

Our Sins at the Seminary

By [J. A. James](#)

(Two letters from John Angell James to his brother Thomas James—
on beginning his studies for the Christian ministry)

December 19, 1811.

To my brother Thomas,

Were my ability equal to my wishes, with what hallowed delight would I expatiate on the scenery of that prospect, which, to the eye of your imagination, is seen stretching over the interminable compass of futurity. How readily would I trace, and how plainly, the path from which your feet must never deviate. I would mark the spots where you may naturally expect to meet with *danger*—where with *difficulty*—where with *delight*. I would tell you when to open your heart to the most delicious pleasures—when to close it against the most insidious poison. I would caution and encourage, stimulate and restrain, as circumstances required. But because I cannot do what I would, shall I not do what I can, and thus obtain Mary's memorial? I will.

It was my intention, my dear brother, to have written one long letter, containing merely such heads of advice as I thought adapted to your present situation, but finding upon reflection that I would wish to say more than could be well contained in a single epistle, I determined to change my plan, and tax your patience by a series of letters addressed to you at different times, each containing the discussion of some particular topic. The plan which at present I propose is:

1. To state with what particular end and design you should enter on academic pursuits, and the great importance of keeping that precise end continually in view.
2. To consider the great import of preserving in the midst of your studies, the power and life of personal piety.
3. To mention what branches of study should most closely engage your attention during your residence at Hoxton.
4. The means of prosecuting those studies with advantage to yourself, and in subordination to the great end of all your academic pursuits.

The subject of the present letter is to state the chief end and design with which

you should enter on your preparatory studies, and the great importance of ever keeping that end in view.

It is the part of folly to act before the end is chosen or the means of exertion properly arranged.

Right reason suggests to every one entering on a new career this natural inquiry—For what precise object are you about to start? It is to a neglect of this question that we are to attribute that profligate misuse of time and talent which in this world of activity, we are so frequently grieved to witness.

How many active minds, capable of great service to the world, do we see driven at random over the stage of existence, answering no other end but to teach mankind how much exertion may be wasted, for lack of a precise and proper end to guide its progress. Their whole life resembles the evening flight of the bat—a useless flutter amidst darkness and vanity. What wisdom, to say nothing of religion, dictates to you, my dear brother, at the present moment is—to fix with yourself, after serious deliberation, the precise design of your academic career, to divide between many claimants, which has the rightful authority to your supreme reverence and regard. By your preparatory studies you propose to become possessed of learning—you mean to be a minister with some education—you wish to preach with acceptance—you propose to yourself great pleasure in the attainment of knowledge. These are all ends which you may lawfully set before your mind in your present prospect; but woe be to your ill-judging mind, if any of these is your chief end. If this is the case, you will carry a curse with you to the study, and from there to the pulpit, from thence to the grave, from thence to the bar of Christ, and from thence, by a last remove, to the bottomless pit!

I am, however, persuaded better things of you, though I thus speak. Your religion has, before now, fixed this on your heart as the chief design of preparatory studies—"that you might be qualified in the use of appointed means, more fully to glorify God in the salvation of immortal souls." It is not merely to be prepared to preach, nor merely to preach well, nor to preach acceptably—but to preach successfully. And what is successful preaching, short of the conversion of immortal souls?

But what I wish to impress upon your mind is the infinite importance of keeping this great object in view through all, even the most minute of your academic pursuits. Everything is to be viewed by you in connection with this end; and only as it promotes this is anything absolutely momentous. This must remain in the midst of all your feelings and opinions, all your pursuits and exertions—the common centre to which everything by an undeviating law of attraction gravitates.

If you pore over the difficulties of language, if you read the systems of moral

philosophy, if you study the accuracies of logic, if you examine the flowers of rhetoric, or demonstrate the problems of mathematics—it must not be ultimately for the purpose of becoming a classic, a philosopher, a logician, an orator, or a mathematician; but that by these means you may, in one way or other, be prepared to demonstrate, explain, and enforce to the conviction of sinners, the truths on the belief of which, their salvation depends. All are to be viewed as giving you in the order of *means*, a readier access to their minds, a greater power over their hearts.

A man who is systematically trained to the terrible art of war is taught some of the modern languages, he is instructed in mathematics, mechanics, geography, history, fortification; not, however, merely for the sake of being a learned soldier—no, but a successful general in the defense of his country and the destruction of its enemies. He is taught to study, as it were, at the foot of a bastion, in the middle of a trench, pointing a cannon, storming a breach, or heading an army—and drives on his scholastic pursuits amidst imaginary shouts of war, the glories of conquest, or the shame of defeat. Fields covered with the slain, cities reduced to ruin, and prisons crowded with captives, are the objects on which he is taught that all his learning must terminate. Similar must be the manner in which your preparation for the work of the ministry is carried forward.

