



4. BUT ONE THING IS NEEDFUL (*Luke 10:42*).

THERE is much lost time and travel [*travail*] in this world, and it will be found ere it be long, that many of the sons of men weary themselves for very vanity. Some have neither right designs, nor take the right means to obtain them, and therefore we need not wonder, that they are toiled, tossed, and fretted, and yet come little speed [*make little progress*], because they bestow their pains and labor to obtain that which is not needful and they neglect that which is absolutely necessary. And O! how many will cry at the day of judgment, that they have made a bad bargain on this account? If any question be needful to be resolved what we should be peremptory about, and about what we should be indifferent here, our Savior decides this question in the text, *Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled, thou art cumbered, and at much pains about many things* [verse 41]; but it is lost labor; you will get nothing but much trouble and vexation by it. And what pray is the reason, that her pains were troublesome, and not easy or peaceful? He answers, you betake yourself to that which is not necessary, or of any great moment, and you neglect the *one thing which is needful*.

Now, in these words, we have: I. A maxim, or conclusion most needful to all Christians laid down by our Lord.[†] *But one thing is needful*. II. Christ's approbation of Mary's choice in opposition to Martha's care,

[†]The first division is the only one covered in this sermon. Howie (*Scots Worthies*) records that there were eight sermons on the one thing needful, along with one on prayer and two on immoderate anxiety (apparently the three preceding sermons).

that some way illustrates what that *one thing needful* is. 'Mary has chosen that good part, she has betaken herself to hear my words, for the good and advantage of her immortal soul, and she is quiet and content with that, but thou art taken up with many other things, and can never expect quietness nor contentedness in that way.' III. The reason of our Lord's approbation of Mary's practice, which further confirms this truth, that there is but *one thing absolutely needful*. Mary has chosen that one thing, that good part, which shall not be taken away from her. Other things, such as riches, credit, and all the vain enjoyments of this present world will leave people some time or other, but this one thing, and this only, will abide with them, and therefore there is but *one thing needful*.

I. There is but one thing absolutely needful, in opposition to the many things that worldly men are careful about, and here it will be necessary to show you, 1. *What this one thing is.* 2. *How it is needful.*

1. As to the first of these, we observe, (1) That this one thing mentioned in the text, is not simply any created or temporary thing; it must be something which cannot be taken away from us, something that is spiritual, eternal, and satisfactory.

(2) It is not the mere form of religion, for that both may, and will assuredly be taken from us. *To him that hath, saith Christ, shall be given, and from him that hath not, shall be taken away, even that which he seemeth to have. Not every one that says, Lord, Lord, shall enter into heaven* [Luke 19:26; Matt. 7:21].

(3) Neither, thirdly, is it any one particular step or branch of religion; for the promise of happiness is not knit to it, but to universal godliness and obedience to God's will in the general. For though Mary sat at Christ's feet, and heard his word, and was justly commended by Christ on that account, yet it is not for that of itself, but as it evidenced her love to our Savior, and her respect to godliness, and her eager and earnest desire to get her soul saved by Christ. But positively and more directly, *the*

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one thing needful is, the services and sincere practice of true godliness, in order to the saving of our souls, peace with God through the Lord Jesus, communion and fellowship with the Father and his Son. It is not then the bare hearing of the Word as our indispensable duty, but as it is a mean of our daily progress in holiness and godliness, and of our peace and reconciliation with God. And therefore this one thing can be nothing else, but godliness in the life, power and practice of it. It comes then all to the same thing, whether we call this one thing needful, Christ, religion, or the saving of the soul, since the eternal salvation of our souls is the end, and our union and communion with Christ, is the mean or *mids* of attaining this end, which is always inseparably connected with the practice of unfeigned piety. *For godliness, Paul says, is profitable unto all things, having the promise of the life that now is, and that which is to come* [1 Tim. 4:8]. This one thing then is godliness, in its spirit, power, and substance. *One thing, says the Psalmist, I have desired of the Lord, and that will I seek after, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord forever, to behold the beauty of the Lord* [Ps. 27:4]. It was not to attend upon outward ordinances only, but to be lively in religion, to have communion with God in his sacred institutions, and to have the amiable and desirable hope of enjoying God in heaven. This is the one thing, which comprehends many other things, the making of our peace with God, through Jesus our peace-maker and Mediator, and the study of the power and practice of godliness, *that our spirits may be saved in the day of the Lord.*

