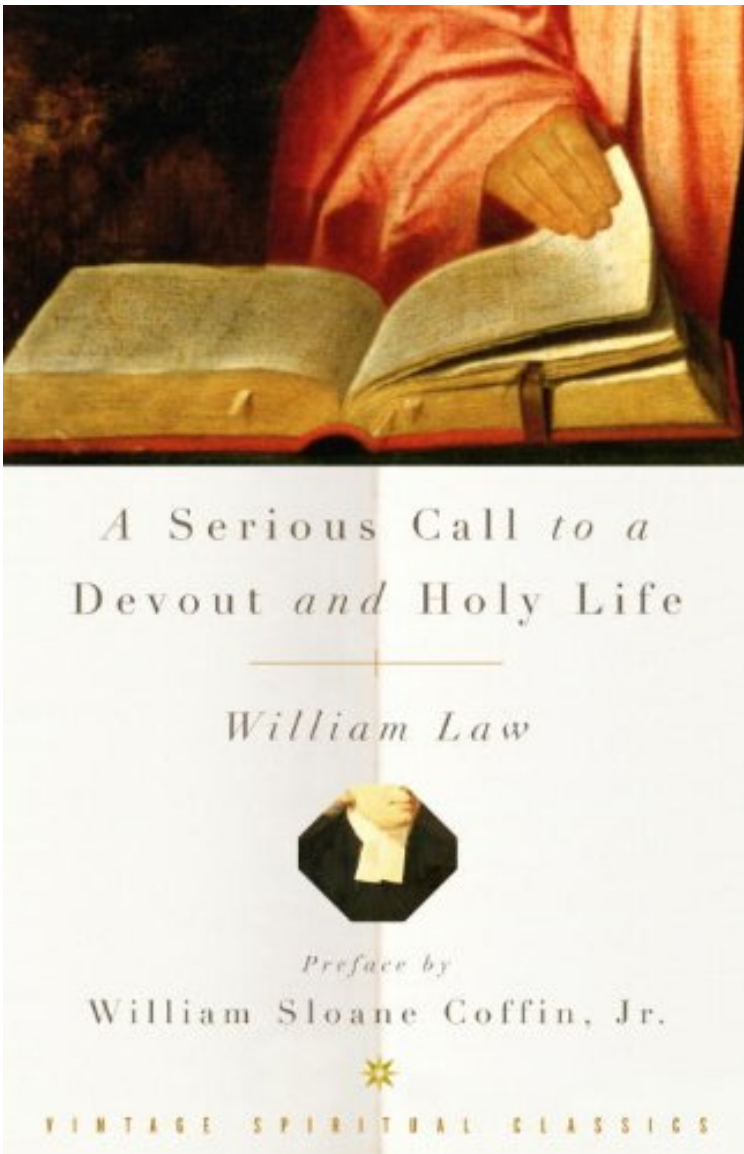


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# A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life



Par William Law  
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**Description :** Description du produitOriginally published at the beginning of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, a time when rationalist criticism of religious belief was perhas at its peak, William Law's A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life succeeded in inspiring the most cynical men of the age with its arguments in favor of a spiritual life. More than simply articulating a set of rules to live by, Law's book examines what it means to lead a Christian life and criticizes the perversion of Christian tenents by the Establishmentwhether secular or spiritualwhose real aim is temporal power. With a perface by the Reverend William Sloane Coffin, Jr., whose own direct engagement in social causes still finds inspiration in Law's argument, A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life is a book that can still speak to our time.

