

A ROD FOR THE LAZY, AND A CRUMB FOR THE HUNGRY

A SERMON

Preached on Lord's Day Morning January 22nd, 1860

By Mister JAMES WELLS

AT THE SURREY TABERNACLE, BOROUGH ROAD

Volume 2 Number 63

“Labor not for the meat which perishes. but for that meat which endures unto everlasting life.” John 6:27

AFTER noticing from these words, the timeliness, and nature, and order of that meat which endures unto everlasting life, I shall at once proceed this morning to notice simply the negative and the positive contained in our text.

First. First then, THE NEGATIVE. “Labor not for the meat which perishes.” I think there are three things we may notice here: first, that it does not mean that we are not to labor for the meat which perishes, it does not mean that positively; secondly, that the words are a reproof for having carnal motives under a profession of religion; and then third, it must be understood in a comparative sense; that valuable and important to us as are temporal things, yet there is something that stands before and above those temporal things, and that infinitely and eternally in value surpasses those temporal things; so that both the clauses are reasonable; labor not, as your main or chief object, for the meat which perishes; but for that meat which endures unto everlasting life. First then, it does not mean that we are not to labor; for we see what the original declaration upon this matter is; and I think that a few remarks upon this matter this morning may do no harm. I may therefore, first remind you that even before the fall took place, man was not even then to pass his time away in a kind of passive idleness, and carelessness, and indifference; for Adam was placed in the garden of Eden “to dress and to keep it.” so that before the fall took place there was wholesome employment. And indeed, the saints in heaven through all eternity will be employed; it will not be a state of sleep nor carelessness, nor indifference, nor idleness; but a state of activity, God himself does not live in a mere passive form; and we see action and labor manifested in everything around us; as said the wise man, “All things are full of labor.” But you must look at labor not above the fall, but under the fall; for when the fall took place, then the ground became cursed; “cursed is the ground for your sake; thorns and thistles shall it bring forth unto you; and you shall eat the herb of the field in the sweat of your face shall you eat bread, till you return unto the ground; for out of it were you taken, for dust you are, and unto dust shall you return.” This brought a cloud upon the earth; this made everything appear gloomy, distressing, and discouraging; so that the antediluvians, though they lived long, they had at first very great discouragement upon this matter. And then there was another scripture added that seemed to darken the scene, and seemed to be exceedingly discouraging; namely, that when Cain had slain Abel, the Lord then, bearing upon the same