2. [*How it is needful.*] We notice also, secondly, that this one thing is said to be needful or necessary, it does not comprehend every kind of necessity; for meat, drink, clothes, health, strength, and other things are also needful in their own kind, but there is nothing peremptorily, or absolutely needful, *but this one thing.* The believer may want [*lack*] other things, but cannot be without this. And *this one thing is needful* in these respects,

First. As it is God's commandment, and what is highly pleasing to him, and approven by him. We may also please God, and be approven of him, though we be not rich in worldly goods, or in credit, or though we have not health and strength; neither are we commanded to be rich, but we are commanded to be godly, to be at peace with God, to be sincere in the performance of every commanded duty.

Second. Religion is the one thing needful with respect to its great end, namely, to make us happy here and hereafter. There is but one thing absolutely needful as it is inseparably connected with our welfare and felicity. It is not these many things some are troubled and careful to obtain, but it is this one thing, the practice of godliness, and our peace with God, that can make us happy. The meaning then of the words is, if Christ had said, "Martha, your mind is taken up with many things, and ye are troubled with them, and that is all the profit ye get. Trouble yourself as ye will, to get all things right, they will not be guided by you, nor can they satisfy you. But there is one thing needful—namely, the practice of godliness, and peace with God, in order to the saving of your soul—absolutely necessary for your blessedness; but the other things you are careful about, are not."

The scope then of the words runs upon these two grounds of doctrine: 1. To divert people from their greedy and eager pursuit after created things, for there is but one thing absolutely needful.

And 2. To point out the absolutely necessity of godliness, and this does evidently intimate to us, that, have what we will, we cannot be well without godliness in the life, and power of it; all other things will be naught without this.

These are two plain truths, 1. That there is nothing absolutely necessary for the happiness of men and women, but godliness, and peace with God, and the making sure of our own salvation and holy calling through Christ Jesus. 2. If then there is one thing necessary, and if this

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be it, then there is nothing absolutely needful but this for a man's happiness. And this appears: (1) When we consider that though a man have all other things, and want godliness, yet he cannot be happy. (2) Though a man want all other things, and be godly, and have peace with God, he cannot be miserable. No other thing can mar his happiness; and these two being clear and certain, it will natively follow, that there is nothing absolutely needful for a man's supreme happiness, but the exercise of godliness and true piety. If then the possession of other things cannot make men happy, and the want of them cannot make them miserable, then surely no other thing is absolutely necessary to promote our welfare but true religion.

(1) We say, that a man, though he has all other things, yet he cannot be happy without godliness. There is a summary or induction of these things drawn by the apostle [in] 1 John 2:15–16, in these three particulars: all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life, pleasure, wealth, honor, preferment, and profit—what can all these do when they are put together to make a man happy? For that which concerns a man's happiness must be a spiritual, incorporeal, incorruptible, and an immortal thing; the soul of man being a spiritual substance, must have a suitable object to its nature. Again, secondly, it must be perfect; for no imperfect thing can make any man happy. Thirdly, it must be eternal and unchangeable, for one cannot be happy the day [*today*] and miserable to-morrow. If then it be a thing that is subject to change, it cannot make us happy.

Now, if we put all the idols that are in the world together, they have none of these three things. They are not spiritual, and cannot satisfy the soul, which must have an object suitable to itself; they are not perfect, but have some defect. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing, they are but temporal and not eternal: a man may be pulled from them or they from him. And for further confirmation

of this truth, that a man's life, peace, and comfort, consists not in the abundance of the things which he possesses, it will be father cleared and confirmed, if we consider,

{1} The experience of all who have gone before us, who have found all these things to be but *vanity, and vexation of spirit*. Solomon, who tried this of purpose, and had both the best means, skill, and dexterity to obtain it, gave it over, declaring, *that all things were full of vanity, and vexation* [cf. Eccles. 1:14]; he found no ground to expect satisfaction or contentment in them, and therefore despaired of attaining it.

