

# John Woolman *speaks*

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The story of John Woolman of colonial New Jersey (1720-1772) is the story of one of the most spiritually sensitive and socially conscious souls in history.

A tailor by trade, he curbed his growing business in order to avoid the dangers of wealth, against which he spoke and wrote continuously and convincingly. His words bore much weight because his actions squared with them. In all his business dealings he strove scrupulously to act as a Christian, and to a marked degree he was successful.

Another of his concerns was for the Negro slaves, in whose emancipation he passionately believed. But he believed they should be freed by the personal action of their owners, rather than by political measures. Patiently and persistently he pursued this policy, traveling hundreds of miles on horseback or on foot, in behalf of this cause. His influence over a period of years was far-reaching, both upon the Society of Friends of which he was a member, and the larger public.

The abolition of war and the type of living which would remove the causes of war were likewise much on his mind, as was the treatment of the Indian. All of these concerns arose from his firm belief in the Inner Light in every man. To this spirit of God within, he was especially sensitive.

Through the quaint language of the following quotations from his *Journal*, a classic of its kind, and from his essays and other writings, he speaks to us today:—

## ON THE PURPOSE OF LIFE . . .

"Our gracious Creator cares and provides for all His creatures. His tender mercies are over all His works, and so far as His love influences our minds, so far we become interested in His workmanship, and feel a desire to take hold of every opportunity to lessen the distresses of the afflicted and to increase the happiness of the creation. Here we have a prospect of one common interest from which our own is inseparable, so that *to turn all that we possess into the channel of universal love becomes the business of our lives.*"

## ON THE INNER LIGHT . . .

"There is a principle which is pure, placed in the human mind, which in different places and ages hath different names. It is, however, pure, and proceeds from God. It is deep and inward, confined to no forms of religion nor excluded from any, where the heart stands in perfect sincerity. In whomsoever this takes root and grows, of what nation soever, they become brethren, in the best sense of the expression."

"He whose tender mercies are over all His works hath placed that in the human mind which incites to exercise goodness towards every living creature, and this being singly attended to, people become tender-hearted and sympathizing."

"To wait for the direction of this light in all temporal as well as spiritual concerns appears necessary; for if in any case we enter lightly into temporal affairs without feeling this spirit of truth to open our way therein, and through the love of this world proceed on and seek for gain . . . we fail in our testimony to the purity and peace of His government."

## ON CHRIST'S EXAMPLE . . .

"Jesus Christ had no reserve in promoting the happiness of others; He was not deficient in looking for the helpless who lay in obscurity. . . ."

"If we consider the life of our blessed Savior when on earth as it is recorded by His followers, we shall find one uniform desire for the eternal and temporal good of mankind discovered itself in all His actions."

## ON SPIRITUAL SENSITIVITY . . .

"Remember then, O my soul, the quietude of those in whom Christ governs, and in all thy proceedings, feel after it. . . ."

"O how precious is the spirit of peace! How desirable that state in which people feel their hearts humbly resigned to the Lord, and live under a labor of mind to do His will on earth as it is done in heaven, where they feel content with that true simplicity in which no wandering desire leads on to strife, where no treasures possessed in a selfish spirit tend to beget ill will in other selfish men, and where true love so seasons their proceedings that the pure witness is reached in such who are well acquainted with them."

"Now this mind being in us which was in Christ Jesus, it removes from our hearts the desire of superiority, worldly honors or greatness. A deep attention is felt to the Divine Counselor and an ardent engagement to promote, so far as we may be enabled, the happiness of mankind universally. This state, where every motion from a selfish spirit yieldeth to pure love, I may, with gratitude to the Father of mercies, acknowledge, is often opened to me as a pearl to dig after."

## ON EDUCATION . . .

"That divine light which enlightens all men, I believe, does often shine in the minds of children very early, and to humbly wait for wisdom, that our conduct toward them may tend to forward their acquaintance with it and strengthen them in obedience thereto, appears to me to be a duty on us all."

"It appears by experience that where children are educated in fullness, ease and idleness, evil habits are more prevalent than in common amongst such who are prudently employed in the necessary affairs of life."

## ON BUSINESS . . .

"Things that served chiefly to please the vain mind in people I was not easy to trade in, seldom did it, and whenever I did, I found it weakened me as a Christian."

"I saw that a humble man, with the blessing of the Lord, might live on a little, and that where the heart was set on greatness, success in business did not satisfy the craving, but that commonly with an increase of wealth the desire for wealth increased. There was a care on my mind so to pass the time as to things outward, that nothing might hinder me from the most steady attention to the voice of the True Shepherd."

"The increase of business became my burden, . . . I then lessened my outward business, and as I had opportunity told my customers of my intention that they might consider what shop to turn to, and so in a while wholly laid down merchandise, following my trade as a tailor, myself only, having no apprentice."

"Divine love, which enlarges the heart toward mankind universally, is that alone which can rightly stop every corrupt stream and open those channels of business and commerce where nothing runs that is not pure. . . ."



## **ON MONEY . . .**

"Through the desire of money, men are tempted at times to deal hardly with their neighbors, and in the possession of riches there is a snare."

## **ON RENTS . . .**

"I feel a sincere desire in my heart, that no rent nor interest might be laid so high as to be a snare to tenants, that no desires of gain may draw any too far in business, that no cares to support customs which have not their foundation in pure wisdom may have place in our minds, but that we may build on the sure foundation and feel our Holy Shepherd to lead us, who alone is able to preserve us and bring us forth from everything which defiles."

## **ON LIQUOR . . .**

" . . . to sell that to people which we know does them harm, and which often works their ruin, for the sake of gain, manifests a hardened and corrupt heart. . . ."

## **ON LABOR . . .**

"Now where such live in fullness on the labor of others who have never had experience of hard labor themselves, there is often a danger of their not having a right feeling of the laborer's condition, and therefore of being disqualified to judge candidly in their case, not knowing what they themselves would desire were they to labor hard from one year to another to raise the necessities of life and to pay large rents besides. It is good for those who live in fullness to labor for tenderness of heart, to improve every opportunity of being acquainted with the hardships and fatigues of those who labor for their living. . . ."

## ON RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS . . .

"I was now desirous to embrace every opportunity of being inwardly acquainted with the hardships and difficulties of my fellow-creatures."

"Love was the first motion and then a concern arose to spend some time with the Indians, that I might feel and understand their life and the spirit they live in, if haply I might receive some instruction from them, or they might in any degree be helped forward by my following the leadings of truth among them."

"Such was the nature of this exercise that I believed the Lord called me to travel on foot amongst them, that by so traveling I might have a more lively feeling of the condition of the oppressed slaves. . . ."

"In a time of sickness . . . I saw a mass of matter . . . and was informed that this mass was human beings in as great misery as they could be and live, and that I was mixed in with them and henceforth I might not consider myself as a distinct and separate being."

## ON WORLD BROTHERHOOD . . .

"The inhabitants of the earth have often appeared to me as one great family consisting of various parts, divided by great waters, but united in one common interest, that is, in living righteously according to that light and understanding wherein Christ doth enlighten every man that cometh into the world."

"To consider mankind otherwise than brethren, to think favors are peculiar to one nation and exclude others, plainly supposes a darkness in the understanding. For, as God's love is universal, so where the mind is sufficiently influenced by it, it begets a likeness in itself, and the heart is enlarged towards all men."

## ON OPPRESSION . . .

"Oppression in the extreme appears terrible, but oppression in more refined appearances remains to be oppression."

" . . . the seeds of great calamity and desolation are sown and growing fast on this continent. Nor have I words sufficient to set forth that longing I then felt that we who have tasted the love . . . of God, might arise . . . to check the growth of those seeds that they may not ripen to the ruin of our posterity."

"To say we love God as unseen, and at the same time exercise cruelty toward the least creature moving by His life . . . is a contradiction in itself."

## ON WAR . . .

"It requires great self-denial and resignation of ourselves to God to attain that state wherein we can freely cease from fighting when wrongly invaded, if by our fighting there were a probability of overcoming the invaders. Whoever rightly attains to it does to some degree feel that spirit in which our Redeemer gave His life for us."

"O that we who declare against wars and acknowledge our trust to be in God only, may . . . examine our foundation and motives in holding great estates. May we look upon our treasures and the furniture of our houses, and the garments in which we array ourselves, and try whether the seeds of war have any nourishment in these our possessions or not."

" . . . where men profess to be so meek and heavenly-minded and to have their trust so firmly settled in God that they cannot join in wars, and yet by their spirit and conduct in common life manifest a contrary disposition, their difficulties are great at such a time."

## ON GOD'S PROVIDENCE . . .

"How deeply soever men are involved in the most exquisite difficulties, sincerity of heart and upright walking before God, freely submitting to His providence, is the most sure remedy. He is able to relieve not only persons but nations in their greatest calamities."

## ON WORSHIP . . .

"In pure silent worship we dwell under the holy anointing, and feel Christ to be our shepherd. Here the best of teachers ministers to the several conditions of His flock, and the soul receives immediately from the divine fountain that with which it is nourished."

"The place of prayer is a precious habitation. . . . I saw this habitation to be safe, to be inwardly quiet when there were great stirrings and commotions in the world."

"Where people are divinely gathered into a holy fellowship and faithfully abide under the influence of that spirit which leads into all truth, these are they who are the light of the world."

"Doth Christ claim my body as His temple, and graciously grant that I may be sacred to Him? Oh! that I may prize this favor. . . ."

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