



# THE SPIRITUAL MAN'S AIM

*Living for the Eternal in a Fading World*



RICHARD SIBBES



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# **The Spiritual Man's Aim**

**by Richard Sibbes**

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## **Introduction**

"It remains, brethren, that the time is short. Let those who have wives be as though they had none; those who weep, as though they did not weep; those who rejoice, as though they did not rejoice; those who buy, as though they did not possess; and those who use the world, as not abusing it—for the form of this world is passing away." —1 Corinthians 7:29–31

The blessed apostle, in the earlier part of this chapter, has given instruction on matters of conscience, being a man who possessed the tongue of the learned, able to speak a timely word to the weary (Isaiah 50:4). Then, as is his custom in nearly every epistle, having before his eyes more weighty concerns, he calls them away from being overly preoccupied with specific cases, exhorting them instead to focus on the greater issue: "The time is short. Let those who are married be as though they were not," and so on.

Nevertheless, he still provides answers to those particular cases. For just as in a journey it is not sufficient to know only that the destination lies east or west, north or south, but a traveler must also know the turns and specific details of the road—so it is in religion. It is not enough merely to understand that we are to serve God above all and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Such general truths even atheists will embrace, and under the guise of these general principles, they will often dismiss any further pursuit of religion.

Our understanding must also be exercised in resolving specific questions, for once these are clarified, the way becomes smoother toward heaven. Yet, we must not dwell too much on particulars, for here you see the apostle calls them away from them with these words: "Finally, my brethren, the time is short." It remains that we fix our attention on the central matters. "For the form of this world is

passing away.” In these words, we consider two main points, which I will simply name now before hastening to what follows.

The first is this:

**Doct. 1. A most excellent way to address particular matters of conscience is to keep the chief end ever before us.**

For there are many who trouble themselves all their life with this or that particular concern, and in the meantime neglect the principal thing. Let a person attend to the main issue, and he will quickly discern what is right in cases such as whether it is good to redeem time to hear a sermon now and then. He will act upon it, and not delay by debating it as a point of conscience; for when he considers how it serves the chief end—the salvation of his soul, for which he was created and sent into this world—he will find his answer without difficulty.

Likewise, with regard to the full sanctification of the Lord’s Day, many have doubts and stir up needless controversy. But if the love of God were in their hearts, and they truly regarded the main issue, they would see it to be a vain and frivolous question. For how greatly does this contribute to the chief end?

Similarly, concerning social interactions—are those with whom I spend time godly, encouraging, and spiritually beneficial? Can I grow through their company? Why, then, should I entangle myself with others who hinder my spiritual progress and obstruct the main pursuit? Thus we observe the apostle Paul, when dealing with

particular questions, brings all back to the central point: “Brethren, the time is short.” Therefore, behave in these matters “as though you were not,” as we shall soon observe in the details—for “the form of this world is passing away.”

This is the reason why only a true Christian can conduct himself with temperance and balance concerning the things of this life. Why is this so? Because only a sincere Christian has a supreme aim and a governing purpose that directs the entire course of his life. He keeps his eyes fixed on heaven and eternal happiness, and considers all particulars in light of that ultimate end. But the man who lacks a gracious purpose will necessarily err in individual cases, for he lacks a righteous aim. No one, except a Christian, fails to become lost amid the vanities of this present world.

The second point is this; you see that,

## **Doctrine 2. Religion concerns itself with all matters.**

It concerns itself with the world, with marriage, with buying, and with possessing, as we shall observe more fully later. The atheist, who takes offense that his ways should be restrained by the commanding authority of religion—which reaches into all areas of life—scoffs and says, “What business does the minister have with our professions, with lawyers, with tradesmen, or with statesmen? What concern is that to him?”

It is true, he is not concerned with the technical aspects, the particular workings of those professions. Those are rightly left to those who are trained and skilled in the specific disciplines of their callings. Yet a minister, a Christian, and religion in any person, has

authority to speak to these matters insofar as they relate to and affect the ultimate purpose of life. For religion is that wisdom which prepares a person for his highest end—for his eternal end—for heaven.

Therefore, being such a wisdom, it must guide all things insofar as they help or hinder that end. Political wisdom, we say, is a commanding wisdom. Why? Because it oversees all trades. How is this so? Does a statesman possess technical skill in every trade? No; not in the intricate practices of each craft. But he understands them to the extent that he can discern what contributes to the common good. Let the safety of the commonwealth be the law governing all trades. Political wisdom is the highest form of earthly knowledge, for it aims at the good of the whole; therefore, it may restrain or even forbid particular practices if they are harmful to the public welfare.

In like manner, all trades must be rebuked where they are sinful, as their corruptions bring reproach upon religion. We must not conduct ourselves in any trade in such a way that we forget we are Christians. Therefore, we must receive the Word of God with humility, especially when it speaks to the details of our specific callings. We observe the Apostle Paul addressing matters of buying and selling, of marriage, and so forth. How does he do this? Only insofar as these things may hinder the greater goal: “Finally, my brethren, the time is short, and the form of this world is passing away.” Therefore, be not overly attached to these things.

This is the supreme rule, the chief reason that governs all for the sake of religion. Just as I said regarding political wisdom—that it is the highest law—so too, religion stands above even that, for it deals with the most excellent and ultimate matters. There are many particular

reasons in favor of this or that activity. Yes, but if religion declares the contrary, then that must prevail, for it is the supreme rule.

Now I proceed to explain the particulars. The apostle here provides five directions, each with corresponding limits. These five directives are supported by three reasons.

### **The five directions:**

1. Let those who are married be as though they were not.
2. Those who weep, as though they did not weep.
3. Those who rejoice, as though they did not rejoice.
4. Those who buy, as though they did not possess.
5. Those who use this world, as not abusing it.

### **How are these five directions supported?**

They are supported by three reasons:

1. The first is at the beginning of the passage: “The time is short.” Therefore, we must be moderate in all temporal matters.
2. The second is at the conclusion of the passage: “For the form of this world is passing away.”
3. The third is a great reason as well: namely, their state and condition in Christ. “Why, brethren,” he says, “partakers of the heavenly calling,” as in Hebrews 3:1, and again, “partakers of better things,” 2 Corinthians 1:7—being brethren in Christ, members of Christ. He is the bond of our brotherhood, for we are born again as sons of God; not merely brethren among

ourselves, but brethren in Christ—therefore, sons of God and heirs of heaven.

