved. Many precious promises are given in Scripture: that the Gospel will be proclaimed throughout the whole world, and that the earth will be covered with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. Therefore it is our duty not to confine our prayers to our own nation, but to pray that all peoples now sitting in darkness and the shadow of death may have the glorious Gospel shine upon them as it has upon us. You need no one to teach you this, since you yourselves are taught by God — by Jesus Christ Himself — to pray that His kingdom may come. Part of the meaning of that petition is that God's ways may be known upon the earth, and His saving power among all nations.

Next, following Paul's instruction, we should pray for those in authority, so that we may lead quiet and peaceful lives in all godliness and honesty. When we consider how heavy the burden of governing is, how much the welfare of a people depends on the zeal and godly example of their leaders, and the many dangers, difficul-

ties, and constant temptations to luxury and self-indulgence that governors face by virtue of their position, we will not only pity them but pray for them. We will pray that He who kept Esther, David, and Josiah untainted by the world amid the splendor of a royal court, and gave success to their endeavors, would likewise preserve those in authority as holy and blameless, and prosper all the work of their hands.

Third, you ought in a special way to pray for those whom the Holy Spirit has appointed as overseers over you. This is what Paul urges again and again in his letters to the churches. In our text he says: 'Brethren, pray for us.' And in his letter to the Ephesians: 'Praying always with all manner of supplication; and for me also, that I may open my mouth boldly to declare the mystery of the Gospel.' In another place, to show how earnest he was in this request and how vital their prayers were to him, he asks the church to strive — or, as the original word means, to be in an agony — together with him in prayer. And surely, if the great apostle Paul, that chosen vessel and favorite of heaven, needed the most fervent prayers of his converts, how much more do ordinary ministers of the Gospel need the intercession of their own congregations.

I must press this point in particular, because the matter is so important. There is no doubt that much good is frequently withheld from many people because they neglect to pray for their ministers — good that they would have received had they prayed as they ought. People often complain of a shortage of faithful and diligent pastors, but how do they deserve good pastors when they will not earnestly pray to God for them?

The church has set apart four seasons each year for exactly this purpose — to call down a blessing on those who are to be ordained to any holy office. But how few observe these ember days! And if we will not pray to the Lord of the harvest, can we expect Him to send workers into His harvest?

Besides, how ungrateful it is not to pray for your ministers! They watch and labor in the Word and in teaching for your sake and for your salvation — should you not pray for them in return? When people do favors for your body, you consider it right and proper to pray for them. Should those who daily feed and nourish your souls not be remembered in your prayers? Add to this: praying for your ministers is a clear sign that you believe that though Paul may plant and Apollos water, it is God alone who gives the growth. You will also find it the best thing you can do for your own benefit, because God, in answer to your prayers, may give them a double portion of His Holy Spirit. This will equip them to bring you deeper knowledge in spiritual things and enable them to divide the word of truth more skillfully.

If people would faithfully practice this — humbly asking God to answer all the prayers their ministers are offering on their behalf, and praying that the Holy Spirit would fall on all who hear the Word — we would see a much more visible effect of their preaching and a far greater love between ministers and their people. Ministers' hands would be held up by the people's intercessions, and the people would never dare to slander or speak against those who are the constant subjects of their own prayers.

Next after our ministers, our friends deserve a place in our intercessions — but we should not limit ourselves to vague, general prayers for them. We should tailor our prayers to their particular

circumstances. When Miriam was struck with leprosy, Moses cried out: 'Lord, heal her.' When the nobleman came to Jesus on behalf of his child, he said: 'Lord, my little daughter lies at the point of death — please come and heal her.' In the same way, when any of our friends are in difficult circumstances, we should pray for them with those specific circumstances in mind. For example: is a friend sick? We should pray that, if it is God's good pleasure, it may not be unto death — but if otherwise, that He would give that friend grace to receive His correction rightly, so that, after this painful life ends, he may dwell with God in life everlasting. Is a friend facing a difficult decision? We should lay his situation before God — as Moses brought the case of the daughters of Zelophehad — and pray that God's Holy Spirit would lead him into all truth. Is he in want? We should pray that his faith will not fail, and that in God's good time he will be relieved. In all such situations, we should not pray for our friends in mere generalities but shape our prayers to their needs — a difficult duty, yet not impossible for those who have turned away from an excessive love of the things of this present life. It is from that kind of disordered love, and that alone, that all enmity arises. Those who know the terrible warning given to those who cause Christ's little ones to stumble can, out of genuine compassion and concern for their danger, pray even for those by whom such offenses come.

