

The Exercise and Profit of Godliness

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"Exercise thyself unto godliness. For bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come."
1 Tim. 4:7, 8

Man has been called, and perhaps with some truth, a religious animal. Religion of some kind, at any rate, seems almost indispensable to his very existence; for from the most civilized nation to the most barbarous tribe upon the face of the earth, we find some form of religion practised. Whether this be engrained into the very constitution of man, or whether it be received by custom or tradition, I will not pretend to decide; but that some kind of religion is almost universally prevalent, is a fact that cannot be denied.

But is there not *true* religion as well as *false*? If the great bulk of mankind are wrapped up in a false religion, is there not a "remnant according to the election of grace," that possesses the true? Has that promise failed in its accomplishment, "A seed shall serve him?" (Psa. 22:30.) Does not the Lord Jesus Christ still reign at God's right hand, full of gifts and grace? And has he not promised to be with his church and people even to the end of the world? Thus, though it is perfectly true that the great bulk of mankind follow after shadows, yet there are a few whose souls are really intent upon substance. If there are those who are given up to believe a lie, there are those that love the truth; and if there are those who worship they know not what, there is still "the true circumcision, who worship God in the spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the

flesh."

I think that we find these two kinds of religion, false and true, earthly and heavenly, fleshly and spiritual, natural and supernatural, discriminated in the words before us. For it seems as though the Apostle calls false religion "bodily exercise," and tells Timothy that this bodily exercise "profiteth little;" and by way of contradistinction to this false religion, this bodily exercise that "profiteth little," he exhorts him to "exercise himself rather unto godliness," assuring him, that "godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come."

Our text, then, divides itself into two branches.

I.—"*Bodily exercise,*" that "*profiteth little.*" And,

II.—"*Godliness,*" which is "*profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.*"

I.—But why should the Apostle affix the term "*bodily exercise*" to false religion? What is there in the expression that seems descriptive of its nature? Let us examine it, probe it to the bottom, and see whether it be not descriptive of a religion of which God is not the origin nor end. By "*bodily exercise,*" then, I understand the employment of our mere natural faculties in the service and worship of God. And if you look at false religion in its various shapes and shades, you will see how much there is in it of this mere "*bodily exercise.*" Look, for instance, at Baal's priests, cutting themselves with lancets, crying from morning to evening, "O Baal, hear us!" and leaping upon the altar they had made. What was this but "*bodily exercise?*" Look at the Pharisees in the New Testament, praying at the corners of the streets, making broad their phylacteries, dropping with ostentation their gifts into the treasury, going up to the temple at certain hours,

fasting on certain days, and scrupulously giving tithes of mint, anise, and cummin. What was that but "bodily exercise?" Look at all the forms and ceremonies of Popery—the bowings, adorations, genuflections, changes of apparel, fastings, and macerating of the body. What is it all but "bodily exercise?" Look at Puseyism, that twin sister of Popery. Certain days, hours, vestments, postures of the body, chantings and intonings, mutterings and mumblings—mere outward movements of bodily organs, and all deriving their supposed virtue from the consecrating touch, the "bodily exercise," of a bishop's hand. Is not all this mere "bodily exercise?"—nothing in it being spiritual, heavenly, or divine? And not only these, but the great bulk of professors generally, who dissent from establishments, and follow a more scriptural worship, is not their religion often made up of "bodily exercise." They exercise their feet in walking to chapel; they exercise their voice in singing; they exercise their ears in hearing; they exercise their tongue in talking; they exercise their knees in kneeling; they exercise their eyes in reading the hymns, or their elbows in nudging the drowsy; they exercise their hands perhaps in giving: but, with all, it is only "bodily exercise." All this maybe done and is done by thousands, without one grain of the grace of God in their souls.

