

[Manuscript?] Sermon on Luke 16:10¹

This sermon was apparently drawn from another longhand manuscript by CW that Sarah Wesley Jr. found among her father's papers and delivered to Joseph Benson for publication, because it appears in the 1816 collection of *Sermons by the Late Rev. Charles Wesley*.²

I say “apparently” because it is the only sermon in that collection for which a manuscript is not known to survive. This makes it impossible to be certain whether it was a sermon written by CW himself or (like the majority of the sermons in the 1816 collection) one of the sermons of his brother John that CW had copied. One factor in favour of it being by CW is the absence of any surviving record of John Wesley preaching on this text.

The published sermon does not include a date when it was preached. If it was by CW, its length and “scholarly” tone would fit best among the early sermons he wrote during his voyage on the *Simmonds* from England to Georgia. One possible occasion would have been October 24, 1735, when Luke 10 was the assigned gospel for morning prayers.

Comparison of the manuscripts that do survive to the published version of the sermons in the 1816 *Collection* reveal that the editor exercised a heavy stylistic hand—which surely applied in this case as well. Lacking the manuscript to counter editorial changes, we reproduce the text as published in 1816, showing the page transitions (in **red** font) in that edition.

¹This document was produced by the Duke Center for Studies in the Wesleyan Tradition under editorial direction of Randy L. Maddox, with the diligent assistance of Aileen F. Maddox. Last updated: Sept. 27, 2024.

²Sermon III, in *Sermons by the Late Rev. Charles Wesley, A.M. Student of Christ Church, Oxford. With a Memoir of the Author by the Editor* (London: Thomas Blanshard, et al., 1816), 43–67.

Luke 16:10

“He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much:
and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much.”

[1.] Christianity, from its first establishment in the world, has met with strong opposition from two different sorts of people—the persecutor and the scorner. The one has essayed by force of arms and violence to drive it out of the world; the other, by scoffs and insults to render it contemptible in it. By the mercy of God and the constancy of Christians, the former have been disappointed of their purpose and their cruel intentions have been entirely defeated; but the latter too often have succeeded, and by their taunts and jeers, their insults and reproaches, have done more injury to Christianity than bonds and imprisonments, [p. 44] racks and tortures, ever could effect. They have made people ashamed of their profession, brought religion into disrepute, and prevailed upon many of its followers to sacrifice their piety to preserve their reputation. One of the arts by which these scorners have been able most effectually to serve their master, the devil, has been to represent the several duties of the gospel as too mean for the Most High God to impose, or for man (his most excellent work) to be solicitous about.

[2.] For instance, profane jesting and loose conversation are expressly forbidden by God himself. But these enemies of righteousness will boldly venture to deny their obligation to obedience in such immaterial matters. That, provided a man is honest and performs his duty in the main, he need not extend his care to a jest or a word, for that the Almighty is too great and too good to take cognizance of such things or expect that man himself should do so.

[3.] Another (if he finds you reluctant to spend your time and money in idle diversions and recreations) will ridicule your scrupulosity, and ask you if you suppose that God can deign to [p. 45] concern himself respecting these trifles, or has given any precept on such unimportant subjects? In short, they have so far carried their cause that religion is almost wholly excluded from common life and confined to solemn times and places, to forms and modes of worship. The practice of Christianity is restricted within the bounds of the church, and he that would regulate all his behaviour and conversation by the rules of the gospel will be inevitably branded with the names of superstitious, scrupulous, and pharisaical.

[4.] It is this error which I design to combat in my present discourse, and show,

First, that no action is too trifling and insignificant to be made a part of our religion, or regulated by the rule of the gospel.

Secondly, that by neglecting to take care of what we call our little actions, we are led into great transgressions.

Thirdly, that the advantage of thus regulating the little common actions of our lives by the rule of the divine command will be greater than Christians at first may imagine.

[I.1.] We know there is but one rule for the Christian’s behaviour in the world, and that is that [p. 46] he should have a constant view to the great end of his creation in every action of his life. Now the end for which man was created and sent forth to be an inhabitant of this lower world was the glory of God and the salvation of his own soul. Accordingly we find St. Paul exhorting his Corinthians to look constantly, with a simple heart and single eye, to this great end of their being; and “whether they eat or drink, or whatever they do, to do all to the glory of

God.”¹

Now I would ask whether the doctrines of my text do not evidently and clearly prove the point we are discussing? Eating and drinking, those common necessary actions of life, are commanded to be done in such a manner as that the glory of God may be promoted. Now it is certain we should never be required to refer these actions to God, unless they were in some measure capable of advancing and promoting his glory. And surely no work can be termed trifling and insignificant whereby so noble an end is attained. No action be deemed indifferent which tends to promote the one design of our creation. Eating and drinking, therefore, those essential means of supporting [p. 47] and preserving our lives, are in this text positively declared to be subservient to the glory of God, and as such are expressly referred to him. And if this principle respecting these necessary actions must actuate us, it applies to everything we do. The consequence of which is that no action is too mean or trifling to be incorporated into our religion, or to be regulated by the strictest rules of the gospel.

[2.] Secondly, we find in effect that the Almighty hath most rigidly extended the rule of his commandments to all our actions, and that there is not anything we can either do, or speak, or think wherein some of his precepts are not immediately concerned. Now, since our Creator has seen good to lay down regulations for every instance of our behaviour, are we not indispensably required to conform ourselves to his rules? Will any man doubt whether he be obliged to demean himself in a manner strictly consonant to a divine command? That be far from us—to question so plain a principle as whether a creature is bound to obey his Creator! All those commandments which enjoin us to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our mind, and with all [p. 48] our strength, and to serve him faithfully with all our soul,² do evidently extend their sense so far as to include every thought, word, and action. For what action can be lawful which cannot be referred to him, directly or indirectly? What are we at liberty to do without having a view to his service? When the Son of God in his holy gospel has particularized those several duties comprised in this saying, to obviate all objections and silence all cavils that might have been made against his precepts as trifling and unimportant, he strengthens it with this solemn sanction, “He that keepeth the least of these commandments, and teacheth men so to do, shall be called *great* in the kingdom of heaven; but he that breaketh the least of these sayings shall be esteemed least in the kingdom of heaven.”³

Now the sense of this passage is plainly this—that nothing is too insignificant to be made an instance of his laws, nor any action so inconsiderable as not to be in some measure a means of increasing our great and glorious reward in his heavenly kingdom. Which suggests a third argument, namely that

[3.] No action is to be considered unimportant [p. 49] which will be followed by such an inconceivably great reward. The text proves evidently that the eternal God has respect to the little actions of our lives; and if they be conformable to his holy commandments, he will not fail to fulfil his gracious promise, and greatly to reward them in the next life.

¹Cf. 1 Cor. 10:31.

²See Matt. 22:37, etc.

³Cf. Matt. 5:19.

“Had the prophet bid thee do some great thing, wouldst thou not have done it? And how much more when he saith, wash and be clean,”⁴ was the reproof that Naaman’s servant gave him when he rejected Elisha’s advice and refused to make use of the means he had prescribed for the recovery of his leprosy. And may not the Almighty make the application to those servants whom he hath ordered to be faithful in that which is least, and for encouragement hath promised to make *great* in the kingdom of heaven? Heavy, without doubt, will be the condemnation of those who neglect to secure the mighty recompense of heaven from not observing to fulfil the jots and tittles of the law. He cannot have a due sense of the value of those good things which God hath *prepared for all who love him*,⁵ who refuses any [p. 50] labour, or starts at any difficulty which lies in the way of attaining them; much less who refuses to comply with easy bonds and so light a yoke, to submit to little grievances and self-denials, which are privileges to a devout Christian. Surely, if heaven be worth all our care and pains, we cannot think ourselves blameless if we do not labour in every action of our life to secure it. And if the kingdom of God is so invaluable, so beyond all that we can hope or conceive as to deserve the struggle of “taking it by force,”⁶ how can we be justified for not entering in when encouraged by this divine promise; “He that keepeth the least of these commandments shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”⁷

[4.] To evince this important truth beyond all possibility of contradiction, and to remove every doubt whether we are obliged to refer all our actions to the glory of God, and consequently that none of them are too mean to be made a part of our religion or to be regulated by the strict rules of the gospel, the blessed Jesus expressly assures us that at the day of judgment every individual action of our lives [p. 51] will be scanned and strictly examined. Now, if not one be too insignificant to deserve the censure and cognizance of the Almighty, not one is too mean to be referred to his service. If we are to give an account for each, certain it is that each should be done *as to the Lord*.⁸

Persuaded I am that no action can stand the test of this strict and solemn scrutiny which is not begun, continued, and ended in his service. And therefore the proof of this article of our faith ought to convince us of the importance, as well as the truth, of the doctrine now under consideration, and effectually prevail upon us to do everything we do as in the presence of our God, in the sight of our judge, who hath required it of us that himself should be the ultimate end of all our actions.

[5.] That we may not think that we shall escape unpunished in the great and terrible day of the Lord merely for the innocence, or rather the insignificance, of our actions, our blessed Saviour has told us that we shall give an account at the day of judgment even for every idle word.⁹ Now, if our idle words will not escape [p. 52] censure, where shall he appear who has a whole train of idle actions?

⁴Cf. 2 Kings 5:13.

⁵See 1 Cor. 2:9.

⁶Cf. Matt. 11:12.

⁷Cf. Matt. 5:19.

⁸See Col. 3:23.

⁹See Matt. 12:36.

Now every word and action is idle which is not done with a view proposed by our Creator in our very existence here. This interpretation is corroborated by St. Paul's well-known passage in his epistle to the Ephesians 4:29–30: "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but such as is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace to the hearers:" and "Grieve not the Holy Spirit, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption."

If any ask what we mean by idle words, my answer is: the same that the apostle means by "corrupt communication"—words that are not edifying or beneficial, such as minister no grace to the hearers. In this manner then we must not converse or speak, but preserve an invariable view to the great end of our being, the glory of God and the good of others.

Now if no conversation can be vindicated which is not sanctified (consecrated, if I may so say); if no subject, however light, be exempted from some moral tendency; I ask [p. 53] whether it doth not hold equally true that no action or business we can undertake is too despicable to have a reference to religion, or to be made an offering holy and acceptable to the Most High?¹⁰

Indeed, if we consider human actions simply in themselves, they are all infinitely too mean for the great Majesty of heaven to regard. What are our best services to the Almighty God? Is he honoured by the bowing of our knee, or lifting up of our hands? Oh no! The high and lofty one who inhabiteth eternity need not be worshipped with man's worship, the worm of yesterday! Neither hath he respect to the *outward* actions of his creature, but to the temper and spirit with which they are performed. He therefore who is faithful in that which is least, is esteemed in his sight as faithful in much. And he that is conscientious and fearful of doing a little thing which may offend God, will be blessed with a reward exceeding all comprehension of mortals.

We know that the two mites of the widow were accepted before the abundance which the rich cast into the treasury because of that [p. 54] simplicity of heart, and fervent piety, wherewith the offering was made.¹¹ And is not the same spirit capable of sanctifying the meanest actions of our lives—that is, the desire to please God, and rendering everything acceptable in his sight?

[6.] Yes, God is a spirit, and seeketh such to worship him as worship him in spirit and in truth.¹² He that hath promised that even a cup of cold water given to a disciple in the name of God shall in no wise lose its reward,¹³ will doubtless have a great respect to, and will mightily bless and prosper, him who in his least action has reference to the advancement of his glory. He therefore who refuses to indulge himself in pleasure, who lays various restraints upon his behaviour and conversation, who is fearful of doing many things which the generality of people freely allow themselves in, if he has made God the foundation of his scrupulosity and a desire of his glory the ground and reason of his singularity—he shall be received as *great* in the kingdom of heaven.

Thus have I endeavoured to prove my first position, and I trust have incontrovertibly [p. 55] proved that there is no act of our lives too mean to be made a part of our devotion, consequently to be laid under the strictest rules of his holy gospel.

¹⁰See Rom. 12:1.

¹¹See Luke 21:1–4.

¹²See John 4:23.

¹³See Matt. 10:42.

[II.] Secondly, I have now to show the danger of not being faithful in that which is least and to evince that, by neglecting what we call our little actions, we are often led into great and heinous transgressions.

[1.] It is the observation of the wise son of Sirach that he who despiseth little things shall fall by little and little,¹⁴ and experience will attest this truth and prove it to every attentive Christian. See we not that vice, as well as virtue, is of a progressive nature, and by degrees encroaches on the hearts of its votaries? The evil spirit is too subtle a tempter to show the heinousness of sin at the first glance, and therefore adapts his temptations to the conscience and disposition. And knowing that mankind (until they become thoroughly reprobate) are averse from monstrous crimes, he ensnares them into little transgressions, aware that he who is once habituated to small offences will soon lose his horror at sin, shake off his [p. 56] tenderness of conscience, and by degrees grow hardened in vice and impiety. Therefore this enemy of our souls, when he would seduce any of the servants of God from the path of righteousness, would make the first declension from that path as small as possible, that he might ensnare them in his nets without their even perceiving the danger, and bring them unawares from the road to heaven to the gate of destruction. For instance, is drunkenness the sin to which he tempts? His method is to conceal this frightful vice, and its dreadful consequences, under the veil of innocent mirth and social pleasure, so that his victim is beguiled, by a desire of being easy and agreeable to his companions, to weaken his understanding, till he becomes a beast and makes shipwreck of his reason as well as conscience. Now had this man been so upon his guard as never to exceed the bounds of Christian temperance and sobriety, had he been scrupulously exact in observing the rule of the apostle of eating and drinking only to the glory of God,¹⁵ he would have preserved the intellects which the Almighty bestowed upon him, avoided the [p. 57] stumbling-block which the evil one cast in his way, and escaped the guilt, the misery, and the punishment which those incur who are overcharged “with surfeiting and drunkenness.”¹⁶

[2.] Again, a virtuous youth who would tremble at the sin of fornication will be tempted to loose conversation, and “jestings which are not convenient.”¹⁷ He will hear them amongst his irreligious companions till he joins in them, and easily be persuaded there is no great evil in such little things. Till by little and little he flings off all restraint, falls into the commission of vices which he once regarded with indignation and horror, and at last is ensnared by the strange woman whose “house is the gate of death, and her chambers the pathway to hell.”¹⁸ Now had this man been so obedient to his Maker, and faithful to himself, as to have “set a watch to his words, and kept the door of his lips,”¹⁹ he had avoided this most dangerous of sins, and been preserved from the iniquity which will now in all probability bring him to destruction.

[3.] Farther, the generality of mankind in theory abhor gambling, though most of them [p. 58] allow themselves in games, and recreation is made a pretence for extravagances, and

¹⁴Ecclus. 19:1.

¹⁵See 1 Cor. 10:31.

¹⁶Luke 21:34.

¹⁷Cf. Eph. 5:4.

¹⁸Cf. Prov. 7:27.

¹⁹Cf. Ps. 141:3.

diversion becomes an inlet to profuseness and prodigality. A trifling wager may be risked and lost without injury, and a small part of our income appropriated to pleasure and chance. But alas, insignificant as these beginnings appear, they are likely to end in serious evil! The gentleman too often degenerates into the gambler. And by degrees it comes to pass that many wager away their estates, and cast the fatal die which reduces themselves and their families to beggary and want.

Now all these may serve as examples to demonstrate the direful tendency of being negligent of our little actions, and the important truth of my text, “that he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much.”²⁰ That he who places not his common ordinary actions under the restraints of religion is bringing himself under snares and temptations, blindly enters into the confines of vice, and throws himself by steps and degrees under the full power and dominion of the adversary.

[4.] And indeed a little spark will quickly kindle [p. 59] to a flame; a small breach in the river’s bank will soon cause an inundation. He that will venture to go ever so little out of the right way ought seriously to weigh with himself where may be the end. Every step out of the path of life is a step leading to death. We have the testimony of the Holy Scriptures that the way to heaven is narrow and beset with traps and pitfalls;²¹ and if we deviate from it, no wonder if we are entangled or dragged down to ruin and destruction. To be secure, we must go on in holiness. And to be free from danger of evil, we must constantly practise all that is good. He that can trifle himself into a *spirit of carelessness*, and want of thought, deceives his own heart if he fancies he is safe. And the man who suffers himself at anytime, or in any degree, to relax in circumspection, exposes himself at that time, and in that degree, to all the assaults of a vigilant and subtle adversary, who seeks to destroy his immortal soul.

[5.] But, it will be said, is the Christian then secluded from mirth and diversion, pleasures and entertainments? Yes, as far as they are [p. 60] inconsistent with piety and innocence, with temperance and safety. Whatever pleasure may be enjoyed *consistent with these*, and is entered upon with either a mediate or immediate reference to the glory of his Creator, a Christian may delight himself in. But whatever is incompatible with these principles, whatever diversion is unlawful, either in itself or in its necessary consequences, which tends to evil or exposes men to be an easier prey to temptation, I scruple not to say, cannot be a pleasure designed for Christians. So manifestly the reverse that God, who seeth the evil as well as the danger, has solemnly forbidden such diversions in his holy word, by commanding us to abstain from all appearance of evil,²² and strictly enjoining us to do nothing which may not be done as unto the Lord, and be some way subservient to his honour and glory.

So much I have deemed proper to remark on the danger of not being faithful in that which is least, and established the truth I undertook to discuss; namely, that by neglecting to take care of our miscalled little actions, we are often led into great and heinous [p. 61] transgressions. I therefore proceed to my third head of discourse, wherein I promised to show,

[III.] Thirdly, the incalculable advantages which will arise from regulation of the little common actions of our lives by the strict rules of God’s commandments.

²⁰Luke 16:10.

²¹See Matt. 7:14, etc.

²²See 1 Thess. 5:22.

[1.] He that would be secure must not approach the precipice of evil. The danger has been demonstrated, and the only means of avoiding it is to keep at a distance from the very appearance. He that maketh every action a point of duty will not easily be ensnared into a flagrant breach of it; and he that is circumspect in little will scarcely ever fall into great transgressions.

[2.] Tenderness of conscience is the noblest preservative from sin, and a scrupulous fear of offending the best safeguard against it. The fortress of virtue is most effectually secured when the inlets to vice are most sedulously guarded. Constant recollection impedes attack. And he who never exposes himself to the least shadow of temptation will never be in danger of being overcome by the greatest. Were the good man of the house always on the watch, [p. 62] the thief could never break in and spoil his goods.²³ And if the Christian would not indulge himself in the full enjoyment of that liberty which he thinks allowed, but conscientiously abstain from *some* of those worldly²⁴ good things which he sees his brethren use intemperately, it would be as probable a means to preserve him from falling as can be conceived. Who is so likely to persevere as such a faithful servant, to whose mind the injunction of his Lord (to all Christians, as well as to his disciples) is ever present, “What I say unto you, I say unto all, *watch!*”²⁵ Is it not one of the most awful punishments that attend the wicked to be given over to a reprobate mind, to have their hearts hardened and their consciences seared. Now such as is the curse of a callous heart, so great is the blessing of a tender conscience. And as on one hand an obdurate resolution is a certain forerunner of eternal destruction, so on the other a sedulous adherence to virtue, and a nice sense of every little breach of duty, is of all others the most powerful preservative from the guilt, as well as the punishment, of sin. And universal conscientiousness [p. 63] is an invulnerable shield against the force of temptation.²⁶

[3.] Hazael, king of Syria,²⁷ was offended highly at the prophet for predicting the evils which he should bring upon the Israelites. “Is thy servant a dog that he should do this great thing?”²⁸ was the rebuke he gave the man of God. But when he had contemplated the splendour of a crown, and permitted his thoughts to dwell on the pleasures of high station, his heart swelled with pride and ambition and he soon fulfilled the awful prognostication, slew his master, ascended his throne, and exercised his ill-gotten power with so much tyrannic cruelty, as served to accomplish the designs of providence, who appointed him a scourge to the rebellious nation, which had become traitors to their God; and has given in this narration, to all ages, a striking instance of the deceitfulness of the human heart, and the danger of not checking evil thoughts

²³See Matt. 12:29.

²⁴Orig., “wordly”; a misprint.

²⁵Mark 13:37.

²⁶Almost certainly an echo of his maternal grandfather; cf. Samuel Annesley, “How We may be Universally and Exactly Conscientious,” Sermon 1 in Annesley (ed.), *The Morning Exercise at Cripplegate* (London: J. Kirton & N. Webb, 1661).

²⁷Hazael was initially a messenger of the king of Syria, becoming king himself later; see 2 Kings 8:7–15.

²⁸2 Kings 8:13.

before they proceed to actions.²⁹

[4.] The case is plain; if we would be holy, we must use the means. The lesson of Christian perfection is not to be learned at once. We [p. 64] must be well exercised in rudiments and first principles, if we ever hope to make a progress in the school of Christ. By habituating ourselves to little restraints in the first instance, by voluntarily imposing on ourselves small crosses, we shall in time become conformed to his death, who deemed no sacrifice too great to purchase our salvation. By abstaining from taking the utmost liberty we lawfully may, we shall be effectually secured from even the desire of criminal gratifications, and escape the dreadful guilt of heinous and presumptuous sins.

[5.] The children of this world (who in their generation are wiser than the children of light³⁰) will eminently prove the advantages resulting from strict exactness and punctual regularity in the most trifling things. They will tell us of the benefits resulting from doing everything by rule and order, neglecting no means of gain, and ever adding to their accumulations. And why the same attention is not required in a Christian, which experience teaches us is so useful in a tradesman's concerns, it will be difficult to show. Christianity is an [p. 65] employment no less extensive than important. Its influence may reach, if we please, to every action, and render the most insignificant of them holy and acceptable to God. Why then should not everything we think, and say, and do, be undertaken with this view, and wholly referred to his most sacred and adorable name?

[IV.1.] I have shown in the first part of this discourse that all our actions are capable of being thus piously and advantageously improved; that none are too mean to be dedicated to the service of God, or instrumental in promoting his glory. Away then with this objection of their being unworthy of the Most High, and not fit to be made instances of our obedience to him, or to be regulated by the strict rules of the gospel. Away with all jeering scoffs against this religious scrupulosity which I have been inculcating. And if any men there be that still continue to laugh at any such little singularities of the true disciples of Christ, let them remember it is written, "Woe unto you that laugh now, for ye shall mourn and weep."³¹ No doubt can possibly be made that every action of our lives may be referred to God. And there is [p. 66] demonstration to prove that we are thus to refer every action. For if we consider, on the one hand, the great danger which those incur who are negligent of their little actions, to what manifold and great temptations they are exposed, even to commit heinous sins; and on the other, those mighty benefits which accrue from bringing our indifferent actions to the standard and test of God's holy will and commandment; I say, whoever weighs these great truths as he ought will find the indispensable necessity of no longer living to himself but unto God, and of doing the most insignificant action of his life with such a spirit and temper as that it might be done unto the Lord and not to man.

[2.] This is the method to escape the punishment due to those who live for themselves and not to God. Hereby we shall assure our hearts before him, when he is constantly in our thoughts and is set always before us. How eminent a share of glory shall they receive, who are thus perpetually concerned in promoting the glory of God? How abundantly shall they be

²⁹See 2 Kings 9–13.

³⁰See Luke 16:8.

³¹Luke 6:25.

recompensed for those pleasures from which they have voluntarily abstained for [p. 67] Christ's sake! Much doubtless shall be given, as well as forgiven, to those who have loved so much as to make the great object of their love the end of everything they do. We have our blessed Saviour's promise that, in consequence of their being faithful in that which is least, they shall be esteemed faithful in much; and for their tender fear of transgressing their divine Master's little commands, they shall be pronounced great in the kingdom of heaven.

[3.] Blessed therefore are all they who hear these sayings and keep them! They shall escape the guilt and punishment of heinous transgressions, and receive a glorious recompense for their labour, an incalculable reward for their care and industry; such a recompense as fadeth not away, eternal in the heavens; such a reward—great as their Master's love, and extensive as the grace which enabled them to do him “true and laudable service!”³²

Source: Sermons by the Late Rev. Charles Wesley, A.M. Student of Christ Church, Oxford. With a Memoir of the Author by the Editor (London: Thomas Blanshard, et al., 1816), 43–67.

³²BCP, Collect for 13th Sunday after Trinity.