

# A Dissuasive From Ambition.

by Edward Payson

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*We should not seek great things for ourselves because it is the sure way to multiply our disappointments and sorrows, and because it is forbidden by God.*

**Scripture:** Proverbs 23:4, Ecclesiastes 5:10, Jeremiah 45:5, Matthew 6:19, Mark 8:36, Philippians 4:11, 1 Timothy 6:10, James 4:3, 1 John 2:15

**Topics:** "Christian Humility", "Spiritual Growth"

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## Description

Edward Payson preaches about the dangers of seeking great things for oneself in this world, emphasizing the sinful nature of covetousness, ambition, and self-gratification. He highlights the need to align our desires with God's will, focusing on what is necessary for our duty, preparing for eternity, and seeking the favor of God. Payson warns that seeking worldly possessions leads to disappointment, sorrow, and distractions from our spiritual growth and responsibilities. He urges listeners to prioritize serving God, promoting the salvation of others, and finding contentment in God's provisions rather than pursuing earthly treasures.

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## Transcript

"Seekest thou great things for thyself? seek them not; for behold I will bring evil upon all flesh, saith the Lord; but thy life will I give unto thee for a prey."

Jeremiah 45:5.

a preceding chapter, we are informed, that God directed Jeremiah to write in a book all the warnings and threatenings which he had previously uttered, that they might be read to his countrymen on a public occasion, in the temple. In compliance with this command, he employed Baruch, a young scribe, to write what he dictated; and as he was himself confined in prison, and of course unable to go to the temple, he sent Baruch, when the book was finished, to read it in the audience of the people, on a day of public fasting and prayer.

The king was not present on this occasion, but he was soon informed of the transaction, sent for the book, caused it to be burned, and directed his officers to apprehend Baruch, probably with a view to put him to death. From this he was preserved by a special interposition of providence; but still the duty which he had performed, at the prophet's request, exposed him to much inconvenience, loss and suffering. He was obliged to conceal himself for a time, and of course to leave his business, to live in obscurity, unnoticed

and unknown, and to lose many opportunities for acquiring property, and of rising in his profession.

These losses and inconveniencies, though incurred in the service of God, appear to have deeply and painfully affected him. He had not yet learned, like the apostles, to rejoice that he was counted worthy to suffer pain and shame for God's name. Though there is sufficient reason to believe that he was truly religious, yet he was young, and not established in religion; his faith was scarcely sufficient to support him under the trial, and he too nearly resembled the persons mentioned by our Saviour, who were offended when they found themselves exposed to trouble and persecution on account of the word.

Indeed, he seems to have been naturally of an ambitious; aspiring disposition, and this disposition was not yet sufficiently subdued and humbled by divine grace. Hence God saw it necessary to reprove and admonish him by the mouth of the prophet. The message which he sent him is recorded in this chapter: Thus saith the Lord to thee, O Baruch! Thou didst say, woe is me, for the Lord hath added grief to my sorrow. In my sighing I fainted, and find no rest. Now thus saith the Lord, behold that which I have built I will break down, and that which I have planted I will pluck up; and seekest thou great things for thyself?

Seek them not; for behold, I will bring evil upon all flesh; but thy life will I give thee for a prey, in all places whither thou goest. My friends, we are all too much influenced by a covetous, ambitious and aspiring spirit. We are all naturally prone to seek great things for ourselves in this world; and even real Christians, while they are young in religion, and their faith, like that of Baruch, is weak, are often too much influenced by this propensity. Hence, when they are required to deny themselves, to make sacrifices and submit to losses and disappointments for Christ's sake; when they listen to some of the rules which he prescribes, they are sometimes almost ready to faint, like Baruch, and to say, if we must act in this manner, how can we pursue any worldly business advantageously, or even obtain subsistence for ourselves and families?

To all such persons, to all who are indulging a covetous or aspiring temper, our text affords a necessary admonition. In it, God says to every member of his church, and in effect to every individual present, Seekest thou great things for thyself in this world? seek them not. In discoursing on this passage I propose to show, I. When we may be said to seek great things for ourselves. II. Why we should not seek them. I. When may we be said to seek great things for ourselves? It is easy to answer this question in general terms.