Shall such as you be immoderate in the things of this world? Paul weaves together a compelling appeal—not only to stir their affections with the term “brethren,” but also to enforce the weight of his reasoning. “Brethren, the time is short,” and “the form of this world is passing away.”

So these three reasons are to be added to the five directions. Consider how strongly Paul supports his exhortations. Indeed, it was necessary that he do so. For we are so desperately attached to the things of this world, so difficult to detach, that reason must be heaped upon reason. The Holy Spirit of God does not waste arguments, nor expend them where they are not needed. Therefore, we must acknowledge the seriousness and equity of this matter, and give careful attention to these instructions.

Let us remember that each of these reasons strengthens every one of the directions. You who have wives, be as though you had none—for “the time is short,” and “the form of this world is passing away.” You who weep, be as though you wept not—for “the time is short,” and “the form of this world is passing away.” You who use the world, use it as not abusing it—for “the time is short,” and “the form of this world is passing away.” Each of these reasons must be considered in every particular direction.

Now, I will briefly speak to the first reason: “The time is short.”

### **What time?**

1. The time of the world. There remains but a little while until the day of judgment. Christ is near, ready to judge the living and the

dead. The time between now and that day is brief. It was short then; it is shorter now. “The time is short.” We are come to the last days, to the closing period of the world. But that is not the only consideration.

2. The time of our own little world—our individual lives. Our personal judgment draws near. Whatever will happen to us at the Last Day, we will experience individually at our death. Our time is short; the time of our personal life is brief. And that consideration should be even more persuasive to convince us that “the time is short.”
3. The season of time—the opportune time, which is the best portion of time. The season and opportunity for acting rightly is even shorter than the span of life itself. For we do not have equal opportunity in every moment of life. “The time is short”—that is, the appointed season of usefulness is even briefer.

**[1.]** The opportunity to do good, and to receive good, is brief. Not every season is a time for harvest or for sowing. The tide does not always flow, nor is the sun always shining. As it is in the natural order, so it is also in the spiritual realm—we do not always have advantages and openings; favorable winds do not always blow. Therefore, opportunity is even shorter than time itself, just as our personal time is shorter than the duration of the world. “The time is short”; and the opportunity, the favorable season of that time, is even shorter.

**[2.]** Moreover, it is uncertain; we cannot know how short it may be. If it were revealed to any one of us here that we would die within two days, it would alarm us, even the most spiritually mature among us. It would cause us to examine ourselves. But which one of us can say with certainty that he will live for even two hours? Time is not only

short, but also unpredictable. And here we behold the astonishing folly of our nature—that we presume so much upon the future, as though we were promised long life, making presumptuous covenants with death itself. But a covenant cannot be made by one party alone. God and future time make no such agreements with us. Therefore, it is the height of foolishness to declare, “I will live this many years.” God says, “You fool,” to the one who laid up treasure for many years, planning for long enjoyment: “You fool, this very night your soul will be required of you,” (Luke 12:20). A man is a fool when he places confidence in that which he has received no promise of. Thus, since time is short and uncertain, we ought to grasp hold of it while it is available—especially those precious opportunities that come with it.

**[3.]** And thirdly, once it is gone, time cannot be recovered. There is no recalling it once it has passed. In all these respects, we must be wise stewards; we must be thrifty with our time, and not anxiously devise ways to waste that which already flees from us so swiftly. Time is a precious gift, valuable for the greatest purposes. What is this little span of time given to us for, but to prepare for eternity, for a world without end? Yet we squander it on trivial matters, and worse, we fill it with sin. In this little time, we commit evils that we may never be able to undo. Such is our madness and folly.

Therefore, since “the time is short,” let us be careful how we use it. In a brief moment, we may do that which we shall mourn for all eternity. Likewise, in a short time, we may also accomplish that which shall benefit us forever. Those who possess but a small piece of land take great care not to lose a single portion of it. So too, those who have but a little time ought to steward it well, sowing to the Spirit, that they may reap a harvest of eternal life. Then they will be able to say, “Oh, what a blessing it was, that God gave me a little time to come to Christ, to repent of my sins, and so on.”

Beloved, this brief span of time consists of three parts:

**Past, present, and future.**

**(1.)** As for the time that is past, let us repent of it if it has not been well spent. That is the best use we can make of it. Nothing can be done in the time that has already passed; but if what was done in it was evil, then let us repent.

**(2.)** The present time is given to us for doing good. As for the time to come, it is not in our power. Therefore, we must make use of the present. For the time that is past, the best use we can make of it is to find comfort in our sincerity, as Hezekiah did (Isaiah 38:3), or else to repent if anything has been done amiss. But let us focus on the present. Let us not delay, but immediately pursue the purpose for which we were sent into the world. “The time is short,” the journey is long, the task is great. It is no small journey to travel from earth to heaven; no small matter to attain eternal life.

**(3.)** Therefore, since we have such a weighty task before us—namely, to enter heaven—let us, I beseech you, consider the seriousness of it. Let us give no sleep to our eyes, nor slumber to our eyelids, until we have obtained a state and condition that is not subject to time. Let us make this our chief use of time. Let the young be wise, and treasure time as more valuable than gold. Let them dedicate the prime and flower of their years to God and to those things which are best. Especially let them consider that they have no guarantee of this time. And let the aged, who are drawing near to the grave, not neglect their time either. A young person may die soon; an old person cannot live long. Therefore, let those who are advanced in years remember that their time is shorter than others’. All human life is brief, but the lives of the elderly are shortest of all. Let them therefore consider this: “The time is short.”

Our folly is this: we shorten our lives even further through vanity—yes, and often through sin. It would be a lesser evil if it were only vanity. But through sinful and excessive behavior, many shorten their lives and become self-destroyers. Or, through wickedness, they provoke God to shorten their days. “The bloodthirsty and deceitful man shall not live out half his days,” (Psalm 55:23). God intervenes. So, though “the time is short,” we often make it shorter. We are responsible for the shortening of our own days. Let us beware of that.

But I have spoken too long on this point; and yet, because it is the foremost reason given before all the following exhortations, I beseech you to consider it: “The time is short.”

If we do not make good use of it, we are worse than the devil himself. For he makes use of the shortness of his time. What does he do? “Because his time is short,” he exerts himself to do as much mischief as he can (Revelation 12:12). He fills his time with evil, enlarging his dominion. He does all the harm he can—for this very reason: because his time is short.