You will not mistake me, and suppose that I am upholding the barbarous idea which many seem to entertain—that *learning* for a minister of the gospel, is unnecessary. Such a sentiment can only spring from ignorance and envy. No, my brother, I attach the greatest importance to general knowledge, considered as a means subordinate to the great end which I have already specified. Learning is likely to procure respect for its possessor, is calculated not only to screen him from neglect or contempt, but to engage the attention of many who would otherwise treat him with indignant scorn. It has, in innumerable instances, abated the violence of prejudice, and conciliated esteem—where excellence the most sterling, unattended by the *polish of education*, would have been totally destitute of attraction.

How often have *men of taste and intellect* been led to hear from the lips of some able preacher the glorious gospel of the blessed God—not from any desire of spiritual edification—but merely to be pleased with the talents of the speaker; and who, when they intended only to admire the abilities of the servant, have returned adoring the grace of his Lord! In this respect, learning is useful to a minister, as it extends the probability of his success. For this end it ought to be pursued; and as this is the *best motive* to stimulate your mind in its academic engagements, so it is unquestionably the strongest. Who is likely to search for knowledge with the greatest ardor—the man that seeks it merely as its own reward—or he that desires it as a probable means of enlarging his qualifications as a messenger of peace?

The former has little to urge him but the prospect of personal gratification; the

latter, in addition to this, has the hope of making his knowledge subservient to the best interests of his fellow-creatures. One is urged forward by selfishness somewhat refined; the other, by a benevolence which knows no limit to the extent of its desires, short of the everlasting happiness of its objects. Such a view as this of the great design of academic pursuits, would not only excite the mind to exertion, but help it to bear with patience—the rigor of intellectual toil. By having determined to arrive at the pulpit only in the regular way of preparatory study—you have undertaken what will often be found a weariness to the flesh.

Your way as a student must necessarily lead you through much which at first will present on every hand, little but alpine hills of difficulty, and desert plains of barren sterility. If you mean to apply closely to study, which I most fervently hope is your determination, there are hastening on to meet you hours and weeks and months of dry and tedious labor. And can your imagination frame one motive so encouraging, so strengthening to the mind—as the recollection that all this toil is to enable you to discharge with ability and success, the arduous and important duties of the ministerial office?

If you keep in view as you ought, and as I pray God you may, the proper design of your academic pursuits—if your soul glows with burning zeal for the glory of God, and is penetrated with tender pity for the souls of mankind—you will with the greatest cheerfulness make any sacrifice, however costly, endure any fatigue, however oppressive. I do most earnestly entreat you, my dear brother, to consider well this great design of your residence at Hoxton. There the model of your future character will be framed, the path for your future steps will be indicated. In short, there will your whole future life in all its important results, both to yourself and others, be epitomized.

I can assure you from evidence, that without great watchfulness you will be often in danger of forgetting the precise end for which you study. If you make proficiency in learning—vanity will suggest how pleasing it is to be esteemed as a literary genius. If you should feel a deficiency compared with some of your fellow-students, envy will sometimes spur you on to diligence, with the hope of equaling or excelling these.

If you are superior to many of the others—pride will induce a kind of idolatry of your own talents. Hearing of the applause with which the attainments of some popular favorites are received, you will feel a temptation to give such a turn to your studies as shall be likely to prepare you for a share of public admiration. These and a variety of other feelings will frequently send up a *mist* that will hide from distinct observation the great object which revelation has already erected for your waymark, and which I have endeavored to point out to your vigilant attention.

Again, before I close this letter, I remind you that the chief design of your academic pursuits is to prepare you more extensively to glorify God in the

salvation of sinners. Let this thought be the constant inmate of your soul. Let it rise up with you in the morning and lie down with you at night. Wherever you go, whatever you do, let it attend and direct you.

Reckon the duties of that day but half performed, on which you have never seriously reflected on this vast subject; and impress it upon your spirit, by making it the subject in part of almost every prayer that you present to God. As a means of fastening it more securely on your own heart, talk of it to others. Let it be the matter of conversation with those to whom it is a subject of equal interest and obligation. And be assured, my dear brother, that it will be my fervent and never-ceasing prayer to the God of all grace, that He would grant you that assistance which is necessary to keep this great object ever before your eye, surrounded with all its tremendous importance, and ever impressed upon your conscience with all its beneficial influence.

Believe me, my dear brother, yours affectionately,

J. A. James.

February 27, 1812.