subject, said, "When you till the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto you her strength;" there seems still something more to discourage. Now under these circumstances, suppose we ourselves were so placed that there is no hope, by any skill, by any labor, by any industry whatever, of getting a bit of bread, that we really must by degrees come to nothing, till we perish by famine; this would be exceedingly distressing; How comes it to pass, then, that we have such assurances in providential matters, seeing when the fall took place everything seemed cut off; there is nothing promised but just thorns, and thistles, and a few herbs; that is all; "you shall eat the herb of the field;" how comes it to pass, then, that there are such promises given relative to providence? It comes to pass in this way; and you will notice this; and indeed this is one chief objects that I have in view in dwelling upon this part for a few moments; you will observe that all through the Scriptures all the promises of providence are connected with the promises of grace; therefore, it is on Jesus Christ's account, and on account of the people that the Lord has chosen and loved in him, and given to him; these are the reasons that we have in the holy Scriptures such sweet promises of the Lord's taking care of us providentially. But, as I have hinted, when the fall took place everything seemed gloomy; there seemed to be no positive promise as to how matters should go; and when Noah was born, a little light was thrown upon this matter; "they called his name Noah, saying, this same shall comfort us concerning our work and toil of our hands, because of the ground which the Lord has cursed." How did Noah bring about instrumentally the fulfilment of that prediction concerning him? He was the means of bringing it about in this way, that after the flood was over, after he had survived the flood, Noah being a man of grace, for he had found grace in the sight of the Lord, and he was a free grace man, he was a believing man, he knew Jesus Christ; "Noah built an altar unto the Lord; and the Lord smelt a sweet savor," a savor of rest; and then in came the promise of providence, that while the earth remained, "seed time and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer, and winter, and day and night shall not cease." There is the fulfilment; Noah was to comfort them concerning their toil and the work of their hands, because of the ground which the Lord had cursed; and you see, therefore, that by that sacrifice Noah offered the Lord brought in that promise, and thus fulfilled the promise. You will observe here, it is worthy of observation, six hundred years between the giving of the promise and its fulfilment; but then a thousand years are as nothing with the Lord. What I am anxious to show from a few scriptures is that all the kind promises of Providence are founded upon the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ; that all things are for his sake. Then, if we go further on in the Scriptures, and if we ask why Joseph was sent before to preserve much people alive? it was chiefly on account of the Lord's own people; for the posterity of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob must be preserved; and among them in that age were many of the Lord's people; therefore, it was chiefly on their account that Joseph was sent before, that the Lord took care of them providentially. And so, when the Israelites came into the land of Canaan, wherein lay the assurance of their temporal supply? Simply by abiding by the Lord, simply by seeking the Lord, simply by renouncing all false gods, listening to no human traditions, but abiding by the Lord their God, that had done such great things for them; so that you see here that they had abundant harvest and vintage, that they did eat in plenty, and praised the name of the Lord their God, and were not ashamed, when they thus abode by the Lord. And I need not remind you of the Savior's own words upon this matter, how kindly he sympathizes with his people under their trials and difficulties upon temporal matters; "But," he says, "seek you first the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added." And then to assure us that the Lord never loses sight of us, that he watches over us carefully, he tells us he takes notice of the lilies of the field, the little sparrow; and if that be not enough, he says, "the very hairs of your head are numbered." There is, therefore, something exceedingly encouraging in the promises of the Lord;

here is, then, encouragement to labor; there is not a lawful occupation upon the face of the earth that may not become most respectable. Some classes of men there are who do so degrade themselves by their vile language, and their awful drunkenness; perhaps it would be hardly right for me to mention the particular class I refer to; why, they might all be gentlemen, at least they might all be truly respectable, only by conducting themselves properly and rationally. And after all, I make no hesitation in saying that as far as natural happiness is concerned, I say that that man that rises and goes to his work every morning as his amusement, his pleasure, and his delight, I say that that man has more real happiness than any other man can have. I do hold with one of our old Writers, that "hard work is the best fun in the world;" I really think it is. And I say that the best scholar under the sun is that man that thoroughly understands his own business; or, if he does not understand it, he is determined to work at it A B C like; to begin at the very beginning, and go on stitch by stitch, and bit by bit, and step by step, until he does thoroughly understand it; and then he will go on with it with ease; and if that man cannot read any language but his own, nor even speak his own language grammatically, yet if he understands his business well, that man is a thorough scholar, let that business be whatever it may. I declare, that if I had to get my living by sweeping a crossing, if I would not sweep it as tastily as I could, make it look as nice as I could, keep my broom as nice, and myself as respectable as I could; so that I do believe that people when they saw me in the distance would come to my crossing for the sake of giving me something. There are some good people get into a lazy, dawdling, mumping sort of spirit, as though they could not move; they are like stagnant pools; they want someone to rout them up, well. I wish I had such persons where I could keep them under my eye for a week or two, or a month or two: I'd give them no peace until they found out that what they want is just to have plenty to do. I speak from experience; I have worked hard myself; I was but seven years old when I was turned out into the world; and I never wanted a bit of bread from that day to this; anything I could get to do, I did it; and the consequence was I got on pretty well; at least, as well as it was good for me to get on; and here am I now, above fifty years old, and a better man than some of you that are hardly thirty; because you have been afraid of work, and I have not. It will make you healthy, and strong, and full of spirit; and when you get seventy or eighty years old, you will be a lively, muscular, mental old gentleman. I recollect Dr. Franklin says, "Here am I, eighty-two years old, and the twelve last years have been the most active and happy years of my life. I have crossed the Atlantic four times, and consulted the English Parliament upon the great question of American Independence." People now at four or five and thirty begin to hang down their heads, and look almost as if they were old; it is all from want of action; less night work, and more morning work, that is what we want, depend upon it. So then, it is a fact, that we need the bread that perishes, and we must labor for it. I remember a minister once wrote to me, and asked me if I would be his doctor; he had a certain disease, he said; and I read the letter, and came to this, he says, "Really, I don't feel that I can work; I am got so lazy; can you prescribe a remedy?" And I wrote to him that I could not; there was no necessity for it, for there was one already prescribed; had he never read the recipe in the good old Book of records? "If any man will not, (not cannot,) work, neither shall he eat;" if that doesn't cure you, I said, I don't know what will. I don't know any remedy more powerful than that; I think it is infallible; you may depend upon it that will move men when nothing else will; for such persons generally think a pretty good deal about number one; so that when you touch them pretty close there, that will do what nothing else can. Forgive these few remarks. We have then, in the word of God, assurances of a kind providence; but at the same time, an order of things established; for he that is afraid of the wind of course will not plough, and he that is afraid of the clouds will not sow. Therefore, we must not shrink back from difficulties; and the word of God everywhere speaks well