It is obvious to remark, that we seek great things for ourselves, when we indulge a grasping, ambitious, aspiring disposition; a disposition which is never contented or satisfied, which still cries give, give. But it is not easy to give a particular and definite answer to the question before us. The words, great and small, are relative terms; for in this world, nothing is either great or small but by comparison. What would be great to one man, might be small to another. What would be little to a king, would be great to a beggar.

It is therefore difficult to give an answer to the question before us, which will accurately apply to all the various cases and situations that are to be found in society. We may however observe, 1. That men are guilty of seeking great things for themselves, when they seek a larger portion of worldly good than is necessary. But still the question returns, how much is necessary? If men were to answer this question, they would soon prove that few or none are guilty of violating the command in our text; for they all pretend that they seek no more than is necessary.

But by this term they usually mean all that would be necessary to gratify their sinful inclinations and desires. The proud and covetous think that an independent fortune is necessary. The ambitious regard honor and power as necessary. The sensual and voluptuous consider the means of pampering their

appetites as necessary. The vain think splendid habitations, furniture, dress and equipage necessary. But in order to determine what is necessary, we must appeal from appetite and passion to right reason; from misjudging men, to the infallible word of God.

These judges will inform us, that to a creature situated as man is, those things only are necessary, which are necessary to the great end of our creation, the end of our existence. Now man's chief end is to glorify God, and enjoy him forever; or, in other words, to obey God's will and receive his everlasting favor. More than this, no man needs; more than this no man ought to seek. Everything which does not assist us in performing our duty, in preparing for death and heaven, is needless.

Much more is everything needless, which serves only to gratify our sinful propensities. Now neither riches, nor honor, nor power, nor the applause of men, is necessary to assist us in performing our duty, or in preparing for a happy eternity. They have no tendency to procure the favor of God or to assist us in seeking it. On the contrary, they often prove hindrances; for it is hard for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. All that we need, then, all that is really necessary, is such a daily supply as is requisite to the support of our bodies, and as may free us from the temptations which result from the pressure of poverty.

Agreeably, our Saviour forbids us to lay up treasures on earth, or to be anxious for the morrow; and his apostles exhort us, having food and raiment, to be therewith content; and to make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lust. A further confirmation of this remark may be drawn from our Lord's prayer. He doubtless there teaches us to pray for everything necessary. And what is the language which he teaches us to utter, respecting the supply of our wants? Give us this day our daily bread.

The man then, who cannot bring his desires within the compass of this prayer, the man who seeks more than Christ allows him to pray for, seeks great things for himself. Similar remarks may be made with respect to honor and power. We are not allowed to wish for or seek a higher station than that which the providence of God allots us. On this point the apostle's language is very strong and explicit. In his day every servant was a slave. Yet he says, Art thou a slave? Care not for it; but if thou mayest be free, that is, if God in his providence gives thee an opportunity to regain thy liberty, in a lawful manner, use it rather; for, he adds, he who is called, being a slave, is the Lord's freeman, and he who is called being free, is the Lord's servant.

The import of these and other similar precepts evidently is, that we ought to regard our station in life with holy indifference, as a matter of no consequence, and to make it our only concern to perform with fidelity the duties of that station, whatever it may be, since in the sight of God, all stand upon the same level; and he that is faithful in that which is least, is faithful also in much. These precepts do not, however, forbid us to receive either wealth or power, or any other temporal blessing, when, without our seeking them, the providence of God bestows them upon us; for every creature of God is good and not to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving.

Indeed, we may safely consider and ought to consider his providence as determining what is and what is not necessary. What he gives, we may consider as necessary, and what he withholds we may be sure is unnecessary. Our duty is to desire no more than he gives, and in whatever state we are, therewith to be content; knowing both how to be abased and how to abound. But it is necessary to remark, 2. That we seek great things for ourselves in the sense of the text, when we seek them for ourselves only, or seek them merely with a view to self-gratification or self-aggrandizement.

In this consists the very essence of the sin forbidden in our text. It is not unlawful for any man to seek great things, provided he does not seek them for himself. It is not unlawful to seek wealth in the use of proper means, if our object in seeking it is merely to increase our usefulness and our opportunities of doing good, by relieving the necessities of others, and contributing to promote the interests of religion; and if we really devote to these purposes all that portion of our acquisition which is not necessary to ourselves.

