

LAWFUL STRIFE

Preached on Lord's Day Morning, December 27, 1840, at Trinity Chapel, Alfred Street, Leicester

"And if a man also strive for masteries, yet is he not crowned except he strive lawfully." 2 Timothy 2:5

The Holy Ghost appears to have made much use of figures and illustrations in the word of God; and I believe we may find more or less of this mode of instruction from Genesis to Revelation. For instance, immediately after the fall, the Lord made use of a visible figure, when he made coats of skins, and clothed in them our first parents. What was this but a visible sign of the garment of imputed righteousness, in which alone they could stand accepted before him, connected with Christ's sacrifice, as the skin of the sacrificed animal was with its poured out blood? So after the flood, the Lord set his bow in the cloud, that, spanning earth and heaven, it might be a visible sign of his covenanted mercy from generation to generation. When we come a little lower down to the period when the Lord brought the children of Israel out of Egypt that they might be to him a peculiar people, He still chose the same visible mode of instruction by type and figure. The paschal lamb, the blood sprinkled on the lintel and the two side-posts, the ark of the covenant, the whole train of sacrifices, rites, and ceremonies, with all the furniture of the tabernacle, were all so many speaking figures, whereby spiritual instruction was communicated to those who had eyes to look through the type to the thing typified.

So when we come down to the times of the prophets, types and figures were still employed. Jeremiah is sent down to the Potter's house to learn God's absolute sovereignty (Jer. 18); was commanded to wear a linen girdle, and then hide it in a

hole of the rock by the river Euphrates, to show how the Lord would mar the pride of Judah (Jer. 13:1-11); and was shown the two baskets of figs, to teach them the difference between the precious and the vile. (Jer. 24.) So Isaiah walked barefoot three years for a sign and a wonder upon Egypt and Ethiopia (Isa. 20:3); and Ezekiel was commanded to take a tile and pourtray upon it the city, even Jerusalem, and lay siege against it. (Ezek. 4:1, 2.) When we come to the New Testament, we find the Lord making great use of this mode of instruction. All his parables were so many speaking figures, under which spiritual wisdom was couched. The sower going forth to sow, the woman hiding the leaven in three measures of meal, the man finding a pearl of great price, the net cast into the sea, the door, the shepherd, the vine to which he compares himself—what are all these but natural figures, which the Lord employs to convey spiritual instruction? Indeed so apt and so beautiful are some of these figures, that it has been a question with some, whether God had not in the original creation of all things a special view to spiritual truths. For instance, when he created the sheep, whether he had not a special eye to the elect; and when he created the vine, whether he had not a spiritual reference to Christ and his members. They thus look upon all outward creation as a type and figure of the new creation. But I think there is one consideration which shows that this view is not founded on truth. We find the apostle Paul employing figures not only altogether of man's invention, but even such as contain in themselves much evil. For instance, in four different places he has borrowed an illustration from the public games of the Greeks, which, like all large and promiscuous assemblies, were doubtless accompanied with much evil. Thus we find him speaking (1 Cor. 9:24-26,) "Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run that ye may obtain. And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things.

Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown, but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air." The figure here is clearly drawn from the foot race and the boxing match in use among the Greeks at their public games. So again (Heb. 12:1) he says, "Wherefore seeing we are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses," **alluding to the multitude of spectators that surrounds the runners for the prize, as a cloud** "let us lay aside every weight and the sin that doth so easily beset us," **as the racers threw aside all useless incumbrances** "and let us run with patience the race that is set before us." So speaking of his own experience (Php. 3:13, 14), he says, "Brethren, I count myself not to have apprehended, but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." Here he clearly alludes to the runner in the foot race who never thinks of the ground over which he has passed, in his eagerness to press forward and carry off the prize.

The fourth place where the same apostle borrows the figure of these public games, is the verse from which I intend, with God's help and blessing, to deliver a few thoughts this morning. "And if a man also strive for masteries, yet is he not crowned, except he strive lawfully."