{2} There is none of these things which have the promise of blessedness; for happiness must either come from these things themselves; but it is not in them, as we have already shown, nor from God's promises annexed to them; for they have not the promise. Riches, profit, pleasure, or credit, have not the promise. *But godliness is profitable unto all things, having the promise of the life that now is, and that which is to come* [1 Tim. 4:8]. Is it then possible, that a man can be happy, and yet want [*lack*] all the promises? And the man, who is destitute of true piety, though he had all things the world can afford, yet he cannot be happy without these goods which are promised.

{3} All these things may be accompanied with God's curse; *for as many as are under the law, are under the curse*, they are condemned already, as it is written, *Cursed is everyone who continueth not in all these things which are written in the law to do them* [Gal. 3:10]; and can a man be happy, have what he will, and yet be under God's wrath and curse, and liable to all misery here and hereafter? Suppose you had a happiness as to created contentments, and worldly enjoyments, beyond all other men in the world, and suppose it were lengthened or extended to a height beyond any we ever heard of. You cannot be happy; your table is a snare, a trap, and a stumbling block. Your wealth, pleasures, and honors are accursed. And we may see, ere long, that these who have had most of

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this world's good, with the curse of God upon all these blessings, are in a miserable condition.

{4} There will be an end of all the things that are in this world. Men's pomp and vanity will not descend into the grave with them; riches will not avail or profit them in the day of wrath. The world, ere long, will be burned into ashes [2 Pet. 3:7], and it will not be known then, where such a city, such a house, or such a man's lands were; and if it be so, these things cannot be absolutely needful for our true happiness. There is then enough to point out the variety of this one ground, that suppose a man had the whole world, and all these things that are perishing, they could not make him happy. But,

(2) As a man can be happy without these things, so they cannot be absolutely needful to promote his welfare. Will any say, that none can be truly happy but the rich man, or the honorable man, that are in eminent stations? Will any say, that none can be happy but the strong, healthy, and powerful, or he that is wise, learned, and well versed in the sciences? If any would say so, they would thortour [*oppose*] and counteract the whole tract and scope of the gospel, that says, *Blessed are the poor in spirit ... Blessed are they that mourn ... Blessed are the meek, merciful, and pure in heart ... Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness ... Blessed are they who are persecuted, reviled, and reproached for the sake of righteousness*. Though Stephen was gnashed upon with the teeth of his enemies, and accused as a blasphemer, and even stoned to death, yet he was not the less happy; neither was the tranquility of his mind, nor his hope of glory brangled [*shaken*], or impaired by his violent death.

This truth might be further illustrated and confirmed: {1} From the experience of all God's saints and servants. The godly man in all ages of the world, has always had the most contented and cheerful life, the most joyful and comfortable death, even though he was under the cross, and wanted [*lacked*] these things. This is evident from Paul's case, *as sorrow-*

ful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things [2 Cor. 6:10]. They have learned, in every case and state to be content; they *have all things and abound*; they *can do all things through Christ, who strengthened them* [Phil. 4:11–13].

{2} They have God's favour, friendship, and peace, his promise, and covenant, and they can lake [*lack*] no good or happiness, though they want [*lack*] the things of the world. And what can mar that man's happiness, who has peace with God, who is in covenant with him, and will have all the promises of it fulfilled with respect to his spiritual good, though he have nothing of this world? When God covenanted with Abraham, he had not a foot breadth of this earth, and yet God blessed him, and made him wealthy and powerful. Therefore a man may be happy without these. We may also observe to confirm this,

{3} *That all these who are blessed in heaven, or shall be blessed in the eternal kingdom and glory of Christ, their happiness is perfect, and will be perfected, without these worldly things.* They will not be happy in the use of created enjoyments in heaven, for there is no need of meat, drink, or clothes in heaven, such as are here; for their happiness is spiritual and immortal: and the reason of this is evident. For,

REASON ONE. The Lord would not have created things necessary to promote our happiness, that thereby he may restrain the immoderate edge that is in our spirits after these creatures. For if they were absolutely necessary to procure it, how greedily would they be followed and doted upon, when we see such an immoderate pursuit of them, though they have no connection with our well-being. Wilt thou set thine eyes upon that which is not, *For riches take to themselves wings, and fly away* [Prov. 23:5]. It is folly for a man to place his happiness in that thing, that can neither mar nor further his happiness.