Finally, to conclude this section: we should intercede for all who are in any way afflicted in mind, body, or circumstances — for all who ask for our prayers and stand in need of them, and for all who do not pray for themselves.

Oh, that all who hear me would set aside some time every day for the faithful practice of this most necessary duty!

I now move on to the third main point I proposed to address.

Third: to show the benefits of daily intercession and to offer some reasons to motivate you to practice it.

First, intercession will fill your hearts with love for one another. Someone who daily and sincerely intercedes at the throne of grace for all people cannot help but be filled, in a short time, with love and charity toward all. The frequent exercise of this love will gradually enlarge his heart and make him a partaker of that overflowing love that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Envy, malice, revenge, and other such destructive attitudes can never long make their home in the heart of a faithful intercessor. Instead, he will be filled with joy, peace, gentleness, patience, and all the other graces of the Holy Spirit. By regularly laying his neighbor's needs before God, he will develop a genuine fellow-feeling for them. He will rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. Every blessing received by others, rather than stirring envy in him, will be seen as an answer to his own prayers for them, and fill his soul with unspeakable joy.

Therefore, abound in acts of both general and specific intercession. When you hear of a neighbor's faults, instead of spreading them to others, bring them quietly before God and ask Him to correct and change that person. When you hear of a notorious sinner, instead of feeling self-righteous anger, ask Jesus Christ to convert him and make him a monument of His free grace. You cannot imagine what a blessed change this practice will bring about in your own heart, and how much you will grow, day by day, in a spirit of love and gentleness toward all people.

To motivate you further to practice intercession faithfully, consider the many examples in Scripture of its power and effectiveness. Great and remarkable things are recorded there as the results of this holy work. Intercession has stopped plagues, it has opened and shut heaven, and it has repeatedly turned away God's anger from His people. Abimelech's household was freed from the disease God had sent among them through Abraham's intercession. When Phineas stood up and prayed, the plague stopped immediately. When Daniel humbled himself and interceded for God's inheritance, an angel was sent at once to tell him his prayer had been heard. And, to give one more example, consider how God Himself appears almost overcome by the persistence of Moses when Moses interceded for his idolatrous people — 'Let Me alone,' says God.

This clearly shows — I might almost say — the unstoppable power of intercession, and how we may, like Jacob, wrestle with God and by holy persistence prevail both for ourselves and for others. There is no doubt that it is the secret, prevailing intercessions of the few righteous souls still remaining among us that have led God to spare this miserably sinful nation. Were there not such faithful ones, like Moses, still standing in the gap, we would already have been destroyed like Sodom and reduced to ashes like Gomorrah.

To stir you further to this God-like work of intercession, consider that it is very likely the ongoing occupation of the glorified saints in heaven. Though they are freed from the burden of the body and restored to the glorious liberty of God's children, their happiness will not be fully complete until the resurrection of the last day, when all their brothers and sisters will be glorified with

them. We can therefore believe they are often earnestly asking our heavenly Father to soon complete the number of His elect and hasten His kingdom. Should we, who are still on earth, not often engage in this holy work alongside the glorious company of the spirits of the righteous made perfect? Since so much of our eternal happiness will consist in the communion of saints in the triumphant church above, should we not regularly intercede for the church militant here below? Should we not earnestly pray that we may all be one — even as the holy Jesus and His Father are one — and that we may all be made perfect in that unity?

To draw you into this great work and labor of love, remember that it is the ceaseless occupation of the holy and highly exalted Jesus Himself, who sits at the right hand of God, hears all our prayers, and makes continual intercession for us. So the person who is constantly interceding for others on earth is doing the very thing that the eternal Son of God is always doing in heaven.