of industry. Now connect the two together: the promises of a kind Providence appearing, and that order of things in which he appears. Consider the lilies of the field; they prosper in their order of things; and the fowls of the air, they are sustained in their order of things; we occupy a certain order of things, and by following out that order of things we shall succeed also. I am not now preaching as though I were promising you all that if you are industrious you shall be rich; no. You must not suppose that rich people are such wonderfully happy people; not they; they don't know what to do with their riches; some of them; happiness does not lie there. I have seen riches do some people a deal of harm; and I have seen other people grow as liberal as they were rich; and in that case riches are a blessing, because they answer the end described by the apostle when he says, "If any man labor with his hands, let him give unto him that needs:" there will always be the poor and afflicted that cannot labor; and, therefore, those that can labor should minister unto such. It is a very great thing if a man can just get his bit of bread, and just clear his way; I always have a respect for that man. The fact is, I have just as much respect for that man as I have for a rich man; for he goes along and clears his way, and the rich man can do no more; and some rich men perhaps do not do as much as he does; for he perhaps is something like the old woman who said she could not afford to give a guinea (i.e. a pound or 21 shillings) a year to a society, but she would not mind giving a shilling a week (i.e. she could give about $\frac{1}{4}$ as much but to her much more than it was to the rich man); and so it is with him; and there are some working men who give much more for the relief of God's people than some of you rich men. I love the promises of Providence; I love a spirit of industry; never mind what your difficulties are, you will in the end overcome them, and surmount them.

The second point is that these words are a reproof to persons whose object in making a profession of religion is merely temporal advantage. I do not think we have many of that stamp here; we may perhaps have half a dozen or dozen just before Christmas, poor things, and I always sympathize with them; they come half a dozen times before Christmas, old men and women; you see they only come then, when they think they shall get something. Well, I always sympathize with such. Why, how is that? Well, poor things, they are dreadfully poor; if they are a little bit roguish, they are dreadfully poor; and poverty is a very trying thing; so, don't be too hard upon them; you don't know what poverty might tempt you to do; if you got into real poverty you might be tempted to do what you never dreamt of. Hunger is sharp, destitution is cutting, real poverty is powerful; and when brought under its power, heaven alone knows what we shall do. Therefore, let us be careful how we judge the poor that do wrong under the pressure of poverty. That is a wise prayer of Agur's when he says "Give me neither poverty nor riches, as though he should say, I am that poor sort of thing, I am so easily puffed up with pride, I should be full, and deny you; and on the other hand, not poverty, that is, not absolute poverty; I do not apprehend he means there comparative poverty, but absolute poverty; as though he should say, I am that poor weak thing that I should steal, or do wrong, under the pressure of the same. So then when a man steals to the satisfaction of his hunger, let us be careful how we judge him. And then let us ask the question, who makes you to differ? Why is it God has so amply fed you all your days, has clothed you and housed you, and sheltered you, and taken care of you? Why some of you when I first knew you had not a penny to help yourself with; you are worth your thousands, now, but who has thus made you to differ? I am sure I am not speaking contrary to your feelings when I say it is the Lord that has exalted you, and favored you by his kind providence, and by his grace as well, keeping you earnestly, and affectionately, and sincerely in the truth; and while the Lord in his providence has dealt so liberally with you, you still feel more room than ever in your souls for the blessed truths of the Gospel; so

that you find your temporal riches cannot be a substitute for the unsearchable riches of Christ, for that meat which endures unto everlasting life.

