

CHRISTIAN MAGNANIMITY:

A

SERMON,

Preached at Princeton, September, 1775—the Sabbath preceeding the

Annual Commencement;

And again with Additions, September 23, 1787.

To which is added,

A N

A D D R E S S

T O T H E

S E N I O R C L A S S ;

Who were to receive the Degree of

BACHELOR OF ARTS;

B Y

JOHN WITHERSPOON,

D. D. L. L. D.

President of the College of New-Jersey:

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PRINCETON:

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M.DCC.LXXXVII.

A N  
A D D R E S S  
T O T H E  
S T U D E N T S  
O F T H E  
S E N I O R C L A S S,  
On the Lord's Day preceeding Commencement,  
September 23, 1776.

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G E N T L E M E N,

**A**S you have now finished the usual course of study in this place, and are to enter upon public life in a variety of ways, as each shall be determined by inclination or other circumstances, I willingly embrace the opportunity of addressing an exhortation to you, at this important and interesting period of your lives. I do not mean to say much if any thing that you have never heard before, but to lay hold of your present situation, with some hope, that what may be said now, will remain upon your memory, and have an influence upon your future conduct. That I may speak with the greater clearness and precision, I will divide what I have to say, into three branches: I. your duty to God, and the interest of your souls: II. the prosecution of your studies, or the improvement of your talents as members of society: III. Prudence in your commerce with the world in general, your outward provision and other circumstances in life.

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As to the first of these, it is to all men of the greatest moment. Some of you, I know, and more, I hope, are intended for the service of Christ in the ministry. To this we have the universal suffrage, that true religion is absolutely necessary, with which I heartily agree. But I with those who are destined for other employments, may not sometimes make a comparison here unjust in itself, and dangerous, perhaps even ruinous to their own souls. Because true religion is necessary to a minister, and they are conscious to themselves, or at least suspect that they are without religion; instead of laying to heart the things that belong to their peace, they only determine that they will follow some other calling. But alas, though the difference to the public is very great, the difference to the persons themselves, seems to me but very small. A clergyman without religion, to be sure is a dreadful character, and when visible, a detestable one; but truly one would think at the close of life, it will be but little comfort to a man, that he must go to the place of torment, not as a minister, but as a lawyer, physician, soldier, or merchant. Therefore suffer me to say to you, and to all who now hear me, that the care of your souls is the *one thing needful*. All mankind, of every rank, denomination and profession, are sinners by nature. The ministers of the New Testament have received a commission to preach the gospel to every creature: "He that believeth shall be saved, and he that believeth not shall be damned."

While I say this, I beg of you to consider that the advantages which you have enjoyed, will be an  
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aggravation of your guilt, if they are unimproved. There is an equity as well as wisdom often to be observed in the Providence of God. Unless reasons of sovereignty, that is reasons unknown to us, prevent it, judgment will be inflicted, when a person or people is ripe for the stroke. Therefore as some plants and seeds, both from their own nature and from the soil and situation in which they are placed ripen sooner than others, so some persons, by the early pains taken upon them, and the privileges they have enjoyed, fill up the measure of their iniquities sooner than others, and are more speedily overtaken with deserved vengeance. There are many common sayings that are the effects of error and prejudice; for example, that which you will be told by many, that the children of good men are as bad as any. If this is intended to insinuate that a regular and pious education affords no ground to hope for good behaviour in after life, it is at once contrary to reason and experience. But if we should say that when young persons piously educated, burst restraining bonds asunder, and are seduced into vicious courses, they commonly run faster and farther than others, it is a certain fact, which may be easily accounted for, and affords an important instruction to all.

After intreating you to lay religion to heart, I must beseech you to guard against being too easily satisfied in a matter of infinite moment. Do not think it enough to be prudent, cautious, or decent in your conduct, or to attain a character formed upon worldly principles and governed by worldly motives. I am not against (as you all know) introducing

roducing every argument against sin, and shewing you that loose practices are ruinous to name, body, and estate. Neither is it wrong that you should fortify every pious resolution by the addition of these motives. But alas! the evil lies deeper. "Except a man be born again, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." True religion must arise from a clear and deep conviction of your lost state, by nature and practice, and an unfeigned reliance on the pardoning mercy and sanctifying grace of God.

