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James H. Hutson: The Founders on Religion

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Addiction



Following are extracts from letters written by Charles Carroll of Carrollton to his alcoholic son, Charles Carroll, Jr. The younger Carroll, as his anguished father frequently reminded him, had been the beneficiary of everything that wealth and parental affection could provide: financial security, a good education, an impressive home. In addition, Carroll, Jr., married a model wife from an excellent Philadelphia family who presented him with attractive children. But the younger Carroll could not conquer his addiction to alcohol, which wrecked his life. Charles Adams, the second son of John and Abigail Adams, was also an alcoholic who died young and in disgrace.

It will add great comfort to the few years I may have to live to see you persevere in the resolution which you have taken. . . . If you have not the resolution of perseverance you will degrade your character, shorten a miserable life, and that of an affectionate wife, who to escape the afflicting scene she has daily witnessed and for the sake of her health has been constrained to abandon her home. I earnestly, advise you to call in religion to your aid; never rise or go to bed without humbling yourself in fervent prayer before your God, and crave his all powerful grace to overcome your vicious and intemperate habit; meditate on the end of your creation, and the dreadful consequences of not fulfilling it; keep your mind and body usefully occupied . . . avoid idle companions addicted to the same failing; which has hitherto overcome all your good resolutions of amendment, and probably theirs. Idleness, says Solomon, is the root of all evil, and St. Paul, that evil communication corrupts good morals. All your endeavours to conquer the dreadful and degrading habit you have contracted, will be

of no avail unless you abstain from tasting, even from smelling all ardent spirits.

Charles Carroll of Carrollton to Charles Carroll, Jr., April 27, 1813.
Carroll Papers (microfilm), reel 2, Library of Congress.

I entreat you to comply strictly with my advice: refrain entirely from ardent spirits and strong malt liquors, and use wine with great moderation. Without a reformation you can not reasonably expect your wife to love you. I beg you will seriously reflect of an hereafter; religion will afford you the greatest of all consolations, and its powerful influence will aid you to get the better of your dreadful habit.

Ibid., May 25, 1813, reel 2.

I need not urge the necessity of your conquering entirely the fatal habit to which you have been so many years a slave; without a perfect and complete mastery of it, you know you can enjoy no peace of mind no comfort in this life, and the thought of your dying without reformation and repentance of the consequences in the next is most dreadful.

Ibid., June 1, 1815, reel 3.

In writing to you I deem it my duty to call your attention to the shortness of this life, the certainty of death, and of that dread judgment, which we must all undergo, and on the decision of which a happy or miserable eternity depends. The impious said in his heart, there is no God. He would willingly believe there is no God; his passions and the corruption of his heart would feign persuade him that there is not; the stings of conscience betray the emptiness of the delusion: the heavens proclaim the existence of God, and unperverted reason teaches that he must love virtue, and hate vice, and reward the one and punish the other.

Keep in mind, and reflect frequently and seriously on the passage in the Apocalypse: “*Audivi Vocem de calo dicentem mihi scribe Beati mortui qui in Domino moritentur; amodo jam dicit spiritus ut requiescant a laboribus suis; opera enim illorum sequuntureos.*”¹

The wise and best of the ancients believed in the immortality of the soul, and the Gospel has established the great truth of a future state of rewards and punishments; a series of prophecies from the expulsion of Adam and Eve out of paradise to within a few hundred years of the coming of Christ announcing that event, and all fulfilled in his person, leave no room to doubt of the truth of Christianity and of the words of Christ; he foretold the approaching destruction of Jerusalem, his resurrection, the conversion of the Gentiles, and the last and general judgment: how can we doubt of the latter, when all the others have been realized? How abject, how degraded, how despicable must the mind of that man be, who wishes to persuade himself, from the dread of punishment in a future state, the inevitable consequence of vice unrepented in this, that he is not of a nature superior to that of his dog and horse, limited like them to a transitory existence, and relinquishing the hope and belief of a glorious immortality, the sure reward of a virtuous life. O! The

¹ Carroll is quoting (but not literally) from the Vulgate, the authorized Catholic Latin version of the Scriptures. The text he is quoting is chapter 14, verse 13, of the Apocalypse of St. John (called the book of Revelation in Protestant Bibles). In the Catholic Church’s English language Challoner-Rheims version of the New Testament the passage reads: “And I hear a voice from heaven saying, ‘Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord henceforth. Yes, says the Spirit, let them rest from their labors, for their works follow them.’” Joseph Grispino, ed., *The New Testament . . . A Revision of the Challoner-Rheims Version Edited by Catholic Scholars under the Patronage of the Episcopal Committee of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Guild Press, 1967).

fatal effect of unbridled and habitual vice, which can pervert and blind the understanding of a person well educated and instructed!

My desire to induce you to reflect on futurity, and by a virtuous life to merit heaven have suggested the above reflections, and warning: despise them not; on the making them the daily subject of your thoughts, they can not fail to impress on your mind the importance of reform and repentance. The approaching festival of Easter, and the merits and mercies of our Redeemer . . . have led me into this chain of meditation and reasoning, and have inspired me with the hope of finding mercy before my judge and of being happy in the life to come, a happiness I wish you to participate with me by infusing into your heart a similar hope. Should this letter produce such a change it will comfort me, and impart to you that peace of mind, which the world cannot give, and which I am sure you have long ceased to enjoy.

Ibid., April 12, 1821, reel 3.

[Charles Carroll, Jr., died, April 3, 1825—Ed.]. I presume that he expressed anguish and repentance for the life he led; the course of which both of us have more cause to lament than his end. He has appeared before a judge, the searcher of hearts and most merciful. Let us pray that he has found mercy at that dread tribunal.

Charles Carroll of Carrollton to Mrs. Charles Carroll, Jr., April 12, 1825. Ibid., reel 3.