And then third, "Labor not for the meat that perishes," will mean, that we are not to labor for it in comparison of the labor wherewith we are to labor for that meat which endures unto everlasting life. How striking the contrast between the temporal and the spiritual as set before us by the Savior in this chapter. "Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead." So, you and I have partaken of the bounties of a kind Providence, but by and bye it will be said of us, they are dead. "But he that eats of the bread that I shall give him," said Jesus, "shall never die. He that comes unto me shall never hunger, and he that believes in me shall never thirst." Here is that bread that endures to everlasting life; the one therefore, is not worthy to be compared with the other. And so far from temporal things being a substitute for spiritual things, the reverse is perfectly true, that spiritual things can be to any extent a substitute for temporal things. It has been put to the test; and this truth does set forth the religion of the Son of God in a very attractive form. Have not the people of God in different ages been cast out; have they not wandered in sheep skins and goat skins; have they not been deprived of temporal sustenance; have not thousands starved to death rather than part with God's truth; If then they could do this, God strengthening them, what shall we say to some of those greedy, carnal professors that will twist and turn into all shapes and forms rather than lose a single farthing? You must forgive what I am going to say, for when I am in the pulpit I must know no person, I must know you all, and yet know none; but I do believe that if some of the ancients were now alive that have fared such privation, for the truth, and found that the Lord could so sustain, them as to enable them to starve to death rather than give up his truth, I think if some of them came here now, and could see how careless even some of you are about the house of God during the week, I think they would be rather surprised. I should not be at all surprised if they came to your shops, and said, How is it you don't go to hear the word of God to night? Well, I shall lose perhaps eighteen-pence, or lose this, or that, if I go. Oh, that's it is it? What, are you under any necessity; are you really so badly off that if you happen to lose half-a-crown by leaving your shop it will get you into trouble? Oh, dear no; I have hundreds of my own. And yet in order to prevent losing a trifle, you can let the evening go over, and let your minister preach just to a few poor people assembled, and treat the truth in that way. They would say, Ah, it was very different in our days; we underwent starvation for it; and were glad to hear it whenever we could. Why, we should not be half heavenly minded enough for them; we should not be prayerful enough, not be enough like Christ, not have fellowship enough with God, for them; and I put myself into the number; I have not a quarter of the zeal nor the life, nor a millionth part of the spirituality that God knows I would desire to have. All real happiness, after all, lies in that small compass described by the apostle. He does not say the possession of houses and lands, and thousands, is life and peace, no he says, "To be spiritually minded is life and peace."

Second. After thus noticing *the negative*, I will now turn to THE POSITIVE OF OUR TEXT; "Labor for the meat which endures unto everlasting life." The Israelites had to be up early in the morning. That is almost the only good custom that exists in the east at this day, that of early rising; then of course they retire early, and we, poor creatures cannot, not very early at least. But I will take the morning, then, in which they were to seek the manna, first figuratively; second, expressive of the willingness of the soul to seek God; and third, to denote constancy; after just reminding you that the labor consisted in gathering in the manna. And just so now the spiritual labor; we have a good heap of manna; the Bible is our heap of manna, one heap; and we want to gather in manna

from the Bible. Do we mean to say that our hope never gets low, our faith never gets weak, our hearts never faint, and we ourselves never seem ready to die; so that as Newton says,

“Can they be worse that never heard his name?”