My dear brother,

Few days have passed during the last month from which I have not parted with regret that they afforded me no opportunity of renewing the subject of my last letter. If it be a fact worth knowing, I can assure you, that my prayers are not so infrequent as my epistles. Having prescribed a path for my thoughts by what I said in my last letter, it will become me now to walk in my own road. What I intend at present is, not to prove the self-evident truth—that to teach religion we must first know it ourselves—but to insist on the infinite importance of endeavoring to maintain the vigor and life of godliness, in the midst of academic pursuits.

Whatever be the cause of such a circumstance, it is a fact which innumerable instances will verify—that many candidates for the ministerial office lose in personal piety while at a seminary, more than they gain in mental improvement. What I have seen and heard and felt on this subject, induces on your behalf, my dear brother, a degree of trembling solicitude in my mind, which only the Searcher of hearts can estimate. What I design, therefore, in this letter is,

First, To state the vast importance of your vigilant endeavors to maintain a spiritual and holy frame of mind, during the pursuit of your preparatory studies. To see this in its true light, and feel it in its full force, consider,

1. That except you cultivate such a disposition while a student, you are not likely to excel in it as a minister.

I have no need to show you how necessary it is that a Christian teacher should be a spiritually-minded Christian. Much more than knowledge is surely requisite for one whose business it is to proclaim incessantly, "though we have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and have not love, we are nothing." Talents may make us shine—but piety alone can make us glow. Without the unction which spirituality of mind alone can impart, our most elaborate sermons will be like the cold beams of a wintry moon, falling upon the icy bosom of the frozen lake. If, then, such a frame of mind be of any significance to you in future, the importance of cultivating it now, exceeds all expression. Such as you are in the academy now—such you will be hereafter found within the circle of pastoral engagements. I speak now not only from the dictates of abstract reasoning—but also from observation and experience. In looking round upon those who were the companions of my studies, I observe that they are the most spiritual ministers—who were the most *devotional* students.

2. Without eminent spirituality of mind, your studies will be in great danger of acquiring a wrong bias.

This is the only channel through which your mind will or can voluntarily propel the stream of its own vigor, to the ocean of Jehovah's glory. Without this frame of heart—it is impossible either to understand the nature, perceive the design, or feel the importance of your present engagements. The object I endeavored to hold up to your view in my last letter, can be distinctly seen through no other medium than a spiritual mind. In the absence of this, you will sink into a mere self-seeking orator; or into a dull, uninteresting, philosophic lecturer; or, what is still worse, into a teacher of damnable heresies.

Perhaps it would be the first of these, for when the fervor of religion is gone from the soul, what other object can you propose to yourself in your preparatory studies, but as a qualification to enable you to become a successful candidate for popular applause? That zeal for the Divine glory, and compassion for immortal spirits—which should be the very soul of every minister's exertions—are the offspring of glowing piety, and must cease with the cause that produced them. The power of God and the spiritual welfare of man will be present to the eye, and objects of pursuit—only so long as they are present with the heart as subjects of experience. Lose from the mind the spirituality which it ought to possess, and which, I hope, yours does possess—and that moment your study is converted into the temple of a false deity. Self becomes the idol—vanity the priest—and all the attainments which your vigilance enables you to make, become so many sacrifices and acts of self-worship; while piety, like Jeremiah anticipating the desolation of the Jewish temple—stands weeping at a distance, exclaiming, "How is the gold changed—the fine gold become dim!"

Perhaps you would sink, without spirituality, into a cold, dull, uninteresting stiffness. Whatever attainments you might make, if during the process of acquiring them, devotion should evaporate—they will remain behind a mere useless sediment. Science and literature, to be useful to a minister of Jesus Christ, must be held in solution by eminent piety. Without this they will be very likely to lead us beyond dullness, and conduct us to the regions where the most pernicious errors dwell. This brings me to the third probable result of a decay of spiritual religion in a theological student, that is, an apostasy from scriptural truth. You will soon learn, my dear brother, if you have not already discovered, that during the revolution excited in the human mind by the influence of sin, its faculties were displaced; and the will and the affections, formerly the servants of the understanding, became to a very considerable extent its governors. Hence, many of the intellectual errors of mankind have resulted from the depraved state of their hearts. In ten thousand instances, a lukewarm state of the affections, has been the cause of the most pernicious errors of the judgment! The truth of God is given to us as the instrument of holiness, and when we become indifferent to the end, it is no matter of surprise that we become regardless about the means. Biblical truth is the food of spiritual religion, which, when the appetite is lost—is first disrelished, and then loathed. Were it possible for us to trace the history of their apostasy, we would certainly find that of those who have wandered into the darkest religious errors—by far the greater part commenced their dreadful career from a lukewarm heart!