But "bodily exercise" may also be understood to comprise the exercise of *mental* faculties, as well as corporeal. Thus there is the exercise of the intellect in understanding the word of God; the exercise of the judgment upon the gifts or abilities of the preacher; the exercise of the memory in recollecting texts and sermons; the exercise of the affections in receiving the word with joy; the exercise of the conscience, as we read of those who were "convicted by their own conscience;" and of the heathen, "their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the meanwhile accusing or else excusing one

another." (Rom. 2:15.) And yet, all this mere mental, intellectual exercise. Men are not necessarily partakers of grace though they exercise their bodies in coming to a place of truth, or exercise their minds in listening to what is delivered from the pulpit.

The Apostle says of this "bodily exercise" (by which I understand the exercise of the body and mind together, as something distinct and apart from the grace of God in the soul) "it profiteth little;" or, as it is in the margin, "it profiteth for a little time." "It profiteth *little*;" it only profits whilst it lasts. It profits the body, but it does not profit the soul. It may profit the intellect, but it does not profit the heart. It profits for time, but not for eternity. It profits for momentary impressions, but not for everlasting salvation. It profits for an hour or a day; but it will not profit for the bed of death, at the bar of judgment, or in a never ending eternity. It may profit to stave back convictions, to harden the heart, to sear the conscience, to deaden the feelings, to wrap up the soul in a graceless profession. It may profit thus far (if the word "profit" may here be used consistently with the meaning of the term), but "profits little," and it profits for a little time, for the "end of these things is death."

Now, when you look at your religion, scrutinize it, analyze it, weigh it, and consider it—cannot you find much of this "bodily exercise" inherent in it, and combined with it? And here in fact lies one thing that often perplexes the mind and conscience of a real partaker of grace, that though he has vital godliness, he has so much of this "bodily exercise" with it. In fact, all religion which is not wrought in his soul from time to time, by the mighty power of God is but "bodily exercise." As then we have a great deal of religion which is not of God, and therefore nothing but "bodily exercise," (and the conscience of a child of God can only receive that religion

which is wrought in his heart by a divine power) it comes to pass, that when we weigh our religion in the scales of the sanctuary, we are compelled to write "Tekel" perhaps upon nine-tenths of it. Now this perplexes the judgment, exercises the mind, and tries the soul of many of God's people; for they, having light to see, life to feel, judgment to understand, affections to embrace, and a conscience to receive nothing but what is of God, their minds are perplexed by the strange intermixture of "bodily exercise" with vital, spiritual godliness. But there is this distinction betwixt the child of God and the one wrapped up altogether in "bodily exercise," that a man who has nothing but "bodily exercise" is satisfied with it; he has no craving for anything better, heavenly or divine; whereas a child of God counts all his righteousness as filthy rags, tramples under foot all his false religion as well as his own doings, and is satisfied with nothing but what the hand of God lodges in his heart, and the mouth of God speaks to his soul.

II.—But we pass on to our *second* point, which is, to consider *that* "godliness" which is so eternally distinct from the "bodily exercise" which profiteth little; and of which the Apostle says, it is "profitable unto all things."

But what is "godliness?" We must distinguish between "godliness," and the "exercise" of godliness. The Apostle makes this distinction. He says to Timothy, "Exercise thyself unto godliness; for godliness is profitable unto all things." He therefore draws a distinction between "godliness" and an "exercise" unto godliness. We will first, then, see what "godliness" is, and then we shall be better able to see what "exercise" unto godliness is.

By "godliness," then, we are to understand that which comes immediately from heaven; that of which God himself is the

author; which "cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither the shadow of turning." (James 1:17.) The Lord Jesus is "the author," that is the beginner, as well as "the finisher of faith;" and "the good work" which God has promised to fulfil, is said also to be "*begun*" by him. Every grain therefore of true religion, every spark of vital godliness, comes directly and immediately from God.

But this "godliness" has branches, parts, graces, gifts, teachings, and operations connected with it. For godliness is a very wide subject; it embraces the whole work of grace from first to last, from the very first sigh of conviction to the last hallelujah of a departing saint. Godliness embraces the whole work of the Spirit; and that work being so comprehensive and diversified, it must needs be a very extensive subject. It comprises repentance, faith, hope, love, prayerfulness, humility, contrition, brokenness, patience; in a word, every act of the blessed Spirit upon the soul, and every fruit that springs out of those actings of the Holy Ghost upon the heart.