Let us learn at least this much from the worst of spirits.

But what is the purpose of this truth here in particular? It is this: we have many things to do, and since time is short, let us be sure to do the main thing for which we were sent into the world. Let us do other things only as they support the main purpose, and not as they hinder it. Time is short, and there are many duties to be performed; let us be sure to attend to the principal one, so that we do not leave the most important undone.

That is the point the apostle presses here: “The time is short.”

## **“It remains that those who have wives be as though they had none.”**

This is the first particular exhortation; for prior to this, the apostle had been asked questions of conscience concerning marriage, which is why he begins here. Each of these particulars is connected to the other. Those who marry will have occasion to weep—that follows immediately—for there will be sorrow. There may be the loss of a husband, or a wife, or a child; and there are always some afflictions. Domestic troubles often accompany the married state. Therefore, after speaking of marriage, he adds weeping.

And then, because there is also joy in marriage—“A woman, when she is in travail, has sorrow, but when she brings forth a child, she rejoices that a man is born into the world,” as Christ says (John 16:21)—there is joy in children, and a mutual joy in the sweet bond of conjugal love. There is much joy, and so, as there is weeping, so also there is joy in the married estate.

“And those that buy, as though they possessed not.” Where there are wives and children, there must be buying; there must be provision made for future generations. And all this necessitates the use of the world. For when men marry, they enter into the world, as it is commonly said—they begin the world anew. They engage more fully with worldly affairs, for many things are needed to sustain that household society. Therefore, we see how one matter follows upon another. The apostle connects all these, especially aiming at this form of life.

Now in each of these particulars, the apostle grants liberty to act. You may marry, you may weep, you may rejoice, you may buy, you may use the world. But as there is liberty, there is also danger: you may

do these things, but you must not go too far. Therefore, with each liberty he imposes a restraint. You may do them, but beware of excess. And this restraint is supported by reason. He provides reasons for these restraints: “The time is short,” and therefore there is danger that you may be carried too far, that you may plunge too deeply into these concerns. “The fashion of this world is passing away”—everything here is transitory. Therefore, it is foolish to become overly involved in that which is perishing.

Moreover, you are brethren, called to higher things. So, in each of these cases, there is liberty, a danger, a restraint upon that danger, and a reason to uphold the restraint.

**(1.) *The liberty:*** We may marry. That is not in question. There is not only liberty, but marriage is an honorable estate, and necessary; honored in paradise, honored by the presence of Christ. It is a liberty by which the church is preserved, and heaven is enlarged. It was the devil who introduced a base view of that honorable condition. In the Roman Church, they would rather be joined to a harlot than to be the head of a wife. It was the devil who introduced those abominable opinions and writings that dishonored this sacred state—and so they must be judged.

**(2.) *But there is a danger,*** and that is the main point. “Let those who have wives be as though they had none.” There is great danger in two ways: a danger inherent in the things themselves, and a danger in exceeding lawful bounds in them. That is, there is a risk in the condition itself, and a peril if we go too far.

For example: Have not some who had wives been drawn away by them, as Solomon was, into idolatry? (1 Kings 11:4). Is there not a danger of being led astray? And in being led astray, is there not the risk of destroying our souls? Did not sin first enter through this

path? Was not Adam misled by his wife? And how many men have perished by being overly indulgent—too yielding and compliant in this matter? If they had remembered the apostle’s instruction—to marry as though they had not—they would not have been so easily led astray.

Because there is danger, there is also restraint: “Let those who have wives be as though they had none.” What does this mean? Are they to disregard their wives, or to neglect care for them? Certainly not. That is not the intent. But rather, they are to *be as though they had none* in the following sense:

Let them be as resolute for God’s truth as if they had no wives to hold them back. Let them be as willing to suffer afflictions, if God calls them to it, as if they had no wives. Let them be as ready for spiritual duties, as their calling permits, as if they had no wives. Let them avoid distracting cares and worldly burdens, as if they had none. Let them not use marriage as an excuse for cowardice or worldliness, or for shirking suffering and affliction when God calls them to it. Let them not use marriage as a pretense for compromise in religion or for hypocrisy, saying, “I must think of my wife and children.”

Let them be as though they had none; for Christ has taught us to hate all things in comparison with Him. A man is not worthy of Christ or of His gospel if he does not value Christ above wife, children, and all else. When a man is forced to choose—whether to remain faithful to Christ, his true Husband, or to cleave to wife and children—he must cleave to Christ. The reason is this: the bond of religion is above all other bonds. And the bond that unites us to Christ will remain when all other bonds are dissolved. The ties between husband and wife, parent and child, all end in death. But the bond with Christ is everlasting.

Every lesser bond must serve the highest bond. Therefore, we must not invoke one bond as an excuse to violate another. We must so strive to please others that we do not displease our chief Husband. For the day will come when there will be no more marriage—when we shall neither marry nor be given in marriage, but shall be like the angels (Matthew 22:30). That time will have no end—it will be eternity. And we must keep our eyes fixed on that.

Therefore, those who marry, “let them be as though they were not married.”

You know how it was in the parable: when some were invited to come to Christ, one of them excused himself on the grounds of marriage. “I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come” (Luke 14:20). His excuse was more definitive than the others. He said, “I cannot.” But did that excuse him? Shall anyone be excused for refusing the call of Christ on account of marriage?

There is such an infinite difference between Christ, our supreme Husband, and any other—though it be the wife of our bosom, or the children of our body—that no excuse will suffice when a man forsakes Christ for the sake of any other bond. Christ has redeemed us. He is our Husband for eternity in heaven. Therefore, no excuse can justify violating the bond of religion for the sake of any other relationship.

And thus, the unyielding answer to that man was, “You shall never taste of my banquet” (Luke 14:24).

## **“And those who weep, as though they wept not.”**

It is lawful to weep—not only for sin, which ought to be our chief sorrow—but also for the miseries of the age and the condition of the times in which we live. There is liberty here. “Oh, that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears,” says Jeremiah (Jeremiah 9:1). He believed he could not weep enough, and therefore he wished that his head were “a fountain,” fearing that his natural tears would be quickly exhausted. Thus, there is liberty to weep.

Indeed, men are obliged to weep. There are tears of sympathy for the miseries of the times and of the people among whom we dwell. Likewise, for afflictions and losses within the family, it is proper to grieve. We are flesh, not pure spirit. God has made us human and has given us sensitive affections to feel sorrow. To be without natural affection is a cursed condition. We may weep, and we may grieve—indeed, we ought to grieve.

