

Matthew Henry's Self-examination before Ordination

Being an extract from

The Life of Matthew Henry

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by

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Chapter 4, 1686 to 1687

When Mr. Henry's resolutions for the ministry were generally known in the metropolis, the reverend and learned Mr. Woodcock applied to him, in favour of a lecture then instituting, chiefly for young persons. But he modestly declined the offer; he thought his service might be most wanted in the country, and might be more suitable there than in or about the city.

Followed by the congregation at Chester with importunate letters, as well as the personal communication of Mr. Henthorne, expressive of their desires for his settlement among them with the least possible delay, he soon retired from Gray's Inn in order to give himself the more entirely unto "the gospel of God." His departure from that honourable society, like his entering and continuance among them, was worthy of his high vocation. He took farewell of his legal associates in an excellent discourse from 2 Thess ii. 1., latter part. "And by our gathering together unto him"—recommending the hope of the blessed *επισυναζωγη*, as the greatest comfort under separation.

The business of ordination was next attended to with exemplary deliberation and seriousness. Not only did he avail himself of the counsel of his friends, particularly the Reverends F. Tallents, and James Owen; but, for more permanent advantage, he sketched a discourse on 1 Timothy iv. 15, “give thyself wholly to them”—in which he stated the nature, and several parts of the ministerial work, and what it is for a man to give himself wholly to them—*εν τ?τοις ισθι*—to be wholly in them; he likewise composed a paper which he designated “Serious Self examination before Ordination.”

That “paper” is so general in its nature, and presents a combination of vigilance and wisdom so unusual and complete, as, notwithstanding the length of it, to render its insertion imperative.

It will reprove, if not convince, of awful presumption, all such as have inconsiderately rushed into the most responsible of all offices. To those who are contemplating the ministry, or who are about to enter upon its active and arduous duties, it will prove a friendly monitor, a useful test, and an all-important directory. While, as a full exposition of Mr. Henry’s own motives and principles, in reference to the same great “work,” upon which he was then entering, it is invaluable. It shews a temper of mind so conscientious, so humble, and so enlightened, as to be perfectly apostolical. He magnified the office, but abased himself. And being unstained, visibly at least, with even the common follies of youth, the severity of his self-judgment becomes additionally observable and impressive. The sins of the heart were, in his apprehension, more humiliating than gross acts of wickedness appear to be in the eyes of many.

As the reader proceeds through the volume, he will, probably, think it worth while to keep this interesting document in view, and to compare the prayers, and purposes, and resolutions it exhibits, with Mr. Henry’s subsequent history, department, and success.

“That it is very requisite,” he writes, “for a man to examine himself seriously at such a time, will readily be granted by those who consider the nature of the ordinance, and of that work into which it is a solemn entrance.

“Search me, O God, and know my heart, try me and know my thoughts, and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.’

“It is worth while for a man at such a time deliberately to ask himself, and, having asked, conscientiously to answer the six following questions:

“Q. I. What am I?

“This is a needful question, because in ordination I give up myself to God in a peculiar manner; and will God accept the torn, and the blind, and the lame? Surely no. The sacrifice must be searched before it was offered, that it might be sure to fit its end. Now, though the truth of grace be not perhaps necessary to the *esse* of a minister (for Judas himself was an apostle), yet it is necessary to the *bene esse*. A man cannot be a good minister without it. And therefore come, my soul, let us inquire what am I? And let the inquiry be strict and serious, for a mistake here is fatal.

“1. Have I ever been inwardly convinced of the lost and undone condition in which I was born, that I was by nature a child of wrath, even as others? Did I ever see myself wallowing in my blood, in a forlorn, out-cast, helpless state, lost and ruined for ever without Christ?

“2. Was I ever deeply humbled before the Lord for the original sin that I was born in, and the numberless actual transgressions in heart and life that I have been guilty of? Hath sin been bitter to my soul, hath my heart been broken for it, and hath my sorrow been of the right kind; hath the sight of a broken Saviour broken my heart?