But the chief thing to which the Apostle directs his son Timothy, and to which I wish this morning to direct your minds, is the "exercise" of godliness. Godliness at times seems to lie still in the heart. It is there, but without much apparent movement. The life of God never dies in the soul; but it has its ebbings and flowings, its throbbings, its heavings, its movements, its awakenings, its desires, its feelings, its actings, its goings out, its drawings in. This is the life of religion in the soul. In fact, we only know that we are partakers of godliness by feeling the exercise of it in the heart. The exercise, too, of godliness is known by the opposition it meets with. Every grace of the soul is from time to time drawn forth into exercise; but it is drawn forth

usually by the opposition made to it, by the difficulties it has to surmount, by the enemies it has to encounter, by the conflicts it has to pass through. And as the body is only kept healthy by exercise; as a man may lie in bed until he dies in bed; may bind up his arm, like an Indian Fakir, till he cannot put it down again; or tie up his leg till it wither in the socket; so religion must be continually exercised in order that the soul may be alive and healthy unto God. All the fruits and graces of the Spirit are, so to speak, stagnant in the soul, except so far as they are brought into living, individual, and active exercise.

Let us look a little more closely at these various graces, and see how they are brought into exercise.

1. There is the grace of *repentance*, sorrow for sin, holy mourning over the iniquities of our heart, lip, and life. But is not this holy sorrow, this contrition, this repentance, this mourning over sin—is not this grace of the Spirit often stagnant, as it were, and asleep in the soul? It has then to be drawn forth; to be exercised. And it is from time to time drawn forth into exercise as God is pleased to lay upon our consciences the filth and guilt, the weight and burden of sin; to set before our eyes the Lord Jesus Christ in his sufferings upon Calvary's tree; or to melt and soften our heart with some compunctious touches of the Spirit; and thus cause us to feel that repentance which is not to be repented of. Here is the exercise of repentance.

2. So with *faith*. You may possess faith; and doubtless there are those here who do possess it. But is not this precious grace and gift of faith often, so to speak, in your souls so dormant, that you cannot awaken it? so stagnant, that you cannot move it? But the Lord is pleased from time to time, by laying eternal things with weight and power upon the

conscience, by applying some truth to the heart, by visiting the soul with his Spirit and grace, by setting Jesus before the eyes, by drawing up our desires unto himself—the Lord is pleased, in some way like this, to call forth into exercise that dormant principle of faith, which before seemed well-nigh buried and hidden in the breast. It is drawn forth into exercise; it looks unto, believes in, and hangs upon the Lord Jesus Christ. It receives out of his fulness; it comes to him poor, needy, naked, faint, helpless, and receives strength to believe in his name—to look unto him—and to cast itself wholly upon him. Look at Jonah in the whale's belly, when he cries as it were out of the very belly of hell: how we find faith under the exercises of his soul; "Yet will I look again," he says, "toward thy holy temple!" Look at Hezekiah upon his bed of sickness, and, to his feelings, on the bed of death: how he turned to the wall, and cried, "O Lord, I am oppressed; undertake for me!" Look at David through all his various troubles, trials, afflictions, and persecutions: how his eyes and heart were continually looking up in faith unto the Lord, and resting wholly and solely upon him! And, in fact, God puts his people from time to time in such situations and trying circumstances, that they have no one else to look unto. They have no other help, shelter, or refuge; but out of sheer necessity are obliged to cast their souls on him who is able to save. And in this we often find the exercise of faith.

3. So with the exercise of *hope*. How the poor child of God sinks at times into such trouble and despondency as scarcely to have a grain of hope left! When Satan tempts, and guilt presses upon his conscience, how his soul is cast down within him! And when God hides his face, and he feels no help nor strength remaining in himself, how his heart is cast down into despondency, and almost despair! But how, too, in these seasons is his hope revived! How the Lord can and does apply a suitable promise to his desponding heart! How he can

bring to his recollection what he has done for him in times of old; the hills Mizar on which he has stood; the Ebenezers which he has been enabled to raise! How the Lord, laying his arm secretly underneath his soul, can whisper a hope in his breast that maketh not ashamed, and give him an anchor sure and steadfast within the veil.

