



*A Serious Call to a  
Devout and Holy Life*

—  
*William Law*



*Preface by*  
*William Sloane Coffin, Jr.*



VINTAGE SPIRITUAL CLASSICS

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## A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life William Law

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

## A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life Details

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## **From Reader Review A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life for online ebook**

### **Daniel Beasley says**

As a 17 year old new Christ follower I was blessed to have a pastor who wasn't afraid to encourage me jumping in at the deep end. If memory serves, this was the third book he loaned to me and it helped set a fearless course out into learning from 2000 years of Christian wrestling with God.

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### **Fergus says**

Many people call our age irreligious and atheistic. I disagree.

We live in the dawn of a NEW world, a NEW way of life!

Let me explain...

William Law wrote this book in a jaded age when folks were just GOING THROUGH THE MOTIONS of religious observance. A beginning of sharp religious decline.

The folks Law addresses didn't even SEE they were only falsely sanctimonious and basically hypocritical, because they were only ACTING as if they were believers.

But their lives were becoming empty.

But the good thing about William Law is that he cut through their layers of illusions, and told them their lives could be MUCH, MUCH deeper and satisfying.

But what about people's lives now?

Now, I look around me and see a whole new generation of avid seekers who have swept the old assumptions off the table and started afresh!

Isn't THAT what dear old William wanted to accomplish? Though he would never have gone so far as to throw the Baby out with the Bathwater! But, somehow, I don't think the new generation has done that..

This is a vibrant, hopeful generation that believes good things can be accomplished in a bad world.

But you know what? That hope is only the first step to finding a secure refuge from the evils of this world!

Along with its friends love and faith, it is just the FOUNDATION for the ONLY kind of permanent transcendence that is remotely possible in this sorry world.

One day the hopeful kids of this world will grow up. And later, they'll see their dreams and visions threatened and perhaps even tossed into the air by the relentless, stormy gales of old age.

What then?

Why, they'll need hope in Real Goodness BEYOND the storm!

And that's no joke. Old age sweeps aside ALL our illusions.

But it can never sweep aside the One who watches over us, and constantly calls out to us.

William Law is right!

REAL things are so rare, and we can't afford to fake them.

The important thing, as young kids now know so well, is NOT how you appear in public...

The important thing is how you appear in private... to God.

And THAT's why Law is still relevant!

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### **Andrea says**

William Law's *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* is the most profoundly challenging, insightful and logical book I have ever read pertaining to my daily life as a Christian. His arguments for the purpose of and motivation for devotion to God (in its many forms) have impacted me in a way that I never would have imagined. I found myself challenged by every chapter and contemplative throughout. Law's arguments touched me intellectually, logically, emotionally, and spiritually. This is not necessarily a book of strict doctrine but it reveals to the reader the core of his or her actions, good or bad. He writes that if any part of our lives is owed to God in devotion, ALL parts are, otherwise we mistake the nature of God (or religion).

While some may feel that this book sets unattainable standards, I believe that the heart of Law's arguments should truly drive Christians to examine how they are living their lives and what that lifestyle demonstrates about the state of their hearts and minds. The magnitude of Law's "call" perhaps only seeks to accurately grasp the magnitude of a life lived fully for Christ, in which case, it is indeed unattainable without the help of the Spirit. For all of the strength and breadth of Law's arguments, I think one would be hard pressed to deny the logic fortifying Law's conclusions or the spiritual motivation behind them.

On top of the raw challenge of what Law writes, I highly recommend reading this for the beauty in which Law communicates his "call." Written in the 1700s, this book has a unique, old-fashioned rhythm and variety of vocabulary that is unrivaled in anything I have read thus far. This work is not only a feast of content but of form as well. The artfulness of Law's writing, I feel, practically ushered in all of the hard-hitting challenges in such a way that I was constantly turning the page from both a compulsion to be encouraged spiritually and to be amazed by his literary style. I found his writing to be, at times, repetitive; but after gleaning such profound insight from a sentence or paragraph stated only slightly differently from the paragraph before, I resolved to read each section carefully for whatever nuanced morsel that I could take away. Just as I thought, after a couple pages of reading, that perhaps THIS chapter wouldn't hold as much impact as the ones before, I would be struck with a simple phrase, analogy, character story or piece of logic that made me laugh at the thought that Law's insight would run out before the pages of this book did.