Now grief is like a cloud, and tears are the rain that falls from it. Weeping is but the distillation of that inward sorrow.

If we may grieve—and indeed ought to grieve—for the state of the times, then surely we may weep. It is a dull and senseless disposition not to be affected by the miseries of the age in which we live. Grief is the spring from which tears flow. Therefore, for grief itself, there is no question that it is allowed. We may weep, but we must weep as though we wept not. For there is a danger in excessive weeping over earthly losses.

Here lies the danger: we may indulge our grief too far—especially for spouses and children. God finds this displeasing. He takes it as an

unkindness when we over-grieve for the loss of a wife, or a child, or a parent, when Christ Himself is our everlasting Husband, and God is our eternal Father. Is not God worth all?

So then, there is a danger—just as we are prone to excessive joy, so are we prone to excessive sorrow. Human nature rarely keeps within proper bounds. When we grieve too much, it reveals that we are not drawing our comfort from God, who is the true source and fountain of consolation. Therefore, “let those who weep be as though they wept not”—that is, let them not weep excessively. “For the time is short.” Have you lost a friend or anything dear to you? “The time is short”—you shall soon meet again. There is but a little while between now and the great day of judgment. “The form of this world is passing away.” A new world is coming, with new heavens and a new earth, wherein righteousness dwells. Then we shall live forever with the Lord.

And consider this, my brethren—why “brethren”? Because brethren ought not to be as those without hope, like the Gentiles. They may weep who do not expect ever to meet again. But a Christian, a brother in Christ, who hopes for a joyful reunion, must not weep as those who have no hope. Let us weep, yes—but “as though we wept not.”

So the apostle places a restraint even upon that kind of weeping which is for sin, for even godly sorrow must be moderated. We may over-grieve even for our sins. We are commanded to rejoice in the Lord always. Therefore, even when we weep for sin, we must also remember to rejoice. One eye must be fixed on our sin to humble us and to stir up holy sorrow, but the other must look to God’s mercy in Christ to comfort us. Even the best kind of sorrow must be balanced

with spiritual joy—how much more, then, must sorrow for earthly matters be restrained?

Now, when we are tempted to over-grieve for anything of this world, the best remedy is *diversion*. Am I sorrowful for these outward things? Yes—but is my soul in the state it ought to be? Let me rather weep for my dead heart, as Christ wept for dead Lazarus. Let me weep for my sluggish, indifferent soul. That is worthy of my tears.

As physicians, when the blood flows too heavily in one direction, provide an outlet in another, so should we redirect our grief. Let us examine ourselves. What is the condition of our souls? Is there spiritual life in me? Are things right between God and my soul? Am I prepared to die? Am I in a state fit for heaven?

Then we shall indeed have something to weep over. It is a pity that such precious pearls as tears should be wasted. God does not store up tears in His bottle that are shed excessively for the fading things of this world. But if they are poured out for sin, for the sins of our times, for the calamities and afflictions of the Church and state, then let us weep with purpose. Let us channel our sorrow in the right direction. And then, if we must grieve, let us grieve deeply—provided that our sorrow flows in that holy and sanctified course.

**“Those who rejoice, as though they did not.”**

We may rejoice—and indeed, we ought to—for God does not envy our joy. He has provided in this life abundant comforts of every kind to bring us delight. For every one of our senses He has appointed

pleasurable objects: flowers for the eye, music for the ear, fragrance for the smell, and so forth. There is nothing in the soul or body that lacks something fitted to delight it. Above all, God has made Himself the supreme joy of the soul, and there is something in every creature to stir up delight in Him. So gracious is God that we both may and ought to rejoice. He gives us spouses and children to delight in: “Rejoice in the wife of your youth” (Proverbs 5:18). There is no question about the lawfulness of these joys.

But there is also danger, especially in delights that are particularly sweet. There is danger because we are inclined to exceed moderation. Poison is most subtly hidden in sweetness. We are prone to overindulge in joy. Therefore, a restraint is necessary. We must “rejoice as though we did not rejoice”; that is, we must enjoy all earthly blessings with the awareness that “the time is short.” Shall I fix my joy upon something I cannot keep? “The time is short.” I cannot retain it. If a man cannot enjoy something for long, he cannot take lasting joy in it. “The time is short”; you must part with it. The joy must end, and the object of it must pass away.

“And the fashion of this world passes away.” The entire structure of things—marriage, business, friends—everything is passing. I implore you, let us learn to rejoice as though we did not. The prophet calls Nineveh “a rejoicing city” (Jonah 3:3), and we live in a similarly jovial age. People eat and drink as they did in the days before the flood, in Noah’s time. They marry and are given in marriage (Matthew 24:37). Therefore, we need to place a guard upon our joy, especially when God, in the times we live in, calls us to mourning as well as rejoicing. If we look around us soberly, we shall find reason to rejoice with moderation. We are not always to be merry and lighthearted. We must temper our joy and keep it in check.

Now, since the apostle joins together weeping, grieving, and rejoicing, observe that

**True religion chiefly concerns itself with moderating the affections.**

Religion purifies our affections from what is sinful in them, and governs them when they are lawful and good. Therefore, do not think you are sufficiently religious merely because you have acquired much knowledge. Many Christians are eager to know much, but if you examine their lives, their grief and joy are unrestrained. They have not learned to bridle and discipline their affections. You see here that religion shows its power in moderating both sorrow and gladness regarding earthly things. Let us see men demonstrate the power of religion by how they bear affliction—so that “they weep as though they wept not”—and how they handle prosperity—so that “they rejoice as though they did not.” The one who has learned this has truly learned religion, for religion deals especially with the affections. We are spiritually healthy if we grieve rightly and rejoice rightly, but not merely if we know much. The devil knows more than we do. Therefore, strive above all that God would grant you grace to govern your affections, that you may learn how to grieve and how to rejoice—for by nature, we do neither rightly.

And from this, observe another point, which now I add:

**The affections of God’s people are mixed.**

They weep with joy mingled in, and they rejoice with weeping. “They weep as though they wept not”; “they rejoice as though they rejoiced not.”