4. Then, as to *love*—how cold, how dead, how unfeeling, how lifeless is the soul at times toward God and godliness, as though there had never been a spark of spiritual affection either to God or his people! But how the Lord can at times melt the soul into affection and love, and make Jesus truly and really dear, near, and precious! How dependent we are thus upon the Lord himself, not only for the communications of godliness, but also for the exercise of godliness! And how he himself must needs exercise his own graces in the soul!

But we pass on to consider how this "godliness," or rather, the "exercise" of godliness is "*profitable unto all things.*" The Apostle speaking of "bodily exercise" declares that it "profiteth little: but godliness," he says, "is profitable unto all things." What a comprehensive term—"all things!" So that there cannot arise a single circumstance in which and unto which godliness shall not be profitable. All states, all circumstances, all conditions; adversity or prosperity; what the world calls happiness, or what the world calls misery: take all the complicated circumstances that befall a child of God through his pilgrimage here below; and *of* them all, and *in* them all, *unto* them all, godliness is profitable. Not always to his feelings, not always in his judgment, not always in his apprehension; for, usually speaking, the things most profitable are to our feelings the most painful. And yet, "godliness is profitable unto all things." You cannot be placed in any circumstance in which godliness is not profitable; you cannot suffer any affliction in which godliness is not

profitable; you cannot meet with any trial unto which godliness is not profitable. There is not a single event that can befall you, in providence or in grace, unto which godliness will not be found in the end really and truly profitable.

But what is "*profitable*?" I may define it in one short sentence—that which does the soul good. Now "godliness" is profitable unto all things, as doing the soul good in all circumstances. Here it stands apart and separate from everything of a worldly nature. Here it is distinguished from the "bodily exercise that profiteth little." It is "profitable unto all things." In sickness, in health; in sunshine, in storm; upon the mount, in the valley; under whatever circumstances the child of God may be, "godliness," or rather the "exercise" of godliness, is profitable. And it is drawn out by these circumstances. It lives in the face of trials; it is strengthened by opposition; it becomes victorious through defeat; it gains the day in spite of every foe;

"Stands every storm, and lives at last."

It does not die away like "bodily exercise;" it does not bloom and fade in an hour; it is not like Jonah's gourd that grew and withered in a night; it does not leave the soul in the horrors of despair when it most needs comfort; it is not a fickle, false friend that turns its back in the dark and cloudy days of adversity. It is "a friend that loveth at all times," for the Author of it "sticketh closer than a brother." It can come to a bed of sickness when the body is racked with pain; it can enter a dungeon, as with Paul and Silas when their feet were in the stocks; it can go, and has gone with martyrs to the stake; it soothes the pillow of death; it takes the soul into eternity; and therefore, it is "profitable unto all things." It is a firm friend; a blessed companion; the life of the soul; the

health of the heart; yea, "Christ himself in you, the hope of glory." It is God's own work, God's own grace, God's own Spirit, God's own life, God's own power, God's own dealings, which end in God's own happiness; and therefore, it is "profitable unto *all* things."

But compare this work of grace upon the soul, this teaching of God in the heart, this life of faith within,—compare this vital, spiritual, heavenly, divine, supernatural religion, with that flimsy counterfeit, "bodily exercise." Compare the actings of real faith, real hope, real love; the teachings, the dealings, the leadings, and the operations of the blessed Spirit in the soul, with rounds of duties, superstitious forms, empty ceremonies, and a notional religion, however vamped up, however varnished. Compare the life of God in the heart of a saint, amidst all his dejection, despondency, trials, temptations, and exercises—compare that precious treasure, Christ's own grace in the soul, with all mere outside, superficial, flimsy, notional religion. O, it is no more to be compared than a grain of dust with a diamond; no more to be compared than a criminal in a dungeon to the sovereign on the throne. In fact, there is no comparison between them.