I highly recommend the reading and re-reading of this book for any Christian would wants to take a serious look at their life and commit to the "serious call" that exists on that life as a follower of Christ.

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### **Glen Grunau says**

There is probably no one author that has had greater influence over my Christian journey than Dallas Willard. From Willard I learned that the Christian life could not be well lived out of willpower. An inner transformation was required to change my heart and my inner desires before my behaviour could be reliably altered. I always appreciated Willard's humility, as evident by his frequent claims that his ideas were not original but were found in the writings of numerous ancient historical figures, encouraging us to check it out for ourselves. It was Willard who introduced me to William Law and particularly to the book for which he is most well-known: *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. One of the chief delights for me in reading this book has been the frequent reminders of so many of Willard's ideas that had such a great influence on my mind and heart. Law frequently appeals to reason in stating his case for the many benefits and virtues of living a life devoted to God. Although he was not a philosopher like Willard, it is easy to see the appeal in Law's book for a brilliant philosopher like Willard.

It was necessary for me to periodically remind myself that this book was written in a different era. Law was born in 1686 and the first edition of this book was published in 1729. At times, Law's writing came across to me as rather harsh and severe, highlighting some of what I have found aversive in the legalistic, often shame-based Evangelicalism in which I was raised. One of the gifts to me of a contemplative life has been the extolling of willingness over wilfulness and the invitation to rest in the initiative of God for a life of devotion rather propelling myself forward on my own initiative. I sensed from Law a bit of this forceful, determined approach to living a devout life that rang of legalism at times. Law seemed prone to dualistic, black-and-white thinking – so inconsistent with contemplative spirituality. Yet there was also a strong sense of mysticism in Law's writings. Apparently, he was significantly impacted by the mystics, with a Kempis and Ruysbroek listed among his favourites (Soulstream's Jeff Imbach emphasized Ruysbroek's ideas when he wrote *The River Within* and *The Recovery of Love*). I was happy to overlook some of Law's severity in light of his frequent consistencies with a contemplative, mystical Christian life. There were times when I also appreciated Law's intensity. In pointing to the straight and narrow path of a devout life, he spoke frequently of the importance of developing and adhering to a "rule of life" that focused on prayer as the primary means of inner transformation. In this respect, his teaching parallels the important contribution of Benedictine spirituality to the contemplative life.

I was convicted to reassess some of my common excuses for neglecting the poor and imprisoned in our society on the basis of their lack of merit, i.e. they deserve their plight because of their irresponsible wastefulness or horrific crimes. Here I was revealed as the severe legalist and Law as the essence of love and compassion when he writes: "You will perhaps say that by this means (charity) I encourage people to be beggars. But the same thoughtless objection may be made against all kinds of charities, for they may encourage people to depend upon them. The same may be said against forgiving our enemies, for it may encourage people to do us hurt. The same may be said even against the goodness of God, that by pouring His blessings on the evil and on the good, and the same may be said against clothing the naked, or giving medicines to the sick; for that may encourage people to neglect themselves, and be careless of their health. But when the love of God dwelleth in you, when it has enlarged your heart, and filled you with bowels of mercy and compassion, you will make no more such objections as these . . . it may be . . . that I may often give to those that do not deserve it, or that will make an ill use of my alms. But what then? Is not this the very method of Divine goodness? Does not God make "His sun to rise on the evil and on the good"? As severely as Law scolds those Christians who are unable to rise at an early hour to pray, I had to laugh at his obvious intolerance for such slothfulness (maybe I am laughing at myself at the same time): "For if he is

to be blamed as a slothful drone, that rather chooses the lazy indulgence of sleep . . . how much more is he to be reproached, that would rather lie folded up in a bed, than by raising up his heart to God in acts of praise and adoration! . . . Sleep is such a dull, stupid state of existence, that even amongst mere animals, we despise them most which are most drowsy (actually, I have developed a great admiration and respect for my “slothful” cat who can rest away the hours of the day in such peace and tranquility!)”.

