



Renovaré BOOK CLUB

An Introduction to *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*

By James Catford

Devotion is neither private or public prayer, but a life given to God. Such is the devout person, therefore, who considers and serves God in everything and who makes all of their life an act of devotion.

These opening words from *A Serious Call* crackled and flared into life for me when I first read them over twenty years ago now. At the time I was on an accelerated path through the ranks of commercial publishing and was coming to the end of my time as publishing director at HarperCollins in London.

The effect of the book was something like a spiritual gut punch to me and I was rocked by the clarity of the words and the simplicity of the book that followed. We are to "live unto God in the same spirit that we pray unto him" and this includes any way of life, any employment of our time, out talents, or our money...".

Working long hours in a highly competitive industry, this simple book challenged me deeply. So much so that, within six months of reading it, I was out of HarperCollins and adjusting myself to life in Christian ministry leading the British Bible Society where I served for fourteen years.

I'm not sure that William Law would have totally approved on my move out of main street. Why? Because the whole point of *A Serious Call* is to affirm the vocation of Christ-followers to nurture a devout and holy life right where we have been planted.

Published in 1729, the book was intended for just the kind of people who—in 1968 in Fort Wayne, Indiana—worked with John Meister on revising the text "for the modern reader": wholesale grocers, factory workers, physicians, lawyers, salespeople, mothers, business and professional women. Along with this diverse audience, the editor gives a shout out to unmarried adults, recently married couples and, rather mystifyingly, "choir members".

Inspired by *A Serious Call*, and with a team of highly talented colleagues, at Bible Society we set out to jump the all too familiar spiritual/secular fences that are so often erected in an attempt to protect believers from the hazards of a fallen world. With a vision of a devout and holy life, our desire was to push ever deeper into God while at the same time penetrating ever deeper into the four main drivers of our culture today: media, government, arts, and education.



That's quite a legacy for a little book written almost three-hundred years ago by someone stripped by society of his privileges (on a point of political principle) and largely detached from the public conversation of his day.

And yet the mystical theology of William Law caught the eye of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. He called *A Serious Call* "a treatise which will hardly be excelled, if it be equalled, in the English tongue, either for beauty of expression or for justness and depth of thought."

According to Paul Miller, "Law gave a great impulse to Methodism and breathed new life into the old-fashioned High Church. But he also strongly affected the rising Evangelical school" of his day. Other writers recognise him as an influence on Quakers and many others down the years.

His legacy lives on. The Dutch theologian and prime minister Abraham Kuyper famously said, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!" The great British teacher and evangelist John Stott echoed Law's theme to call for "whole life discipleship" right in the middle of a messy world. And in the States our own Dallas Willard acknowledges the influence of Law on how to live as an apprentice of Jesus.

I've found it helpful to read Christian classics like *A Serious Call* with a certain awareness and sensibility. Never to be overlooked is that we do not have to agree with everything that's written by the author. The people of his or her day certainly didn't and if there is something we find unpalatable or hard to digest, then just leave it on the side of the plate.

Always read books such as *A Serious Call* in the context of their day. For Law, the social pressure of piety and to look good on a Sunday was a huge problem in small, insular rural communities. As Dallas Willard has taught, everyone wants to be good, and if we can't be good then we want to be seen to be good.

An example of this today is 'virtue signalling' where we say or do things to be praised for our noble character. Is this the twenty-first century equivalent of eighteenth century piety? As we shall see, William Law calls it out in very blunt terms.

One reference to note is the way Law talks about angels, but with little explanation. The reason for this is that he would have been familiar with the metaphysical art and literature of his day, represented by the poet John Donne and others. Angels were seen as non-physical spiritual beings engaged in human affairs on behalf of God. If you have time to find out more about them, a good place to start is Billy Graham's short book *Angels: God's secret agents*.



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The Christian writer Jan Johnson rightly says that "trying to be good generally makes us obnoxious"* and there are times in *A Serious Call* when I think I really wouldn't want to share a room with this guy. But that would be to miss the everyday pragmatism of this wonderful guide to a devout and holy life. I'm excited to be on this journey of discovery with you.

* *Prayer and Listening*, LifeGuide Bible Studies / IVP 2020

Reading Schedule for *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*

Renovaré Book Club Session Four <i>A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life</i> (by William Law) Facilitator: James Catford			
Week/Date	Reading Assignment	Resources/Rhythm	Live Component?
Prep Week Monday, April 12	Book Club Introduction & Foreword and Preface	Introduction, Reading Schedule	N/A
Week One Monday, April 19	Chapters 1-4	Article #1	N/A
Week Two Monday, April 26	Chapters 5-8	Podcast #1	N/A
Week Three Monday, May 3	Chapters 9-12	Article #2	N/A
Week Four Monday, May 10	Chapters 13-16	Podcast #2	N/A
Week Five Monday, May 17	Chapters 17-20	Article #3	N/A
Week Six Monday, May 24	Chapters 21-24	Readers' Questions Webcast (live & will be recorded and posted later)	Tuesday, May 25, 2021 at 9 AM Pacific Time
Week Seven Monday, May 31	Catch-up Week	Wrap-Up Week	Online All-Member Mingles: Wednesday, June 2 at 8AM and 5PM Pacific Time