In order to enter into the spiritual meaning of this text, I must detain you for a few minutes with the natural explanation of it. The Holy Ghost has chosen by the mouth of Paul to convey spiritual instruction under this natural figure; we must therefore break through this shell to get at the kernel, for unless we have a clear view of the figure itself, we shall have a confused idea of its spiritual signification.

The apostle then, as I have already shown, borrows a figure here from the public games in his time, where there were prizes given to those who obtained the victory in one of these five contests, the chariot, and the foot race, wrestling, boxing, and a combat made up of the two last. The "man that strives for masteries," means he who wrestles, or otherwise contends for victory, the prize being a crown of leaves, which was given publicly to the victor. Now there were certain rules and conditions, laid down beforehand, which were to be rigidly observed by all the candidates for the prize, and if any one of these what we may call "rules of the game" were broken by a candidate, then though he came in foremost, yet he lost the prize, because "he had not striven lawfully." that is, had not complied with the rules. To borrow a comparison from the horse-races of this country, **a practice I condemn, though I use the figure to throw a light upon the text** if a horse runs the wrong side of the post, or carries less weight than the rule of the race requires, he loses the prize, though he comes in the first.

Having thus far opened up the natural meaning of the figure, we will now proceed to the spiritual instruction conveyed by it. We gather from it, then, that in spiritual things, there is a striving lawfully, and a striving unlawfully; and that the prize is not necessarily given to him who wins the race, if he has not complied with certain rules laid down.

I think then we may say that there are three distinct ways of striving.

1. There is an unlawful striving after unlawful objects.
2. An unlawful striving after lawful objects.
3. A lawful striving after lawful objects.

Of these three kinds of striving two are wrong, and one is right. To strive unlawfully after unlawful objects is clearly wrong. To strive unlawfully after lawful objects deprives a man of the prize, and it is therefore wrong too. To strive lawfully after lawful objects is the only strife that the Lord crowns, and therefore the only strife that is right.

I. But as what is right is often more clearly shown by holding up what is wrong, I shall attempt to describe first what it is to strive unlawfully after unlawful objects.

1. To strive then after the pre-eminence, to be a Diotrephes in a church (3 John 9), is an unlawful striving after an unlawful object. There is to be no superiority, or pre-eminence among the followers of Christ. "All ye are brethren," said Jesus to his disciples (Matt. 23:8); "the greatest in the kingdom of heaven is he who is most like a child." (Matt. 18:4.) "The princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you; but whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant." (Matt. 20:25-26.) Pre-eminence among brethren is an unlawful object, and must therefore be always unlawfully striven after.

2. All strife about vain and idle questions is unlawful strife. "Of these things," says Paul, "put them in remembrance, charging them before the Lord that they strive not about words to no profit, but to the subverting of the hearers." (2 Tim. 2:14.) So he speaks of those who "dote about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds." (1 Tim. 6:4, 5.) When men of this cavilling, contentious spirit arise in churches, woe to their peace.

3. To seek after a form of godliness, while secretly denying the power thereof, or to have a name to live when dead in sin, is an unlawful striving after an unlawful object. To strive to be a whited sepulchre, a painted hypocrite, a deceiver of the churches, is awful striving indeed.

4. To strive after fleshly holiness and creature perfection is an unlawful strife. God never designed that the flesh should be holy. In his discourse with Nicodemus, Jesus laid it down at the very entrance in the divine life, that "that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit," thus establishing an eternal and unalterable distinction between them. "I know that in me," says Paul, "that is, in my flesh, there dwelleth no good thing." "The flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh, and these are contrary the one to the other." (Gal. 5:17.) All attempts therefore to improve or sanctify the flesh, are bidding "the leopard change his spots, and washing the Ethiopian white."

5. Again, all attempts to please God by anything that we ourselves can do, is an unlawful striving after an unlawful object. He cannot be so pleased. The corrupt fountain of our heart is continually pouring forth its polluted streams, and therefore all that comes out of it is polluted. Nothing short of perfect purity can please a perfectly pure God; and as no thought, word, or deed has passed from us by nature which is not defiled, it cannot please God. But how many think that their prayers or their tears or their good actions are acceptable to Him.