“3. Have I sincerely closed with the Lord Jesus Christ, by a true and lively faith, taken him to be mine, and resigned up myself to him to be his? Have I

accepted of Christ upon gospel terms, to be my Prince to rule, and Saviour to save me? Have I renounced all others, and resolved to cleave to the Lord Jesus Christ, let what will come? Is Christ precious to me, is he dearer to me than any thing in the world besides? Could I be freely willing to part with all for Christ, and count every thing but loss that I may win Christ?

“4. Have I a real hatred of every sin, in myself as well as in others? Have I no beloved lust which I would have spared, no darling corruption which I would have to remain unmortified? Doth sin appear sin in my eyes, and can I say with David, that ‘I hate every false way?’ Are the remainders of indwelling corruption a burden to me? Do I long to be rid of sin? Are my resolutions sincere and my endeavours serious against sin, and all appearances of it, and that because it is against God?

“5. Have I a real love to holiness? Do I press after it, and earnestly desire to be more holy, using holy ordinances for this end, that I may be made thereby more and more holy? Am I fond of holy ordinances and holy people, and that because they are holy? Have I a real value for holiness wherever I see it? Do I delight in God’s holy word, and that because it is holy? Do I call the holy sabbath a delight, and that because it is holy? Do I love the brethren because they are holy, and love them the better the more holy they are? Do I long to be made perfect in holiness in that other world?

“To these weighty questions my poor soul (though compassed about with manifold weaknesses, wants, and corruptions) doth, as in the presence of God, the Searcher of hearts, give a comfortable answer, and if these be the signs and characters of true grace, I trust my heart doth not deceive me, when it tells me, I have some sparks of it, though swimming in a sea of corruption. ‘But who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that thou hast brought me hitherto? And yet as if this had been but a small thing, thou hast spoken concerning thy servant for a great while yet to come. And is this the manner of man, O Lord God!’

“Q. II. **What have I done?**

“This is also a needful question, that searching and examining what hath been amiss, I may repent of it, and make even reckonings in the blood of Christ, that I may not come loaded with old guilt to put on a new character, especially such a character as this. Aaron and his sons must offer a sin-offering to make atonement before they were consecrated, Lev. viii. 34. For he that comes near to God under guilt of sin unrepented of, comes at his peril, and the nearer the more dangerous.

“And therefore, O my soul, what have I done? My soul cannot but answer, I have sinned, I have perverted that which is right, and it hath not profited me. And in a serious reflection I cannot but observe,

“1. What a great deal of precious time I have trifled away and misspent in folly and vanity, and things that do not profit. Time is a precious talent which my Master hath entrusted me with, and yet how long hath it been buried, and how much hath it run waste?

“How many precious opportunities (which are the cream of time) have I lost and not improved through my own carelessness. Golden seasons of grace which I have enjoyed, but have let them slip, and been little bettered by them; sabbaths, sermons, sacraments that have come and gone, and left me as they found me. My fruit hath not been answerable to the soil I have been planted in. How often have I been ignorant under enlightening means; hard and cold under softening and warming ordinances, trifling and careless when I have been dealing with God about the concerns of my soul and eternity?

“3. How often have I broken my covenants with God, my engagements, promises, and resolutions of new and better obedience, resolved against this and that sin, and yet fallen into it again; many a time returning to folly, after God hath spoken peace to me, and after I have spoken promises to God. Presently after a sacrament, how have I returned to former vanity, folly, sensuality, frothiness, to former pride, passion, and worldliness; so soon have I forgot the vows of God!

“4. How unprofitable have I been in my converse with others; how few have been the better for me; how many the worse for me; how little good have I done; how little light have I cast in the sphere wherein God hath placed me; how little have I been concerned for the souls of others; and how little useful have I been to them. How vain and light have I been many times in my words and carriage, going down the stream of folly with others, when my seriousness might have stemmed the tide. How seldom hath my speech been with grace, and how often with corruption; not seasoned with salt

“5. In the general, how forgetful have I been of God and his word, and of myself and my duty, and of the great concernments of my soul and eternity, living too much, as if I had no God to serve, and never a soul to save!