I was particularly impacted by his pervasive teaching on the dangers of pride (he makes 100 uses of the word pride in his book) and the virtues of humility. In the conservative evangelicals church today, so much emphasis is placed on the sins of the body, to the complete neglect of the more important sins of the heart (chief among them pride) that Jesus so frequently emphasized in his teaching (which makes me wonder if we are all following the same Jesus). Law’s interpretation of I John 2:15 “All that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” is particularly striking. He suggests that the “world” that we are to fear in this regard is not the “heathen world” that we normally think of when we read this verse, but the “Christian world” that has such an alarming tolerance for pride in its midst! He concludes that “there is nothing, therefore, that a good Christian ought to be more suspicious of, or more constantly guard against, than the authority of the Christian world”.

Law goes on to blame our education system for instilling such pride and vainglory in our citizens, with its high regard for competitive achievement in which “we stir them (our students) up to action from principles of strife and ambition, from glory, envy, and a desire of distinction, that they may excel others, and shine in the eyes of the world . . . how dry and poor must the doctrine of humility sound to a youth, that has been spurred up to all his industry by ambition, envy, emulation, and a desire of glory and distinction!”

Law asserts with confidence that pride is such a pervasive motive in every one of us that we can virtually be certain that when it comes time to repent of our sins before God, we can be almost certain that pride is chief among our sins in need of repentance: “For there is no one vice that is more deeply rooted in our nature, or that receives such constant nourishment from almost everything that we think or do: there being hardly anything in the world that we want or use, or any action or duty of life, but pride finds some means or other to take hold of it. So that at what time soever we begin to offer ourselves to God, we can hardly be surer of anything, than that we have a great deal of pride to repent of”.

I have been reminded through the reading of this important book that I do not necessarily have to agree with everything that an author says in order to benefit greatly from being exposed to him whatever truth may be offered. Law offers so much! I can appreciate why this particular book was recently included in the “Hall of Fame” 25 books that every Christian should read, noting that both Dallas Willard and Richard Rohr, my two favourite authors, were on the committee that selected these books.

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### **Tyler Eason says**

This is a helpful and convicting book. While he writes from a unique and often aberrant theological perspective (Christian perfectionism), Law gives practical steps to take on the path of holiness that are relevant for believers in every walk of life.

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### **Barry says**

William Law's "A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life" (1728), deeply influenced the chief actors in the great Evangelical revival in England, George Whitefield and John and Charles Wesley. I first read it while a ministry student in college and have re-read it several times since. It is on my personal list of top 10 life-changing books. A sample of Law is the following on prayer:

"Prayer is the nearest approach to God and the highest enjoyment of him that we are capable of in this life. It is as much your duty to rise to pray as to pray when you are risen. And if you are late at your prayers you offer to God the prayers of an idle, slothful worshiper who rises to prayers as idle servants rise to their labor. What conquest has he got over himself? What right hand has he cut off, what trials is he prepared for, what sacrifice is he ready to offer to God, who cannot be so cruel to himself as to rise to prayer at such a time as the drudging part of the world are content to rise to their labor?"

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### **Pam Nelson says**

One of my favorite books of all time. I reread portions frequently!

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### **Mark Thomas says**

Excellent book that is contemporary 200+ years after it was written...

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### **Aaron Downs says**

Summary:

William Law's *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* urges believers to consider pursuing piously as a comprehensive life task. His influential work specifically explains and describes devotion, especially in regards to times of prayer. He defines a devout man as one "who lives no longer to his own will, or the way and spirit of the world, but to the sole will of God, who considers God in everything, who serves God in everything, who makes all the parts of his common life parts of piety, by doing everything in the Name of God, and under such rules as are conformable to His glory" (7). This definition, he argues, "signifies a life given, or devoted, to God" (7).

Throughout the book, Law argues that devoted and holy living is all encompassing and does not apply only to regularly scheduled worship times, nor does it apply only to members of the clergy. Law offers a holistic approach to life, "As a good Christian should consider every place as holy, because God is there, so he should look upon every part of his life as a matter of holiness, because it is offered unto God" (34). He makes clear argumentation that all Christians ought to pursue holiness and devout living. This distinction eliminates a separating the "sacred" and the "secular." In combining the secular elements of life and the sacred elements of life into an all-sacred category before God, he urges Christians to consider why piety is so rare among believers.