6. All attempt to keep the law in its strict requirements is an unlawful striving. That is, it is not done as God would have it done. Jesus, and He alone of all the sons of men, kept the law; and he who would go about to establish his own

righteousness, to the neglect or contempt of Christ's righteousness, strives unlawfully.

7. To strive to convert the world, and to turn goats into sheep, to seek to overthrow the eternal lines of distinction between the elect and the reprobate, and frustrate Jehovah's sovereign decrees of judgment and mercy, is an unlawful strife after an unlawful object. To break down the barriers of the church and the world, and reduce to mere nullities the distinguishing doctrines of grace, is indeed to strive contrary to every rule in the word of God.

8. To seek to find an easier and smoother path than the strait gate and the narrow way; to come into the fold, but not through the door of regeneration, as the Porter opens it; to be aiming at any other salvation than an experimental acquaintance with Christ and the power of his resurrection; to set up human talents, and creature religion as sufficient with, or without the Holy Ghost's heavenly teachings; to strive after natural faith, hope, repentance, and love—all are so many branches of unlawful striving after unlawful objects. By **unlawful** is meant as I said before, not that which is contrary to the letter of the law, not that which is not in strict accordance with the moral law, or the ten commandments, or any branch of the Mosaic law. The words "lawful" and "unlawful" in the text have no reference whatever to the law properly so called. The words "lawfully" and "unlawfully" mean a complying, or a not complying with certain rules and conditions, laid down in God's word. The laws and rules are not legal, old covenant rules, but gospel, law covenant conditions. Mistake me not. I do not here mean conditions to be performed by the creature, but certain rules, according to which the Holy Ghost works. "We are the clay, and He the Potter;" but the heavenly Potter works according to certain rules; and could it be possible for a vessel to be made

contrary to these rules, it would not be a vessel of honour meet for the master's use. I wish to explain myself clearly, for directly a man begins to talk about rules and conditions, there are plenty of persons so ignorant or so prejudiced, that they will be sure to make him an offender for a word. Remember this then, that by the word rules, laws, or conditions, I mean certain modes laid down in God's word, according to which the Holy Spirit acts, when he works in us to will and to do of his good pleasure.

All the striving then of carnal unregenerate professors is an unlawful striving after one or more unlawful objects.

Being destitute of heavenly teaching, lawful objects, that is, such objects as are set before the eyes of the elect, are never striven after by them. God has never enlightened them into the depths of the fall, nor brought his holy law into their conscience in its depth and spirituality. The fountains of the great deep in their heart were never broken up, nor their secret corruptions laid bare. Sin is a burden under which they never groaned, unbelief never grieved and plagued them, the utter alienation of their heart from God was never so discovered to them as to convince them of their helplessness and hopelessness. Isaiah's experience was never theirs, when he cried out, "Woe is me, for I am undone; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." Their comeliness was never turned into corruption like Daniel's nor did they ever abhor themselves in dust and ashes, like Job. Had this work been wrought with divine power on their consciences, had the law been inwardly applied, it would effectually have cut them off from all unlawful striving.

Nor on the other hand did the Holy Spirit ever set before the eyes of their mind the gospel of the grace of God. No carnal professor, whether Calvinist or Arminian, ever had a spiritual

knowledge of law or gospel. Had he experimentally known the law, it would have cut him off from unlawful striving. Had he known experimentally the gospel, it would have cut him off from unlawful objects. Thus they never had any inward taste of the sweetness of the gospel. The outward scheme and theory they might perfectly understand, and discuss it most exactly and learnedly; but the inward power, the heavenly sweetness, the divine application of it they had never the least acquaintance with. Their heads may be at Mount Zion, but their hearts are at Mount Sinai.