Well, when the Lord is pleased to feed us with this heavenly manna, namely, his blessed truth, and strengthen our hope, then we abound in hope; then we abound in faith, and sweet assurance that this God is our God; and we abound in love, our affections are set upon the Lord, and we love him; we lose sight of our thousand supposed miseries; and our real troubles become then almost ideal; and our enemies seem lost, as it were, in a cloud, and we lose sight of everything, and we are left like Peter, James, and John on the mount of Transfiguration, with Jesus only; then, come Satan, come life, come death, come what will, we can rejoice in the blessed assurance that this God is our God, and will be our guide even unto death. I said I would take the morning figuratively; where shall I go to find it? I go into the morning of eternity. Ah! say you, that is too early. Not at all. “The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting;” grace was given in Christ before the world began; the people were given to Christ before the world began, all the blessings were given to Christ before the world began. And therefore, in the morning of eternity I have picked up many grains of manna; that is to say, many words recorded in the Bible concerning what the Lord was from everlasting have been strengthening to my heart, cheering and delightful to my heart. I shall never forget a sweetness I realized many years ago. I was in much trouble of soul relative to my state and relative to the ministry; and these words came with a power I shall never forget; “the election of grace.” That which appeared so conspicuous to me was that not only was there an elect, but that it was an election of *grace*; and the feeling that I had was this, that if it were the work of grace to inscribe my name in God's eternal book, then it can certainly be there; it is an election of grace. And those who make light of election, think little of election, say we ought not to speak much about election; if they had seen and felt what I have, and found the manna that I have found in that early morning, I am sure they would join with the apostle, or wish to do so, giving thanks unto God, who from the beginning has chosen us unto salvation. Then there is the early morning of prediction; “The seed of the woman shall bruise the serpent's head.” And then there is the morning of the Savior's birth; the anthem of the angels; that has been made food to many and then there is the morning of Christ's resurrection, and reappearance to his disciples. In all these senses we may seek the manna in the morning. But, secondly, it will mean the willingness of the soul. Now here is the Israelite after the night of sleep; he is awaked in the morning, he is hungry; and there is the food. Let us take this for one moment; of course, it will not bear far; but you must take my meaning; let us take this sleep of the Israelite as a figure of our state by nature; when we were in darkness, sleeping the sleep of death; when we know not God, nor obeyed the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ; when we were unconscious spiritually, as the Israelite was literally, and as we all are, when in sleep; and as persons are liable and subject to many curious dreams in their sleep, so we while in a state of nature, what we thought of religion was a mere dream; we as it were dreamed many things about religion, but it was but a dream: our thoughts were all wrong. And by and bye, when the Lord commanded the light to shine into our souls to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God, then all our dreams passed away, we awoke to the reality then; our sinner-ship and our destitution became realities then; we began then to feel a little of that spiritually which the prodigal felt literally when he said, “I perish with hunger.” Ah, now, what shall we do? Here is the morning. Is that man unwilling to receive a promise, to feed upon free-grace, to feed upon the truth? I believe at the first it is true that some of you perhaps fed upon a kind of mixed food; but

there is a promise that they shall feed upon clean provender; and the manna, as we observed last Lord's day morning, was pure, purity was one of its chief characteristics; and so the soul thus awakened has a pure appetite for the truth, free grace truth; it hungers and thirsts after the truth. Then after we have taken it in a figurative sense, and as expressive of the willingness of the soul to seek after God, let us take it in the next place as expressive of constancy. This was to be done every day. And so, after you are brought out of a state of nature, you will have many sleepy states. I do hate that condition that when I read the Bible, and can see nothing in it, feel no enjoyment in it, I hate, I detest such a state. I like the words of the poet:

“More the treacherous calm I dread,
Than tempests bursting o'er my head.”