Some Christians may be tempted to give push back to Law on this argument, perhaps saying that it is impractical for a non-clergy member to pursue a life as devout and holy as a clergy member, or, that those who are not ordained ministers have more license for pursuing things of this world than those who are ordained ministers. Law responds to such thinking by saying that there is no other kind of devotion that God desires from man than "living devoted to God in the common business of our lives" (41).

He continually compares the contemporary believers of his day to the primitive Christians of the early

church; in his comparison he concludes that the difference in lifestyles finds its root in a difference of intentionality.

Intentionality, Law argues, is what is lacking. He says that if an individual lacks piety, the person lack piety “neither through ignorance nor inability, but purely because you never thoroughly intended it” (17). He goes on to explain that unless Christians intend daily living as a duty of devotion to God, their daily living will be devoid of devotion to God. He does not say this as though the power for holy living is found in effort alone, because he concedes that people will fall short of the perfection of the Gospel; however, he points out that the average Christian does not come as near to the perfection of the Gospel as he or she could had the person only had sincere intention and careful diligence in daily living.

Daily living, without intentional devotion to God, results in living that cannot make true progress in religion. Law argues that most Christians aren’t living debauched lives that are keeping them from holiness and devotion, but that most Christians simply don’t include holiness and devotion into their lives. “More people are kept from a true sense and taste of religion,” Law writes, “by a regular kind of sensuality and indulgence, than by gross drunkenness” (67). He is writing in this book not to those who take interest in pursuing the “gross and notorious sins” (67), but those who have failed to “put the most common and allowed actions of life under the rules of discretion and piety” (67). Christians don’t miss devotion and holiness because they are drunk or living as a prostitute, but because they do not intentionally pursue the virtues of the Christian life.

Christians often devote much time and energy pursuing hobbies, or studying the details of their vocation, but never put the same amount of effort into studying the details of the Christian faith. Law argues that intentionality requires Christians to study the Christian faith with even more diligence than any studies in occupations or hobbies. Instead, Christians are to give themselves to their vocations only inasmuch as is necessary to glorify God in their work; the Christian’s passions should be devoted to pursuing holiness in Christ.

After Law describes the intensity with which Christians ought to devote themselves to holy and devout living, he prescribes the primary method for that living: daily prayer—prayer at formal times during the day and continuous prayer throughout the day. He explains that Christians must pray in all circumstances, primarily because the act of prayer cultivates affections toward God. This high duty requires that prayer “ought to have a great share in the forming and composing” (153) of private devotions. Prayer, however, takes time. And many Christians do not think that prayer is worth the time that it takes—at least the unhurried, contemplative, intentional prayers that Law prescribes.

Although prayer is time consuming, Law does not give any indication that people who are unusually busy are exempt from lengthy times of prayer. He does indicate that those who are free from the obligations to work for a living should devote themselves to prayer all the more. He explains, “Now though people of leisure seem called more particularly to this study of devotion, yet persons of much business or labour must not think themselves excused from this, or some better method of improving their devotion” (154). Prayer and meditation are those methods of improving devotion that all Christians are responsible to faithfully and thoughtfully pursue.

Law follows these methods of piety by explaining that without humility, they are useless. He teaches that the most difficult part of being humble is that the world teaches the exact opposite of humility, and because people are afraid of what others think about them, humility is hindered by fear. He persuades Christians to stop being afraid what unbelievers will think if they demonstrate true, Christ-like humility. “Will you let the fear of a false world, that has no love for you, keep you from the fear of that God, who has only created you

that He may love you and bless you to all eternity?" (189) Christians can rejoice in God's love and blessing when they cast off fear of man in favor of humble devotion to God.

Finally, Law concludes that devoted, holy living takes into consideration other people. He spends the majority of the book focusing on personal love toward God, but he argues that love toward God alone does not fulfill God's requirements, "that no love is holy or religious, till it becomes universal" (241).

This book calls Christians to radically holy living, and it has made this call for centuries. I was surprised to read that this book affected John Newton. I was also surprised to read elsewhere that George Whitfield wrote in his journal about thanking God based on Law's criteria. There were points in my reading that I felt that Law was developing a plan for holy living that is impossible to pursue, and without the energies of Christ, it is impossible to pursue. However, his explanations and illustrations helped me greatly. I especially appreciated the fictional characters he utilized to serve as examples throughout the book.

