

The first general instrument of Holy Living, Care of our Time.

He that is choice of his time will also be choice of his company, and choice of his actions; lest the first engage him in vanity and loss; and the latter, by being criminal, be a throwing his time and himself away, and a going back in the accounts of eternity.

God hath given to man a short time here upon earth, and yet upon this short time eternity depends: but so, that for every hour of our life (after we are persons capable of laws, and know good from evil) we must give account to the great Judge of men and angels. And this is it which our blessed Saviour told us, that we must account for every idle word; not meaning that every word which is not designed to edification, or is less prudent, shall be reckoned for a sin; but that the time which we spend in our idle talking and unprofitable discourings; that time which might and ought to have been employed to spiritual and useful purposes — that is to be accounted for. For we must remember that we have a great work to do, many enemies to conquer, many evils to prevent, much danger to run through, many difficulties to be mastered, many necessities to serve, and much good to do; many children to provide for, or many friends to support, or many poor to relieve, or many diseases to cure; besides the needs of nature and of relation, our private and our public cares, and duties of the world, which necessity and the providence of God have adopted into the family of religion.

And that we need not fear this instrument to be a snare to us, or that the duty must end in scruple, vexation, and eternal fears, we must remember, that the life of every man may be so ordered (and indeed must) that it may be a perpetual serving of God: the greatest trouble and most busy trade and worldly encumbrances, when they are necessary, or charitable, or profitable in order to any of those ends which we are bound to serve, whether public or private, being a doing of God's work. For God provides the good things of the world to serve the needs of nature, by the labours of the ploughman the skill and pains of the artisan, and the dangers and traffic of the merchant: these men are, in their callings, the ministers of the Divine Providence, and the stewards of the creation, and servants of a great family of God, the world, in the employment of procuring necessities for food and clothing, ornament, and physic. In their proportions also, a king and a priest and a prophet, a judge and an advocate, doing the works of their employment according to their proper rules, are doing the work of God; because they serve those necessities which God hath made, and yet made no provisions for them, but by their ministry. So that no man can complain that his calling takes him off from religion; his calling itself, and his very worldly employment in honest trades and offices, is a serving of God; and, if it be moderately pursued and according to the rules of Christian prudence, will leave void spaces enough for prayers and retirements of a more spiritual religion.

God has given every man work enough to do, that there shall be no room for idleness; and yet hath so ordered the world, that there shall be space for devotion. He that hath the fewest businesses of the world is called upon to spend more time in the dressing of the soil; and he that hath the most affairs may so order them that they shall be a service of God; whilst at certain periods, they are blessed with prayers and actions of religion, and all day long are hallowed by a holy intention.

However, so long as idleness is quite shut out from our lives, all the sins of wantonness, softness, and effeminacy, are prevented and there is but little room left for temptation; and, therefore, to a busy man temptation is fain to climb up together with his business, and sins creep upon him only by accidents and occasions; whereas, to an idle person they come in a full body, and with open violence and the impudence of a restless importunity.

Idleness is called ‘the sin of Sodom and her daughters,’ and indeed is “the burial of a living man;” an idle person being so useless to any purpose of God and man, that he is like one that is dead, unconcerned in the changes and necessities of the world; and he only lives to spend his time, and to eat the fruits of the earth; like a vermin or a wolf, when their time comes they die and perish, and in the meantime do no good; they neither plough nor carry burdens; all that they do is either unprofitable or mischievous.

Idleness is the greatest prodigality in the world; it throws away that which is invaluable in respect of its present use, and irreparable when it is past, being to be recovered by no power of art or nature. But the way to secure and improve our time we may practice in the following rules.