

A Reading Selection from Jonathan Edwards's The Religious Affections

Introductory comments:

The book *The Religious Affections* was taken from a series of sermons Edwards preached during the latter part of the Great Awakening.

The purpose of these sermons was to help people know the nature of true conversion, and to help them grow in their walk with Christ.

I will only be reading small excerpts of this lengthy book. I will read a small section and then we will discuss it. Then I will read another section.

Edwards wrote a "doctrine" for each sermon he preached. His doctrine for this series was "True religion, in great part, consists in holy affections."

A few words about terms:

Religion – By this Edwards means true Christianity – not a "dead system" as we sometimes do.

Affections – By this Edwards means a deep inner desire that motivates us to love or hate something. He relates the affections to the inclination or will – they make us choose or reject something. Edwards speaks a lot about the difference between understanding (mere mental knowledge) and affections (a great desire for or against something)

Who will deny that true religion consists in a great measure, in vigorous and lively actings of the inclination and will of the soul, or the fervent exercises of the heart? That religion which God requires, and will accept, does not consist in weak, dull, and lifeless wishes, raising us but a little above a state of indifference: God, in his word, greatly insists upon it, that we be good in earnest, “fervent in spirit,” and our hearts vigorously engaged in religion: Romans 12:11, “Be ye fervent in spirit, serving the Lord.” Deuteronomy 10:12, “And now, Israel, what doth the Lord thy God require of thee, but to fear the Lord the God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul?” and chap. 6:4, 6, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy might.” It is such a fervent vigorous engagedness of the heart in religion, that is the fruit of a real circumcision of the heart, or true regeneration, and that has the promises of life; Deuteronomy 30:6, “And the Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live.” If we be not in good earnest in religion, and our wills and inclinations be not strongly exercised, we are nothing. The things of religion are so great, that there can be no suitableness in the exercises of our hearts, to their nature and importance, unless they be lively and powerful. In nothing is vigor in the actings of our inclinations so requisite, as in religion; and in nothing is lukewarmness so odious. True religion is evermore a powerful thing; and the power of it appears, in the first place in the inward exercises of it in the heart, where is the principal and original seat of it. Hence true religion is called the power of godliness, in distinction from the external appearances of it, that are the form of it, 2 Timothy 3:5: “Having a form of godliness, but denying the power of it.”

Questions:

1. How important are the affections to Edwards?
2. What does Edwards mean when he says “That religion which God requires, and will accept, does not consist in weak, dull, and lifeless wishes, raising us but a little above a state of indifference”?
3. What is the difference between the Devil and a believer? Is it knowledge? Or is it affections for the things believed?

If true religion lies much in the affections, hence we may learn, what great cause we have to be ashamed and confounded before God, that we are no more affected with the great things of religion. It appears from what has been said, that this arises from our having so little true religion. God has given to mankind affections, for the same purpose which he has given all the faculties and principles of the human soul for, viz., that they might be subservient to man's chief end, and the great business for which God has created him, that is, the business of religion. And yet how common is it among mankind, that their affections are much more exercised and engaged in other matters, than in religion! In things which concern men's worldly interest, their outward delights, their honor and reputation, and their natural relations, they have their desires eager, their appetites vehement, their love warm and affectionate, their zeal ardent; in these things their hearts are tender and sensible, easily moved, deeply impressed, much concerned, very sensibly affected, and greatly engaged; much depressed with grief at worldly losses, and highly raised with joy at worldly successes and prosperity. But how insensible and unmoved are most men, about the great things of another world! How dull are their affections! How heavy and hard their hearts in these matters! Here their love is cold, their desires languid, their zeal low, and their gratitude small. How they can sit and hear of the infinite height, and depth, and length, and breadth of the love of God in Christ Jesus, of his giving his infinitely dear Son, to be offered up a sacrifice for the sins of men, and of the unparalleled love of the innocent, and holy, and tender Lamb of God, manifested in his dying agonies, his bloody sweat, his loud and bitter cries, and bleeding heart, and all this for enemies, to redeem them from deserved, eternal burnings, and to bring to unspeakable and everlasting joy and glory; and yet be cold, and heavy, insensible, and without regard! Where are the exercises of our affections proper, if not here? What is it that does more require them? And what can be a fit occasion of their lively and vigorous exercise, if not such a one as this? Can anything be set in our view, greater and more important? Any thing more wonderful and surprising? Or more nearly concerning our interest? But is there anything which Christians can find in heaven or earth, so worthy to be the objects of their admiration and love, their earnest and longing desires, their hope, and their rejoicing, and their fervent zeal, as those things that are held forth to us in the gospel of Jesus Christ? In which not only are things declared most worthy to affect us, but they are exhibited in the most affecting manner. So has God disposed things, in the affair of our redemption, and in his glorious dispensations, revealed to us in the gospel, as though everything were purposely contrived in such a manner, as to have the greatest possible tendency to reach our hearts in the most tender part, and move our affections most sensibly and strongly. How great cause have we therefore to be humbled to the dust, that we are no more affected!

Questions:

1. Does Edwards think most people display great desire for the things of God?
2. What does Edwards think most people display a true affection for? What are the things people have a passion for today?
3. Does Edwards think we should have more affection for the things of this world or the things of God?
4. Does Edwards think that we should be greatly affected when we consider the things God has revealed to us and done for us?

If it be so, that true religion lies much in the affections, hence we may infer, that such means are to be desired, as have much of a tendency to move the affections. Such books, and such a way of preaching the word, and administration of ordinances, and such a way of worshipping God in prayer, and singing praises, is much to be desired, as has a tendency deeply to affect the hearts of those who attend these means.

Questions:

1. How does Edwards think we can increase our affections for God and His kingdom?
2. Is there anything you can think of that Edwards does not include in this brief list?
3. How regular are most of us at these “exercises”? If we truly desire to get closer to God, what must we do?