A carnal man experiences his emotions in extremes. If he rejoices, he casts off all restraint. If he is merry, he is beside himself. He has no moderation. If he grieves, unless some external check restrains him, he is crushed beneath the weight of sorrow, like Nabal, whose heart died within him (1 Samuel 25:37–38). He has no grace to temper his sorrow or his joy. Therefore, he is either excessively sorrowful or excessively joyful.

But grace—recognizing that we live in a world that contains both grief and gladness—moderates the affections. A Christian, when he rejoices, does not do so immoderately, for he always sees something to mourn. And when he mourns, he does not grieve without hope, for even in sorrow he has reason to rejoice: Christ is his, heaven is his, and the providence of God is still ordering all things for his good. Therefore, even in the worst of times, he has cause for joy. All his affections are balanced and refined.

So much, then, for this point.

## **“And those who buy, as though they possessed not.”**

It is lawful to buy. It is lawful to make contracts, and private ownership is lawful. Every person ought to have his own property. There would be no theft if there were no such thing as personal ownership, and without it, works of mercy would be impossible. Now, if ownership and dominion over material things are lawful—that we may rightfully possess things as our own—then buying is also lawful. It is one of the ordinary ways by which we lawfully acquire things. There is no danger in the act of buying itself.

But there is danger in *how* we buy. Men buy with the aim of establishing themselves permanently. “They call their lands after their own names” (Psalm 49:11), imagining that they will endure forever. Yet God makes fools of them. How few are there whose lineage continues in the same estate beyond the third generation? How few houses exist where the child or grandchild can say, “This was my grandfather’s or great-grandfather’s”? How rare it is to find a household where the current inhabitants can say, “My ancestor dwelled here, and these lands were his”? Survey a whole region, and few indeed can say such things.

When men build, they do not merely build upon the earth—they build castles in the air. They indulge lofty thoughts: “Now I build for my child, and for my child’s child.” But God overturns their plans. Either they are left without descendants, or, through countless unforeseen events, matters turn out otherwise. “The time is short, and the form of this world is passing away.” That is to say, buildings pass away, ownership passes away—everything here fades and perishes. Therefore, let us buy as though we did not possess. Let us purchase and hold earthly things in such a manner that we neglect not the better, eternal possession in heaven. Possess these things in such a way that they do not possess and command you.

In Leviticus 25:8 and following, you see the institution of the year of Jubilee. All possessions were to return to their original owners, should they so desire. God trained His people by this practice to teach them not to think of any earthly acquisition as permanent. Whatever had been bought would return to its prior owner in the fiftieth year. In this way, they learned that no possession was lasting. Even if we hold something for a time, we may be deprived of it through fraud, injustice, or tyranny.

Therefore, “let those who buy be as though they did not possess.” As Jeremiah 22:23 says, “You make your nest in the cedars,” imagining that your condition will remain secure. Oh, beloved, let us not build our hopes or rest our confidence upon that which offers no true or lasting assurance in this world. “For the form of this world,” as we shall further consider, “is passing away.”

And consider this also: for “brethren” who have an inheritance in heaven to live and buy as though they would remain here forever—this is not fitting. The very word “brethren” is reason enough to moderate us. “Brethren,” remember who you are. You have a heavenly inheritance. Therefore, buy as though you did not possess.

So much then for this fourth direction.

## **“Those who use the world, as not abusing it.”**

We may indeed use the world while we are in it, for we cannot do without the necessities of this life. While we are here, we belong to two realms—we are members of this present world, and yet we are heirs of a better world to come. We are bound by our relation to both.

Now, while we live in this present world, we must make use of its resources. How many things does this frail life require while we journey here below? As travelers, we must have provisions that assist us on our way to heaven. Travelers require necessities—this is not in question. Therefore, it is lawful and even necessary to use the world in many ways.

## **“As not abusing it.”**

Yet there is danger in the use of the world. The danger lies in becoming so attached in our affections to the things of this world that we forget the better world to come. Therefore, we must use the world in such a way that we do not abuse it.

How, then, should we use it?

Use the world as a means of laying a foundation for the life to come. While we live here, let the things of this world serve to help us settle our accounts for eternity. Use the world in such a way that some grace is expressed in the very act of using it. Let our engagement with earthly things be such that when those things pass away, the grace we exercised in their use may remain. “The world passes away,” but let us use it so that what we do by faith and love in the midst of it may endure.

Use the world to the honor of God, to the good of others, and to the increase of our eternal reward. Do not abuse it to the dishonor of God. Do not take God's blessings and turn them against Him. That is to abuse the world. Forget not the Giver. Would it not be an ungrateful act if a man, having been invited by a kind host, were to cast that very host out of his own house? Such is the case when one uses the things of the world in a way that turns God out of the heart—the very God who has given all.

Do not turn the things of this world into weapons against God or against others. Do not make them tools of injustice, or instruments to ruin others. Do not abuse them to your own hurt, to pierce your own soul, as the apostle says: “They have pierced themselves through with many sorrows” (1 Timothy 6:10). This is to abuse the world—

when by its misuse we dishonor God, wrong others, or wound our own souls.

God has not given us the things of this life so that we might destroy ourselves with them. Therefore, along with the gifts themselves, let us earnestly desire grace to use them rightly—for that is better than the gifts themselves. Labor to use the world without abusing it, for we certainly shall abuse it if we do not have grace to use it well. Many possess the gifts of God but do not have God Himself, because they lack His grace. When we receive any of His gifts, we must seek also the grace to manage them well.

To His children, God always gives grace along with His gifts. He never bestows anything upon them apart from the grace to use it in a sanctified way. They are sanctified in all things, and all things are sanctified to them. “Use the world as not abusing it.”

The reason is compelling: “The time is short.” Why should we be excessive in our use of this world? For overindulgence is one way by which we abuse it. “The time is short.” We shall be torn from these things whether we desire it or not. Therefore, let us begin to wean ourselves from them.

And again, “the fashion of this world passes away.” Why should we dote upon a perishing form? All things here are fading, and a new form will come in their place. You, “brethren,” who are heirs of a better world, use this world as those who understand it is not your true home. “Brethren”—he reminds them of their higher calling.

And thus I come to the final exhortation.

## **“For the fashion of this world passes away.”**

This is the second reason. The word *schema*—that is, the outward form or appearance of this world, its visible show, its external appearance and coloring—passes away. The term used in the original language is notably diminishing, as if the world were not a true substance, but merely a fashion, a form without enduring essence. Just as in natural philosophy, there are appearances in the air that have no true substance—such as visions of flying horses or battling soldiers in the sky—these are not real things, but only appearances. They are *phasis*, illusions or shapes. The substance and true reality lie elsewhere.

So it is with everything in this world—it is but an appearance. When the devil showed Christ all the kingdoms of the world, he showed Him only an image, a mere appearance, a show of things. Even the word “show” is itself a diminishing term.

And again, in the phrase “passes away,”

“The fashion of this world passes away.” Or, as some translate it, “deceives and leads us astray.” And indeed it does turn us from better things. “The fashion of this world passes away”—that rendering is fitting enough. It passes away. Shall we then become immoderately attached to that which is transient? It is only a show, a spectacle, a pageant. The word itself suggests a passing spectacle, a display that resembles various things but possesses no substance. There is no enduring reality in a pageant.

**Use 1.** Let us learn to think rightly of the things of this life—that there is no enduring reality in them. They have a kind of reality, it is

true. Riches are, in a sense, riches; beauty is, in a sense, beauty; nobility is, in a sense, nobility; possessions are, in a sense, possessions. But all this is as in a pageant. It is as if a man plays the part of a king or a beggar in a theatrical performance. He is, for a time, a king or a beggar, but we do not evaluate him based on his costume or role, but rather by who he truly is once he is off the stage.

And so it is with life in this world. While we live here, we act a part—some play the role of rich men, others of noblemen, others of poor men or beggars. All is but a part in a fleeting drama. And the gap between this life and eternity is even greater than the difference between the role an actor plays and the man himself. All of life is but a scene in a passing pageant. In the grave, no one is rich more than another. The king is as poor in death as the lowliest peasant. His riches do not follow him. The worm and the grave recognize no distinctions. When we enter the house of the dead, all roles and differences come to an end.

Therefore, since this world is but an appearance, a fleeting performance, why should we esteem ourselves more highly because of anything in it? Does the actor who plays the part of a nobleman consider himself better than the one who plays a beggar? No. He knows that soon the play will end, and he will return to what he truly is. Why are we not as wise in greater matters? It is not the one who plays the grandest part, but the one who plays any part best, who is most to be commended.

A man who faithfully serves God in a humble condition is far better than one who, possessing great power, turns his authority into a tool of injustice—living as if the world were created for his indulgence and to make others bow before him. Such a man is wretched, and will be seen to be so when he exits the stage of this life. It does not matter

how long he has lived or how great a part he has played, but only how well.

We do not honor actors for the parts they play, but for how skillfully they perform them. If they were wicked before, they are still wicked after. But if they act well, they are praised. Likewise, it matters not what role a person plays in this world. If he performs it well, he is blessed forever. If he plays it poorly, he is miserable forever. All is but a passing spectacle.

If we speak of what is real, we must speak of the things of religion. If we speak of true nobility, it is to be a child of God. If we speak of true riches, they are those which we carry to our deathbed—those which we take to heaven—those which comfort the soul and enrich it with grace, peace, and spiritual blessing. That is true wealth.

If we speak of true beauty, it is to have the image of God imprinted upon the soul, to be conformed to Christ, to be a new creature. If we speak of true strength, it is to stand firm in temptation, to serve God faithfully, to pass through this world without defiling the soul, to bear the cross with endurance. That is what is truly real. All else is shadow and illusion.

The greatest man in the world will confess this on his deathbed. As that mighty emperor once said, “I have passed through all things, and now nothing benefits me.” The reality had departed, and only the appearance remained—an appearance that could no longer sustain or satisfy him.

Go to the man who lies gasping for breath, and ask him: “Do honors profit you now? Do riches aid you now? Do possessions comfort you now?”

Solomon—wise by the Spirit of God, wise by experience as a king, wise by a special endowment from heaven—he who had tasted the full variety of earthly blessings, what was his verdict? “Vanity of vanities.” He could not express it fully. “Vanity of vanities,” said the wise, holy, experienced Solomon. He alone could say it with true authority. And worse still, he declared it to be “vexation of spirit,” unless a man has special grace to use these things rightly.

Therefore, I beseech you, “brethren,” let us view the things of this life according to the truth here revealed—they are but appearances, but pageants. When we go to purchase something in this world, we examine it closely, removing any adornment or disguise, lest we be deceived. Likewise, if we would judge rightly of this world’s offerings, let us strip away the trappings.

What lies beneath riches? Is it not full of anxiety? What lies beneath worldly power and rule? What lies within these earthly things? On the outside, they offer a fine show, a pleasing appearance. But what lies beneath? Strip away the mask, and you will see the truth.

The more you investigate them, and the better you understand them, the less you will value them. Beneath them lies emptiness—and not only emptiness, but vexation. Yet the things of heaven are altogether different. The closer you draw to them, the more you will love them and be in awe of them. The more a man knows of God, the more he desires to know. The more he knows Christ, and loves Christ, the more he longs to love Him still.

In the love of God in Christ, and in the joy of heaven, there is height, depth, breadth, and length—dimensions beyond measure. The blessings we have in Christ exceed the capacity of the soul itself; they are unsearchable, uncontainable.

Nothing in this world can match them. Everything here lies beneath our understanding and affections. Our hearts and minds are greater than all earthly things. But the blessings of the life to come are greater than our hearts and minds combined.

Shall we then be captivated by appearances—by things that the more we know them, the more we despise them?

**“And the fashion of this world passes away.”**

It is a fashion—merely a fashion—and then it passes away. Indeed, it truly does pass away, as experience shows. It passes even as a river flows: the water moves on and on, but never returns. So it is with the things of this world; they pass away, and they do not come again. They vanish, and we vanish with them. Just as passengers in a ship—whether they eat, or drink, or sleep, or walk—the ship moves forward, and they with it. So it is with this life: whether we eat, or drink, or sleep, we are continually moving toward death. Every day takes some portion of our life from us. With each day we live, we live one day less. It is gone, and never returns—like water once poured out. Whether we are walking or engaged in any activity, time passes. Even as you hear, and as I speak, time passes, never to return. So then, “the fashion of this world passes away.” All things here are in motion.

We call some things “moveables,” but in truth, even those we call “immoveables” are moving. All things pass. Even the heavens and the earth shall pass away, and a new heaven and new earth shall come (Revelation 21:1). Kingdoms pass away, kings pass away, nations and empires pass away. What has become of Rome? What of Jerusalem? What of Babylon and all those splendid cities? All have passed away—they are gone. This, experience affirms as clearly as theology.