These unlawful strivers after unlawful objects are never crowned. They may indeed seem to arrive first at the goal; and we well know how an unburdened professor outstrips in zeal, activity, and outward religion, the poor heavy laden, panting child of God. But he is not crowned. He has carried no weight. He has run the wrong side of the post. He has won the race and lost the prize. We hear the great Judge at the last day, in reply to all his declarations of his having prophesied in his name, cast out devils, and done many mighty works, refuse the crown of eternal life with this awful sentence; "Depart from me, I never knew you."

I shall have occasion to show as I proceed with my subject, that the Judge of quick and dead gives the lawful victor two crowns, a crown here and a crown hereafter: the crown of his love and approbation in the conscience on earth, and the crown of eternal glory in heaven. The unlawful striver after unlawful objects has neither of these crowns bestowed upon him, for the one is but the foretaste and sure forerunner of the other. He has therefore no secret crown of divine approbation set on his heart. God never smiled into his soul, nor sanctioned with a divine manifestation in his conscience his words and works. Professors of every degree may have

bepraised him; but the sealing of the Spirit, the heavenly diadem of God's own putting on, was never felt nor known.

God's children themselves are often entangled in this freewill strife, especially younger days, before the Lord has purged away their filth by the Spirit of Judgment, and the Spirit of burning. We find this much in the case of the disciples, whilst their Lord was with them, before they were baptized with the Holy Ghost and with fire. Though quickened into spiritual life, they were continually striving after pre-eminence, each wishing to be greatest. Thus the sons of Zebedee, fearful of their own persuasive powers, must needs employ the valuable tongue of a woman, that powerful weapon which so few men can withstand, to induce their master to seat them on his left hand and his right hand in his kingdom. So, on another occasion, the same two disciples would have had fire come down from heaven to consume the Samaritans, when they would not receive Christ (Luke 9:54). Thus we in our youthful religious day were striving after many unlawful objects. Holiness in the flesh, to please God by our own exertions, to make ourselves religious, and understand the doctrines of grace by reading all sorts of religious books, to please professors, conciliate the world, avoid the cross, shun the imputation of uncharitableness, soften down carnal relations, and keep up old acquaintances,—who of us has never thus striven after these unlawful objects? But we could never get the Searcher of hearts, to put on our consciences the crown of his approbation. We strove for the mastery but were never crowned because we strove unlawfully.

II. But now I come to another kind of striving, which is unlawful strife after lawful objects. The strife we have just been describing was unlawful strife after unlawful objects. In that the things aimed at and sought after were as contrary to the rules of the word of God as the mode of striving to obtain

them. In the strife that we are about to consider now, the objects aimed at are lawful and good, but they are sought after in an unlawful, wrong way.

I repeat again, that lawful and unlawful here do not mean, and have nothing to do with the law properly so called, but signify a compliance or a noncompliance on the part of the striver with certain rules, which God has laid down in his word. What those rules are we shall see before long.

There are then certain lawful objects, set forth in the word of God, as the things to be aimed at by every one who runs the race set before him by the Holy Spirit. These lawful objects are the blessings which God blessed his church with in Christ Jesus. Who sits at the end of the race to award the prize? What says Paul? "Let us run with patience the race set before us, **looking unto Jesus**, the author and finisher of our faith." (Heb. 12:1, 2.) Now to whom can the runners in a race look, but to him who sits at the goal? They leave the spectators behind, and without stretched necks look forward to the Judge of the prize. He is "the Author of their faith," giving them power to run, and "the Finisher," by crowning it with his approbation.

To "win Christ" then is the object set before the soul that runs the heavenly race. "That I may win Christ," says Paul. (Php. 3:8.) But what is it to win Christ? Why to have him in our hearts as the hope of glory, to embrace him in our arms of faith and affection, and to be able to say feelingly, "My beloved is mine, and I am his." Again, pardon of sin, manifestations of mercy, visitations of God the Father's presence and love, the Spirit of adoption enabling the soul to cry, "Abba, Father," applications of Christ's atoning blood, and gracious discoveries of his glorious righteousness, these are lawful objects for the living family to strive after. Lawful,

not because the law, strictly so called, speaks of them, for the law never did testify of them either outwardly or inwardly, but because the believer's rule, the glorious gospel of the grace of God, sets forth these blessings as the portion of the people of God in the New Testament. Now none but a living soul ever panted and longed after these spiritual blessings. Hypocrites and reprobates may desire heaven to escape hell, as Balaam desired to die the death of the righteous. But I never can believe that any but a living soul desired an eternal heaven. Pardon of sin a reprobate may desire, to escape the gnawing of the worm that dieth not, and the fire that is not quenched; but I feel fully persuaded, that no one dead in sin longed and panted with intense breathings and burning desires after the manifestations of the pure love of an all pure God.

No natural man, no, not the highest doctrinal professor, ever poured out his soul after the blessed overshadowings of the Holy Ghost. It was never his daily longing, nor midnight cry. Such a blessing he has neither a heart to ask, nor a heart to receive.

But in his gracious dealings with his own children, the Lord usually sets before them certain blessings, of which he makes them feel their deep need, and after which he kindles in their soul intense desires. I well remember how ardently not quite fourteen years ago my soul longed after the knowledge of God. It came upon me in the depths of affliction, unsought, and abode with me for weeks at times night and day. what a spirit of grace and supplication I then had after the internal knowledge of God in Christ!

But there is an unlawful striving in quickened souls after these lawful objects.

Now God has laid down in his word of truth three solemn rules, laws you may call them if you like, which constitute lawful striving.

1. The Holy Ghost must begin, carry on, and finish the inward work of grace.
2. The soul must be brought under his divine teaching to be thoroughly stripped and emptied of all creature wisdom, strength, help, hope, and righteousness.
3. The glory of a Triune God must be the end and motive of all.

Any departure from these three rules of striving makes a man strive unlawfully.

Now in early days with us we are often striving after lawful objects, but our manner of striving after them is not in compliance with these three rules, and therefore we strive unlawfully. We are not stripped and laid low in a day. It is often the work of time. I can speak well from experience here. I was not stripped, nor brought down for several years after, as I trust, the Lord quickened my soul, though from the first I was led to strive more or less after lawful objects, and could not do without an internal religion. But thorough soul poverty had not laid hold of me, shame and confusion of face had not covered me. I had not then felt what a vile monster of iniquity I was, nor loathed and abhorred myself in dust and ashes. Man's utter helplessness was to me more a doctrine than a truth; I was not acquainted with the mighty overwhelming power of sin, nor had the ploughshare of temptation turned up the deep corruptions of my heart. I therefore strove unlawfully. When I fell as I fell continually, I had some secret reserve in self, some prayers, or

repentance, or hopes, or resolutions to help me out of the ditch. Have we not all been more or less here? We had a legal spirit influencing us, and there was a kind of dead hope that if we lived holy lives, believed the promises, looked, as we thought looking then was, to Christ, and kept perseveringly on, we should get the object of our desires. And though we never got a step forward in the matter, there was a dim struggling after progressive sanctification, and seeking the blessings of the gospel by the works of the law. Now what was the result of all this unlawful striving? Did God ever crown it with his gracious smiles and heavenly approbation? We know that he never did. When is the crown put on? "In the day of the espousals, and in the day of the gladness of the heart." (Song. 3:11.) And there can be no espousals, no manifested betrothing of the soul unto Christ in loving kindness, in mercies, in faithfulness, until we are dead to the law, our first husband. Then the crown is put upon the heart. God is a jealous God, and will not give his glory to another. Our own strivings shall never procure us the looks of his love. Now this denial of the crown to all their ardent desires and earnest strivings sadly puzzles and bewilders the seeking soul. Nay he is almost ready to quarrel with God, and accuse him of unfaithfulness, because he will not smile, and speak peace and pardon. Jeremiah was here, when with intemperate complaint, he cried aloud, "Why is my pain perpetual, and my wound incurable, which refuseth to be healed? Wilt thou be altogether unto me as a liar, and as waters that fail?" (Jer. 15:18.) But we cannot learn religion, as we learn arithmetic; we cannot take the slate, and copy out the rule, and work the sum. God's teachings are of a very different nature, intended to baffle and confound all the pride and wisdom of the creature. Nor can we hasten God's work. His teachings are not hasty teachings for the most part, but line upon line, line upon line, here a little and there a little. I cannot stand in your experience; you cannot stand in mine.