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*Devout and Holy Life* is a book that can still speak to our time. From the Trade Paperback edition. Excerpt I Concerning the Nature and Extent of Christian Devotion Devotion is neither private nor public prayer; but prayers, whether private or public, are particular parts or instances of devotion. Devotion signifies a life given, or devoted, to God. He, therefore, is the devout man who lives no longer to his own will, or the way and spirit of the world, but to the sole will of God; who considers God in everything, who serves God in everything, who makes all the parts of his common life parts of piety, by doing everything in the Name of God and under such rules as are conformable to His glory. We readily acknowledge that God alone is to be the rule and measure of our prayers; that in them we are to look wholly unto Him and act wholly for Him; that we are only to pray in such a manner, for such things, and such ends, as are suitable to His glory. Now let anyone but find out the reason why he is to be thus strictly pious in his prayers, and he will find the same as strong a reason to be as strictly pious in all the other parts of his life. For there is not the least shadow of a reason why we should make God the rule and measure of our prayers; why we should then look wholly unto Him and pray according to His will, but what equally proves it necessary for us to look wholly unto God and make Him the rule and measure of all the other actions of our life. For any ways of life, any employment of our talents, whether of our parts, our time, or money, that is not strictly according to the will of God, that is not for such ends as are suitable to His glory, are as great absurdities and failings as prayers that are not according to the will of God. For there is no other reason why our prayers should be according to the will of God, why they should have nothing in them but what is wise and holy and heavenly; there is no other reason for this but that our lives may be of the same nature, full of the same wisdom, holiness, and heavenly tempers, that we may live unto God in the same spirit that we pray unto Him. Were it not our strict duty to live by reason, to devote all the actions of our lives to God, were it not absolutely necessary to walk before Him in wisdom and holiness and all heavenly conversation, doing everything in His Name and for His glory, there would be no excellency or wisdom in the most heavenly prayers. Nay, such prayers would be absurdities; they would be like prayers for wings when it was no part of our duty to fly. As sure, therefore, as there is any wisdom in praying for the Spirit of God, so sure is it that we are to make that Spirit the rule of all our actions; as sure as it is our duty to look wholly unto God in our prayers, so sure is it that it is our duty to live wholly unto God in our lives. But we can no more be said to live unto God unless we live unto Him in all the ordinary actions of our life, unless He be the rule and measure of all our ways than we can be said to pray unto God unless our prayers look wholly unto Him. So that unreasonable and absurd ways of life, whether in labor or diversion, whether they consume our time or our money, are like unreasonable and absurd prayers and are as truly an offense unto God. It is for want of knowing, or at least considering this, that we see such a mixture of ridicule in the lives of many people. You see them strict as to some times and places of devotion, but when the service of the Church is over, they are but like those that seldom or never come there. In their way of life, their manner of spending their time and money, in their cares and fears, in their pleasures and indulgences, in their labor and diversions, they are like the rest of the world. This makes the loose part of the world generally make a jest of those that are devout, because they see their devotion goes no further than their prayers and that when they are over, they live no more unto God till the time of prayer returns again, but live by the same humor and fancy and in as full an enjoyment of all the follies of life as other people. This is the reason why they are the jest and scorn of careless and worldly people; not because they are really devoted to God, but because they appear to have no other devotion but that of occasional prayers. Julius is very fearful of missing prayers; all the parish supposes Julius to be sick if he is not at church. But if you were to ask him why he spends the rest of his time by humor or chance, why he is a companion of the silliest people in their most silly pleasures, why he is ready for every impertinent entertainment and diversion, if you were to ask him why there is no amusement too trifling to please him, why he is busy at all balls and assemblies, why he gives himself up to an idle, gossiping conversation, why he lives in foolish friendships and fondness for particular persons that neither want nor deserve any particular kindness, why he allows himself in foolish hatreds and resentments against particular persons without considering that he is to love everybody as himself; if you ask him why he never puts his

conversation, his time, and fortune, under the rules of religion-Julius has no more to say for himself than the most disorderly person. For the whole tenor of Scripture lies as directly against such a life, as against debauchery and intemperance: he that lives such a course of idleness and folly, lives no more according to the religion of Jesus Christ than he that lives in gluttony and intemperance. If a man was to tell Julius that there was no occasion for so much constancy at prayers, and that he might, without any harm to himself, neglect the service of the Church, as the generality of people do, Julius would think such a one to be no Christian and that he ought to avoid his company. But if a person only tells him that he may live as the generality of the world does, that he may enjoy himself as others do, that he may spend his time and money as people of fashion do, that he may conform to the follies and frailties of the generality and gratify his tempers and passions as most people do, Julius never suspects that man to want a Christian spirit or that he is doing the devil's work. And if Julius was to read all the New Testament from the beginning to the end, he would find his course of life condemned in every page of it. And indeed there cannot anything be imagined more absurd in itself than wise and sublime and heavenly prayers added to a life of vanity and folly, where neither labor nor diversions, neither time nor money, are under the direction of the wisdom and heavenly tempers of our prayers. If we were to see a man pretending to act wholly with regard to God in everything that he did, that would neither spend time nor money, nor take any labor or diversion, but so far as he could act according to strict principles of reason and piety and yet at the same time neglect all prayer, whether public or private, should we not be amazed at such a man and wonder how he could have so much folly along with so much religion? Yet this is as reasonable as for any person to pretend to strictness in devotion, to be careful of observing times and places of prayer, and yet letting the rest of his life, his time and labor, his talents and money, be disposed of without any regard to strict rules of piety and devotion. For it is as great an absurdity to suppose holy prayers and Divine petitions, without a holiness of life suitable to them, as to suppose a holy and Divine life without prayers. Let anyone therefore think how easily he could confute a man that pretended to great strictness of life without prayer, and the same arguments will as plainly confute another that pretends to strictness of prayer without carrying the same strictness into every other part of life.