Suffer me, upon this subject, earnestly to recommend to all that fear God, to apply themselves from their earliest youth, to the exercises of piety, a life of prayer and communion with God. This is the source from which a real Christian must derive the secret comfort of his heart, and which alone will give beauty, consistency, and uniformity to an exemplary life. The reason why I have mentioned it on this occasion is, that youth, when the spirits are lively and the affections vigorous and strong, is the season when this habit must be formed. There are advantages and disadvantages attending every stage of life. An aged Christian will naturally grow in prudence, vigilance, usefulness, attention to the course of Providence and subjection to the divine will, but will seldom attain to greater fervour of affection and life in divine worship, than he had been accustomed to from his early years. On the contrary, he will generally see it necessary instead of trusting to occasional impulses to guard and strengthen the habit by order and form.

Be companions of them that fear God. Esteem them always most highly, and shun, as a contagious pestilence, the society not only of loose persons, but of those especially whom you perceive to be infected with the principles of infidelity, or enemies to the power of religion. Many of these are much more dangerous to pious persons than open profligates. As for these last, decency is against them, the world itself condemns them, reason despises them, and prudence shuns them. He must have a very mean taste indeed who is capable of finding pleasure in disorder and riot. If I had no higher pleasure on earth than in eating and drinking, I would not chuse to eat and drink with the drunken. Order, neatness, elegance and even moderation itself are necessary to exalt and refine the pleasures of a sensual life. Therefore I will not allow myself to suppose, that I shall afterwards hear of any of you roaring and swearing in taverns, or wasting your bodies and estates by lewdness and debauchery, or that you take pleasure in those who do so. But be especially careful to avoid those who are enemies to vital piety, who do not pretend to speak directly against religion, but give every ill name they can think of, to all who seem to be in earnest on that subject, and vilify the exercises of religion under the names of whining, cant, grimace, and hypocrisy. These are often unhappily successful in making some uncautious persons ashamed of their Redeemer's name, his truths, his laws, his people and his cross.

I need hardly observe that this is not to be understood as recommending pharisaical pride and su-  
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perciliousness far less a rash and presumptuous judging of the state of others. It is not only lawful but our duty, to have a free communication with our fellow-citizens, for the purposes of social life : It is not only lawful but our duty to be *courteous* and to give every proper evidence of respect and attention to others, according to their rank and place in society. What I mean to caution you against, is an unnecessary, voluntary intercourse, such as has inclination for its motive and pleasure for its object. With respect to this, we need not hesitate to say with the inspired prophet, " he that walketh with wise men shall be wise, but a companion of fools shall be destroyed."

2, I come now to speak a little upon the prosecution of your studies and the improvement of your talents. - Your education in a seminary of learning, is only intended to give you the elements and first principles of science, which should whet your appetite for more, and which will enable you to proceed with an assured hope of success. It hath been generally a favourite point with me, to recommend the union of piety and literature, and to guard young persons against the opposite extremes. We see sometimes the pride of unsanctified knowledge do great injury to religion, and on the other hand, we find some persons of real piety despising human learning, and disgracing the most glorious truths by a meanness and indecency hardly sufferable in their manner of handling them. On this account, industry and application to study is of the utmost importance to those who are intended for the office of the ministry.

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But I have it further in view, to recommend to you all, without exception, a life of diligence and application. Avoid sloth as a dangerous enemy. Fear it, hate it, and despise it. It is a common saying, that men do not know their own weakness, but it is as true, and a truth more important that they do not know their own strength. I desire that you will receive the following information from me, which I dare say every person of judgment and experience will confirm, that multitudes of moderate capacity have been useful in their generation, respected by the public, and successful in life, while those of superior talents from nature, by mere slothfulness and idle habits, or self-indulgence, have lived useless and died contemptible. There is also a disposition in young people, which you know I have often set myself to oppose, to think that loose, irregular sallies, and sometimes even vicious liberties are a sign of spirit and capacity. The very contrary is the truth. It requires no genius at all to do mischief. Persons of the greatest ability have generally been lovers of order. Neither is there any instance to be found of a man's arriving at great reputation or usefulness, be his capacity what it might, without industry and application.

Suffer me here, in a particular manner, to recommend to you a firmness of mind and steady perseverance, as of the utmost moment to your progress and success. Whatever a man's talents from nature may be, if he apply himself to what is not altogether unsuitable to them, and hold on with steadiness and uniformity, he will be useful  
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