Neither of us know one jot more nor one jot less than the Holy Ghost has written upon our heart. We do not learn religion in a day. The way from Egypt to Canaan was but a few days journey, but the Lord choose to lead his people about in the wilderness, amid fiery flying serpents, drought, and famine, for forty years. And why, but "to humble them, and prove them, and know what was in their heart?" This was one part of the lesson; and the other was that "he might make them know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord." (Deut. 8:2, 3.) And thus we have to learn by painful experience the inutility of all creature strivings, and to be brought down into that state where all exertions fail.

LAWFUL STRIFE

III. But we come now to the only striving which the Lord crowns—a lawful striving after lawful objects.

Of the other two kinds of striving, the first was chiefly the striving of reprobates; therefore not crowned. The second was the striving of quickened souls, but not crowned, because they strove not according to gospel rules.

But now we are dealing with characters brought down to penury and utter insolvency, in the state described in the parable of the two servants, "when they had nothing to pay." What Hart calls "perfect poverty."

'Tis perfect poverty alone
That sets the soul at large;
Whilst we can call one mite our own,
We have no full discharge.

To bring this about is the work of the law. The gospel does

not reduce the soul to beggary. It only steps in as a friend to pay the debt when all one's own money is gone. The law draws all the money out of the pocket by crying, "Do, do," "work, work." But when all is gone, the law can do no more. The law then has done its office. The law puts a burden on, which burden is carried until the heart is brought down with labour, and the soul falls down, and there is none to help. (Ps. 107:12.) As Paul says, "I was alive without the law once, but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died." By this death the soul becomes dead to the law, as Paul says again, "Know ye not, brethren, **(for I speak to them that know the law)** how that the law hath dominion over a man as long as he liveth." (Rom. 7:1.) When then he dies **under** the law, he dies **to** the law, and the law ceases to have dominion over him. All strivings therefore of the elect under the law, end sooner or later in death to the law. Now I appeal to your consciences, whether God ever crowned your legal strivings. What has the law done for you? what can the law do for you, but to bring its curse in your heart, lay guilt on your conscience, and stir up slavish fear in your mind? To strive lawfully then, is not to strive after the law, but after certain rules laid down in the gospel. Well then, they are called laws, as the Holy Ghost uses the word when he says, "I will put my laws into their hearts, and write them in their minds." Now we will begin with the first rule, which is this, that the Holy Spirit must work in us all the power, wisdom, grace, faith, strength, and life, that we strive with. This work the apostle calls a law in. (Rom. 8:2.) "The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death." "Whatever is not of faith is sin." "As many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God." "The things of God knoweth no one but the Spirit of God." "When the Spirit of truth is come, he will guide you into all truth." Now whilst striving in our own strength, the power and reality of the Spirit's teachings were little known. We could

not lie passive, as helpless as the Potter's clay. All creature strength was not gone; some little store was left.

