

DUTIES OF CHURCH MEMBERS by John Angell James

These are so numerous and various, that they must be classed under different heads. I do not now intend so much those duties, which they owe in common to God as Christians—as those which they owe to the church, as members. If I was speaking of the former, it would be proper to enumerate, supreme, habitual, practical love:

- To God, [Matthew 12:37]
- Unreserved, cheerful, and perpetual devotedness to Christ, [Rom 14:7-9; 1 Cor 3:23; 6:19,20; Phil. 1:21]
- Entire and constant dependence on the Holy Spirit, [Rom 3:13, 14, 16, 26; 1 Cor 6:19; Gal 5:16, 25]
- A life of faith. [2 Cor 5:7; Gal 2:20]
- Spirituality of mind. [Rom 8:4-6]
- Deadness to the world, [Col 3:2, 3; 1 John 2:15-17; 1 Cor 7:29-31; 1 John 5:4]
- Heavenly mindedness, [Col 3:2,3; Phil 3:20,21]
- Supreme regard to eternity, [2 Cor 4:16-18; 5:1-4]
- Separation from the world, [2 Cor 6:17,18; Rom 12:1,2]
- Universal and high toned morality, [Phil. 4:7; 2 Peter 3:10-14]
- Eminent social excellence in all the relative duties of life, [Eph 5,6]
- All the gentle and passive virtues, [Matt 5; Eph 5:26-32]
- Diligent attendance on all the means of grace, [Heb. 10:25].

O, what a character is that of a consistent Christian, how holy and heavenly, how meek, how gentle, how benevolent, how just, how devout, how useful, how happy!! "Lord, who is sufficient for these things?" "My grace is sufficient for you."

But I now enumerate the duties which belong to church members as such—

I. There are solemn duties which members owe to the pastor.

- Love and affection for his work's sake. [1 Thess 5:12, 13].
- Submission to his authority as the servant of Christ, appointed to enjoin obedience to the precepts of our Lord, and to rule his church. [Heb 13:17].
- Constant, punctual, and devout attendance on his ministrations, not neglecting him for others, not led by curiosity to indulge a rambling taste for novelty. [Heb 13:7; 2 Tim 4:3, 4].
- Provision for his temporal comfort. [Gal 6:6; 1 Tim 5:17; 1 Cor 9:13, 14].
- Tender regard for his reputation. [Phil 2:9].
- Cooperation with him in all his scriptural and judicious schemes for the good of the church, or the spread of religion in the world. [2 Cor 1, 2; Phil 4:3; Rom 16:2-12; 3 John 5-8].
- Sympathy with him in his personal, relative, and official sorrows and anxieties. [Acts 28:15].
- Earnest and constant prayer. [2 Cor 1:12; Eph 6:19; Phil 1:19; 1 Thess 5:25].
- Deep and constant interest in the success of his ministerial labors.

II. There are solemn duties which the members owe to each other.

The bond which unites the members of a Christian church is a very sacred and very tender one. It is altogether peculiar; there is nothing like it in the world. It is not a tie of interest or blood kinship, or mere friendship, but of holy love: they are all one in Christ, and are therefore to regard one another for Christ's sake, as well as for their own.

1. There is a duty of reciprocal love. The whole system of the gospel is a system of love: God is love, and redemption is a manifestation of his love; Christ is love incarnate; and His religion is love, love to God for his own sake, love to man for God's sake, and love to Christians for Christ's sake. All who make a profession of such a religion should therefore be distinguished by its characteristic feature, and shine forth in the mild beauty of holy love. This is enjoined upon us in many parts of the New Testament: "Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love." [Rom 12:10]. "Let brotherly love continue." [Heb

13:1]. A Christian church is a society of brothers, and they ought therefore to love as brothers. But how is this love to show itself?

By a feeling of deep interest in each other, not only as belonging to the church universal, but to that particular branch of it with which we are in direct association and communion.

By bearing with each other's infirmities of manner, temper, and ignorance, and neither despising each other for those infirmities, magnifying, misrepresenting, nor reporting them. "We then who are strong ought to bear with the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves."

By sympathizing with each other in our sorrows and cares, "Weeping with those that weep." We ought to visit one another in sickness, or any personal or family trouble of mind, or estate. Without being meddling or obtrusive, we certainly ought to feel it our duty to offer to the afflicted our kind condolence. This is "bearing one another's burthens, and so fulfilling the law of Christ."