Picture, then, when you are lifting up holy hands in prayer for one another, that you see the heavens opened and the Son of God in all His glory — as the great high priest of your salvation — offering and pleading the all-sufficient merit of His sacrifice before the throne of His heavenly Father. Join your intercessions with His, and ask Him to let them rise, through Him, as incense, received as a pleasing aroma, acceptable in the sight of God. This vision will strengthen your faith, stir up holy earnestness in your prayers, and make you wrestle with God as Jacob did when he saw Him face to face and his life was preserved — as Abraham did when he pleaded for Sodom — and as Jesus Christ Himself did when He prayed in agony, all the more earnestly, on the night before His bitter passion.

And now, brothers and sisters, what more can I say? You are taught by Jesus Christ Himself to overflow in love and in this good work of praying for one another. However humble your station, though as poor as Lazarus, you will become a benefactor to all humanity through intercession. Thousands — yes, tens of thousands — will be blessed because of you. And after you have spent a few years in this holy work on earth, you will be carried to that happy place where you have so often prayed others might go. You will be exalted to sit at the right hand of our all-powerful, all-prevailing Intercessor, in the kingdom of His heavenly Father forever.

I must press this duty upon you with special urgency now, because in all probability most of you who have heard me preach will see me no more. I am leaving — I trust under the guidance of God's Holy Spirit — without knowing what will happen to me. I therefore need your most fervent intercessions: that nothing will shake me from my duty, and that I may not count even my life precious to myself, so long as I may finish my course with joy and complete the ministry I received from the Lord Jesus to testify to the Gospel of the grace of God.

While I have been among you, I have, to the best of my knowledge, not failed to declare to you the whole will of God. Though my preaching may have been an occasion of death to some, I trust it has also been an occasion of life to others. I earnestly hope that those to whom it has been life will not forget to remember me in their prayers. As for my part, the many kindnesses you have shown me — far more than I deserved — will not allow me to forget you. Out of the deep, I trust, my cry will go up to God, and while winds and storms blow over me, I will make my prayers to the Lord on your behalf. For it is only a little while before we must all stand be-

fore the judgment seat of Christ — where I must give a strict account of the doctrine I have preached, and you of what you did with it. Oh, may I never be called as a witness against any of those for whose salvation I have sincerely, though too feebly, longed and labored.

It is true that some have accused me of acting from hidden and selfish motives, but it is a small thing to me to be judged by human opinion. I hope my motives are pure, but I beg you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God in Christ Jesus — pray that they may be even more so, and that I may grow in the knowledge and love of God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

And now, brothers and sisters, what more can I say? I could wish to go on much longer, for I can never fully put into words the longing of my soul for you. Finally, then, brothers and sisters: whatever things are holy, whatever things are pure, whatever things are honest, whatever things are of good report — if there is any consolation in Christ, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any hope of our standing together with joy at the awesome tribunal of Jesus Christ — think on the things you have heard, and on what your pastors have declared and will yet declare to you. Continue under their ministry to work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, so that whether I see you again or whether God brings me back to you at some point, I may always have the joy of knowing that your lives are worthy of the Gospel of Christ.

I almost feel I could willingly endure anything, if it might in any way advance the salvation of your precious and immortal souls. And I urge you, as my last request: obey those who have authority over you in the Lord, and always be ready to attend their ministry — it is our duty. Do not think I am seeking to elevate my-

self at the expense of anyone else's reputation. Rather, think of it this way: do not hold men's personalities in too high an admiration, but hold your ministers in high esteem and love, as they justly deserve for the sake of their work.

And now, brothers and sisters, I commit you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. May God reward you for all your works of faith and labors of love, and cause you to overflow more and more in every good word and work toward all people. May He truly convert all who have been convicted of sin, and awaken all who are dead in trespasses and sins. May He strengthen all who are wavering. And may you all go forward from one degree of grace to another, until you reach the full measure of the stature of Christ, and are thereby made ready to stand before that God in whose presence is fullness of joy, and at whose right hand there are pleasures forevermore. Amen! Amen!

## THANKS FOR READING



If you spotted a typo or have feedback, the email is **sam@goodsoilapps.com** — or use the in-app feedback form in *Christian Reader*.