William Law taught me, "Devotion is nothing else but right apprehensions and right affections towards God" (158). His teaching makes me want to perceive God more biblically and respond to the perception more deeply.

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### **Nemo says**

William Law in this work reminds me of Leo Tolstoy in his late writings. Both of them write with a limpid style, both make moral arguments that are undeniably logical and rational, both make severe and incisive criticisms of Christendom, and not surprisingly, both were excommunicated.

If a Christian reader tries to see things through Law's eyes, he would find himself in a dream world, where people, himself included, live in a way that defies logic and reason, either sleepwalking through the day never knowing where they were going, or habitually engaging in various kinds of activities that are beneficial to none but harmful to all.

The reader is then perhaps confronted with an uncomfortable choice: Either Law is a crackbrained writer, or something is seriously wrong with my way of life. If that is the case, the condescending and sarcastic, though urbanely controlled, tone in the introduction written by the Reverend Charles Bigg, DD is quite understandable.

(To judge for yourself, read an excerpt of "Serious Call" at Nemo's Library. It is representative of Law's writing and ideas.)

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### **Jocelyn says**

A diatribe against nominal Christians. Even though I sympathize with much of what Law says, I find his way of saying it a bit tiresome. I was about to quit reading it and return it to the library but then I came across this line: "[The impious Christian] will sometimes read a book of piety, if it is a short one, if it is much commended for style and language, and she can tell where to borrow it." After that, I had to soldier on for 295 more pages.

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### **Gregory says**

A must read classic. The author has a passion for Christ that is most uncommon for this modern age. With line upon line and precept upon precept, he lays down a solid, biblical foundation for understanding the fundamentals of the Christian faith. Once you take the time to carefully read this book, you will see that the work of sanctification in the believer belongs alone to the person of the Holy Spirit.

More emphasis is placed on the power of the finished work of Christ than on the struggling Christian's own will power to persevere. There is a call to come to God for holiness, and complete conformity to Christ. Yet the author never loses site of the yielded life and complete cooperation that must be given daily, even hourly, so that God may make the believer a true partaker of the divine nature of Christ. Receiving the Holy Spirit and coming under his complete control is to William Law, the true interpretation of authentic & genuine Christianity.

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### **Kim says**

Simple but so profound!! It definitely stepped on my toes numerous times because it put so many things into true perspective. Our purpose is to live for the glory of God and that requires a constant spirit of devotion. It requires charity to those that we don't think deserve it (because we don't deserve the charity that God shows us). It requires not neglecting our Christian calling, a calling that all receive, regardless of occupation. Clergy are not to be considered more pious or righteous than we are as God holds us all to the same expectations of devotion. He speaks of humility, Divine love, and respect for God's creation and children (we are contrary to Christ if we despise anything that He loves).

There were just so many great statements in this that I was glad I had the Kindle version where I could highlight points that I want to easily refer back to. As an example, "If man will boast of anything as his own, he must boast of his misery and sin; for there is nothing else but this that is his own property." Christians have no problem stating that everything good that we have comes from God, but seldom do we think that all we truly have that is not from God is our own misery. It was statements like this that really made me think of many things in a new light.

At times, the book was difficult to get through. It was written in the 18th century so occasionally I got bogged down in his wording of things, and sometimes Law simply repeats the same thought in multiple chapters. However, he creates "characters" to serve as examples, and I liked how he did that. Those portions were much easier to read and understand his point. For anyone that desires to grow into a deeper understanding of his/her relationship with God, I highly recommend attempting to tackle this one.

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### **Michelle says**

Humbling and practical. Reminded me what frivolous and vain thoughts sometimes consume me!

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## **Garland Vance says**

The first several chapters of this book were excellent--worth 6 stars! Law's challenges to Christians centuries ago reads as if he understands current believers. He says that most believers think that the only change in their lives are that they need to introduce devotional practices of prayer & Bible study. Law says that the problem is that we do not desire to please God in all decisions as the best & happiest thing in the world. The next few chapters unpack this & these chapters are outstanding.

About 1/3 of the way thru the book, I found Law going on beyond what was necessary. Most of the chapters are too long, and I found myself getting bored with it.

In spite of my dislike of the last 2/3 of the book, the first few chapters were WELL worth the cost of the book.

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