3. Spirituality of mind would be likely to ensure the blessing of God upon your studies, by urging you to constant and earnest prayer.

Let it be remembered that intellectual as well as moral improvement, is dependent on Divine assistance. God is the creator, the preserver, and the benefactor of the human faculties. It is in Him they live, and move, and have their being. It is God alone who can expand the judgment, invigorate the imagination, strengthen the memory, sharpen the penetration. One very considerable cause that produced the vast superiority of mind in the early Nonconformist divines above their successors, was the vast proficiency they made in personal religion.

These ideas, and many others which your own judgment will readily suggest, will tend to unfold and enforce the importance of eminent piety, to a candidate for ministerial employment.

Secondly, I will now, my dear brother, point out those circumstances in your present situation, in which the vigor of personal piety is in danger of being relaxed.

It is certainly a melancholy reflection that there should be any circumstance likely to be injurious to piety, in that very situation where it sojourns for a while for the

purpose of being better qualified to teach its own nature and enforce its own practice. Yet so it is. Not, however, that there is anything in academic institutions naturally and essentially unfavorable to it; if there were, the prejudices which many have imbibed against them would be too well founded to be easily overthrown. Still there are circumstances which, through the imperfections of the best men, are likely, unless constantly watched, to issue in this baneful consequence. What these are I will now specify, that being apprised of the source from whence danger may be expected—you may be incited to incessant watchfulness.

1. The first source of danger I shall notice, is in the NATURE of your studies.

These will of course be multiform, and by examination it will be found that each, without great watchfulness, may become injurious to piety. Let it be remembered that in an academy, divinity is studied as a science—a hallowed one, it is true, but still a science. Its evidences are canvassed, its terms are categorized, its parts are analyzed, its doctrines are classed. What till now has been treated as a system of facts and maxims—will be treated as a theory of doctrines and sentiments. Instead of listening to the holy converse of Christian friends comparing their experience with the Scriptures of truth, and mutually helping each other forward through all the difficulties of the path to Zion—you will frequently think and speak and read of religion as merely an intellectual study.

The Bible, which you had never read but as a *Christian*, you will peruse as a *student*. You will pray—to learn to conduct public prayer with decorum and edification. You will compose sermons, and listen to the composition of others, that you may learn to preach. You will hear the most solemn, the most melting truths of the Word of God mentioned and conversed on, without any of that feeling or that reverence with which you had ever been accustomed to listen to them. You will hear sermons in the academy for the sake of exercising your analytical talents, until you find it difficult to lay aside the *academics* in the most solemn and serious engagements. Where, without some exceedingly strong counteracting force, all this tends—you have perhaps, my dear brother, felt before now, to your no small distress and humiliation. Where, without incessant vigilance, will such a state of things lead us—but to the most frigid, barren, deathlike regions of lukewarmness itself!

2. The CLOSE APPLICATION which it will be found necessary to pay to your studies, will frequently endanger the prospects of your personal piety.

Goaded by the reproofs of your tutors, or impelled by the rivalry of the students—you will carry on your pursuits with a closeness of attention that will sometimes render you deaf to the call of that hour that summons you to the closet of devotion and the mercy-seat of God. In this particular, my dear brother, your danger will be found peculiarly imminent; indeed, still greater by the suggestions

of a deceitful heart, that the neglect is excused by the cause of it.

3. The NOVELTY of a great part of your studies will also open a source of danger.

Your mind is traveling through a country almost new to you; objects before unseen will be perpetually starting up before you, not only soliciting your attention, but highly deserving of it; and as new situations are always a trial of piety—you will need all the care which it is possible your soul can exercise, to prevent your mind being so occupied with the novelties of your present situation, as to neglect those important concerns—which nothing should be so bright as to eclipse, or so great as to obscure.

4. The COMPANIONS of your studies will render great caution absolutely necessary.

Those who ought to be helpmates, will frequently become snares. Some of them, it may be feared, entered the academy with but little personal piety—and have been gradually losing what little they had, since they have been there. Others, with dispositions far more jocular and volatile than is consistent with much seriousness and spirituality, are apt, in unbending the mind after the rigors of a close application to study—to run into an excess of levity and unsanctified hilarity. Amidst such circumstances, it is easy to perceive that fervent piety is endangered. The student, I acknowledge, must have occasional relaxation from intellectual labor. His health, his spirits, require it; but then even his recreations ought to be those of a man of God—such as fit him for his future work, and not such as disqualify him. Incessant joking, laughter, sarcasm—which I lament to say form the substance of that conversation which is generally maintained within the walls of a seminary—totally unfit the mind of the students for spiritual fellowship with God or each other. I beseech you, my dear brother, be upon your guard! There is something bewitching in the character of a merry fellow, even though it is united with that of a candidate for the pulpit. We love too much to be amused, to be sufficiently alarmed at the danger arising to piety from a jocular and witty disposition.