REASON TWO. The Lord has reserved as a prerogative to himself, to be absolutely needful, for the happiness of his people, that the edge

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of their affection and desire may be carried towards him; and that they may be brought to say, *Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon the earth that I desire besides thee* (Psalm 73:25). This is a singular prerogative. All things may be wanted [*gone without*] but God; and he alone is sufficient for his own happiness; and he will have his people contenting themselves in him as their happiness also, and would not have them to find contentment in other things.

REASON THREE. The Lord would by this discovery of the needlessness of other things, and of the absolutely necessity of himself, make his people more submissive to his dispensations in outward things; for it is a great ground of submission, when they know that these things are not absolutely needful, and that they may be happy without riches, health, strength; yea, without life, in sticking only to this: To have him and be like him.

The USE or improvement of this subject, is very plain and obvious.

USE ONE. I would have you study to have this plain truth acknowledged, and to yield yourselves to the belief of it. It is no controverted truth, nor is it liable to be controverted; and yet if it were believed, we would come a great length in religion. If, I say, it were believed, that there is nothing absolutely needful to happiness, and that there is nothing but folks may want [*lack*] it, and be well, but godliness, and to be at peace with God; to have God for our portion, and to be like him, it would have these advantages: It would loose people's affections from the creature, and draw them from the heat of their pursuits after creature comforts and contentments. One of the great things which mars the growth of religion, is that folks never come to dispute the necessity of godliness, they are so taken up with creature vanities. Some would be rich, and they are deaf to any other thing; some would have credit though it should cost them their life; they will not be discredited or ashamed, though they should die at the end of it. But if they lay such

a conclusion, more shame will follow upon it. And when such a conclusion is laid, there is a vent made to passion, revenge, loose-speaking, complaints, and the like. Some are unwilling to want a child [*be childless*], as if their happiness depended upon it, whereas, if it were believed, we may be well, though we want [*lack*] this or that, it would re-blunt the edge of our affections toward it.

2. Some folks would not think much of these things when they had them, considering that they may live and die miserable, and under God's curse, if they be without godliness, for all that. A man's life consists not in the abundance of these things which he possessed. Nay, there is a secret pride that follows the having of these things; they that have them, think themselves better than these who want them. The rich glutton thought himself much better than poor Lazarus, who lay at his gate full of sores, and yet it was just the contrary, for Lazarus was the happy man, and he was miserable, *Lazarus was comforted, and he was tormented* [Luke 16]. It is much to get a single [*certain*] or a right thought, of what it is to be happy.

But 3. This advantage would follow the belief of this truth: people would not be so soon anxious for the want of these things, though they were poor, and knew not where to get a meal of meat, or were under reproach or contempt. Why? They know that the having of meat, drink, credit, and the like, are not absolutely necessary for happiness; if God please he will give them, and if he keep them up [*withhold them*], his people can be happy without them. Though one was to be stoned to death, as Stephen was by the rude multitude, he may be happy for all that. What is it that makes people so eager in seeking, so tenacious in keeping, and so anxious when they want [*lack*] the creatures, but because they place somewhat of their happiness in them? And it is the want of a right faith of this truth, that they are not absolutely needful for their well-being, that is the ground of it; as it is the want of a thorough faith

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of the plainest truths, that we suspect not ourselves, in that which often mars our peace and progress in holiness. And so there is reason why we would have this believed as most profitable, and yet most rare. For if we look to folks' practice, there are but very few that will believe it. It is scarce one among many; and this evidently proves that they are so eager and anxious for many things of no moment, and very careless about the *one thing needful*. They are soon troubled about what concerns their names or estates; a petty loss, or a bad bargain, will sit heavy on them, when that which prejudices their souls, or their progress in godliness, does not affect them. Whence does this flow, but from this ground, that they think the one more needful than the other; and that they cannot be well, if they thrive not in their trade, and have not a name, and yet they apprehend they may be well, though they thrive not in godliness?