Yet there seems something beautiful in the Scriptures in these words upon this in Solomon's Song: “I sleep but my heart wakes.” The Christian is not happy: he has all sorts of ugly dreams when he gets into this kind of carnal sleep: he dreams he shall go to hell: he dreams he never was a Christian, he dreams that everything is against him: and that after all he shall fall someday by the hand of Saul: and yet how true the words are that no man can keep alive his own soul. But what a mercy it is that these sleepy states, though they seem for the time to take away the keenness of our appetite for spiritual things, seem at the time to make us unconscious of any hunger or thirst after God, it is remarkable by and bye, after a long experience of this kind, how keen the hunger of the soul becomes, how ardent the thirst of the soul becomes; so that perhaps it can rise high enough to take up the language of Christ himself, for it is Christ's language, namely, “As the hart pants after the water-brooks, so pants my soul after you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; when shall I come and appear before God?” We seek this meat, then, that endures unto everlasting life, in the morning of truth; we seek it when first called by grace; we seek it every fresh manifestation the Lord is pleased to bless us with. And this is one reason why I think we have all cause to love the house of God. Have you not come here fast asleep sometimes, and gone away wide awake? Ah, say you, and we have come here sometimes wide awake, and gone away fast asleep. Perhaps that is through my dull, heavy sermon, for I am but a poor, weak, feeble preacher; still I hope that is not often the case; I hope the other is more frequently the case. But have you not come sometimes, and thought, Well, I will go this morning, or this evening; but I don't think there is any hope for me; and perhaps the minister has been led on that very occasion into the very path you are in, has opened up everything, and has made such a crooked thing as you are fit entirely with God's truth, and you have gone away and felt renewed, and established, and comforted, and blessing the name of the Lord that he has once more blessed you with a little of his hidden, manna, that he has sent down a little of that bread from heaven that strengthens man's heart.

I must now close with two different scriptures, which I hope we have in our hearts; the one is a solemn prayer for the church; and the other a prayer for the world, or for those in the world that are not yet called out of it. The words were very sweet to me this morning in running through my sermon; and I thought, Well, these two prayers would seem to come in at the end of my sermon very nicely. What is our desire for all the churches? I thought it could not be better expressed than in the words of Psalm 144, “That our sons may be as plants grown up in their youth;” that is a beautiful idea, “grown up.” You always see that when a tree is a bit of a shrub, and another tree overshadows it, that poor little tree has no chance of growing at all, remains a shrub all its days, because it has not the sun, nor the rain, nor the wind nicely; and it is not blown about and its roots

moved. We would pray then that the church may grow up high. Why, the higher I grow, the less likely I am to be overshadowed by other trees; as good John Bunyan observes, that the two columns that stood in the front of the temple were eighteen cubits high, and the two tallest giants were but nine cubits, so that the Lord's people would overtop all the rest. So that we want the Lord's people to grow up so high that they shall overtop all, but none shall overtop them; that they may grow up into the sun, and wind, and rain, and become like cedars on Lebanon. "And that our daughters may be as cornerstones," square with God's temple, with God's truth; at right angles with God's budding; "polished after the similitude of a palace;" let us see that there is something royal about them, something of Christ about them, something of heaven about them, something of God about them. "That our garners may be full, affording all manner of store." Well, this is a good prayer; I can pray this from my very soul, "and that our sheep may bring forth, thousands and ten thousands in our streets;" yes, I love to see poor sinners gathered in; "and that our oxen," our ministers, "may be strong to labor well," I said, Lord, I can pray this also; "and that there be no breaking in nor going out; that there be no complaining in our streets." Happy is that people that is in such a case; yes, happy is that people whose God is the Lord. Can we really pray that prayer earnestly before God for the churches; for we are to labor in faith. and in prayer. And I did intend also to notice the prayer for the world, or those in the world not yet brought out of it; and thought, well I can pray that prayer too; and it is recorded in the Psalms, as you know; "God be merciful unto us, and bless us and cause his face to shine upon us; that your way may be known, upon the earth, your saving health among all nations; let the people praise you, O God; yes, let, all the people praise you. Then shall the land yield her increase; and God even our own God, shall bless us; and all the ends of the earth shall fear him." I thought I could pray this as well.

May the Lord keep us thus laboring for this bread of everlasting life, praying for ourselves, and praying for the churches, and praying for the multitudes yet without God and without Christ; may we have grace so to do. Amen and Amen.