So far, indeed, is it from being unlawful, that it is our duty to do this, to improve our talents to the utmost, and to do all the good in our power. Hence Paul commands us to labor, that we may have something to give to him that needeth. But to seek great things for others, is very different from seeking them for ourselves. The man who seeks anything for himself alone, violates the spirit of the command in our text, whether the objects of his pursuit be great or small. He shows that he is not actuated by that charity which seeketh not her own.

He exposes himself to the charge which God brings against his ancient people: Israel is an empty vine, he bringeth forth fruit to himself. He acts inconsistently with the character of a Christian, as described by St. Paul. None of us, says he, liveth to himself. Even Christ pleased not himself. We may add, that there is danger of seeking great things for ourselves, even when we fancy that we are seeking them for others. Covetousness and ambition may conceal themselves under the garb of benevolence, and we may flatter ourselves that we seek wealth or influence merely with a view to promote the happiness of others, when in fact we are seeking them for the sake of gratifying ourselves.

Let us now proceed to consider, II. Some of the reasons why we should not seek great things for ourselves. At the head of these reasons we might place the divine command. We might say, seek not great things for yourselves in the world, because God has forbidden it. He not only forbade Baruch to do it, but he forbids us all to do it. His word is full of commands, cautions, and warnings, all leveled against the pursuit of earthly things. Some of these commands and cautions we have already had occasion to mention, and we shall still have occasion to mention others.

We shall therefore only add here, that, since God forbids us to seek great things for ourselves, it is highly sinful to do it; and if it be sinful, it is dangerous; dangerous here, and destructive hereafter. Every consideration, then, which can be assigned as a reason why we should avoid sin, why the should obey God, is a reason why we should not seek great things for ourselves. But we wish to show you, not only that God forbids this, but why he forbids it; and thus convince you that it is not a cruel or arbitrary prohibition, but a most reasonable one. 1.

We ought not to seek great things for ourselves, because it is the sure way to multiply our disappointments and sorrows. This it is easy to prove. It is evident from the past history, and from the present state of the world, that however eagerly You may seek great things, very few of you will obtain them. In the very nature of the case, few can obtain them. In the lottery of life there are few prizes, and many blanks. He, then, who seeks great things for himself, engages in a pursuit in which it is exceedingly probable he will be disappointed; and the more ardent are his desires, the more eager his pursuit, the more keen will be the sufferings which his disappointment will occasion.

Now is it wise for any man to hazard his happiness, in a pursuit where there is so little probability of success, where hundreds fail, while one succeeds. But this is not all. The man whose pursuit is crowned with success, will be no less disappointed than his unsuccessful neighbor. After he has obtained great things, he will find himself as far from happiness, find his desires as unsatisfied, his mind as discontented,

as before. His desires will increase with his success. Nay, they will increase much faster than his success.

Objects which seemed great before they were obtained, will appear small after he obtains them; and he must still toil on, like a man who is endeavoring to fill a vessel which has no bottom, or who attempts to quench his thirst by drinking the briny waters of the ocean. And should the tide of success turn, should one who has acquired great things lose them, an event which very frequently occurs, how keen, how insupportable are the pangs of disappointment? Who, my friends, are the men that find life a burden too heavy to bear? who seek a momentary oblivion of their sorrows in the gulf of intemperance? who madly put an end to their lives by violence?

Those who have sought great things for themselves, and been successful in the pursuit. My friends, I presume you seek great things for yourselves, only with the expectation of obtaining happiness. But what is happiness? who is the happy man? Is it not he who thinks he has enough; whose possessions are equal to his desires? There are, then, only two ways of obtaining happiness. One is to increase our possessions till they satisfy our desires. The other is to bring down our desires to our possessions.

The first is evidently impossible. No man ever did satisfy his desires by increasing his possessions, nor can any man do it, for our desires are boundless. To attempt to satisfy them in this way, is like attempting to extinguish a fire by supplying it with fuel. The only way to be happy, then, is to bring down our desires to our possessions. This can be done, for it has been done. There has been at least one man who could truly say, I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.