The **second** rule of lawful striving is, that the runners in this race should have no strength. "He giveth power to the faint, and to them that have no might he increaseth strength." "When we were without strength, Christ died for the ungodly." "Without me," said Jesus, "ye can do nothing." The Lord opened his ministry with setting forth his covenant character to the poor and needy. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, to set at liberty them that are bruised." So he said, "blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God. Blessed are ye that mourn, for ye shall be comforted." All the blessings of the gospel are promised to the poor in spirit, the outcasts of Israel. But who makes them poor? The Lord surely, according to that word, "The Lord maketh poor, and maketh rich." A man may indeed after a form make himself poor by wearing rags, and assuming the garb of poverty. I have read of a man who, from some whim or kind of madness, went about the country dressed and living as a common beggar. He had abundance of property, but he chose to dress in rags, and live on alms. Such a man was not really poor, as his apparent poverty was but a mask and a cheat. So spiritually, he that makes himself poor is not one of God's poor; and he infringes just as much upon the work of the Spirit, and is as much guilty of presumption and hypocrisy, as if he made himself rich. And a child of God who strives to make himself poor, strives unlawfully, for he acts against the rule, that all we are and have, all we know and feel aright, must be the whole and sole work of the blessed Spirit. A man that makes himself poor by throwing away outward pride, and putting on outward humility never passes in his soul through the

feelings that God exercises his children with. The living family are stripped **unwillingly**; they cannot believe the Lord is leading them in the right way. Despondency, unbelief, rebellion, infidelity work up in their heart against His teaching. Their former enjoyments, and what they thought communion are taken away, and they feel as Isaiah speaks, left as "a beacon upon the top of a mountain, and as an ensign on a hill." (Isai. 30:17.) The word beacon is in the margin, "a tree bereft of branches." And thus they stand bereft of all their spreading boughs of religion, a leafless trunk stripped of flowers and fruit, naked and bare. Perhaps some of you here never were in this spot—never lost all your religion, and stood before God without a grain, like the tall, leafless, branchless mast on the top of the hill, "O no," say you, "I have been very far, but was never driven into this spot yet." Then I will tell you a secret; If you belong unto God, you have to be driven farther than you have been yet. We read (Ezek. 17:24) that "the Lord dries up the green tree, and makes the dry tree to flourish." Then you must be dried up, for you are a green tree still, before you can flourish in the courts of the Lord. And perhaps when you get to have no religion, it will be the very time for the Lord to give you some of his. We are "to buy of him gold tried in the fire." Now if we look into the fire, where the gold was being tried, what should we see? why a crucible, that is a kind of earthen pot, with scum and dross and foam, bubbling and boiling. O where is the gold? Out of sight, at the bottom of the vessel, covered with scum and foam. So it is with the soul that is in the furnace. Faith, hope, and love, are all hid at the bottom of the heart, and the scum and dross of unbelief, despondency, and rebellion are alone seen. But when the refiner removes the scum with his rod, then the pure gold shines forth. Now whilst passing through this experience, you are striving lawfully, for you are fulfilling the second rule of the Christian strife. You are a poor needy

outcast, who can do nothing. You now are where Paul was, "though I be nothing." (2 Cor. 12:11.)

And this enables you to comply with the **third** rule of lawful strife—to give God all the glory. Surely you can take no glory to self, when self has been proved, and found wanting. Then if the Lord has made you poor, in order to make you rich, naked that he may clothe you, a beggar that he may relieve you, a bankrupt that he may pay all your debts, an insolvent that he may take you out of jail with flying colours in the face of your creditors, and has brought you down to the gates of hell to lift you up to the door of heaven, then surely you must give him all the glory. He has solemnly declared that "no flesh shall glory in his presence," and "he that glorieth let him glory in the Lord." But what is so staggering to nature and reason is the way that he brings about this taking to himself the glory. No man in his senses would walk in this way. But God does not act according to our senses, but "according to the counsel of his own will."

Thus we never strife lawfully till we cease to strive naturally. Then the Holy Spirit begins to strive within with groanings which cannot be uttered. No pretty prayers to tickle rotten professors; no cut and dried sentences with texts nicely assorted and fitted in like the squares of a chess-board, no flowers of eloquence to please those who are all for word and hate power. But the real striving is all inward work, sighing, crying, and groaning to the Lord. "Oh!" say you, "I will tell you what I call striving. It is to go to chapel three times on the Lord's day, attend prayer meetings, pray privately seven times regularly every day." Ah, my friend, this is striving after the flesh. The only striving that God acknowledges is the striving of the Spirit and the Spirit never strives effectually, till the flesh has ceased to strive.