“I might mention many particular miscarriages which I have been guilty of in heart and life, and which are known to God and my own heart; and yet after all—‘Who can understand his errors’? Cleanse thou me, O God, from my secret sins; have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy loving-kindness, and according to the multitude of thy tender mercies, blot out all my transgressions, for the sake of the Lord my righteousness.’

Q. III. From what principles do I act in this undertaking?

“This is also a very material enquiry in every action, to ask whence it comes, especially in so great a turn of life as this.

1. I hope I can say that it is of faith; and I am concerned it should be so, for ‘whatever is not of faith is sin.’ It is good for every man that he be fully persuaded in his own mind. Now,

“(1.) I am fully persuaded that Jesus Christ, as King of the church, hath appointed and established the office of the ministry, to continue in a constant succession to the end of time, for the edification of the church, and has prom-

ised to be with them always to the end of the world. So that the office of the ministry is no human invention, but a divine institution.

“(2.) I am fully persuaded that no man ought to thrust himself upon the work of the ministry, without a clear call from God to it. Not that we are to expect such extraordinary calls as the apostles had, but the ordinary call, by the mediation of ministers, who, as such, are authorized by Christ to try the abilities of those who offer themselves to the ministry.—And if they find them fit, then to set them apart to that work, in a solemn manner, by the imposition of hands, with fasting and prayer—and that the laying on of the hands of the presbytery is the most regular way of ordination, and most agreeable to scripture.

“(3.) I bless God that I am pretty well satisfied with the clearness of my call to the work, though I cannot but be sensible of great weakness and insufficiency for these things; yet I find that what abilities God has been pleased to give me, (and let him have all the glory) do evidently look towards this work, so that if I be in any measure qualified for any service, it is for this. I find also mine own inclination strongly bent towards it, and that it hath been so ever since I knew any thing, and especially I consider that I have been much excited and encouraged to it by divers (both ministers and others) able, skilful, and faithful, fit to judge, by whom my purposes have been much confirmed.

All which goes a great way towards the clearing of my call; and the earnest invitation I have lately had to stated work in a particular place, doth much help to clear my call to the work in general.

“2. I hope I can say, I act herein from a principle of true zeal for the glory of God; that this great thing I do, as I should do every thing to the glory of God, that my light may shine, that Christ’s kingdom may be advanced, the power of godliness kept up, the word of life held forth; by all which God is glorified. The desire of my soul is, that ‘whether I live I may live to the Lord, or whether I die I may die to the Lord, and that, living and dying I may be the Lord’s.’

“3. I hope I can say, that I act herein from a principle of real love to precious souls, for the good of which I would gladly spend and be spent. Methinks I love the precious souls of men so well, that I would fain be an instrument of convincing the unconvinced, converting the unconverted, and building up saints in holiness and comfort. I hope I know so much of the worth of souls, that I should think it a greater happiness to gain one soul to the Lord Jesus Christ, than to gain mountains of silver and gold to myself.

“Q. IV. What are the ends that I aim at in this great undertaking?

“It is a common saying, that the end specifies the action; and, therefore, it is of great consequence to fix that right, that the eye may be single, for otherwise it is an evil eye. A bye and base end will certainly spoil the acceptableness of the best actions that can be performed.

“Now what is the mark I aim at in this great turn of my life? Let conscience be faithful herein, and let the Searcher of hearts make me known to myself.

“1. I think I can say with confidence, that I do not design to take up the ministry as a trade to live by, or to enrich myself by, out of the greediness of filthy lucre. No! I hope I aim at nothing but souls; and if I gain those, though I should lose all my worldly comforts by it, I shall reckon myself to have made a good bargain.

“2. I think I can say with as much assurance, that my design is not to get myself a name amongst men, or to be talked of in the world, as one that makes somewhat of a figure. No; that is a poor business.—If I have but a good name with God, I think I have enough, though among men I be reviled, and have my name trampled upon as mire in the streets. I prefer the good word of my Master far before the good word of my fellow servants.