O what a mercy for you and me if we are partakers of godliness; if the Lord's own grace be in our soul; if there be anything divine in our heart! We shall find it "profitable unto all things." It will not go out in darkness; it will not expire like a flickering lamp; but will burn brighter and brighter unto the perfect day. We need envy none, if we are partakers of one grain of vital godliness. We need envy no professor, however high: nay, we need envy no child of God himself, however favoured. If there be real grace in our souls, it will be found "profitable unto all things." It will do the soul good. There is a reality in it; a blessedness in it; for there is eternal life and immortal bliss in it. It is of and from God; it came

from God, and leads to God. It begins on earth, but it is consummated in heaven. And therefore, well may we say, it is "profitable unto all things."

But there is another thing said of it—that it has "promise of *the life that now is.*" What is "the life that now is?" And how has godliness the promise of that as well as of the future?

1. "The life that now is"—the life that we live in the flesh—the life of these mortal bodies—is, for the most part, *a life of affliction.* For the Lord has chosen his Zion in the furnace of affliction. If we suffer with him, we are to be glorified together. Now godliness has "the promise of the life that now is," as a life of *affliction.* And O, how real affliction deadens us to everything else! When there is no affliction, the world dances before us with a sunbeam upon it—attractive, dazzling, and beautiful; and we, in our carnal minds, can fly from flower to flower as a butterfly in the sun. Our religion is at a very low ebb when this is the case: there may be a decent profession; but as to any life and power, how little is there except when affliction presses the soul down! True religion lies deep: it is not a balloon hovering over us miles up in the air. It is like truth—it lies at the bottom of the well. We must go down then into religion if we are to have it really in our hearts. The Lord Jesus Christ was "a Man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." He took the lowest, last, and least place. He was always down; so that if we are to be companions with the Lord Jesus Christ, we must go down with him—down into the valley, down into sufferings, down into humiliation, down into trial, down into sorrow. When we get puffed up by worldly joy, or elated by carnal excitement, we do not sympathise with the Lord Jesus Christ in his suffering manhood; we do not go with him then into the garden of Gethsemane, nor behold him as "the Lamb of God" on the accursed tree. We can do without Jesus very well

when the world smiles, and carnal things are uppermost in our heart. But let affliction come, a heavy cross, a burden to weigh us down, then we drop into the place where the Lord Jesus Christ is only to be found. We find *then* if the Lord is pleased to bring a little godliness into the soul, and to draw forth this godliness into vital exercise, that it has "the promise of the life that now is." There are promises connected with it of support and strength, comfort, consolation, and peace, that the world knows nothing of; there is a truth in it, a power, a reality, a blessedness in it, that tongue can never express. And when the soul gets pressed down into the vale of affliction, and the Lord is pleased to meet with it there, and visit it then, and draw forth godliness in its acting and exercises, then it is found to have "the promise of the life that now is." Faith, hope, love, repentance, prayerfulness, humility, contrition, long-suffering, and peace—all these gifts and graces of the Spirit are exercised chiefly when the soul is down in affliction. Here is "the promise of the life that now is," in the drawing forth of these heavenly graces in the heart.

2. "The life that now is," is *a life of temptation*. "Count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations." (James 1:2.) "He was tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin." (Heb. 4:15.) "Jesus was led up into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil." (Matt. 4:1.) And we are to share with him in these sufferings. It is, then, a life of temptation. O, how continually is the poor child of God tempted! And what strong temptations! how painful, how powerful! how distracting, or how entangling! how harassing, or how bewitching! How Satanic is the black devil! how more Satanic is the white devil! How continually is the child of God exercised with temptation! And temptation so suitable, so powerful, so overpowering, that nothing but the grace of God can ever subdue the temptation, or deliver the soul out of it.