And if we wish to be happy, either here or hereafter, we must learn the same lesson. If we cannot be contented and satisfied with the portion God allots us, we must be miserable, in whatever world or situation we may be placed. Witness our first parents. They possessed the whole world, possessed it when it was adorned with all its pristine glory and beauty. But they were not satisfied. They sought great things for themselves. They wished to be as gods, knowing good and evil; and by attempting to gratify the wish, they lost everything, and ruined themselves with all their posterity.

Witness, too, the fallen angels. They possessed more than the world. They possessed heaven. They were raised as high as creatures could be raised. But they were not satisfied. They wished to rise higher. They attempted it, and fell; fell into a gulf of misery which has no bottom, into a state of misery which has no end; fell from the highest state in which creatures can be placed, to the lowest depth of degradation to which creatures can sink. Thus will all perish who seek great things for themselves; for omnipotent truth has declared that everyone who exalteth himself shall be abased. 2.

Another reason why we should not seek great things for ourselves, may be drawn from the nature and situation of the world in which we live. We live in a changeable world, where nothing is stable, where nothing is certain; where everything is changing, or dissolving, or passing away; a world, which with all its works, is destined to be burned up, and from which we must soon be removed. And is such a world a suitable portion for immortal beings; a proper place in which to lay up treasures, or on which to rest our hopes?

Might we not as easily employ our time and exertions in building upon a quicksand, or upon ice which the summer's sun will melt away? Again, the world in which we live is a sinful, and of course a dying world, which lies in wickedness, under its Maker's curse, on which the vials of his wrath are constantly poured out, and from which thousands are daily swept away to the retributions of eternity. We live in a prison, where rebels against heaven's King are awaiting their sentence; in a place of execution, where fire and

sword, pestilence and famine, disease and death, have for ages been employed in executing the sentence of God's law upon transgressors; in a grave yard, where lie buried the many successive generations of sinners, upon whom the sentence has been executed.

We live, surrounded by the dying and the dead; we walk over the ashes of the departed; we build our habitations upon their graves; we strive to enrich ourselves with treasures which they have left behind; treasures for which many of them bartered their salvation, and which are, therefore, the price of blood, the blood of immortal souls. We live in a world in which multitudes of intelligent beings are daily commencing their existence, an existence which is never to end; in which still greater multitudes are constantly ripening for heaven or for hell; and from which thousands are daily going to one or the other of those endless abodes.

And is such a world a proper place in which to seek great things for ourselves? Can the fires of avarice or ambition glow in the midst of so many things which are calculated to extinguish them? We sometimes read of wretches, who, when a city is wrapped in flames or overturned by an earthquake, rush among the blazing ruins, or the falling houses in search of plunder. We read of others, who follow the march of armies, and hover around a field of battle, with a view to strip the bodies of the dying and the dead.

We wonder at their insensibility; but alas! my friends, our conduct, while we seek great things for ourselves, in such a world as this, proves that we are equally insensible. We rush on in the mad pursuit of worldly objects, surrounded by dangers, diseases and death, with the earth trembling, and the grave ready to open under our feet. We follow in the rear of an immense army of our fellow creatures, who have all advanced to grapple with the king of terrors, and have all fallen in the unequal combat.

We are hastening to encounter the same enemy, with an assurance of meeting the same fate; yet we eagerly seize the spoils which the dead have left scattered on the field of battle; we are ready to contend and quarrel for their possessions, and take no means to prepare for the contest in which we must soon engage with the last enemy, who will strip us of all we have so hardly and laboriously acquired. My hearers, what folly, what madness, what inexcusable want of feeling, what an awful insensibility, does such conduct evince!

What! can we find nothing better, nothing more necessary to do, in such a world as this, than seeking great things for ourselves? Have we no children, no friends, no acquaintances, who are in danger of perishing, whom our prayers, our example, our exertions might be instrumental of saving? What, O what, would have been our fate and the fate of mankind, had our Saviour, had his apostles passed through the world, employed only in seeking great things for themselves? Permit me to enforce these considerations by reminding you, that God himself mentions them, in his address to Baruch, as a reason why he should not seek great things for himself.

Thus saith the Lord, I will break down what I have built up, and pluck up that which I have planted; for behold, I will bring evil upon all flesh. And seekest thou great things for thyself? seek them not. As if he had said, Dost thou, a member of a sinful race, an inhabitant of a guilty, ruined world, a world on which my judgments are about to descend; dost thou, thus situated, seek great things for thyself? Art thou thinking of pleasure, or wealth, or honor, while I am overthrowing and plucking up and destroying, and such multitudes are perishing around thee?