“3. I can appeal to God, that I have no design in the least to maintain a party, or to keep up any schismatical faction; my heart rises against the thoughts of it. I hate dividing principles and practices, and whatever others are, I am for

peace and healing; and if my blood would be sufficient balsam, I would gladly part with the last drop of it, for the closing up of the bleeding wounds of differences that are amongst true Christians. Peace is such a precious jewel, that I would give any thing for it but truth. Those who are hot and bitter in their contentings for or against little things, and zealous in keeping up names of division and maintaining parties, are of a spirit which I understand not. Let not my soul come into their secret.

“My ends then are according to my principles, and I humbly appeal to God concerning the integrity of my heart in them.

“(1.) That I deliberately place the glory of God as my highest and ultimate end, and if I can be but any ways instrumental to promote that, I shall gain my end and have my desire. I do not design to preach myself, but as a faithful friend of the bridegroom, to preach Christ Jesus my Lord, as the standard-bearer among ten thousands. And if I can but bring people better to know, and love, and honour Christ, I have what I design.

“2.) That in order to the glory of God, I do sincerely aim at the good of precious souls. God is glorified when souls are benefited, and gladly would I be instrumental in that blessed work. I would not be a barren tree in a vineyard, cumbering the ground; but by God’s help, I would do some good in the world, and I know no greater good I can be capable of than doing good to souls. I desire to be an instrument in God’s hand of softening hard hearts, quickening dead hearts, humbling proud hearts, comforting sorrowful hearts; and if I may be enabled to do this, I have what I would have. If God denies me this, and suffers me to labour in vain (though I should get hundreds a year by my labour) it would be the constant grief and trouble of my soul; and if I do not gain souls, I shall enjoy all my other gains with very little satisfaction. Though even in that case it would be some comfort, that the reward is not according to the success, but according to the faithfulness. But I seriously profess it, if I could foresee that my ministry would be wholly unprofitable, and that I should be no instrument of good to souls, though in other respects I might get enough

by it, I would rather beg my bread from door to door, than undertake this great work.

“V. What do I want?

“And what special things am I now to desire of God, the God of all grace? When I know whither to go for supplies. I am concerned to enquire what my necessities are. The requests I have to put to God are such as these.

“i. That he would fix and confirm and establish my heart in my dedication of myself to the work of the ministry. My carnal heart is sometimes ready to suggest to me, that I had better take some other way of living, that would be less toilsome and perilous, and more pleasant and gainful; and the devil joins issue with my heart, and sets before me the profits and preferments I might possibly have in another way, and the trouble and reproach I am like to meet with in this way. Now, O that my God would restrain the tempter, and satisfy me in my choice, and furnish me with suitable considerations with which to answer such suggestions; and in order thereunto, give me believing views of eternity; having deliberately devoted myself to the work of the Lord, keep it always in the imagination of the thoughts of my heart, and establish my way before him.

“ii. That he would in a special manner be present with me in the ordinance of dedication, filling my heart with such an experimental sense of the excellency of Christ, and the comforts of the Holy Ghost, as that I may have cause to remember it, by a good token, as long as I live; that he would manifest himself to me, mark me for himself, and leave some sign behind him in my soul, that may make it evident God was there of a truth; that he would give me a comfortable earnest of the success of my ministry, by a signal owning of me in my entrance upon it.

“iii. That he would fit and qualify me for this great work to which he is calling me. When Saul was anointed king, ‘God gave him another heart, an heart

fit for kingship.’ I would fain have another heart, a heart fit for ministerial work, filled with ministerial gifts and graces.

“1. Ministerial gifts: every good gift comes from above, and therefore I look upwards for gifts of knowledge in the mysteries of religion; gifts of utterance to explain and apply myself to others, and to speak the word with boldness. I have, also need of prudence and discretion to order the affairs of my ministry.

“2. Ministerial graces. Faith, love to God and souls, zeal for God’s glory, and souls’ good; patience to do, to suffer, and to wait; an inward sense of the weight of the things I speak of. Two graces I do more especially beg of God,

“(1.) Sincerity. That I may be really as good as I seem to be; that inward impressions may always be answerable to outward expressions in all my ministrations; that my eye may be single, my heart upright; and my ends fixed; that I may not cast the least glance at any low, bye, base end.

“(2.) Humility. That God would hide pride from me, and clothe me with humility, that I may see that I have nothing (except my sins) but what I have received; that I may never please myself with the praises of men, but hand up all the praise to God; that the least workings of pride and conceitedness may be checked in me.

“iv. That God would open a door of opportunity to me, and make my way plain before me, that the call I have to my work may be clear and satisfying, and that God would bless and succeed my endeavours for the good of souls.

“Q. VI. What are my purposes and resolutions for the future?

“This is also a requisite enquiry, when I am to put on a new character, and one so honourable. What shall I do that I may walk worthy of the vocation wherewith I am called?’

“1. I purpose and resolve by the grace of God, that I will have no more to do with the unfruitful works of darkness, seeing it will not only be my duty as a christian, but my office as a minister to reprove them rather. ‘Pride, passion, worldliness, wantonness, vanity, are things the man of God must flee.’ 1 Tim. vi. 11. What have I to do any more with idols? What have I to do any more with sin? By the grace of God it shall not have dominion over me. The ministerial character will add a great aggravation to every sin; and therefore, ‘O my soul! stand in awe and sin not.’

“2. I purpose and resolve that, by the grace of God, I will abound more than ever in all manner of gospel obedience; that I will strive to be more humble, serious, and watchful, and self-denying, and live more above the world and the things of it; that I will pray with more life, and read the scriptures with more care, and not be slothful in business, but fervent in spirit, serving the Lord that I will abound in good discourse, as I have ability and opportunity with prudence; endeavouring as much as I can ‘to adorn the doctrine of God my Saviour in all things.’

“3. In particular, I resolve in the strength, spirit and grace of Jesus Christ my Lord, to consider well and perform my ordination vows; to hold fast the form of sound words which I have heard and received in ‘faith and love which is in Christ Jesus;’ and never to let go any truth, whatever it cost me; ever owning the scripture as ‘the only rule of faith and practice.’

“That I will wholly give up myself to the work, and employ all my talents in the service of God and souls, with seriousness and sedulity: that I will not only preach, but to the utmost of my power defend, the truths of God against all opposers, and do all I can to convince or silence gainsayers.

“That I will endeavour to maintain not only truth, but peace and unity in the church of God; that I will patiently bear and thankfully accept of the admonitions of my brethren, and esteem such smitings as an excellent oil that shall not break my head.

“That if ever God shall call me to the charge of a family, I will walk before my house in a perfect way, with an upright heart, not doubting but that then God will come unto me; my house shall be a Bethel; wherever I have a tent, God shall have an altar; and Joshua’s resolution shall be mine, ‘Whatever others do, I and my house will serve the Lord.’

“That if ever God calls me to the charge of a flock, I resolve, by his grace, with all possible diligence to lay out myself for the spiritual good of those over whom God shall set me; and that in conversation I will endeavour to be an example to the flock going before them in the way to heaven, and will improve all the interest I have, and all the authority I may have, for the honour of God, the good of souls, and the edifying the mystical body of Christ.

“Whatever opposition I may meet with in my work, by the grace of God I will not be terrified with it, nor frightened by the winds and clouds from sowing and reaping, but in the strength of my God, go on in the midst of discouragements; and if God shall call me to sufferings, which I promise to expect and count upon, I will, by the grace of God, suffer cheerfully and courageously for the truths and ways of Christ, ‘choosing rather, with Moses, to suffer afflictions with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin, which are but for a season;’ and I will esteem not only the crown of Christ, but the reproach of Christ, greater riches than the treasures of Egypt, having respect to the recompence of reward.

“This is the substance of what I promise in the strength of the Spirit in the grace of Christ, and having sworn by his strength, I will perform it, that I will keep his righteous judgments, and the Lord keep it always in the imagination of the thoughts of my heart, and establish my way before him.”