USE TWO. This may discover the great folly that is among men; and give ground to expostulate with them for it. If nothing be absolutely necessary for happiness but godliness, what will become of the most part of men that slight it, and desire and endeavor to obtain other things? *They spend their money for that which is not bread, and their labour for that which satisfieth not* [cf. Isa. 55:2]. They go many a wearisome foot, and yet find nothing but vanity; they gather wealth and put it into a bag with holes; they labor in the fire, and have no fruit of their labor, more than they had never had anything [Hag. 1:6; Hab. 2:13]. And they shall know, to their woeful experience, this truth, when the world shall be burned, and they shall be stripped naked of all their enjoyments, and brought to an account for *wearying themselves with very vanity* [Hab. 2:13]; and their neglecting the *one thing needful*. It will be a great thing to get folks convinced of this now, they cannot believe it, but they are seeking the *one thing needful*, and they think they place not their happiness in creatures. But if the Lord were discovering some of your hearts, could you say, that most of your time and pains have been spent upon

that which is most needful; if so then, what length are you come in godliness, when compared with what you formerly attained long since? What acquaintance have you with the spiritual exercises of pious souls, or of living by faith upon the Son of God? If you were coming to die, what is laid up for the foundation of your peace? Are you reconciled to God, and in good terms with him? Is your interest in Christ clear? Is there any ground of your acceptance with Christ at his coming, and second appearance?

I am not now speaking of guessing and conjectures, which the profaneest [*most profane*] may have, but what solid and real ground have you, that will bear you out if the day of judgment were come, and men and women were brought to the trial; or more particularly called out, and spoken to, and it were said unto them, “What have you been seeking as necessary?” Your deeds prove that you have come some speed [*progressed*] in other things, but what speed have ye come in your peace with God, in your progress in holiness, or in conformity to him? However you may now shift the challenge, you will then know it, that you have been loading yourselves with the thick clay, chaffing bells in the water,[†] beating the air, placing your well-being in that which many who have gone before you to heaven never had, on that your care was taken up about, and on that your pains and care was bestowed. But your conscience will tell you, there was never much seriousness in the *one thing needful*.

Now there is a day coming when we must give an account, and when

[†] *Chaffing*, or to chafe, means to worry or vex, and *chaffing bells*, while it may refer to specific bells common at the time, the sentence structure with verbs beginning two of the three items in the list, would indicate an action as well. The imagery may be of ringing or vigorously ringing of bells in or under the water, which is rather ineffective if they are to be heard; hence an ultimately useless activity. The first and third actions at least allude to scriptural imagery for futile or self-defeating endeavors (Hab. 2:6; 1 Cor. 9:26).

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the soul departs out of the body. As many of you have had, so many of you may have this question, "What have I now of all my labor that I have taken under the sun?" Is it not the saying of many when they come to die, "Alas! This false world has beguiled me. I thought all had been well, but now I see I have not made my peace with God"? Some expressions of this kind have been extorted from some that thought to have denied them; and I fear there be silence in many under this challenge, that have reason to speak. It were good therefore that there were some restraint upon your pursuit of many things, and that you would learn to turn about to seek the one thing which is absolutely needful.

To branch out the things which some people seek after here, were to fall upon an enumeration of all the idols which men hunt after, which would take a long time; yea, some time it will appear to be a very light thing that some folks will be taken up with, and be so eager in the pursuit of, as if their happiness were placed only in it, and they could not want it, as if it were a want, to have it supplied; if it be a cross, to have it removed; yea, where there is no want, to get an addition. Only in general, know that there is such an evil, and such a hazard, for immortal souls to *weary themselves for very vanity*, and to neglect the *one thing needful*.

USE THREE. It should teach these that want [*lack*] these things, namely wealth, honor, and pleasures, to quiet themselves, and not to fret, but be content with their lot, and to bless God that he has not made any of these things absolutely needful for our happiness, but himself only, that the poor, mean, and foolish may attain happiness, as well as the rich and honorable in the world, and these who have wit and learning, and are much cried up amongst men; and therefore if they be in want can say: "Blessed be God, this or that is not needful for my happiness. What is this I am taking so much pains for? I may be happy without this, why then should I vex myself about it?"

This I speak not to foster any people's neglect of their lawful calling,

but to moderate their affections in the prosecution of it, and to moderate their grief when they are disappointed of anything they would have; and that all may learn to supply the want of other things with religion, the *one thing needful*, without which, they can neither be happy here, nor hereafter.

USE FOUR. It would point out this, which is the scope of all, that godliness should be pre-emptorily studied as the *one thing needful*, because without it, a soul will never be well. This should put us all to be serious in the exercise of it, above any other thing, because godliness is not only commanded, but useful and profitable for all things, and so absolutely needful. This may recommend godliness to you above all things, because our happiness consists in it, and this cannot be said of any other thing in this world. ❧