Thirdly, I will now proceed to give you a few directions to guard you against the danger which your experience will testify I have not exaggerated.

1. Endeavor to acquire a deep conviction of the necessity of spiritual religion, as an important part of your present and future character.

Do, my dear brother, survey the subject on every side; consider it in every point of view; trace it in all its bearings, all its connections. Let no suggestion of Satan, no insinuation of your own depravity—lessen in your estimation the importance of

this ministerial qualification. Look at the ministers who most excel—and those who are the most deficient. Think of the glowing ministrations of that great man whose public and private services you found so profitable and delightful during your stay at Romsey. What unction attends all his labors; and oh, what success! I can assure you, there is much truth in Abraham Booth's remark—that it is from a pastor's defects in piety, that his principal deficiencies and his chief dangers arise. For there is no reason to fear, that if tolerably furnished with gifts—that he will be remarkably deficient or negligent in any known branch of pastoral obligation, while his heart is alive to the enjoyments and duties of piety.

2. Impress your mind with the danger arising to personal piety, from the causes I have already specified.

Of this object never for a moment lose sight; never think yourself beyond the necessity of caution and watchfulness. Let a holy trembling take possession of your soul. Consider that you have a *treasure to preserve among thieves*. Exercise an incessant jealousy over your own heart.

3. Consider the guilt of such a defect—yes, the guilt, the guilt!

For if it is sinful in a *Christian* to be lukewarm, how much criminality attaches to such a frame of soul when found in a student or a *pastor!* The deceitfulness of your own heart will frequently suggest, by way of apology, that it is impossible in such a situation to avoid it, that the rigor of your studies requires relaxation.

My dear brother, nothing can justify the decay of real religion in the soul of anyone, least of all in a student or minister! I do assure you, I can never look back without pain upon my academic years; for though I then endeavored to justify myself under a too considerable declension of piety, now I exclaim "O Lord, you make me to possess the sins of my youth." It is impossible for us to say how many of the trials of our future ministry, are retributive visitations for our sins at the seminary.

4. Be exceedingly strict and conscientious in observing the times, and maintaining the spirit, of personal devotion.

In whatever danger a Christian is placed, I have no great apprehension of his safety, when he continues constant in secret prayer. In having separate studies, you possess every advantage for the performance of this momentous duty. Let nothing ever induce you to give up the time, whatever it be that solicits it, which is allotted to this sacred exercise. Be exceedingly careful so to arrange your studies, as to have sufficient time for your visits to the throne of grace. Rather than part with the opportunity for this, and thus incur the frown of God—carry an imperfect lesson to your tutor, though it may bring upon you his censure and the laughter of your fellow-students. And let your prayers ever embrace the subject which I now am endeavoring to impress upon your heart. Your petitions will bind

you to fresh watchfulness—and your watchfulness will impel you to fresh prayer.

5. It will greatly assist you to set apart occasional extraordinary seasons of devotion—

say one afternoon every month. There is no one circumstance which I find so adapted to check the progress of lukewarmness, and to promote an opposite frame—as this very edifying practice. During the common routine of stated duties, the soul is apt to be lulled into a lethargy from which nothing is so likely to rouse it as a season of extraordinary devotion. On such occasions call your spirit to a reckoning, examine its accounts, reprove it for negligence, and stimulate it to greater diligence. Not one direction which I have yet given deserves so well your serious regard as this. I speak from experience, and do therefore urge it upon you with the utmost importunity.

6. Occasionally select the most holy of your fellow-students for a time of spiritual conversation and prayer.

Never mind what their talents are—just so long as they have much piety. Choose such a one for a bosom friend. Converse and pray over your difficulties and dangers.

I must now, my dear brother, leave to your devout attention these few hints. If you needed an admonition to attend to the subject of this letter, I could upon my bended knees beseech you at your very feet—as you valued your own comfort and usefulness, the salvation of sinners, the glory and favor of God—to take the most earnest heed to the piety of your own heart. Happy indeed will your unworthy brother feel, if his loving effort, weak as it is, should contribute to a purpose so important and so desirable.

Commending you to God and the word of his grace, I remain your affectionate brother,

J. A. James.

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