Entertain such thoughts no more, but let it suffice thee if thou canst thyself escape. 3. Another reason why we should not seek great things for ourselves, may be found in our own character and situation. We are

not only placed in a sinful, dying world, but we are ourselves sinful, dying, and accountable creatures. We are by nature and practice children of disobedience, and of course children of wrath. God is angry with us every day; the curse of his broken law rests upon us; and death, in a thousand forms which we can neither foresee nor resist, is constantly ready to arrest and hurry us to his tribunal, where a sentence awarding eternal death or everlasting life, will be pronounced upon each of us.

We have, therefore, a great work to do, no less a work than securing the favor of God, and obtaining the salvation of our immortal souls, a work which demands our time, our attention, our utmost exertions. And can we, in such a situation, find leisure or inclination to seek great things for ourselves here? to seek them while death is at the door; while the Judge is at hand; while eternity draws near; while our souls, unprepared, are in momentary danger of sinking beyond the reach of hope or mercy?

Shall we, instead of diligently preparing to give in our account to God, labor to increase our responsibility by increasing those possessions for which an account must be given? Alas! my friends, however small our possessions may appear to us now, we shall all think them large enough, and too large, when we are called to account for them at the tribunal of God. But perhaps some may reply, we hope that our preparation for death is made, that our sins are pardoned, that our salvation is secure?

But are you sure that this is the case, sure that you are not deceived? If not, you have still a great work to do, a work, the performance of which requires all diligence; and that is, to make your calling and election sure. Will any one reply, they are sure, I know them to be so; I have a full assurance of salvation. And is this a reason why you should seek great things for yourselves? What! has a pardoned rebel, a rebel who deserves the deepest hell, a rebel rescued from that fate by a Redeemer's blood, by sovereign grace, has he nothing to do but to seek great things for himself? nothing to do for the Saviour, who has bought him with a price? nothing to do for the honor of that God who has freely pardoned and made him an heir of eternal glory?

Nay, have you not yet something to do to accomplish your own resolution? Are you not commanded to work it out with fear and trembling, to fight, to run, to endure to the end, to be faithful to death; Have you not also something to do, much to do, to promote the salvation of others? Are there none perishing within your reach, whom you might, whom you ought, to attempt to save? And even if there were not, even if you had nothing to do for your Creator, your Redeemer, or your fellow creatures, could you find no better employment than seeking great things for yourselves here on earth?

Does it become a child of God, an heir of heaven, an expectant of celestial, immortal glories, to grovel here in the dust, instead of looking upward, commencing his eternal song, and rejoicing in hope of the glory of God? Are you so ambitious that you cannot be satisfied to live and reign forever at Christ's right hand, unless you can be honored and applauded here? Are you so avaricious, that you cannot be satisfied with immortal, incorruptible treasures, unless you can have amass of glittering dust in addition?

Are your desires so unreasonable that you cannot be contented with sharing the inheritance of Christ, with possessing such a portion as the infinite, eternal God; is it not enough that he has pardoned you, saved you, rescued you from hell, raised you to heaven, given his Son to die for you, his Spirit to sanctify you, and himself to be your exceeding great reward? Will you ungratefully forget all these favors, and murmur, repine, or be discontented because he does not also give you great things in this world, things which he knew would prove injurious?

Indeed, my friends, indeed, whether we are penitent or impenitent, pardoned or unpardoned, it by no means becomes us to seek these things. We have all something else, something of more importance to do, something which it will require the greatest diligence, our utmost exertions to accomplish. 4. Another reason why we should not seek great things for ourselves is, that seeking them is incompatible with the duties which we are required to perform; and of course incompatible with our best interests.

It is not enough to say, that seeking them is not the end for which we were created, not the work which we are required to perform; for it is directly opposed to that end, it is inconsistent with the performance of that work. Man has but one soul, but one heart, but a certain limited portion of time, strength and energy. Of course, he is capable of a certain limited degree of exertion. He cannot then give his heart to God and to the world at the same time. To use our Saviour's language, he cannot serve two masters, cannot serve God and mammon.

If he serves the latter, he must hate the former. In short, he who seeks great things for himself, is covetous; we are assured that every covetous man is an idolater, and that he has no part in the kingdom of Christ. And as an allowed, indulged desire of great things for ourselves, is utterly incompatible with religion, so the smallest desire for such things is highly injurious to our religious progress and enjoyment; for so much of his heart as any man gives to the world, so much he must withhold from God.

So much of his time, strength and energy as are employed in forming worldly objects, must be subtracted from religious pursuits, from the performance of his duty. The more concerned he feels to lay up treasure on earth, the less concerned he must be to lay up treasure in heaven. The more he thinks of the body, the less attention he can pay to the soul. In a word, no man can pursue two objects with the same zeal, energy and success, as he can pursue one; least of all can he do this, when these objects are diametrically opposite to each other.

Now in this case, the objects of pursuit are diametrically opposite, as opposite as light and darkness, as sin and holiness; for a disposition to desire, or seek great things for ourselves, is in every degree in which it can exist, sinful, since it proceeds from a sinful source. What is it, my hearers, which prompts you to seek great things for yourselves? It must be either avarice, or ambition, or pride, or a wish for sensual gratification. Now these, as I need not inform you, are all sinful propensities, and by obtaining great things, these sinful propensities are gratified and strengthened, and, of course, your religious progress is interrupted.

Nor is this all. A desire for great things exposes us to innumerable temptations. Indeed, it is this desire which gives worldly objects all their power to tempt and entangle us. The man who does not desire great things, will feel no temptation to do wrong in order to obtain them, or to avoid doing right, through fear of losing them. But he who desires to do great things will be perpetually tempted to omit duty, and to commit sin. They that will be rich, says the apostle, fall into temptation and a snare, and into many hurtful and deceitful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition.

On this part of our subject it would be easy to enlarge, and to multiply reasons why we should not seek great things to ourselves. But, the undesigned length of the preceding remarks renders it necessary to omit them, and conclude with a brief improvement. Permit me, then, to improve the subject by asking each of you, in the language of God to Baruch, Art thou seeking great things for thyself? You may perhaps reply, No, we seek but little, we seek for a competency. But are you not deceived?

You may now fancy that a little more would satisfy you, but would not your desires increase with your possessions? The only way to arrive at the truth is to ascertain whether you are contented with what you have; for if you are not, you would still be discontented were all the treasures of the earth poured into your coffers. The man who seeks more than God sees it best to give, the man who is discontented with what God has given him, certainly seeks great things for himself.

And is not this the character of some, of many present, of some even among the professed disciples of Christ? Are not some of you, notwithstanding the express prohibition and commands of your Master, seeking great things for yourselves? Are you not doing it knowingly and allowedly, almost without suspecting it to be sinful? Are you not in fact seeking as much as you can obtain, placing no limits to your desires, but rather gratifying them, and suffering them to increase? My hearers, it is time, high time, that our eyes were opened to the sinfulness and danger of this conduct.

It is astonishing that we do not see it, or that seeing it, we are not alarmed. We should be alarmed were we guilty of murder, or theft, or perjury? Why then are we not alarmed at finding ourselves guilty of a sin which is expressly forbidden, and which is as inconsistent with the Christian character, as robbery or murder? A sin, which the law of God and the gospel of Christ unite to condemn? Do you never read such passages as these: Thou shalt not covet; labor not to be rich; labor not for the meat that perisheth; lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth; If any man will follow Christ, let him deny himself; They that are Christ's have crucified the flesh, with its affections and lusts; love not the world, neither the things that are in the world.

One would infer from our conduct, that these passages were no part of the Bible; but, my friends, they are a part, and a most important part of it, as we shall all one day be convinced, if we neglect them. Indeed, it is to the neglect of these passages that the declining state of religion among us, and all the evils which affect us, as a church, and as individuals, are to be ascribed; nor can religion flourish either in the church, or in our own hearts, any farther than the spirit of these passages prevails.

O then, strive to imbibe their spirit. Guard against seeking great things for yourselves, as you would guard against any atrocious crime, as you would guard against an enemy which has injured more Christians, and destroyed more immortal souls than all other enemies.

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