**Reason 1.** The underlying cause of this is not only the nature of created things. All things that exist were made from nothing, and are therefore subject to return to nothing. That is the fundamental reason for their mutability and capacity to pass away. Yet this alone does not determine that they must pass. God, if He pleased, could have suspended the mutability of created things—as He has done with the angels in heaven, who are mutable by nature, but whom God has preserved in their integrity forever. So it is not enough to say that because all things are made from nothing, they must necessarily perish. It shows they are capable of perishing, but does not make it certain.

**Reason 2.** But here is a more pressing reason: since the fall of man, there lies a curse upon all creation. A sentence of mutability and change has been pronounced upon everything. All things that have a beginning must have an end. This present world is a stage of continual change. There is a sentence of vanity upon the creature: “The creature was made subject to vanity—not willingly, but by reason of Him who subjected it” (Romans 8:20). Man committed treason, and the creatures, being his servants, suffer along with him. They mourn, as it were, in black. All created things are subject to vanity and change. The world groans beneath this burden. And we must blame ourselves—we are the traitors who brought this ruin upon creation.

This is the true reason why all things pass away—and why we too are under the sentence of death. We pass away, and the things we use pass away with us. This is the root: the sentence of change and vanity which God has imposed.

**Use 2.** If this is so, beloved, let us not esteem too highly the things that must pass away. Let us not cling to them, but rather learn to

follow the earlier exhortations. “The fashion of this world passes away.” Shall we grieve excessively for the loss of what we cannot retain? If a glass cup breaks, do we rage? We say, “It is fragile, and nothing in this life endures.” If a friend dies, shall we become angry or despair? “The fashion of this world passes away.” God has decreed it so. Shall I be disturbed by that which God has determined—that one generation shall come and another go, as water flows in a stream? Shall I oppose God’s sentence? God has made all things frail; this is the common condition of all since the fall.

**Use 3.** This truth ought also to yield comfort and contentment in every condition. Whether we have place, riches, or honor—we must leave them, and we do not know how soon. This thought will breed a disposition of contentment. It is enough to consider that we must soon leave all. Whether we have much or little, all must be left. This is sufficient to temper desire. Let worldly things be for worldly men. Let vain things be for vain minds. Shall I build a lasting hope upon that which is vain? No—let it never be.

**Use 4.** As this teaches us contentment, so also it should loosen us from worldly hopes, and from making false promises to ourselves about things for which we have no assurance. Who promised you that you would enjoy your wife for many years? Or your children? Or your possessions? Do you have any such promise from God? Do not the very natures of these things argue against such expectations? Are they not constantly changing? Have we not the evidence of time and Scripture to tell us that “all is vanity”? Why then do we promise ourselves what the Word of God does not promise, and what experience does not confirm?

Shall we expect a condition in life that is exempt from the universal law of decay? The reality of change and instability should teach us

moderation. It should restrain us from building false hopes. It should teach us wisdom, so that we do not presume upon anything in this world.

**Use 5.** This truth should stir us to seek those things that are stable and certain amid the uncertainties of life. Let us fix our eyes upon something that will abide when all else is lost. Will all worldly things forsake me? Must I forsake them? Then how stands my soul for the life to come? Have I made provision for eternity?

Shall I not then lay hold of the comforts, graces, and heavenly inheritance that will endure when I am gone? What greater folly could there be than to neglect what is eternal for the sake of what is passing? Let us labor for a sanctified use of this transitory world, that we may be prepared for that which is unchanging.

The favor of God in Christ is everlasting. The graces of the Holy Spirit are everlasting. The inheritance of the children of God is everlasting. Why then should we pursue that which perishes, and neglect that which remains forever?

The Christian possesses what is real. He has a Husband who abides forever, joy that is everlasting, a possession that cannot be taken away. A new world is coming. All these present things are but shadows. The Christian has the substance—he holds what never “passes away.”

Therefore, since everything else shall be dissolved except what belongs to the Christian as a Christian, let every believer make the most of his heavenly calling. Let him value himself by his union with Christ. Let him value others according to the grace they possess, not according to riches, poverty, rank, or status.

“The fashion of this world passes away.” Let us judge men by what they have of eternity within them. What grace is in them? What of the Spirit? What of the image of God? Are they born again? Are they truly noble as new creatures in Christ?

Let that be our standard of value. Let us labor to see this heavenly image stamped upon our children and our friends. Let us strive to enjoy our loved ones in such a way that our fellowship may continue in heaven. Let our friendships be formed and nurtured in Christ, so they may last eternally.

All earthly friendships, bonds, possessions—everything that men foolishly dote upon—shall pass away. “The fashion of this world passes away.”

It is a strange and grievous thing, beloved, that a man—capable of noble and excellent thoughts—should expend the very marrow of his soul and the strength of his spirit on these fleeting things; that he should weary his soul, wound his conscience, and wear out his life for what he knows not how long he shall enjoy, while neglecting those things which endure forever. For any man, this is folly; but for *brethren*, as the apostle calls them—*brethren* who have an inheritance that is incorruptible and eternal—for them to be so easily cast down by every trouble, by every loss; for those who are the children of God and heirs of heaven to be so greatly moved by worldly joys or sorrows—what a shame this is! That Christians should be so overwhelmed with delight or distressed with grief over these things comes from several causes:

[1.] First, they do not consider these things as already passing. They do not look upon the world with the eye of faith, seeing that these things are fading. Instead, they observe them as if they were fixed, seeing no immediate change. But they ought to consider: what

sentence has God already pronounced upon them? They are as good as gone. They will vanish soon. View them, therefore, as already passed. We are dying; our friends are dying; and the world is passing away. Faith affirms this. But because we do not reflect upon this truth, we are swept along with these vanishing things. We look upon them in the moment, and observe no change. A man who looks at a shadow while it moves may not perceive it, but if he returns hours later, he sees that it is gone. So must we learn to look upon the things of this life as already past. Though they are not yet visibly removed, let faith perceive their end, and this will cause us to consider them rightly—as passing away.

**[2.]** Again, we are deceived by the passing nature of earthly things because we fail to compare them with eternity. We think it a great matter to enjoy something for twenty or forty years. But what is this brief span compared with eternity? Measure this short time—of health, strength, honor, position, or companionship—against that everlasting duration to come. What madness it is to forfeit eternity for a temporary pleasure! Compare these things with “world without end” (Ephesians 3:21), and it will keep us from being deceived by what is fleeting. Our great error lies in failing to weigh temporal things against the things which last forever.