But godliness hath the promise of "the life that now is," though "the life that now is," for the most part, is a life of temptation. For it is when godliness is in exercise, that the strength of temptation is defeated. But *where* are we? *what* are we? *what do* we? *what should* we do *not*? when sin and temptation meet together, and the Lord's grace does not intervene? Now "godliness hath the promise of the life that now is," that you "shall not be tempted above that ye are able to bear, but with the temptation God will make a way to escape that ye may be able to bear it;" and thus deliver (for the Lord knows how to deliver) "the godly out of temptation." He can either break the temptation to pieces, or else deliver you from the temptation altogether.

3. But it is *a life of trial*. "The Lord trieth the righteous." (Ps. 11:5.) In fact a righteous life is for the most part a tried life. There is not a child of God, whose graces are lively and active, that is not tried in his soul. I have no more belief that the soul can live without exercise than that the body can. The more the soul is exercised, the healthier it will be. Trial is one main source of exercise. If you are tried as to your standing, tried as to your state, tried as to the reality of the work of grace upon your soul; tried as to your soul; tried as to your experience; tried as to your manifestations, deliverances, and evidences; tried by your sins, tried by Satan, tried by professors, tried by profane; and, above all, tried by your own heart, and that continually—it will keep your soul in exercise.

And this is "exercise *unto* godliness." If these exercises are *unto* godliness, they lead to godliness, they take you on your way to godliness, they bring you near to godliness, they bring you into godliness; and, above all things, they bring godliness into your soul. And thus, there is an exercise of the soul *unto* godliness. Does not your heart at times seem

without a grain of it? You see what godliness is in its nature, in its branches, in its fruits, in its graces, in what a Christian should be, practically, experimentally, and really—outwardly and inwardly—in the church and in the world. You say, 'I a Christian? I a godly man or woman? Let me compare myself with godliness. Am I godly? Is there grace in my heart? Do I live? do I speak? do I think? do I act? do I walk? do I suffer as becomes a Christian? Is my life, my profession, my conduct—in the family, in the world—in the business, in the church—at home, abroad—openly, secretly—privately, publicly—is it such that I can take it and lay it down, step by step, with vital, real, experimental, scriptural godliness? O,' say you, 'I shrink back from the test. There are many things in me inwardly and outwardly which will not bear to be weighed up with godliness as revealed in the scriptures of truth.' Well, your mind is exercised, I suppose, when you have these workings. Now what is the result? It is an exercise unto godliness. You want it; you strive for it; you cry for it; you press after it; you know that none but the Lord can work it in your soul; you feel needy, naked, and destitute; you know that without it you can neither happily live nor die; yet have it you must, or perish body and soul for ever.

Now if this is going on in a poor sinner's heart day after day, it will be an exercise unto godliness. And this godliness hath "the promise of the life that now is," because godliness is "profitable unto all things;" and has promises, precious promises to those who are thus exercised. "My grace is sufficient for thee." (2 Cor. 12:9.) "As thy day is, so shall thy strength be." (Deut. 33:25.) "My sheep shall never perish, neither shall any pluck them out of my hand." (John 10:29.) "He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ." (Phil. 1:6.) "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee." (Hebrews 13:5.) "Come unto me, all ye

that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (Matt. 11:28.) "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is none else." (Isa. 45:22.) Thus, godliness hath "the promise of the life that now is," in having such suitable promises to the souls that are exercised unto godliness.

Is your soul exercised? If your soul is exercised, you will find it is unto godliness; and you will see at times a beauty in godliness, compared to which everything else shrinks into nothing. For Christ is himself godliness, the Author and the Finisher; the head and object; the beginning, the middle, and end; and therefore to have godliness, is to have Christ.

A few words more, and I conclude. Godliness hath the promise also of "*the life that is to come.*" It supports in life and in death; and takes the soul into a happy and blessed eternity; and therefore has "the promise of the life that is to come." Grace will end in glory; faith in sight; hope in fruition. The soul taught of God will see Jesus as he is. Thus godliness has "the promise of the life which is to come," when eternal peace shall abound, tears be wiped from off all faces, and grace consummated in endless bliss.