Now this inward strivings of the Spirit are a fulfilling of the experience Paul describes. (2 Cor. 12:9, 10.) "When I am weak, he says, then am I strong." Why so? Because "the strength of Christ is made perfect in weakness." Then if I am saved, I am saved as a vile wretch, a monster of iniquity, by rich, free, sovereign, distinguishing grace. Not a drop of heavenly favour can reach my heart by my own exertions. I might as well think of taking up the Atlantic ocean in the hollow of my hand, as bring down into my soul a drop of God's love, or a single smile of his countenance. I may sigh, cry, groan, long, and pant after the shedding abroad of his love, but I cannot bring down one grain or atom of it within. Then if felt, must not we give to God all the glory?

Now these lawful strivers after lawful objects are crowned, and they only. This crown is two-fold—a crown here and a crown hereafter, a crown of grace set on the heart below, and the crown of glory set on the head above. Thus Paul says, "Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge shall give me at that day; and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing." (2 Tim. 4:8.) This crown none will have but those who have striven, striven lawfully to enter in at the strait gate, and striven successfully. The crown below is the crown spoken of in (Ezek. 16:12), "I put a beautiful crown on thine head;" and which the church laments to have lost, "The crown is fallen from our head." (Lam. 5:16.) This crown is put on the heart, when the Lord smiles approbation and acceptance in the Son of his love. As David speaks (Ps. 103:4), "Who crowneth thee with loving-kindness and tender mercies." Now this inward crown is never set on the heart of any but a beggar, that has been on the dunghill. "He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes, and make them inherit the throne of glory." This beggar is one who is

begging for a manifested interest in God's great salvation, clothed in rags and sitting in dust and ashes on the dunghill of his own corruptions. He and he only is raised up in his soul to sit among princes, the priests and kings, the royal generation, who are invariably crowned with divine favour below, and inherit the throne of glory above.

Now of this internal crowning I believe there are different degrees. There are no degrees in glory, but there certainly are degrees of grace. There are no pious eminent saints above close to the throne, whilst the thief on the cross and Mary Magdalene stand at the door as having been such great sinners. But below there are degrees of manifested favour; there are babes, young men, and fathers. Whenever then you have been enabled by faith to rest on Christ's blood and righteousness, whenever a drop of God's favour has flowed into your soul, whenever peace has been felt and known, and a solemn sense of God's goodness and mercy through the blood of the Lamb has been tasted; whenever in the depths of soul poverty and helplessness, help and strength have been found to cast your burden on the Lord, then and there you have been crowned as a lawful striver. O, say some, "We must have full assurance, and there is no faith without it." I believe that all true faith has a measure of assurance in it, but who can say how full it shall be. The leper who merely cried, "If thou wilt thou canst make me clean," had faith, and so had the woman who pressed through the throng to touch Jesus' garment, and so had the Canaanitish woman who sought but for a crumb from the children's table. This was a venturing faith, a faith of necessity, a faith working up and out of trials and burdens. This faith the Lord crowns as his own work, for he never crowns anything else. He crowns not our strivings but his own, not our work but the work of Jesus Christ. Have you then never felt a little of this soul melting work? "Aye," say you, "but it did not last long, and has been

but rarely felt." But where is it said how long it is to last, or how often to be felt? To have had the crown on but once, and that but for a few moments, is to have been crowned. You complain that you have lost these sweet feelings. But how could you have lost what you never had? You are saying, "the crown has fallen from my head." Then it must have been there. And I will tell you another thing, that if the crown was ever set on your heart, the rim of it has left its mark behind, and upon that spot where it has left its impression, you are longing to have it again set on. See then to it that you are striving lawfully. Have you run yourself out of breath yet? are your arms withered, your legs and back broken? Then will the Lord himself bear you, as on eagles' wings, to the end of the race, and lay you at the feet of the Judge, where you will learn that "the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong," but that "God has mercy upon whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth."