

HOW MAY WE CURE DISTRACTIONS IN HOLY DUTIES?

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Ye hypocrites, well did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me.—Mat. XV. 7, 8.

IN this chapter you will find a contest between Christ and the Pharisees, about their traditions and old customs, which they valued above the commandments of God; as it is usual with formal men to love chains of their own making, and to make conscience of a tradition, when yet they can dispense with a commandment; and thereby discovering themselves to be very hypocrites, who are more in externals than in internals, in show than substance, minding the formality rather than the spirit and life of service to God. Our Lord confirms his censure by the testimony of the prophet Isaiah, 'Ye hypocrites,' &c.

I shall not stand explaining the words. *Drawing nigh* is a phrase peculiar to worship, especially to invocation. *Mouth and lips* are put for all external gestures, and that bodily exercise which is necessary to the worship of God, especially for words. *But their heart is far from me*; it chiefly intendeth their habitual averseness from God, but may also comprise the wandering and roving of the mind in duty, which is a degree and spice of it: of that I shall treat at this time, and my note will be:—

That distraction of thoughts, or the removing of the heart from God in worship, is a great sin, and degree of hypocrisy.

The text speaketh of gross hypocrisy, or a zealous pretence of outward worship without any serious bent of heart towards God; but any removal of the heart from him in times necessary to think of him is a degree of it; for though distractions in worship are incident to the people of God, yet they are culpable, and do so far argue the relics of hypocrisy in them. I shall show:—

1. The greatness of the sin.
2. The causes.
3. The remedies.

First, That there is such a sin, sad experience witnesseth; vain thoughts intrude importunately upon the soul in every duty; in hearing 444 the word we are not free (*Ezek. xxxiii. 31*), nor in singing; but chiefly they haunt us in prayer, and of all kinds of prayer, in mental prayer, when our addresses to God are managed by thoughts alone; there we are more easily disturbed. Words bound the thoughts, and the inconvenience of an interruption is more sensible, as occasioning a pause in our speech; and as in mental prayer, so when we join with others, to keep time and pace with the words, unless the Lord quicken them to an extraordinary liveliness, we find it very hard; but how great a sin this is, is my first task to show. I shall do it:—

1. By three general considerations.
2. By speaking particularly to the present case.

First, Generally.

1. Consider how tender God is of his worship: **Lev. x. 3**, he hath said that he 'will be sanctified in all that draw nigh unto him.' To *sanctify* is to set apart from common use. Now, God will be sanctified, that is, not treated with as an ordinary person, but with special needfulness of soul and affection, becoming so great a majesty; when you think to put him off with anything, you lessen his excellency and greatness, and do not sanctify him, or glorify him as God, and therefore God pleadeth his majesty when they would put a sorry sacrifice upon him, as if everything were good enough for him: **Mal. i. 14**, 'Cursed be the deceiver which hath in his flock a male, and voweth and sacrificeth to the Lord a corrupt thing: for I am a great king, saith the Lord of hosts.' To be slight in his service, argueth mean thoughts of God: **Eccles. v. 2**, 'Be not rash with thy mouth, nor hasty to utter anything before God, for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth.' We forget our distance, and by a bold profaneness are too fellow-like and familiar with God, when we are not deeply serious and exact in what we do and say in his presence, but only babble over a few impertinent words without attention and affection. Certainly, God is very sensible of the wrong and contempt we put upon him, for he noteth all: **Heb. iv. 13**, 'All things are naked and open to him with whom we have to do.' And he will not put it up, for he telleth us, **Exod. xx. 7**, that he 'will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain;' and he will be as good as his word; for the least disorders in worship have been sorely punished; witness the stroke from heaven upon Aaron's sons, **Lev. x. 2**; the breach made upon Uzzah, **2 Sam. vi. 6**; and the havoc made of the Bethshemites, **1 Sam. vi. 19.**; the diseases that raged at Corinth, **1 Cor. xi. 30**. And though judgments be not so rife and visible now upon our unhallowed approaches to God, yet he smiteth us with deadness, where he doth not smite us with death; for a man is punished otherwise than a boy, and judgments are now spiritual, which in the infancy of the church were temporal and bodily. Certainly, we have all cause to tremble when we come before the Lord.

2. The more sincere any one is, the more he maketh conscience of his thoughts, is more observant of them, and more troubled about them: **Isa. lv. 7**, 'Let the unrighteous man forsake his thoughts;' then he beginneth to be serious, and to have a conscience indeed, when his thoughts trouble him. So David: **Ps. cxix. 113**, 'I hate vain thoughts: but thy law do I love.' We think thoughts are free, 445 and subject to no tribunal; if there be any error in them, we think it is a very venial one; they betray us to no shame in the world, and therefore we let them go without dislike and remorse. But a child of God cannot pass over the matter so: he knoweth that thoughts are the immediate births of the soul, and do much discover the temper of it; that there actions begin, and if vain thoughts be suffered to lodge in him, he will soon fall into further mischief, and therefore he considereth what he thinketh, as well as what he speaketh and doeth; and if at all times, especially in worship, where the workings of the inward man are of chief regard, and the acts of the outward only required, as a help to our 'serving God in the spirit,' **Phil. iii. 3**.

3. Carelessness in duties is the high way to atheism; for every formal and slight prayer doth harden the heart, and make way for contempt of God; men that have made bold with God in duty, and it succeeds well with them, their awe of God is lessened, and the lively sense of his glory and majesty abated, till it be quite lost; by degrees they outgrow all feelings and tenderness of conscience; every time you come to God slightly, you lose ground by coming, till at length you look upon worship as a mere custom, or something done for fashion's sake.

Secondly, Particularly:—1. It is an affront to God, and a kind of mockery. We wrong his omniscency, as if he saw not the heart, and could not tell man his thought. It is God's essential glory in worship to be acknowledged an all-seeing spirit, and accordingly to be 'worshipped in spirit and in truth,' **John iv. 24**. Thoughts

are as audible with him as words; therefore when you prattle words, and do not make conscience of thoughts, you do not worship him as a spirit. We wrong his majesty when we speak to him in prayer, and do not give heed to what we say. Surely we are not to prattle, like jays, or parrots, words without affection and feeling, or to 'chatter like cranes,' or be like Ephraim, whom the prophet calls 'a silly dove without an heart.' A mean man taketh it ill when you have business to talk with him about, and your minds are elsewhere; you would all judge it to be an affront to the majesty of God if a man should send his clothes stuffed with straw, or a puppet dressed up in stead of himself, into the assemblies of God's people, and think this should supply his personal presence; yet our clothes stuffed with straw, or an image dressed up instead of us, such as Michal put into David's bed, **1 Sam. xix. 12, 13**, would be less offensive to God than our bodies without our souls; the absence of the spirit is the absence of the more noble part. We pretend to speak to God, and do not hear ourselves, nor can give any account of what we pray for; or rather let me give you Chrysostom's comparison: a man would have been thought to have profaned the mysteries of the Levitical worship, if instead of sweet incense he should have put into the censer sulphur or brimstone, or mingled the one with the other.²⁴⁸ Surely our prayers should be 'set forth as incense,' **Ps. cxli. 2**. And do not we affront God to his face, that mingle so many vain, sinful, proud, filthy, blasphemous thoughts? What is this but to mingle sulphur with our incense? Again, when God speaketh **446** to us, and knocks at the heart, and there is none within to hear him, is it not an affront to his majesty? Put it in a temporal case. If a great person should talk to us, and we should neglect him, and entertain ourselves with his servants, he would take it as a despite and contempt done to him. The great God of heaven and earth doth often call you together to speak to you; now if you think so slightly of his speeches as not to attend, but set your minds adrift to be carried hither and thither with every wave, where is that reverence you owe to him?

It is a wrong to his goodness, and the comforts of his holy presence; for in effect you say that you do not find that sweetness in God which you expect, and therefore are weary of his company before your business be over with him. It is said of the Israelites, when they were going for Canaan, that 'in their hearts they turned back again into Egypt,' **Acts vii. 39**. They had more mind to be in Egypt than under Moses' government; and their thoughts ever ran upon the flesh-pots and belly-cheer they enjoyed there. We are offended with their impatience and murmurings, and the affronts they put upon their guides; and do not we even the same and worse in our careless manner of worshipping? When God hath brought us into his presence, we do in effect say, Give us the world again; this is better entertainment for our thoughts than God and holy things. If Christians would but interpret their actions, they would be ashamed of them; is anything more worthy to be thought of than God? The Israelites' hearts were upon Egypt in the wilderness, and our hearts are upon the world, nay, every toy, even when we are at the throne of grace, and conversing with him who is the centre of our rest, and the fountain of our blessedness.

2. It grieveth the Spirit of God: he is grieved with our vain thoughts as well as our scandalous actions; other sins may shame us more, but these are a grief to the Spirit, because they are conceived in the heart, which is his presence-chamber, and place of special residence; and he is most grieved with these vain thoughts which haunt us in the time of our special addresses to God, because his peculiar operations are hindered, and the heart is set open to God's adversary in God's presence, and the world and Satan are suffered to interpose in the very time of the reign of grace, then when it shall be *in solio*, in its royalty, commanding all our faculties to serve it; this is to steal away the soul from under Christ's own arm, as a captain of a garrison is troubled, when the enemies come to prey under the very walls, in the face of all

his forces and strength; so certainly it is a grief to the Spirit when our lusts have power to disturb us in holy duties, and the heart is taken up with unclean glances, and worldly thoughts, then when we present ourselves before the Lord. God looks upon his people's sins as aggravated because committed in his own house: **Jer. xxiii. 11**, 'In my house I have found their wickedness;' what is this but to dare God to his very face? Solomon saith, 'A king sitting upon his throne scattereth away evil with his eyes,' **Prov. xx. 8**. They are bold men that dare break the laws when a magistrate is upon the throne, and actually exercising judgment against offenders; so it argueth much impudence that when **447** we come to deal with God, as sitting upon the throne, and observing and looking upon us, that we can yet lend our hearts to our lusts, and suffer every vain thought to divert us. There is more of modesty, though little of sincerity, in them that say to their lusts, as Abraham to his servants: **Gen. xii. 5**, 'Tarry here while I go yonder and worship;' or, as they say, the serpent layeth aside her poison when she goeth to drink. When a man goeth to God he should leave his lusts behind him, not for a while, and with an intent to entertain them again, but for ever. However this argueth some reverence to God, and sense of the weight of holy duties; but when we bring them along with us, it is a sign we little mind the work we go about.

3. It is a spiritual disease. The soul hath its diseases as well as the body; the unsteady roving of the mind, or the disturbance of vain and impertinent thoughts, is one of those diseases,—shall I call it a spiritual madness, or fever, or shaking palsy, or all these? You know madmen make several relations, and rove from one thing to another, and are gone off from a sentence ere they have well begun it; our thoughts are as slippery and inconsistent as their speeches, therefore what is this but the frenzy of the soul? What mad creatures would we seem to be, if all our thoughts were patent, or an invisible notary were lurking in our hearts to write them down! We run from object to object in a moment, and one thought looks like a mere stranger upon another; we wander and run through all the world in an instant. Oh, who can count the numberless operations and working of our mind in one duty! What impertinent excursions have we from things good to lawful; from lawful to sinful, from ordinarily sinful to downright blasphemous! Should any one of us, after he hath been some time exercised in duty, go aside and write down his thoughts, and the many interlinings of his own prayers, he would stand amazed at the madness and light discurrency of his own imaginations.

Or shall I call it the feverish distemper of their soul? *Ægri somnia* is a proverb; in fevers men have a thousand fancies and swimming toys in their dreams, and just so it is with our souls in God's worship. We bring that curse upon us spiritually, which corporally God threatened to bring upon the Jews: 'I will scatter you to the end of the earth.' We scatter our thoughts hither and thither without any consistency; the heart, in regard of this roving madness, is like a runagate servant, who, when he hath left his master, wandereth up and down, and knoweth not where to fix; or like those that are full of distracting business, that cannot make a set meal, but take their diet by snatches.

4. It argueth the loss and non-acceptance of our prayers. You are in danger to lose your worship, at least so much of it as you do not attend upon; and truly to a man that knows the value of that kind of traffic, this is a very great loss. You that are tradesmen are troubled if you happen to be abroad when a good customer cometh to deal with you; the ordinances of God are the market for your souls; if you had not been abroad with Esau, you might have received the blessing, and gone away richly laden from a prayer, from the **448** word, and the Lord's Supper; but you lose your advantages for want of attention; allowed distractions turn your prayers into sin, and make them no prayers. When the soul departeth from the body it is no

longer a man, but a carcase; so when the thoughts are gone from prayer, it is no longer a prayer, the essence of the duty is wanting. What is prayer? Ἀνάβασις τοῦ νοῦ, as Damascene defined it, the lifting up of the heart to God. Many have prayed without words, but never any prayed without lifting up, or pouring out the heart. If a man should kneel, and use a gesture of worship, and fall asleep, no doubt that man doth not pray. This is to sleep with the heart, and the words uttered are but like a dream, have but a slight touch of reason in them, a mere drowsy inattentive devotion; the soul is asleep though the eyes be not closed, and the senses locked up. Can we expect that God should hear us, and bless us, because of our mere outward presence? We are ashamed of those that sleep at a duty, and this is as bad or worse; they may sleep out of natural infirmity, as weakness, age, sickness, &c., but this doth more directly proceed from some slightness or irreverence. Well, then, with what face can we expect the fruit of that prayer to which we have not attended? It is a great presumption to desire God to hear those requests, a great part whereof we have not heard ourselves; if they be not worthy of our attention they are far more unworthy of God's. Cyprian,²⁴⁹ or Ruffinus, or whoever was the author of the explication of the Lord's Prayer in Cyprian's works, hath a notable passage to this purpose: *Quomodo te a Deo exaudiri postulas, cum te ipse non audias? Vis Deum esse memorem tui cum rogas, cum ipse tui memor non sis?* Thou art unmindful of thyself; thou dost not hear thy self; and how canst thou with reason desire the blessing and comfort of the duty which thou thoughtest not worthy thine own attention and regard?

I would not willingly grate too hard upon a tender conscience. It is a question that is often propounded, whether wandering thoughts do altogether frustrate a duty, and make it of none effect? and whether, in some cases, a virtual attention doth not suffice? There is an actual intension, and a virtual intension. The actual intension is when a soul doth distinctly and constantly regard everything that is said and done in a duty; and a virtual intension is when we keep only a disposition and purpose to attend, though many times we fail and are carried aside. This Aquinas calleth *priorem intensionem*; out of the Scripture we may call it, the 'setting of the heart to seek the Lord,' **1 Chron. xxii. 19**. Now, what shall we say in this case? On the one side, we must not be too strict, lest we prejudice the comfort and expectation of God's people. When did they ever manage a duty, but they are guilty of some wanderings? It is much to keep up our hearts to the main and solid requests that are made to God in prayer. But, on the other side, we must not be too remiss, lest we encourage indiligence and careless devotion. Briefly, then, by way of answer, there is a threefold distraction in prayer—*distractio invita, negligens, et voluntaria*.

1. There is *distractio invita*, an unwilling distraction, when the 449 heart is seriously and solemnly set to seek God, and yet we are carried besides our purpose; for it is impossible so to shut doors and win dows but that some wind will get in—so to guard the heart as to be wholly free from vain thoughts; but they are not constant, frequent, allowed, but resisted, prayed against, striven against, bewailed; and then they are not iniquities, but infirmities, which the Lord will pardon; he will gather up the broken part of our prayers, and in mercy give us an answer; I say, where this distraction is retracted with grief, resisted with care, as Abraham drove away the fowls when they came to pitch upon his sacrifice, **Gen. xv. 11**, it is to be reckoned among the infirmities of the saints, which do not hinder their consolation.

2. There is *distractio negligens*, a negligent distraction, when a man hath an intention to pray, and express his desires to God; but he prays carelessly, and doth not guard his thoughts, so that some times he wanders, and sometimes recovers himself again, and then strays again, and is in and out, off and on with God, as a

spaniel roveth up and down, and is still crossing the ways, sometimes losing the company he goes with, and then retiring to them again. I cannot say, this man prayeth not at all, or that God doth not hear him, but he will have little comfort in his prayers; yea, if he be serious, they will minister more matter of grief to him than comfort; and therefore he ought to be more earnest and sedulous in resisting this infirmity, that he may be assured of audience; otherwise, if his heart be not affected with it in time, by degrees all those motions and dispositions of heart that are necessary to prayer will be eaten out and lost.

3. There is *distractio voluntaria*, a voluntary distraction, when men mind no more than the task or work wrought, and only go round in a track of accustomed duties, without considering with what heart they perform them: this is such a vanity of mind as turneth the whole prayer into sin.

Secondly, The causes of this roving and impertinent intrusion of vain thoughts.

1. Satan is one cause, who doth *maxime insidiari orationibus* (as Cassian speaketh), lie in wait to hinder the prayers of the saints; whenever we minister before the Lord, he is at our right hand ready to resist us, **Zech. iii. 1**. And therefore the apostle James, when he biddeth us 'draw nigh to God,' biddeth us also to 'resist the devil,' **James iv. 7, 8**; implying thereby that there is no drawing nigh to God without resisting Satan. When a tale is told, and you are going about the affairs of the world, he doth not trouble you; for these things do not trouble him, or do any prejudice to his kingdom; but when you are going to God, and that in a warm, lively, affectionate manner, he will be sure to disturb you, seeking to abate the edge of your affections, or divert your minds. Formal prayers pattered over, Jo him no harm; but when you seriously set yourselves to call upon God, he saith within himself, This man will pray for God's glory, and then I am at a loss; for the coming of Christ's kingdom, and then mine goeth to wreck; that God's will may be done upon earth as it is in heaven, and that minds me of my old fall, and my business 450 is to cross the will of God; he will pray for daily bread, and that strengthened dependence; for pardon and comfort, and then I lose ground (for the devils are the 'rulers of the darkness of this world,' **Eph. vi. 12**); he will pray to be kept from sin and temptation, and that is against me. Thus Satan is afraid of the prayers of the saints; he is concerned in every request you make to God; and therefore he will hinder or cheat you of your prayers; if you will needs be praying, he will carry away your hearts. Now, much he can do if you be not watchful; he can present objects to the senses which stir up thoughts, yea, pursue his temptations, and cast in one fiery dart after another, therefore we had need stand upon our guard.

2. The natural levity of our spirits. Man is a restless creature. We have much ado to stay our 'hearts for any space of time in one state, much more in holy things, from which we are naturally averse: **Rom. vii. 21**, 'When I would do good, evil is present with me.' τὸ κακὸν παράκειται. Oh! consider this natural feebleness of mind, whereby we are unable to keep long to any employment, but are light, feathery, tossed up and down like a dried leaf before the wind, or as an empty vessel upon the waves. It is so with us in most businesses, especially in those which are sacred. The apostle biddeth us 'pray without ceasing,' and we cannot do it whilst we pray; he is a stranger to God and his own heart who finds it not daily. This is an incurable vanity; though we often repent of it, yet it is not amended; a misery that God would leave upon our natures, to humble us while we are in the world, and that we may long for heaven; the angels and blessed spirits there are not troubled with those things; in heaven there is no complaining of wandering thoughts—there God is all in all; they that are there have but one object to fill their understandings, one object to give contentment to their desires, their hearts cleave to God inseparably by a perfect love; but here we are cumbered with much serving, and much work begets a

multitude of thoughts in us: **Ps. xciv. 11**, 'The Lord knows the thoughts of man, that they are but vanity.' When we have summed up all the traverses, reasonings, and discourses of the mind, we may write at the bottom this, as the total sum—Here is nothing but vanity.

3. Another cause is practical atheism. We have little sense of things that are unseen, and lie within the veil, in the world of spirits; things that are seen have a great force upon us. 'Offer it now to thy governor,' saith the prophet, **Mal. i. 8**. God is afar off, both from our sight and apprehension; senses bind attention. If you speak to a man, your thoughts are settled, and you think of nothing else; but in speaking to God, you have not like attention, because you see him not: **Exod. xxxii. 1**, 'Make us gods to go before us.' Ay! we would have a visible god, whom we may see and hear; but the true God being a spirit, and an invisible power, all the service that we do him is a task performed more out of custom than affection, in a slight, perfunctory way.

1. Strong and unmortified lusts, which being rooted in us, and having the soul at most command, will trouble us, and distract us when we go about any duty. Each man hath a mind, and can spend 451 it unweariedly as he is inclined, either to covetousness, ambition, or sensuality; for 'where the treasure is, there will the heart be,' **Mat. vi. 20**. Set but the covetous man about the world, the voluptuous man about his pleasures, and the ambitious man about his honours and preferments, and will they suffer their thoughts to be taken off? surely no; but set either of these about holy things, and presently these lusts will be interposing: **Ezek. xxxiii. 31**, 'Their heart goeth after their covetousness.' The sins to which a man is most addicted will engross the thought; so that this is one sign by which a man may know his reigning sin, that which interrupts him most in holy duties; for when all other lusts are kept out, Satan will be sure to set the darling sin a-work to plead for him. If a man be addicted to the world, so will his musings be; if to mirth, and good cheer, and vain sports, his thoughts will be taken up about them; if to the inordinate love of women, his fancy will be rolling upon carnal beauty, and he will be firing his heart with unclean thoughts.

5. Want of love to God and holy things. Men are loath to come into God's presence for want of faith, and to keep there for want of love; love fixeth the thoughts, and drieth up those swimming toys and fancies that do distract us; we ponder and muse upon that in which we delight. Were our natural hatred of God and of the means of grace changed into a perfect love, we should adhere to him without distraction. We see where men love strongly, they are deaf and blind to all other objects—they can think and speak of no other thing; but because our love to God is weak, every vain occasion carrieth away our minds from him. You find this by daily experience; when your affections flag in an ordinance, your thoughts are soon scattered, weariness maketh way for wandering, your hearts are first gone, and then your minds. You complain you have not a settled mind; the fault is, you have not a settled love, for that would cause you to pause upon things without weariness: **Ps. i. 2**, 'His delight is in the law of the Lord, and in that law doth he meditate day and night;' **Ps. cxix. 97**, 'O how I love thy law, it is my meditation all the day.' David's mind would never run upon the word so much if his heart were not there. Thoughts are at the command and beck of love; where love biddeth them go, they go; and where love biddeth them tarry, they tarry: the saints first delight, and then meditate.

6. Slightness and irreverence, or want of a sense of God's presence. A careless spirit will surely wander; but one deeply affected is fixed and intent. Jonah, when he prayed in the whale's belly, could he have an heart to forget his work? Daniel, when he prayed among the lions, could he mind anything else? When we are serious and pray in good earnest, we will call in all our thoughts, and hold them under

command. This question was put to Basil, how a man should keep the mind free from distraction? His answer was—γίγνεται ὁ μετεώρισμος ἀπὸ τῆς ἀργίας τοῦ νοῦ, καὶ ἐξ ἀπιστίας μὴ παρεῖναι τὸν Θεὸν ἐξετάζοντα καρδίας καὶ νέφρους.²⁵⁰ That is, that this evil came from slowness of heart, and unbelief of God's presence; for if a man did believe that God were before his eyes, searching the heart, and trying the reins, he would be serious: 'All things are naked and 452 open to him with whom we have to do;' God looketh on, and so do the angels; he looketh on the heart, and will not you be serious? Scholars that have a truant mind, yet the presence of their masters forceth them to their books; the great God who telleth man his thought, he seeth our desires; and thoughts speak louder in his ears than our words; therefore possess the heart with a dread of his glorious presence, and with the weight and importance of the works we are about: were we to deal with man in a case of life and death, we would weigh our words and not rove like madmen.

7. The curiosity of the senses, these occasion a diversion. It is the office of the fancy to present, as in a glass, whatsoever is received by the external senses, or offered by the memory, and so the understanding taketh notice of it; the wandering eye causeth a wandering heart. Solomon saith, **Prov. xvii. 24**, 'The fool's eyes are to the ends of the earth;' first, his eyes rove, and then his heart. The apostle Peter saith of unclean persons, that 'they have eyes full of adultery,' 2 Pet. ii. 14, *μοιχαλίδος*, of the adulteress (as the word signifieth); the eye is rolled upon the object, and then the dart is by the fancy transmitted to the heart. Senses are the windows and doors of the soul; keep the senses if you would keep the heart. Job was at a severe appointment with his eyes, **Job xxxi. 1**. It is good when we go to God to renew these covenants, to agree with the heart that we will not go to God without it; with the eyes and ears, that we will not see and hear anything but what concerns our work. It was a strange consistency and fixedness which Josephus speaketh of,²⁵¹ when Faustus, Cornelius, and Furius, and Fabius with their troops had broken into the city of Jerusalem, and some fled one way and some another, yet the priests went on with their sacrifices and the holy rites of the temple, as if they heard nothing; though they rushed on them with their swords, yet they preferred the duty of their religion, before their own safety; and strange is that other instance of the Spartan youth in Plutarch, that held the censor to Alexander whilst he was sacrificing, and though a coal lighted upon his flesh, he suffered it to burn there, rather than by any crying out he would disturb the rites of their heathenish superstition. Certainly these instances should shame us Christians, that do not hold the senses under a more severe restraint, but upon every light occasion suffer them to trouble and distract us in worship.

8. Carking and distrustful cares. When we are torn in pieces with the cares of the world, we cannot have a composed heart, but our minds will waver, and our dangers will recur to our thoughts, and hinder the exercise of our faith. God took special care of the Jews, when they went up to worship, that they might have nothing to trouble them; and therefore he saith, **Exod. xxxiv. 24**, 'None of the nations shall desire the land when thou shalt go up to appear before the Lord thy God thrice in the year; and Augustine²⁵² gives the reason of it, lest they should be distracted with thoughts about their own preservation—*Vult Deus intelligi ut securus quisque ascender et, nec de terrâ suâ sollicitus esset, Deo promittente custodiam*: and one of 453 the arguments by which Paul commendeth single life is freedom from the incumbrances of the world: 'That we may serve the Lord without distraction,' **1 Cor. vii. 35**.

Thirdly, Remedies. I might speak many things by way of mere counsel about guarding the senses, the use and abuse of a form, &c.; but all these are but like external applications in physic, or topical medicines, as the binding of things to the wrists of the hands, &c., which work no perfect cure of a disease, unless the

distemper be purged away; therefore I shall speak to those things that are most effectual.

1. Go to God and wait for the power of his grace. David speaketh of it as his work: 'Ps. lxxxvi. 11, 'Unite my heart to the fear of thy name,' fix it, gather it together, ἐνώσον τὴν κάρδιαν μου (saith the Septuagint²⁵³), make it one. The heart is multiplied when it is distracted by several thoughts. God hath our hearts in his own hand, and when we can keep them up no longer, then he holds them up; when he withdraws his grace, we lose our life and seriousness; as meteors hang in the air as long as the heat of the sun is great, but when the sun is gone down they fall; as long as the love of God and the work of his grace are powerful in us, we are kept in a lively heavenly frame; but as that abateth, the soul swerveth and returneth to vanity and sin. We read, Acts xvi. 14, 15, that 'The Lord opened the heart of Lydia, so that she attended to the things that were spoken of Paul.' Attention there beareth somewhat a larger sense than we now consider it in, namely, a deep regard to the doctrine of life; yet this sense of fixedness of spirit cannot be excluded. Go to God, then, pray him to keep thy heart together; he that hath set bounds to the sea, and can bind up the waves in a heap, and stop the sun in its flight, certainly he can fasten and establish thy heart, and keep it from running out.

2. Meditate on the greatness of him before whom we are. It is of great consequence in duties to consider whom we take to be our party with whom we have to do, Heb. iv. 13. In the word, God is the party that speaketh to us: 'Thou shalt be as my mouth,' Jer. xv. 16; 'As if God spake by us,' 2 Cor. v. 20. It is God speaketh; and the heathen king of Moab showeth such reverence, that when Ehud said, 'I have a message to thee from God,' he arose out of his seat, Judges iii. 20. So in prayer you have to do with God; you do as really minister before him as the angels that abide in his presence. Oh, if you could see him that is invisible, you would have more reverence. A man that is praying or worshipping should behave himself as if he were in heaven immediately before God, in the midst of all the blessed angels, those ten thousand times ten thousand that stand before God.²⁵⁴ Oh, with what reverence, with what fear, should a poor worm creep into his presence! Think then of that glorious 454 all-seeing God, with, whom thou canst converse in thoughts as freely as with men in words; he knoweth all that is in thy heart, and seeth thee through and through. If you had spoken all those things you have thoughts upon, you would be odious to men; if all the blasphemy, uncleanness, worldly projects, were known to those that join with us, should we be able to hold up our heads for blushing? And doth not the Lord see all this? Could we believe his inspection of the heart, there would be a greater awe upon us.

3. Mortify those lusts that are apt to withdraw our minds. He that indulgeth any one vile affection will never be able to pray aright. Every duty will give you experience what corruption to resist, what thoughts we are haunted and pestered with, when we come to God. God requireth prayer, that we may be weary of our lusts, and that the trouble that we find from them in holy exercises may exasperate our souls against them. We are angry with an importunate beggar that will not be satisfied with any reasonable terms, but is always obtruding upon us. Every experience in this kind should give us an advantage to free our hearts from this disturbance. The whole work of grace tendeth to prayer; and the great exercise and employment of the spiritual life is watching unto prayer, Eph. vi. 18; and that prayer be not interrupted, 1 Peter iii. 2.

4. Before the duty there must be an actual preparation, or a solemn, discharge of all impediments, that we may not bring the world along with us. 'Put off thy shoes off thy feet,' saith God to Moses, 'for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.' Surely we should put off our carnal distractions when we go about holy

duties. 'Gird up the loins of your minds,' saith the apostle Peter, **1 Peter i. 13**, an allusion to long garments worn in that country: it is dangerous to come to prayer with a loose heart. 'My heart is fixed' saith David, 'O God, my heart is fixed,' **Ps. lvii. 7**; that is, fitted, prepared, bended to God's worship: the soul must be set, put into a dexterous ready posture. *Claudatur contra adversarium pectus, et soli Deo pateat, ne ad se hostem Dei accedere tempore orationis patiatur.*—(Cyp. lib. De Oratione Domini.) There must be a resolved shutting of the heart against God's enemy, lest he insinuate with us, and withdraw our minds.

5. Be severe to your purpose, and see that you regard nothing but what the duty leadeth you unto. It is the devil's policy to cheat us of the present duty by an unseasonable interposition. Satan beginneth with us in good things, that he may draw us to worse. What is unseasonable is naught; watch against the first diversion, how plausible soever; it is an intruding thought that breaketh a rank. In this case say as the spouse, Cant, iii., 'I charge you that you awake not my beloved till he please;' such a rigid severity should you use against the starting of the heart. If Satan should at first cast in a thought of blasphemy, that would make thee quake and shake; therefore he beginneth with plausible thoughts; but be careful to observe **455** the first stragglings; yea, be not diverted by thy very strivings against diversions, and therefore do not dispute with suggestions, but despise them; nor stand examining temptations, but reject them,²⁵⁵ as blind Bartimeus regarded not the rebukes of the people, but cried the more after Christ; or as travellers do not stand beating back the dogs that bark at them, but hold on their course; this is to be religiously obstinate and severe to our purpose. Satan contemned, hath the less advantage against you; when he is writing images upon the fancy, do not vouchsafe to look upon them. A crier in the court that is often commanding silence, disturbeth the court more than they that make the noise; so disputing with our distractions, increaseth them. They better are avoided by a severe contempt.

6. Bring with you to every holy service strong spiritual affections; our thoughts would not be at such a distance from our work if our affections were more ready and more earnestly set. It is the unwilling servant that is loath to stay long at his work, but is soon gone; could we bring ourselves more delightfully to converse with God, our hearts would hold our minds close, and we would not straggle so often as we do; therefore see you do this, or you do nothing. 'I was glad,' saith David, 'when they said unto me, Come let us go into the house of the Lord,' **Ps. cxxii. 1**. Were we of this frame of spirit, many directions would not need. Now what should hinder us from, being thus affected? Are not the ordinances of God the special means of our communion with him? and the throne of grace the very porch of heaven? Can we be better than in God's company, pleading with him for our soul's good, and waiting for his blessing? Therefore let us be glad, and rejoice in his presence, and you will not easily find such outstrayings of mind and thought.

7. Remember the weight and consequence of the duties of religion, that is a cure for slightness; you are dealing with God in a case of life and death, and will you not be serious? With what diligence and earnestness doth an advocate plead with a man in a case wherein he himself is not concerned, either for the life of another, or the inheritance or goods of another!²⁵⁶ And wilt not thou plead earnestly with God when thy soul is in danger, when it is a case of eternal life and death, as all matters that pass between God and us are? Certainly, if we did consider the weight of the business, the heart would be freed from this garish wantonness. If Christ had taken thee aside into the garden, as he took Peter, James, and John, and thou hadst seen him praying and trembling under his agonies, thou wouldst have seen that it is no light matter to go to God in a case of the salvation of souls, though thou hast never so much assurance of the issue, for so Christ had: the frequent return of Christian **456** duties maketh us to forget the consequence of them. In hearing the word, be

serious, it is your life: **Deut. xxxii. 46**, 'Hearken unto the words of the law, for this is not a vain thing, because it is your life;' thy everlasting estate is upon trial, and the things that are spoken concern your souls; every act of communion with God, every participation of his grace, hath an influence upon eternity. Say, therefore, as Nehemiah in another case, **Neh. vi. 3**, 'I am doing a great work, I cannot come down.' Can you have an heart to mind other things, when you are about so great a work as the saving of your souls?

8. Let every experimental wandering make you more humble and careful. If men did lay their wanderings to heart, and retract them, even every glance with a sigh, the mind would not so boldly, so constantly digress and step aside; all actions displeasing are not done so readily; therefore it is good to bewail these distractions. Do not count them as light things. Cassianus, speaking of these wandering thoughts, saith, The most that come to worship, being involved in greater sins, scarce count distraction of thoughts an evil, and so the mischief is increased upon them.²⁵⁷ It is a sad thing to be given up to a vain mind, and such a frothy spirit as cannot be serious; therefore if we do soundly humble ourselves for these offences, and they did once become our burden, they would not be our practice. One saith,²⁵⁸ that huntsmen observe of young dogs, that if a fresh game come in view, they leave their old scent, but if soundly beaten off from it, they kindly take to their first pursuit; the application is easy,—did we rate our hearts for this vanity, and pray against the sins of our prayers with deep remorse, this evil would not be so familiar with us.

9. A constant heavenliness and holiness of heart. If men were as they should be, holy, ἐν πασῇ ἀναστροφῇ—**1 Peter i. 14**, 'In all manner of conversation,' in solemn duties, good and proper thoughts would be more natural and kindly to us. They that live in a constant communion with God do not find it such a tedious business to converse with him; if they have any excursion of thoughts, it is in their daily work, and the offices of the common life, which they are ever seasoning with some gracious meditations and short ejaculations; when they are in duty, they are where they would be; constant gravity and seriousness is a great help to them. Men allow themselves a lawless liberty in their ordinary conversations, and then in prayer they know not how to gather up their hearts. Such as men are out of prayer, such they will be in prayer; we cannot expect that pangs of devotion should come upon us all of a sudden, and that when we come reeking into the world, we should presently leap into a heavenly frame.

10. The next remedy is frequent solemn meditation. If the understanding were oftener taken up with the things of God, and our thoughts were kept in more frequent exercise, they would the better 457 come to hand. There is a double advantage comes to us by meditation:—

1. The soul gets more abundance of heart-warming knowledge, and therefore will not be so barren and dry, which certainly is a cause of wandering: **Ps. xlv. 1**, 'My heart inditeth a good matter, and then my tongue is as the pen of a ready writer.' A man that boileth and concocts truths in his heart, hath a great readiness of words and affections. There is a good treasure within him, **Mat. xii. 35**, out of which he may spend freely. One expresseth it thus:²⁵⁹ 'He that hath store of gold and silver in his pocket, and but a few brass farthings, will more readily, upon every draught, come out with gold and silver than brass farthings; so he that hath stocked his heart with holy thoughts will not find carnal musings so rife and frequent.'

2. By use a man gets a greater command over himself. When we constantly leave the thoughts at random, and never lay restraints upon them, it is in vain to think we shall keep them in order when we please. Fierce creatures are tame to those that use to command them; every art is difficult at first, as writing, singing,

playing upon an instrument; but we get a facility by use and exercise; yea, not only a facility, but a delight in them; and those things that at first we thought impossible, by a little practice grow easy. Certainly, 'the way of the Lord is strength to the upright,' **Prov. xi. 29**, and the more we set ourselves to any good thing, the more readily and prepared are we for it.