By relieving each other's temporal needs. How explicit is the language of the apostle: "Distributing to the needs of saints, given to hospitality." Perhaps there is scarcely one duty more neglected by Christians than this. The richer members of our churches are strangely neglectful of their poorer brethren. It is true that considerable caution is necessary, lest the poor should be induced to desire to enter into church fellowship for the sake of having their temporal needs relieved; against this danger, however, our mode of admission is a sufficient check. The monthly contribution at the Lord's supper is not, in most cases, what it ought to be. It is oftentimes matter of surprise and grief to the deacons, who carry round the plates, to see how many pass it on without adding a farthing to its contents, from whom, too, better things might be expected. Every single member, however poor, not excepting even those who are relieved from the church fund, ought to put something into the plate, if it were only a single penny. But the richer members should not satisfy themselves with what they do at the Lord's supper for their poorer brethren; but ought, especially the females, to make themselves personally acquainted with the condition and needs of the poor, in order to supply them.

How striking is the language which Christ represents himself as addressing to his people at the last day: "For I was hungry and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty and you gave Me nothing to drink; I was a stranger and you didn't take Me in; I was naked and you didn't clothe Me, sick and in prison and you didn't take care of Me.' Then they too will answer, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or without clothes, or sick, or in prison, and not help You?' Then He will answer them, 'I assure you: Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for Me either.'" [Matthew 25:42-45]

2. Reciprocal watchfulness is another duty that church members owe to one another. "Am I my brother's keeper?" is a question which no church member should ever allow himself to ask: for we are united in fellowship for the very purpose of endeavoring to watch and care for each other. The pastor is appointed to take the oversight of the church; but this by no means relieves the church from the duty of also taking the oversight of itself. How utterly impossible is it for one man efficiently to watch over several hundred members! How can the members of the church really love one another, if they do not in some measure watch over one another? Can we pretend to love a person, and yet not warn him of the danger into which we see him running? Is it compatible with affection never to warn or admonish those who are in imminent peril? Even the Old Testament enjoins this duty in the following striking language: "You shall not hate your brother in your heart; you shall rebuke your neighbor, and not allow sin upon him." This duty is still more explicitly enjoined in the New Testament, "Comfort yourselves together, and edify one another. Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the feeble minded, support the weak, be patient towards all men." This was addressed to church members, not to church officers. If any one sees his brother living in the known neglect of an obvious duty, or in the commission of a known sin, or in a careless and lukewarm manner; it is his duty, in a spirit of true humility, meekness, and affection, to mention it to him. This, however, it must be admitted, is an extremely difficult and delicate matter, and ought not to be attempted in any case, but in a spirit of the purest love, and in a manner the most gentle, unassuming, and inoffensive. All appearance of officiousness, superiority or dictation; all that savors of accusation, scolding, and reproach, must be avoided, for such things instead of producing conviction will only excite irritation.

Except in rare cases, this is a duty which ought generally to be performed by the old towards the young, and the experienced towards the inexperienced, and by superiors towards inferiors. Still no man, whatever be his situation, ought to be offended in being told in a kind, humble, and delicate manner, of his faults. Every man in whom is the meek and humble spirit of the gospel is ready to say with David, "Let the righteous smite me, it shall be a kindness; and let him reprove me, it shall be as excellent oil, which shall not break my head." To give warning and reproof, and to take it in a right spirit and manner, are both difficult; but yet, for all that, incumbent duties.

3. Reciprocal helpfulness is another duty of church members, and another end of church fellowship. We all need assistance in the way to glory, not only from God, but as his instruments—from each other; and we are associated together for this purpose. This appears to be plainly our duty from 1 Thess 5:11, "Therefore, comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as you also do. Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feeble minded, support the weak." Nothing can be more plain than that the members of a church are to help their fellow-members in their spiritual course, in such manner and measure as their circumstances may allow; by promoting religious conversation, by uniting with them in social prayer, encouraging their hopes, dissipating their sorrows, instructing their ignorance, removing their doubts, and promoting their edification. O how much were it to be desired that they could all be baptized into the spirit of that holy love: "Love is patient; love is kind. Love does not envy; is not boastful; is not conceited; does not act improperly; is not selfish; is not provoked; does not keep a record of wrongs; finds no joy in unrighteousness, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." [1 Corinthians 13:4-7].

III. There are duties which the members owe to the church in its collective capacity.

They ought to take a deep interest in its welfare. They should not of course, cherish a sectarian spirit, an exclusive feeling of separation from the church universal, from other denominations of real Christians, or other congregations of their own denomination. But they should consider the church with which they are united as the special object of their interest, affectionate solicitude, and fervent prayer. They should attend all its meetings, when convenience will allow. They should endeavor to promote its welfare by leading suitable people into its communion. They should in an especial manner do all they can to preserve or restore its peace. If they know any of the brethren in a state of alienation or strife, they should do nothing to fan the coals of contention, but all they can to extinguish the unholy fire. They should never lend their ear to the tale bearer, and sower of discord, but discourage him.

They should never connect themselves with those who on any occasion are seeking factiously to make a party in the church, either on the ground of dissatisfaction with the pastor's labors, or the church's decisions in matter of discipline. The peace of the church should lie so near their hearts, that for the sake of it, they should be willing to make any sacrifice of feeling, and any surrender of their own will, except in matters of truth and conscience. They should consider a spirit of cabal, and party, and faction, as a species of high treason against the well-being of the church. "Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of the Lord Jesus, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no division among you; but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind, and in the same judgment." "Mark those who cause divisions and offences, contrary to the doctrines which you have learned, and avoid them." "All of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility." "Let nothing be done through strife or vain glory, but in lowliness of mind, let each esteem others better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others." "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem; they shall prosper, who love you. Peace be within your walls and prosperity within your palaces. For my brethren and companions' sakes, I will now say, Peace be within you. Because of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good."

IV. The duties of church members to Christians of other congregations and other denominations.

With Christians of other congregations of their own denomination, it is their duty to keep up friendly fellowship and to be ever ready to cooperate with them in every proper scheme for the promotion of the gospel in general, or the good of their own denomination in particular; avoiding at the same time all feelings of envy and jealousy, and all expressions in reference to their respective ministers or churches, in the smallest degree calculated to produce hostility or alienation. Towards other denominations that agree with us in the fundamental truths of the gospel,

there should be a charitable forbearance of those things wherein they differ from us; a belief that they are as conscientious in their views, as we are in ours; a candid respect for their conscience, combined with an opposition to their opinions; an abstinence from all ridicule, sarcasm, and bitterness, though at the same time a readiness, on suitable occasions, by reason and persuasion, to convince them and the world of their errors; a unity of spirit with them as fellow Christians: a love to them for the sake of the truth which is in them; and a willingness not only to blend with them in the fellowship of private life, but to cooperate with them in all those public objects which admit of union without compromise. "John said to Him, "Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in Your name, and we tried to stop him because he wasn't following us." "Don't stop him," said Jesus, "for whoever is not against us is for us." "Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity." "Who are you that judge another man's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind." "We then that are strong, ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let everyone please his neighbor for his good to his edification."

V. Duties of church members in reference to the world.

It is their manifest duty to pay all due respect and obedience to civil governors in secular affairs, honoring the king, upholding the constitution, observing the laws, paying all lawful taxes, and never defrauding the revenue, nor in any way obstructing the administration of public justice. While at the same time they may lawfully exercise all their rights and enjoy all their privileges as citizens of a free state, in such peaceable and orderly manner as they believe will be for the benefit of their country; and remembering that as it is by God that kings reign, and princes decree justice, it is their duty to sanctify their loyalty and their patriotism, by earnest prayer for their king and country. [Rom 13; 1 Tim 2:1-3; 1 Peter 2:12-17].

It is no less the duty of church members meekly, but firmly to refuse obedience to all laws that are manifestly in opposition to the Word of God. [Acts. 4:18,19].

Towards the world they owe all the ordinary duties of social life; and it should be their especial care, in all their transactions with the ungodly, to manifest the utmost kindness, the most transparent morality of every kind, the greatest courtesy, the most conciliatory spirit, and throughout the whole of their demeanor, avoiding everything that is in the smallest degree inconsistent, that savors of spiritual pride, or that looks like contempt, or conscious moral superiority. "Walking in wisdom towards those that are outside."

It is the duty of church members to avoid what are called worldly amusements, such as theatrical representations, card playing, balls, and all kinds of gambling, frequenting taverns, fashionable concerts of music, private dancing parties, and fashionable games, and oratorios: for although some of these entertainments may not be demoralizing, yet they abate seriousness and spirituality, promote levity and frivolity of mind, are a great waste of time, and are a part of that conformity to the world in which Christians are forbidden to indulge. It is a sad proof of little or no true vital piety, when people feel it a hardship to be debarred by their profession from such engagements. [2 Cor 6:17; Rom 12:2].

Nor ought real Christians to intermarry with worldly and unconverted people. "She is at liberty," says the apostle, "to marry whom she will—but only in the Lord." This law of Christ is strangely forgotten in the present day; and to the neglect of it may be attributed in a great measure, the low state of religion in the hearts of many professors.

It is the solemn duty of church members to seek the conversion of the world to Christ. Every church ought to be a home and foreign missionary society within itself, and every professing Christian should consider himself converted to seek the conversion of others. "From you;" said the apostle to the Thessalonian church, "sounded out the word of the Lord, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to Godward is spread abroad." A similar testimony should be borne to every church.

Such then are the solemn and incumbent duties of all who have made a profession of piety, and taken upon them the name of Christ. Let them often read over this Manual of their obligations, be humbled that they have lived so far below the standard of their duty, and beg renewed grace from God, to live more and more to his glory.