**[3.]** And the third cause is this: we are forgetful. We do not keep in mind our better condition. We fail to make use of the knowledge that we possess.

When a Christian is overtaken by emotion—whether overwhelmed by joy, by fear, or by grief—what is his state at that moment? What thoughts has he of his eternal inheritance? What thoughts of the fading nature of all worldly things? He is forgetful and heedless.

Therefore, we must diligently labor to keep our souls in a heavenly frame of mind.

And to draw toward a conclusion: let us learn to esteem ourselves rightly. If we are Christians, as we profess to be, then let us value ourselves accordingly. It is a poverty of spirit for a Christian to be overjoyed or overly grieved by anything inferior to himself. And are not all things in this world beneath us, if we are truly in Christ?

If we are not Christians, then even toads and serpents are better than we—better than blasphemers and defilers, better than those who oppose God's ordinances. Such men are close to the devil himself. The very earth they walk upon is better than they. But if a man has the grace of God in him, all the world is beneath him in value.

What weakness and shallowness of soul, then, is it to be undone with sorrow or inflated with joy over anything beneath us—over anything fading—when we have a condition in Christ that is eternal and unfading? Let us therefore often reflect on our dignity in Christ. Let us consider the apostle's address—*brethren*—and remember that title alongside the fading condition of this present world.

If we would wean our hearts from these earthly things, let us often consider the eternal state of a Christian, that our thoughts may dwell there. And let us meditate also upon the frailty and perishability of all things below, that our affections may be withdrawn from them. For there are two things that mortify a person:

First, the detaching of his affections from what they are wrongly fixed upon; and second, the turning of his desires toward that which can fill and satisfy him entirely. If a man does this, he does what a mortified Christian ought to do—living in this world as one who is passing through it to a better.

## Conclusion

To conclude everything with this final word:

All things in this world are subordinate to a greater end. Let us therefore use them in such a way that we do not lose what is most important.

All the comforts a traveler experiences along his journey are subordinate to his destination. If his accommodations are poor—if his bed is hard—will he quarrel with his host? No. He thinks to himself, “I am on my way home; I shall have better when I arrive. These things are but to carry me onward.” So it is with all things below—they are but subordinate helps to something far greater. Shall we then make them the chief thing? Shall we treat them as ultimate, and subordinate everything else to them, as worldly men do—placing even religion beneath the interests of this life, and making all things out of order?

They do not “weep as though they wept not,” but rather hear as though they heard not. They receive the sacrament as though they received it not. They pray as though they prayed not. They speak of sacred things, and even perform them, as though they did them not. Yet in worldly things, they are swallowed up. This is Satan’s subtle strategy: to make religion subordinate—to permit it only so far as it does not interfere with worldly advantage.

Thus, if a man may be religious and still retain the favor of some great person; if he may be religious and still prosper in the world—then he will. But if religion itself, and standing firm for truth, hinders

his ambitions, he casts it aside. He would rather be hollow-hearted than stand for a good cause. Why? Because he has not learned to subordinate lesser things to the chief end. He lacks grace and heavenly wisdom to teach him how to rightly rank the things of life—to discern what is supreme, and what merely serves the supreme end. And therefore, he mistakes by-things for the main thing, and the main for that which is secondary.

Indeed, no one is truly wise except the genuine Christian. He is wise for his soul, and he is wise for eternity. But what does this mean for the sacrament? To put all in one word:

Are these earthly things nothing more than perishing food—vain and empty treasures that we must soon leave behind? Will not this truth drive us to seek what is lasting—the food that endures to everlasting life? Shall we not labor to be more deeply rooted in Christ, to nourish communion with Him, that everlasting bond?

What is the sacrament, if not the nourishment of our souls? It is our heavenly manna—the bread that endures forever and causes us to endure forever. Christ, if we have Him, abides forever—and He causes us to abide forever as well.

Therefore, considering that all other things are vanity, I beseech you: let the reflection upon this truth be as “bitter herbs” that sharpen your appetite for the true Passover Lamb—Christ Himself. Oh, are all things vain? Shall I not labor, then, to gain my portion in Him who never dies—in Him who is my eternal Husband and Lord? Shall I not strive to deepen my interest in Him who contains all good things?

What if the whole earth should fail? If I have communion with Christ, I have all. If I am united to Christ, all that He has becomes

mine. It is my spiritual inheritance. “All things are yours, if you are Christ’s” (1 Corinthians 3:21–23). If I have Christ, what can I lack?

Let this truth stir up in me a greater desire to come to the Lord’s Table. Christ is the food of the soul. All other food loses its sweetness within moments, and its strength within a few days. But this food—Christ crucified, Christ offering Himself to death, shedding His blood, giving His body for our salvation—this food sustains the soul unto eternal life. Through it we are strengthened in faith, confirmed in the assurance of God’s everlasting favor. The sweetness, the power, the comfort of this heavenly nourishment never fade.

Therefore, since all else is food that perishes, let us labor for that which feeds us to eternal life. Then we shall profit rightly from the truth that all things are subject to change and decay.

A heathen man could recite this text—*set the word "brethren" aside*—a heathen could say, *transit gloria mundi*, “the glory of this world passes away.” He sees it with his eyes and draws a reasonable conclusion: therefore, we ought not to be worldly-minded. By the light of nature alone, a man without religion may come to this truth, and so learn not to cling tightly to earthly things, knowing he must soon leave them.

Many pagans—Plutarch, Seneca, and others—spoke eloquently along these lines. They wrote many beautiful and wise sayings about the vanity of worldly things.

But the **positive part**, the vital truth—that when we perceive all earthly things to be vain and fading, we must then cling to something better—this belongs only to true religion. To know Christ, and the blessings we have in Christ; to know that in Him we possess all—this is unique to the Christian. He is the nourishment of our souls.

These truths belong to the gospel. Therefore, let us rise from the contemplation of vanity to the pursuit of substance. Let us press forward to lay hold of that which surpasses all else. If we have Christ, we have everything. And then we shall make a right use of all that has been spoken.

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## MONERGISM BOOKS

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ePub, .mobi & .pdf Editions May 2020 Requests for information should be addressed to: Monergism Books, PO Box 491, West Linn, OR 97068