For to be weak and foolish in spending our time and fortune is no greater a mistake than to be weak and foolish in relation to our prayers. And to allow ourselves in any ways of life that neither are nor can be offered to God, is the same irreligion as to neglect our prayers, or use them in such a manner as make them an offering unworthy of God. The short of the matter is this: either reason and religion prescribe rules and ends to all the ordinary actions of our life, or they do not. If they do, then it is as necessary to govern all our actions by those rules as it is necessary to worship God. For if religion teaches us anything concerning eating and drinking or spending our time and money; if it teaches us how we are to use and condemn the world; if it tells us what tempers we are to have in common life, how we are to be disposed towards all people; how we are to behave towards the sick, the poor, the old, the destitute; if it tells us whom we are to treat with a particular love, whom we are to regard with a particular esteem; if it tells us how we are to treat our enemies, and how we are to mortify and deny ourselves, he must be very weak that can think these parts of religion are not to be observed with as much exactness as any doctrines that relate to prayers. It is very observable that there is not one command in all the Gospel for public worship; and perhaps it is a duty that is least insisted upon in Scripture of any other. The frequent attendance at it is never so much as mentioned in all the New Testament, whereas that religion or devotion which is to govern the ordinary actions of our life is to be found in almost every verse of Scripture. Our blessed Savior and His Apostles are wholly taken up in doctrines that relate to common life. They call us to renounce the world, and differ in every temper and way of life from the spirit and the way of the world; to renounce all its goods, to fear none of its evils, to reject its joys, and have no value for its happiness; to be as newborn babes, that are born into a new state of things; to live as pilgrims in spiritual watching, in holy fear, and heavenly aspiring after another life; to take up our daily cross, to deny ourselves, to profess the blessedness of mourning, to seek the blessedness of poverty of spirit; to forsake the pride and vanity of riches, to take no thought for the morrow, to live in the profoundest state of humility, to rejoice in worldly sufferings; to reject the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life; to bear injuries, to forgive and bless our enemies, and to love mankind as God loveth them; to give up our whole hearts and affections to God, and strive to enter through the strait gate into a life of eternal glory. This is the common devotion which our blessed Savior taught in order to make it the common life of all Christians. Is it not therefore exceeding strange that people should place so much piety in the attendance upon public worship, concerning which there is not one precept of our Lord's to be found, and yet neglect these common duties of our ordinary life which are commanded in every page of the Gospel? I call these

duties the devotion of our common life, because if they are to be practiced, they must be made parts of our common life; they can have no place anywhere else. If contempt of the world and heavenly affection is a necessary temper of Christians, it is necessary that this temper appear in the whole course of their lives, in their manner of using the world, because it can have no place anywhere else. If self-denial be a condition of salvation, all that would be saved must make it a part of their ordinary life. If humility be a Christian duty, then the common life of a Christian is to be a constant course of humility in all its kinds. If poverty of spirit be necessary, it must be the spirit and temper of every day of our lives. If we are to relieve the naked, the sick, and the prisoner, it must be the common charity of our lives as far as we can render ourselves able to perform it. If we are to love our enemies, we must make our common life a visible exercise and demonstration of that love. If content and thankfulness, if the patient bearing of evil be duties to God, they are the duties of every day and in every circumstance of our life. If we are to be wise and holy as the newborn sons of God, we can no otherwise be so but by renouncing everything that is foolish and vain in every part of our common life. If we are to be in Christ new creatures, we must show that we are so by having new ways of living in the world. If we are to follow Christ, it must be in our common way of spending every day. Thus it is in all the virtues and holy tempers of Christianity; they are not ours unless they be the virtues and tempers of our ordinary life. So that Christianity is so far from leaving us to live in the common ways of life, conforming to the folly of customs, and gratifying the passions and tempers which the spirit of the world delights in, it is so far from indulging us in any of these things, that all its virtues which it makes necessary to salvation are only so many ways of living above and contrary to the world in all the common actions of our life. If our common life is not a common course of humility, self-denial, renunciation of the world, poverty of spirit, and heavenly affection, we do not live the lives of Christians. From Publishers Weekly William Law, the 18th-century Anglican priest who heavily influenced the theology of John and Charles Wesley, lambastes pious hypocrisy and the corruption of the church in *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, the latest reissue in Vintage's *Spiritual Classics* series. Law's prose is fresh and vivid as he illustrates the holy Christian life as one lived wholly for God. His thoughts on prayer, personal holiness and service to the poor will resonate with many contemporary readers. Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc.