

Proverbs Sermons-Charles Simeon

SERMONS ON PROVERBS by CHARLES SIMEON

If you are not familiar with this great saint read John Piper's discussion of Simeon's life entitled [Brothers We Must Not Mind a Little Suffering \(even better listen to the 84 minute audio at top of this page\)](#). You will want to read some of Simeon's sermons after meeting him in this short biography. Below is the list of sermons on this page. Scroll down page for sermon

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DCCLIII

THE NEED OF ATTENDING TO GOD'S GRACIOUS INVITATIONS

Prov. 1:20–31. Wisdom crieth without; she uttereth her voice in the streets: she crieth in the chief place of concourse, in the openings of the gates: in the city she uttereth her words, saying, How long, ye simple ones, will ye love simplicity? and the scorers delight in their scorning, and fools hate knowledge? Turn you at my reproof: behold, I will pour out my spirit unto you. I will make known my words unto you. Because I have called, and ye refused: I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded; but ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof: I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh; when your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind; when distress and anguish cometh upon you. Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me: for that they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the Lord: they would none of my counsel: they despised all my reproof. Therefore shall they eat of the fruit of their own way, and be filled with their own devices.

TO expostulate with men respecting their evil ways, to point out the consequences of persisting in them, to urge the necessity of a speedy and thorough conversion to God, and to enforce the address with affectionate entreaties and encouraging assurances, is stigmatized as the effervescence of a heated imagination, the offspring of a weak enthusiastic mind. But, however it be foolishness with men, it is wisdom in the sight of God. No expostulations, entreaties, promises, or threatenings can be delivered with greater energy or affection than those in the text; yet God calls them the voice, not of folly and enthusiasm, but of "wisdom;" and, whatever we may think of them, they will be found to be "the words of truth and soberness." We are now "in the chief place of concourse," and it is wisdom itself, or God under the name of Wisdom, that now addresses us. The substance of the address may be comprehended under two general observations:

- I. To those who receive his invitations, God will be exceeding gracious—

Nothing can be more tender than the expostulation before us—

[The words are addressed not merely to the “simple,” but to those who “love simplicity;” not only to the ignorant, but to them that “hate knowledge;” not only to those who are destitute of religion, but who “delight to scoff” at it. What can we suppose that God should say to such daring transgressors? What, but to denounce the heaviest judgments? But “he is God and not man,” and therefore he speaks to them as God, in terms of inconceivable love and mercy; “How long will ye love your evil and destructive ways?” Will not “the past time suffice to have followed” them? Have they been so pleasant or profitable that ye will forego all the happiness of heaven for them? or, if ye intend to turn away from them, have ye fixed the period of your conversion? “How long” do you intend to persist? Till the time of sickness, and the hour of death? or till some more convenient season? Ah! “turn you at my reproof;” let the words of a Father and a Friend prevail with you: do not attempt to justify your actions; or to extenuate your guilt: you see clearly enough that your conduct is indefensible: turn, turn from it without delay—]

The promises, with which the expostulation is enforced, add greatly to its weight—

[A consciousness both of weakness and of ignorance often contributes to keep men under the power of their sins—A thought arises in their minds, ‘I know not how to turn; I know not how to obtain either the pardon of my sins, or victory over my lusts.’ But God obviates at once all such discouraging reflections. He says in effect, ‘Are your corruptions insuperable by any efforts of your own? “I will pour out my Spirit” to sanctify you throughout. Are you at a loss how to obtain my favour? “I will make known to you the words of life;” I will reveal my Son in your heart; I will shew you the efficacy of his atonement, and make you wise unto salvation through faith in him.’ Thus does he silence their objections, and dissipate their fears: “Behold, what manner of love” is this! surely we should not hear of it but with wonder; we should not receive its overtures, but with grateful adoration—]

But “God will not always strive with man.” On the contrary,

II. They, who despise his invitations, shall be given up to final impenitence and ruin—

The contempt too generally poured upon the mercy of God, is awful in the extreme—

[One would suppose that such invitations and promises could not fail of producing the desired effect. But, alas, the reception they meet with is such as God himself represents it: men “refuse to obey his calls; when he stretches out his hands to them with parental tenderness and importunate entreaties, they will not regard him; they set at nought his counsel; they despise his reproof; they hate even to hear of their duty, and determine, whatever be the consequence, that they will not perform it.” The zeal and earnestness of his ministers are made a subject of profane ridicule; and the dictates of wisdom are laughed at as the effusions of folly and fanaticism. We appeal to the consciences of all respecting these things. Who that has made any observations on the world around him, or on what passes in his own heart, must not attest that these things are so? Yes; we are all guilty: “This has been our manner from our youth.” Some have been more open and notorious, and others more secret and reserved, in their oppositions to God’s will; but all have opposed it, and, if divine grace have not slain our enmity, we are opposing it still: the deliberate sentiment of every unregenerate man is like theirs of old, “As for the word which thou hast spoken unto us in the name of the Lord, we will not hearken unto thee.”]

But such conduct, if persisted in, will one day meet a suitable reward—

[As God cannot be deceived, so neither will he be mocked: if he have a day of grace, so has he also a day of vengeance; and that day is hastening on apace. However secure the sinner may think himself, there is an hour of “desolation, and of consequent distress and anguish coming upon him.” Perhaps it may come in this life; on a dying bed he may be filled with terror and remorse; and though, like Judas, he may confess his sin, or, like Esau, pray for a revocation of his sentence, his prayers may be cast out, and God laugh at his calamity. Often does God threaten this, and often has he executed his threatening; “Go to your gods whom ye have chosen,” said he to his people of old; let them deliver you; for I will deliver you no more.” So now does he often suggest to the mind of an awakened, but unconverted sinner, ‘What will the world do for you now? What will your pleasures, your riches, or your honours profit you in this day of my wrath? What do you think of the seed which you have been sowing, now you begin to reap the fruit thereof?’ But if God deal not with us thus in this world, most assuredly he will in the world to come. That will indeed be an hour of distress and anguish when these despisers of mercy shall stand at the tribunal of their Judge: and oh! how will HE then “laugh at their calamity! how will he mock at all their fear” and terror! ‘You would not believe my word: now see whether it be true or not. You would not be persuaded that I would ever vindicate my insulted Majesty: What do you think of that matter now? You despised me, and said, “Depart from me; I desire not the knowledge of thy ways!” You shall have your request: I will depart from you; and you too shall depart from me: depart, accursed, into everlasting fire: and though you should pray to all eternity for a mitigation of your pain, you shall never have so much as a drop of water to cool your tongue.’

Would to God that men would realize these things, and be persuaded to believe that God is true! But whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear, we must declare what God has spoken: and, however an ignorant world may deride it as folly, we will aver it to be the “counsel of true wisdom,” and the declaration of an unerring God.]

APPLICATION—

1. Let all adore the divine goodness—

[Which of us must not plead guilty to the charge of despising God? Which of us has not persevered in a course of disobedience to him in spite of all his messages of mercy; and that too, not for days merely, but for months and years? Yet has God exercised

forbearance towards us; and at this very instant renews to us his gracious invitations. Let us consider how many thousands have been cut off in their sins, while we are yet spared to hear the tidings of salvation: and “let the patience and long-suffering of God lead us to repentance.” Let us magnify him for such distinguished favours; and turn to him “to-day, while it is called to-day, lest he swear in his wrath that we shall never enter into his rest.”]

2. Let all tremble at the divine justice—

[Though God be so full of compassion, “not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance and live,” yet is he a just and sin-avenging God: “he will by no means clear the guilty.” He sometimes “repays the wicked to their face” even in this life; but there is a day which he has appointed for the full display of his own righteousness; a day, wherein he will render to every man according to his deeds; to those, who have sought for immortality, eternal life; but to the despisers of his truth, indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish. Let us then get our minds impressed with this thought, that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God: and let us instantly comply with his invitations here, that we may be partakers of his promises in a better world.]

DCCLIV

THE WAY OF ATTAINING DIVINE KNOWLEDGE

Prov. 2:1–6. My Son, if thou wilt receive my words, and hide my commandments with thee; so that thou incline thine ear unto wisdom, and apply thine heart to understanding; yea, if thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding; if thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures; then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord giveth wisdom; out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding.

WISDOM is justly considered as the first of human attainments. It is that which elevates us in the scale of being, and to it we are indebted for all the most refined comforts of civilized society. But there is a spiritual wisdom totally distinct from that which is merely intellectual, and as much superior to it both in its qualities and effects, as reason is superior to instinct. What this is, and how it is to be attained, we are informed by Solomon in the words before us. Let us then consider,

I. Wherein true wisdom consists—

The nature of true wisdom is plainly declared in the text—

[That which in one verse is called, “Wisdom,” and “Understanding,” in a subsequent verse is called, “The fear of the Lord,” and “The knowledge of God.” The wisdom which unregenerate men possess, resides only in the head; but that of which the text speaks is seated in the heart. The former consists merely in a knowledge of men and things, with a faculty of applying that knowledge to present circumstances: but the latter consists in a knowledge of God as reconciled to us in Christ Jesus, together with a correspondent fear and love of his name. The former enlarges the mind, and directs the conduct in things relating to time: the latter informs and regulates the soul in reference to eternity.]

This description is just and accurate—

[We confess that the knowledge and fear of God is not so reputed by the world: on the contrary, it is stigmatized as folly and madness. But that which arrogates to itself an exclusive title to the appellation of wisdom, is by no means so deserving of it as this: because, whatever excellencies it possesses, its operations are weak, uncertain, transient: whereas “the wisdom that is from above” brings into subjection every rebellious passion, and progressively prepares us for the enjoyment of our God. It was with this wisdom that the Messiah himself was endued. And it is of this that Solomon speaks, when he declares that nothing else is worthy the name of wisdom.]

Respecting wisdom the text further informs us,

II. By what means it is to be attained—

The wisdom of this world may be gained by study only: but spiritual wisdom requires,

1. Sincerity—

[If a man have not a disposition to obey the word of God, he will find occasion of cavil and dispute in the plainest expressions. The Pharisees of old, though conversant with the sacred writings, and instructed by our Lord himself, remained ignorant of the truth, because “they loved darkness rather than light.” Thus it will be with us. However good the seed that is sown may be, it will never bring forth fruit to perfection, unless it be “received into an honest and good heart.” If we would be truly wise, we must imitate the docility of Cornelius; or, in the language of the text, we must “receive God’s word, and hide his commandments with us,” as an inestimable jewel which we are solicitous to possess and keep.]

2. Diligence—

[This idea is strongly inculcated in the words before us: “we should incline our ear, and apply our heart to understanding, and seek it as silver, and search for it as for hid treasures.” We should consider the inspired volume as an inexhaustible mine, which yields

nothing to a superficial observer, but will richly repay those who explore its inmost recesses. To this effect was the direction given to Joshua; and if we follow that advice, we shall succeed like the Bereans of olde. It is the diligent hand, and that only, that can ever make us rich.]

3. Prayer—

[Nothing will succeed without prayer. A man might commit to memory the whole Bible, and yet not understand one spiritual truth contained it, if he trusted in his own powers, instead of looking up to God for the teaching of his Spirit. Our blessed Lord assures us, that none knoweth the Father, but he to whom the Son shall reveal himf. And this also is intimated in the repeated direction given us in the text, to “cry after knowledge, and lift up our voice for understanding.” The Apostles themselves needed to have “their understandings opened, before they could understand the Scripturesg.” Yea, established Christians still need “a spirit of wisdom and revelation to be given” to them, in order to their obtaining a juster view of revealed truthsh. All of us therefore, if we would be taught of God, must cry with David, “Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy lawi.”]

For the encouragement of all, Solomon further declares,

III. The certain issue of those means—

God is the source and giver of all spiritual knowledge—

[Nothing can be more positive than the assertion before us. That “God giveth wisdom, and that out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding.” It is in this view that he is called, “The Father of lightsk,” because as that bright luminary, the sun, was the work of his hands, so all light, intellectual or spiritual, is derived from him. Human learning gives a man no advantage towards the attainment of true wisdom. All, under God, depends on the state of mind with which men seek divine knowledge: if they be willing to “learn of the Fatherl,” he will teach them: if they be too proud to submit to his instructions, he will leave them to wander further and further from the right way. He will “take the wise in their own craftinessm,” and “reveal to babes what he hides from the wise and prudentn.”]

Nor will he suffer us to use the appointed means in vain—

[Frequent are the assurances which God has given us respecting thiso. And he has made distinct promises to each of the foregoing means. Are we sincere? he will open our eyesp. Are we diligent? he will reveal himself to usq. Are we importunate in prayer? he will give us liberally, and without upbraidingr. No want of learning, no weakness of intellect, shall be any obstacle to him, or deprive us of the benefits which we seek. On the contrary, he will make use of the weakest and most contemptible of men to confound the wise and mightyt.]

INFER—

1. How highly should we value a preached Gospel!

[Men spend much time and money in acquiring human knowledge, and are glad to avail themselves of all lectures, public or private, whereby they may gain instruction. But a frequent ministration of divine ordinances, and a faithful dispensation of God’s word, are deemed worthy of censure rather than of approbation; and the very persons for whose benefit the word is preached, can scarcely be prevailed upon to lend an ear to the instruction that is freely offered. Little do they think what it is that they thus despise. The ordinances are appointed of God for the express purpose of “converting souls, and making wise the simpleu.” How many are there now in heaven, who would have “perished for lack of knowledge,” if the voice of God in his ministers had not reached their hearts, and “brought them out of darkness into marvellous lightx!” Let all then improve the ordinances with diligence, and pray that by means of them they may be “made wise unto salvationy.”]

2. How precious should the Scriptures be in our sight!

[It is only at certain seasons that we can attend on public ordinances: but the Scriptures we may read at all times. In them is contained all that we need to know. And the Holy Spirit is promised us, to guide us into all truthz. Let the sacred volume then be our delight, and our meditation all the daya. Let us not cavil at any part of it, or say. This is a hard sayingb: but let us receive it with meekness, knowing that, if it be engrafted in our hearts, it is able, and shall be effectual, to save our soulsc.]

DCCCLV

PIETY A PRESERVATIVE FROM EVIL

Prov. 2:10, 11. When wisdom entereth into thine heart, and knowledge is pleasant unto thy soul, discretion shall preserve thee, understanding shall keep thee.

PIETY, more than any other thing whatever, is regarded with jealousy and suspicion: and it is no uncommon thing for parents to guard their children against its advocates and professors, as they would against persons infected with a contagious disease. What the fruit of this folly, both in parents and children, too generally is, may be easily conceived: the children, taught to dread piety, which

alone could preserve them from evil, become the victims of temptation, and fall into every species of iniquity: and the parents not unfrequently are bowed down by the misconduct of their children, till their grey hairs are brought with sorrow to the grave. Men vainly hope to effect that by moral suasion, which nothing but the grace of God can produce: they would have fruit without a root, and blamelessness without any fixed principle of piety in the soul. But the only way in which any man can be kept in one uniform path of goodness and of honour, is, by submitting his soul to the influence of true religion, and surrendering himself up unreservedly to God. This at least was the conviction of Solomon's mind: "When wisdom entereth into thine heart, and knowledge is pleasant to thy soul, discretion shall preserve thee, understanding shall keep thee." By "wisdom and knowledge" we are not to understand worldly wisdom: for a proficiency in that, however great it may be, is no pledge of morality, no preservative from sin. These terms are used in Scripture to express real piety: and it is that alone which will prove a sufficient antidote to temptation, or become a perennial source of holiness in the life.

In confirmation of this sentiment, I will shew,

I. What reception divine truth should meet with—

The heart is the proper seat of divine knowledge—

[Other knowledge is seated in the head: it is acquired only by deep study, and by force of intellect: nor, in whatever degree it be attained, does it at all sanctify and renew the soul. But the truth of God "enters into the heart:" there is that "incorruptible seed" deposited; and from thence is it brought forth into life and action. I mean not to say, that the understanding is not to be exercised, or exercised deeply, in relation to divine truth; for, beyond all doubt, every truth must so far approve itself to our judgment, as evidently to appear worthy of God, and suited to our condition: nor should any man give an unrestrained scope to his imagination or affections: for, if he were implicitly to follow them, he would of necessity be led away from the solid maxims of the Gospel: but when once he is convinced of any truth of God, then is he to deliver up his affections to be moulded and directed by it.

To make this clear, let me state what I mean by divine knowledge. The word of God teaches us that sin is an evil of extreme malignity; that, to every soul in which it reigns, it is defiling, debasing, damning. It teaches us that we are altogether incapable of cancelling its guilt, or of subduing its power; and that if we find not a Saviour who is able to effect these things for us, we must inevitably and eternally perish. It teaches us yet further, that the Lord Jesus Christ is precisely such a Saviour as we want, and that he is both "able and willing to save to the uttermost all who come unto God by him." Still further, it teaches us the beauty of holiness, and the blessedness of serving and enjoying God. But of what use are those things, as a mere theory? It is only by their being actually experienced in the soul that they can be productive of any solid benefit. But, when truly received into the heart, they set in motion all the affections of the soul, and call into activity our fears and our hopes, our sorrows and our joys.]

It should be received there with supreme delight—

[Truth of any kind is pleasing to the mind, as all who are accustomed to the investigations of science can attest. But divine truth should generate the sublimest joy; or, as my text expresses it, should be "pleasant to the soul." It should be to us what light is to the wandering and benighted traveller: he pants for it; and congratulates himself on the very first appearance of its orient dawn. To him it comes as a remedy that is suited to his most urgent necessities. Conceive of the Israelites, when pressed with hunger, or perishing with thirst; with what interest must they have beheld the manna that was showered about their tents! and with what avidity must they have bowed down to drink of the streams that issued from the rock! Or, if it be said that these things are objects of sense, and therefore inapplicable to the point in hand, take the instance of the brazen serpent, which was exhibited to their faith. They felt themselves dying of the wounds which had been inflicted by the fiery serpents: they were perfectly conscious that no physician on earth could help them: and they were informed, that, by God's appointment, a brazen serpent had been erected, in order that, by looking to that, they might be restored to health. Would they hear of that with sceptical indifference, or behold it with uninterested curiosity? No: it would be to them a matter of life and death: the very first tidings of such an instrument would make them eager for the exposure of it to their view: and when they saw or heard others attesting its efficacy, they would look to it with a desire to experience in themselves its healing power. Now this is the way in which divine truth should be viewed by us. To the ungodly world it is most unwelcome, because it bears testimony against them, and against all their ways: hence "they hate the light, and will not come to it, lest their deeds should be reprov'd." But to us it should be an object of ardent desire and supreme delight. We should look to it, not for the purpose of critical discussion, but of grateful application to the soul. Our spirit should be precisely that of the blind man whom Jesus had healed. Our Lord put the question to him, "Dost thou believe on the Son of God?" To which he replied, "Who is he, Lord, that I might believe on him?" Here he finds no disposition to speculate upon the subject, as on a matter of mere critical inquiry: but shews a readiness to admit the truth the moment it should be revealed to him, and to embrace it as the one ground of all his future conduct. Such should be the disposition of our minds also. And when we have attained clearer views of divine truth, we should "rejoice as one that findeth great spoilb."]

That we may be stirred up to seek divine truth in this way, let us consider,

II. Its salutary influence when duly received—

"Discretion will preserve us, and understanding will keep us." This is the testimony of God himself. But it may be asked, 'If common knowledge be not, effectual to keep us, or even divine knowledge when received only into the head, how can the circumstance of receiving knowledge into the heart be productive of any such effect?' I answer, 'It is this very circumstance which makes all the

difference: divine knowledge, when it resides merely in the head, is speculative only; whereas, when it enters into the heart, it becomes practical.

1. It rectifies the judgment—

[On every subject connected with the soul, the judgment of mankind is in direct opposition to the mind of God. In their eyes, the things of time and sense are of the first importance; but in the sight of God they are all lighter than vanity itself; in his eyes, the concerns of the soul and of eternity are alone worthy of the care of an immortal Being. To the ungodly, even the Gospel itself, that unrivalled production of divine wisdom, is “foolishness;” but to an enlightened mind, it is “the power of God and the wisdom of God.” To the stout-hearted infidel, to follow the commands of God is to “be righteous over-much;” but to one who is taught of God, obedience to God’s commands appears his highest honour and felicity. But the truth is, he once was in darkness, but is now “brought into marvellous light:” he once saw only through the distorting medium of sense; he now beholds with the eye of faith, which brings him within the vail of the sanctuary, and discovers every thing as it is beheld by God himself. Nor should this appear strange to us. The difference made in the aspect of any object by its being viewed through glasses of different construction, may easily convince us how different an appearance every object must assume, according as it is viewed through the medium of sense, or by the penetrating eye of faith. The person who turns to God has the very law of God written in his heart; and needs only to look within, and he will see the correspondence between the divine records and his own actual experience: so that he does not merely believe the divine testimonies to be true and good, but “has within himself a witness” of their transcendent excellence: or, as it is said in the verse before our text, “he understands righteousness, and judgment, and equity, yea, every good path.”]

2. It infuses sensibility into the conscience—

[The conscience of an unenlightened man is blind, partial, and in many respects seared; since, in relation to the dispositions of the soul towards God, which is of far greater importance than any thing else, it never reproofs at all. But when divine wisdom has entered into his soul, a man will not be satisfied with a freedom from great and flagrant transgressions: he will examine his duties towards God as well as those towards man: he will mark his defects, no less than his excesses: he will observe his thoughts, yea, and “the very imaginations of his thoughts:” and will be more grieved for an evil propensity or desire, than the world at large are for an evil act. He endeavours to have his conscience as much alive to the least evils, as to the greatest: and to keep it tender, as the apple of his eye: and if but a mote assail it, he will take no rest, till he has wept it out with tears of penitence and contrition. See this in the Apostle Paul. Before his conversion, he could find no evil in himself, though he was “a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious:” but after his conversion, he did but utter a disrespectful word to a judge who was violating the plainest rules of justice, and he made it a matter of humiliation in the presence of the whole court.]

3. It instils a watchfulness against the occasions of evil—

Those who are destitute of vital godliness will venture themselves any where, without fear and without remorse: but a man of real piety will be afraid to expose himself where the objects around him present only what has a tendency to vitiate his mind: he prays to God “not to lead him into temptation:” and therefore he will not voluntarily run into it; he will select his associates from amongst the excellent of the earth, who will forward, rather than retard, the growth of holy affections within him: and, as far as his situation will admit of it, he will “come out from the ungodly world, and be separate, and not even touch an unclean thing,” lest he be defiled, and have “his good manners corrupted by evil communications.” This is very particularly insisted on in the following context, in reference both to evil men and evil women. It is said, “Discretion shall preserve thee, understanding shall keep thee: to deliver thee from the way of the evil man, from the man that speaketh froward things; who leave the paths of uprightness to walk in the ways of darkness: who rejoice to do evil, and delight in the frowardness of the wicked: whose ways are crooked, and they froward in their paths: to deliver thee also from the strange woman, oven from the stranger who flattereth with her words: who forsaketh the guide of her youth, and forgetteth the covenant of her God: for her house inclineth unto death, and her paths unto the dead: none that go unto her return again, neither take they hold of the paths of life: That thou mayest walk in the way of good men, and keep the paths of the righteous.” Here the conduct of evil men is drawn to the very life, as is the character of the evil woman also, against both of whom the man of piety will be strictly on his guard, proposing to himself the example of the godly, and availing himself of their aid in his walk before God. He knows, that “he cannot take fire in his bosom, and not be burned;” and therefore he will use the utmost possible circumspection in the whole of his deportment. The books, the company, the conversation that would defile his mind, he carefully avoids; and, like the Jews at the time of the Passover, he searches the most secret recesses of his soul, to sweep from it the leaven that would offend his God.]

4. It leads us continually to God for direction and support—

[Without divine aid all human efforts are vain. But the word of God clearly, fully, constantly directs us to look to him i and an experience of it in our own souls will convince us of the necessity of crying to him continually, “Hold thou me up, and I shall be safe.” It is in this way chiefly that divine wisdom preserves us. The soundness of our principles may prescribe what is right; and our love to those principles may incline us to the performance of it: but divine grace alone can ever prove effectual for us. No “power, but that which raised Jesus Christ himself from the dead,” will be sufficient to carry on within us the work that has been begun. On the other hand, if we really trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, we shall, “through his strength, be able to do all things,” “nor shall any thing ever

prevail to separate us from his love.”]

Having illustrated the great truth in our text, we would further IMPROVE it, by suggesting,

1. In what spirit we should hear the word—

[We should not come to the house of God in a mere customary manner, for example sake, or to perform a duty, and still less to be amused with what we hear: but, as Cornelius and his friends, when Peter came to minister unto them, said, “Now are we all here before God, to hear all things that are commanded thee of God;” so should we come up to the house of God to “hear what the Lord our God shall say concerning us.” We should come to learn our duty, in order that we may practise it. We should bless our God that so sublime a privilege is accorded to us. We should come as a patient to receive the counsels of his physician, with a determination of heart to follow his prescriptions. A mariner, if amongst shoals and quicksands, does not consult his chart and compass for amusement, or with a disposition to dispute their testimony, but with a desire to have every mistake rectified, and to navigate his ship through the dangerous passage, agreeably to their direction. O! when will Christian assemblies meet in this frame? When will God’s ordinances be thus improved for their proper end? Brethren, only reflect on the office of true wisdom, as delineated in the passage before us. and you will never want either a direction or a motive for a profitable attendance on the means of grace.]

2. With what care we should improve it—

[The word we hear will judge us in the last day; and if we do not take occasion from it to follow the counsels of the Most High, we shall greatly aggravate our guilt before God. The word we hear, if it prove not “a savour of life unto life, will become to us a savour of death unto death.” The lessons of wisdom had better never have been delivered to us, than be suffered to pass away without a suitable improvement of them. Our blessed Lord told his hearers, that if he had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin; but that now they had no cloak for their sin. And so must I also say unto you. All that you have heard respecting the evil of sin, the sufficiency of Christ, the beauty of holiness, of what use will it be to you, if it do not humble you as sinners, encourage you as penitents, and animate you as believers? I pray you, neglect not the day of your visitation, nor “hold the truth in unrighteousness:” but receive the truth in the love of it: and deliver your souls into it as a mould, that it may fashion you after the image of your God. And never imagine that you have got above the use of ordinances, or that it is of no profit to attend upon them: they are the golden pipes through which, to your latest hour, you must receive the golden oil into your lamps: and through the supplies of the Spirit which you may receive by them, you may hope that your path shall shine brighter and brighter unto the perfect day.”]

DCCLVI

BENEFITS OF TRUE WISDOM

Prov. 2:10–22. When wisdom entereth into thine heart, and knowledge is pleasant unto thy soul, discretion shall preserve thee, understanding shall keep thee: to deliver thee from the way of the evil man, from the man that speaketh froward things: who leave the paths of uprightness, to walk in the ways of darkness; who rejoice to do evil, and delight in the frowardness of the wicked; whose ways are crooked, and they froward in their paths: to deliver thee from the strange woman, even from the stranger which flattereth with her words; which forsaketh the guide of her youth, and forgetteth the covenant of her God: for her house inclineth unto death, and her paths unto the dead. None that go unto her return again, neither take they hold of the paths of life; that thou mayest walk in the way of good men, and keep the paths of the righteous. For the upright shall dwell in the land, and the perfect shall remain in it: but the wicked shall be cut off from the earth, and the transgressors shall be rooted out of it.

WHETHER we regard Solomon as a saint walking with his God, or as a backslider restored to God, we must consider him as pre-eminently qualified to give advice for the regulation of our conduct: for, as a saint, he was endued with wisdom above all the children of men; and, as a backslider, he had a wider range for his wickedness, and a deeper experience of its folly, than any other person ever possessed.

Under the character of “wisdom,” he here speaks of true religion; which he recommends to all, but especially to persons in early life; and, in order to impress his advice the more deeply on our minds, he sets before us,

I. The benefits derived from true wisdom—

When once religion is deeply rooted in the heart, it will render us the most essential services—

1. It will keep us from the society of ungodly men—

[There are many whose delight is in wickedness: they have departed from God themselves, and have “made crooked paths for themselves;” in which they proceed with all imaginable “frowardness” and perverseness. Disdaining to receive any light from God or his word, they “walk in utter darkness, not at all knowing whither they goa.” And not content with casting off all restraint themselves, and walking after their own lusts in all manner of uncleanness, they wish to draw all they can along with them: they deride all serious piety, and labour to the uttermost to turn aside from the way of godliness any who may be inclined to it—“They rejoice to do

evil:" and, if they can but succeed in their efforts to ensnare a person who has been fleeing from sin, and to divert him from following after God, not even Satan himself will exult more than they——

Now from such companions true religion will preserve us. We shall see at once how far they are from God, and how impossible it is to be happy in their society: "for what fellowship can righteousness have with unrighteousness; or light with darkness; or Christ with Belial; or he that believeth with an unbeliever?" Instead of seeking their society, therefore, we shall come out from among them, and be separated;" and not have any fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove theme"——]

2. It will keep us from the snares also of ungodly women——

[It is lamentable to think how degraded human nature is, and how assimilated to the very beasts multitudes are, who were originally formed in the image of their God. Females, married, as well as unmarried, "forsaking the guide of their youth and the covenant of their God," will abandon themselves to the most vicious courses, soliciting the embrace of men to whom they are utter "strangers," and practising every species of artifice, to ensnare and vitiate all who come in their way——

And such is their influence over those whom they have once ensnared, that it is a miracle almost if even one is recovered to a sense of his duty, and is brought back again in penitential sorrow to his God. Truly their ways lead down to death and to hell; for not only do they draw men from all thoughtfulness about their souls, but they bring them into extravagances and crimes, which not unfrequently issue in suicide, or death by the hands of the public executioner.

But from these also will vital piety preserve us. It will lead us to use all the precautions against them, that a prudent government employs against the infection of the plague. We shall have no communication with person, whose very presence will endanger the life of our souls. We shall not go near their houses, or the places of their resort. We shall not parley with temptation when it comes in our way: but shall flee from it, as Joseph did, saying, "How shall I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?"——]

3. It will guide us in the paths of righteousness and peace——

[When once true religion enters into the soul, we shall take the Scriptures for our guide, and endeavour to walk in the paths which all the holy men of old have trod before us. We shall not be satisfied with following the customs of those around us, or with conforming to the standard of duty which the world approves; we shall desire to be "holy, as God is holy:" and shall determine through grace to "perfect holiness in the fear of God"——]

Such being the effects of true wisdom, I will proceed to point out to you,

II. The vast importance of seeking after it——

Both the promises and threatenings of the Mosaic law were chiefly of a temporal nature; the people who served God faithfully being encouraged to expect peace and plenty in the land of Canaan; whilst those who were disobedient to his laws were to be visited with war, famine, pestilence, and ultimately to be driven out of that land, as the Canaanites had been before them. But under these figures truths of far higher moment were veiled: and the present and eternal states of men were shadowed forth as indissolubly connected with their moral and religious character. Hence the contrast drawn between the sentence accorded to "the upright" and "the wicked" in the concluding verses of our text, must be understood as referring to their respective states,

1. In this world——

["Godliness is profitable unto all things, having the promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come." Certainly in this world there is an immense "difference between those who serve God, and those who serve him not." We readily grant that the ungodly and profane may prosper in respect of outward things, and that the saints may be in a state of degradation and oppression: but there is no comparison between the real happiness of the one and of the other: the ungodly are "like the troubled sea, whose waters cast up mire and dirt:" they are agitated by many ungovernable and conflicting passions: their tempers are a source of continual disquietude: and they have no inward resources to calm the tumult of their minds——But the godly have consolations peculiar to themselves, and abundantly sufficient to counterbalance their afflictions. They have a God to go unto; a God, who says, "Cast thy burthen on the Lord, and he will sustain thee." The very tribulations which they endure for righteousness sake, are to them a ground of glorying; and the light of God's countenance lifted up upon them their souls with joy and peace, even with "a joy that is unspeakable," and "a peace that passeth all understanding."

If then we look no further than to this present life, we do not hesitate to declare, that "the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil, that is understandingr."]

2. In the world to come——

["There is a rest which remaineth for the people of God;" a rest, into which the true Joshua shall introduce them, as soon as ever they shall have completed the period fixed for their abode in this dreary wilderness: and there shall they "remain" for ever: there shall they be as "pillars in the temple of their God. and shall go no more out." But how shall I represent their happiness in that place where there will be no remains of those evils which they experienced in this world; and where every blessing which they here sought for, shall be imparted to the utmost extent of their desires, and of their capacities for enjoymentx——

On the other hand, there is a day of retribution for the ungodly, when they shall not only be "convinced of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodlily committed, and of all their hard speeches which they have spoken against the Lord and his ways, but will have judgment executed upon them" by the Judge of quick and dead. And what words can ever suffice to give an adequate idea of

their misery, when, driven from the presence of their God, and from the congregation of his saints, they shall be consigned to those regions of misery, where they will take their portion in “the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone,” and “dwell for ever with everlasting burnings!”——

If men would but reflect one moment on these consequences of their impiety, there would be no longer any occasion to descant on the wisdom of seeking after God, or the folly of provoking his displeasure by a life of sin.]

Let us LEARN then,

1. To form a right estimate of religion——

[Religion is wisdom, even though the whole world should combine to call it folly——]

2. To seek it in due measure——

[To receive it into the head is to little purpose: the proper seat of it is the heart. Nor is it sufficient that we yield a constrained obedience to it: its service should in our estimation be accounted perfect freedom. It is only “when wisdom enters into our heart, and knowledge it pleasant to our soul,” that we can be said to have received the grace of God in truth. The worldly man is at home in the world: it is his element wherein he moves. And such must religion be to the child of God, his rest, his element, his delight——]

3. To let it have its full operation on our souls——

[Wherever true wisdom is, there will be “discretion to preserve us, and understanding to keep us.” We conceive this observation to be deserving of peculiar attention; because the indiscretions of religious people are rarely traced to their proper source, a want of right dispositions in the heart. Where meekness, and modesty, and diffidence, and humility reside in the heart, there will be a corresponding propriety of conduct in the life: but where pride, and conceit, and forwardness, and self-will are predominant, there will the deportment savour of these hateful qualities in all our intercourse with mankind. There is this remarkable difference between human wisdom and that which is divine: human wisdom leaves the heart untouched, or even administers fuel to its corruptions: but divine wisdom “pours the very soul into the mould of the Gospel,” and assimilates all its dispositions to the image of God himself. It was not Paul’s eminence in intellectual attainments that made him so eminent in Christian tempers: it was the abundance of God’s grace that rendered him so fruitful in every good word and work: and, if the grace of God abound in us, we also shall proportionally adorn the Gospel in the whole of our life and conversation. Let that then be remembered which Solomon has told us, “I Wisdom dwell with Prudence:” and let us be careful that we do not by any indiscreet conduct give “occasion to the adversary to speak reproachfully.” Our determination, through grace, must be, to cut off from the world all unnecessary occasion of offence. We must not imagine that our separation from an ungodly world gives us a licence to violate either the duties or the charities of life; but, whilst we “abstain from all appearance of evil,” we must cultivate to the uttermost not only “whatsoever things are true, and honest, and just, and pure, but whatsoever things are lovely and of good report.” We must labour to “behave ourselves wisely in a perfect way.”]

DCCLVII

CONFIDENCE IN GOD ENCOURAGED

Prov. 3:5, 6. Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him; and he shall direct thy paths.

THE book of Proverbs is not so much designed to open to us the way of salvation, as it is to regulate our conduct after we have attained the knowledge of the truth. It abounds with maxims admirably calculated to assist us in our intercourse with men, and with instructions also relative to our walk before God. Of this latter kind is the advice given us in the words which we have just read: wherein we see,

I. The confidence which God requires of us——

As creatures, we are of necessity dependent on Him who first gave us our existence: for in him we live, and move, and have our being. But it is by no means sufficient for us to acknowledge this as a truth which we cannot controvert: we must acquiesce in it as a state that we approve, and glory in it as our highest privilege. Our confidence in God must be co-extensive with our necessities: it must be——

1. Entire——

[We must trust in the Lord “with all our heart.” There must be no aversion to such an appointment as unnecessary, no distrust of it as insufficient. We should view ourselves as utterly incapable of ensuring our own happiness: and we should regard God as engaged to order every thing for our good. We should not for a moment doubt his wisdom to discern what shall eventually prove best for us, nor his power to execute it, however great or numerous the difficulties may be which appear to obstruct its accomplishment. Nay, we must be persuaded, that his love delights in caring for us, and that his truth and faithfulness will perform all that in his unbounded

mercy he has undertaken in our behalf. From this conviction we must commit all our concerns to him. to be ordered and overruled as he in his infinite wisdom shall see best. There must be an actual transfer of them if we may so speak into his hands, and a full conviction of mind that he is able to keep, and will assuredly keep, what we have so committed to him, so as to bring all our affairs to a blessed and successful issuea.]

2. Exclusive—

[We must “not lean to our own understanding.” so as to rely on it for any thing. We are to use our understanding indeed, but not to transfer to it any measure of that dependence which should be placed on God only. We know not what would be the ultimate issue of any one thing. We are ready to suppose, that whatever obstructs our wishes for a time, will endanger their final accomplishment: whereas God often makes those very events subservient to his own gracious purposes, and uses them as means whereby his ends shall be fulfilled. This was remarkably the case with Joseph, in all his trials: and there is no true believer who will not acknowledge, that in his own experience many things which have been desired by him would have proved injurious, and many things which have been deprecated by him have been overruled for his welfare. From a full conviction that “a man’s way is not in himself, and that it is not in man that walketh to direct his stepsb,” we must renounce all idea of planning for ourselves, any further than in an entire dependence on the divine guidance and direction. We are doubtless to use all proper means for attaining what on the whole appears most desirable: but the relying on our own devices, as calculated of themselves to ensure success, is the thing which God has marked with his strongest disapprobationc——The doing of this demonstrates our follyd, and exposes us to the heaviest curse. We must therefore altogether “cease from our own wisdomf.”]

3. Uniform—

[“In all our ways we must acknowledge him;” not in those only which seem to be of greater importance, but in all without exception. It is not in the rise and fall of empires only that God’s hand is to be viewed, but in the falling of a sparrow, or in any event equally insignificant. We are apt to consider some things as important, and others as unimportant; but the truth is, that in God’s sight nothing is important (except as it may advance his glory); nor is there any thing unimportant as it relates to us. Many things which in their effects and consequences have been of the greatest imaginable importance, may in their origin be traced to the slightest possible occurrence. If we look into the book of Esther, we shall see this observation confirmed in its utmost extent. Nor is God to be acknowledged only in those events which would be deemed small, but in those also which are casual, or, as we call them, accidental: “the lot (than which nothing is more casual) is cast into the lap, but the whole disposal thereof is of the Lord.” In every thing therefore, whether great or small, painful or pleasant, concerted or fortuitous, God must be acknowledged as having sent it, if past, and as having the entire disposal of it, if future.]

To place this entire confidence in God will be found our truest wisdom, if we consider,

II. The encouragement he gives us to trust in him—

Wonderful is the promise here given for our encouragement; “He will direct our paths.” But how will he direct us? Will he speak to us in dreams, or visions, or by Urim and Thummim, or by an audible voice? Or will he go before us in the pillar and the cloud, as he did before his people in the wilderness; or answer us, as he did David, in reference to the men of Keilah, and the Amalekitesg? No: we are not authorized to expect any thing of the kind: yet will he direct us sufficiently to preserve us from any material error,

1. By his Spirit—

[To “open the eyes of our understanding” is one of the most important offices of the Spirit: and, in doing this, he will purge away from our eyes that film which obstructs our sight. Pride, passion, interest, and a thousand other things, incapacitate us for a clear and perfect discovery of our duty: and, till these be mortified, we are constantly exposed to the most awful delusions: we are ready at all times to “call good evil, and evil good: to put darkness for light, and light for darkness.” But, when our minds are duly enlightened, we see things in their proper colours. On different occasions, when the apostles would have called fire from heaven to consume a Samaritan village, and when they contended with each other who should be the greatest, our blessed Lord instructed them better: and so will he do with us, bringing to our remembrance some portion of God’s word which bears upon the point in hand. Thus he fulfils that blessed promise, “that we shall hear a word behind us, saying. This is the way, walk ye in it: when we should otherwise have turned either to the right hand or to the lefth.” We say not, that the Holy Spirit does not sometimes effect this without the word: we are inclined to think he does; and that too by a kind of impression on the mind deterring us from evil and guiding us to good: but he never does it contrary to the word. Suffice it to say, that whether with or without the word, he will guide us into all truth, so far as shall be necessary for the rectifying of our views, and the regulating of our conduct.]

2. By his Providence—

[God often interposes for men in a most wonderful manner, to preserve them from evil, and to guide them into that which is good. Even a wicked Balaam was obstructed in his way by God’s appointment, in order to awaken him to a just sense of his duty. A remarkable instance of such an interposition occurs in the life of David. He, being incensed against Nabal for the contemptuous manner in which he had treated his messengers, and for his ungrateful refusal to administer to his necessitiesk, had determined to avenge himself upon him and all that belonged to him. But God put it into the heart of Abigail to go to meet him, and by mild representations to pacify his wrathl. Thus were the greatest impieties prevented through the intervention of this prudent femalem.

And in this way God often directs the ways of his people, either sending a friend perhaps, or a minister, to suggest such considerations as shall influence their minds: or by some particular occurrence “raising, as it were, a hedge, or building a wall,” to keep them in the path of duty. It may be, that the occurrence may occasion much grief at the time; but God knows how to accomplish his own purposes, and will constrain us all in due time to acknowledge that “he doeth all things well.”]

We will ADD a few words,

1. To direct your exertions—

[Do not imagine that confidence in God is to supersede your own personal exertions. You are to labour, as much as if every thing depended on yourselves; and then to trust in God, as if nothing had been done by you. You must also expressly commit your concerns to God in fervent and continual prayer. The Psalmist particularly combines this with confidence in God: “Trust in God at all times, ye people; pour out your hearts before him.” The confidence that is unaccompanied with prayer and diligence is mere presumption. We have a beautiful pattern in Jacob, when he was about to meet his brother Esau. He disposed every thing in a way most suited to pacify his brother’s anger, or, in the event of not succeeding in that attempt, to secure that part of his family who were most dear to him: but, whilst he acted thus, he committed himself wholly to the Lord, and looked for success from him alone. Thus let there be no want of prudence or of diligence on your part; and then you may be assured that God will not suffer you to be disappointed of your hope.]

2. To regulate your expectations—

[Though God promises to direct your paths, he will not so direct you as to keep you from every degree of error. The apostles themselves, though in what they declared to be the will of God they were inspired to utter nothing but what was true, were not infallible in their own personal conduct. Peter greatly erred on one occasion, in his conduct towards the Gentiles; as Paul also did in reviling God’s high priest. You must not therefore conceive that you are certainly and altogether right, because you have prayed to God for direction: God may have many wise and gracious purposes to answer by leaving you still under some measure of darkness and ignorance: if it be only to humble you still more, and to shew you the blindness of your minds and the deceitfulness of your hearts, it is a good and gracious end, for which you will in the issue see reason to be thankful. Be modest then, and diffident in your conclusions: and instead of assuming infallibility to yourselves, be always ready to suspect that your way is still far from perfect; and to the latest hour of your lives be proving to God to lead you in a right path, and to fulfil to you that gracious promise. “The meek he will guide in judgment; the meek he will teach his way.”]

DCCLVIII

THE REWARD OF CHARITY

Prov. 3:9, 10. Honour the Lord with thy substance, and with the first-fruits of all thine increase: so shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy presses shall burst out with new wine.

TO instruct men how to ensure success in their agricultural pursuits or commercial speculations, is no part of a minister’s office. Were we able substantially to benefit mankind in those particulars, there would be no want of hearers, nor any complaint that we laboured too zealously in our vocation: on the contrary, the more successful we were in effecting our wishes, the more gratefully should we be acknowledged as public benefactors. Shall I then, for once, exceed, as it were, the commission given me, and attempt to teach you how to thrive in this world? Yes; suffer me for once to usurp this office: and to assure the most unlearned person amongst you, that by acting on the principles which I will set before him this day, he shall be as sure to prosper in his business, as if he were ever so conversant with the arts of trade. I mean not indeed to say, that a person going out of his own proper line shall be enabled to prosecute that line to advantage: but that, whilst proceeding prudently in his proper vocation, he shall succeed more certainly, and to a greater extent, than on other principles he can expect to do. And I say this the more confidently, because the directions which I shall give are not the results of fallible reasonings or of uncertain conjectures, but the plain unequivocal declarations of Heaven: “Honour the Lord with thy substance, and with the first-fruits of all thine increase: so shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy presses shall burst out with new wine.”

In these words we see,

I. Our duty—

We must “honour the Lord with our substance”—

[All that we have is the Lord’s. “Our very bodies and souls are his;” and much more the property which he has committed to our care. With the whole of that he is to be honoured; and in the disposal of it, respect must be had to his will, his interests, his glory. We are to consider every thing that we possess, not as given to us, but merely as confided to us, to be improved for him; and we must so employ the whole, as to meet his approbation in the day that we shall give up our account, and to be acknowledged by him as good and faithful stewards.]

We must honour him, also, “with the first-fruits of all our increase”—

[The first-fruits under the Law were claimed by God as his, and they were to be presented to him as his peculiar property: “Thou shalt take of the first of all the fruit of the earth, which thou shalt bring, of the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, and shalt put it in a basket, and shalt go unto the place which the Lord thy God shall choose to place his name therea.” Besides these, was the tithe of all their increase to be offered to him every third year: “At the end of three years thou shalt bring all the tithe of thine increase the same year, and shalt lay it up within thy gates. And the Levite, because he hath no part nor inheritance with thee, and the stranger, and the fatherless, and the widow, which are within thy gates, shall come, and shall eat and be satisfied; that the Lord thy God may bless thee in all the work of thine hand, which thou doestb.” Under the Gospel, the letter of this law is abolished; but the spirit of it yet remains in force: for the express command of God to us is, “On the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store as God has prospered himc.” We are not to wait for the gathering in of our harvest; and then give a portion to the Lord after our own interests are secured: but rather to honour the Lord first, as the real proprietor of all; and then, trusting him for a supply of our own wants, to employ for ourselves what he shall graciously bestow upon us.]

This duty will not appear hard, if we consider what God has spoken for,

II. Our encouragement—

It should seem as if the giving of our substance were the way to diminish it: and the devoting of our first-fruits to him, the way to endanger our own provision through the year: but God has declared the very reverse, and has pledged himself that he will amply make up to us all that we part with for his sake.

This, under the Law, he did, visibly, according to the letter—

[Under that dispensation, a present and visible retribution marked, for the most part, the approbation or displeasure of God. When the people delayed to build his temple, he chastised them with famine, and referred to that visitation as a judgment inflicted on them for their sin: “Ye looked for much, and, lo! it came to little; and when ye brought it home. I did blow upon it. Why?. saith the Lord of Hosts. Because of mine house that is waste, and ye run every man to his own house. Therefore the heaven over you is staved from dew, and the earth is stayed from her fruitd.” And when they were stirred up to begin the work, he not only assured them of his blessing on their temporal concerns, but bade them note down the day that the foundation of his temple was laid, and see whether their blessings were not augmented from that very hour: “Consider now, from this day and upward, from the four-and-twentieth day of the ninth month, even from the day that the foundation of the Lord’s temple was laid, consider it: from this day will I bless youe.” He bids them even to prove him in relation to this matter, and to see whether his bounty would not keep pace with their piety: “Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house: and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of Hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive itf.”]

Under the Gospel, also, he will do it, but invisibly, and according to the spirit—

[We are not taught to look so much to temporal rewards, as to those which are spiritual and eternal: though still we are told that “godliness has the promise of the life that now is, as well as of that which is to comeg;” and that, if we “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, all needful things shall be added unto ush.” A temporal recompence for our liberality we may not obtain: but a spiritual reward is sure. For thus said the Lord: “If thou deal thy bread to the hungry, and bring the poor that are cast out to thy house; if, when thou seest the naked, thou cover him, and hide not thyself from thine own flesh; then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the Lord shall be thy rereward. If thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noon-day: and the Lord shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in thought, and make fat thy bones; and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail noti.” An eternal recompence will also most assuredly await us: for our blessed Lord has expressly told us, that if, instead of lavishing our money in feasting the rich, we delight to expend it on the poor, “we shall be recompensed at the resurrection of the justk.” He has commanded us on this account to “make friends to ourselves of the mammon of unrighteousness,” in the full expectation that at our death “we shall be received into everlasting habitationsl.” And St. Paul speaks to the same effect, when he says, “Charge them that are rich in this world, that they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate, laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal lifem.”]

But, after all, we must not altogether put out of our consideration even a present reward in the precise sense spoken of in our text: for it is beyond a doubt, that God does engage to supply the necessities of those who honour him with their substancen: and we can appeal to many, and ask, whether they have not seen, in relation to their temporal concerns, many gracious interpositions of God in their behalf? But, independent of these, who does not know that liberality is the parent of economy, and economy of wealth? A man desirous of honouring God with his substance, is delivered at once from all those vices and follies which ruin the estates of thousands. Besides, who that delights in doing good has not found incomparably greater delight in self-denial for the benefit of others, than the utmost latitude of self-indulgence could ever have afforded him? Granting, then, that no addition is actually made to our wealth: yet, if our desires are moderated, and our expenditure restrained, the same effect is ultimately produced: for we are not more truly enriched by the increase of our substance, than we are by the diminution of our wants and our consumption.]

Let me now point out THE BEARINGS of this subject,

1. On those who are engaged in visiting the sick—

[Persons engaged in imparting instruction to the ignorant, and consolation to the afflicted, have yet, in a more eminent degree, the promise in our text fulfilled to them. Their light perhaps, at first, is but very imperfect: but by imparting it to others. their own views become enlarged, and their own experience of divine truth becomes deeper, from the very circumstance of their improving it for the benefit of others. Indeed, I can hardly suggest any better method for enlarging our own knowledge, than the making use of it for the instruction of our less enlightened brethren: for besides the natural effect which may be expected from the communication of knowledge, we may expect a peculiar blessing from God whilst we are so employed. A remarkable instance of this may be found in Apollos: “He, when he knew only the baptism of John, spake and taught diligently the word of the Lord.” “Aquila and Priscilla hearing him in the synagogue, took him, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly.” And then, going forth with his augmented light, he prospered far more in his labours of love, not only “convincing the Jews that Jesus was the Christ, but helping them much who had believed through gracep.” This example is most encouraging to all, to improve for God the light which they possess: for, whatever we do for God, is regarded by him as a loan which he will repayq: and in every instance shall it be found, that “he who watereth others, shall be watered also himselfr.”]

2. On those who contribute for the support of the charity—

[On these, the subject bears to its full extent: and we are warranted to affirm, that men shall “reap either sparingly or bountifully, according as they sows.” But there is one point of view in which they pre-eminently “honour God.” and with peculiar advantage secure their reward. They honour God particularly, not merely by the distribution of their alms, but by employing and calling forth into activity the piety of others, for the benefit of their fellow-creatures. It is obvious that individuals of small property could not, without assistance from others, relieve the necessities of the poor to any great extent: and if they could not administer some temporal relief, they could not find easy access to the chambers of the sick. But being furnished with the means of easy access, they can pour the light of instruction and the balm of consolation into the souls of the afflicted to great advantage; and the persons so instructed and comforted, not only abound in thanksgivings to God for the benefits received, but in prayers to God in behalf of their benefactors. This St. Paul speaks of, as ennobling charity far beyond the mere conveyance of temporal relief——Now, then, let me ask, How can you honour God more, than in causing thanksgivings to arise to him from the altars of many hearts? and, What compensation under heaven can equal the prayers and intercessions of saints in your behalf? Put your alms in one scale, and the prayers offered to a prayer-hearing God in the other, and say whether your recompence be not very abundant, or whether it is possible to lay out money in any other way to such advantage? Let all of you, then, according to your power, “abound in this heavenly grace” of charity, after the example of your blessed Lord; “who, though he was rich, yet for your sakes became poor, that ye through his poverty might be richu.” Only get a sense of his love upon your souls, and a “sincere love to him” in return, and we shall have no occasion to entreat liberality from you; for “you yourselves will be willing of your own accord, and will be ready to pray us, with much entreaty, that we will take upon ourselves the office of ministering to the saints” as your stewardsx.]

DCCLIX

THE PLEASANTNESS OF RELIGION

Prov. 3:17. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.

TO be sincerely and eminently religious is considered by the world as a symptom of weakness and folly. But the Scriptures represent such a life as characteristic of true wisdom. Upon such “wisdom” Solomon bestows the highest commendationsa: he speaks of it as incomparably more precious than gold, or rubies, or any earthly good whatever: he paints her as a queen disposing of riches, honour, and longevity to all her subjects: and, because we are more captivated by the idea of pleasure than of any thing else, he commends her to us in the text as productive of it in the highest possible degree.

We are naturally led to shew from the words before us, that the duties of religion are,

I. Pleasant in their exercise—

In confirmation of this truth, let us consider religion,

1. In a general and comprehensive view—

[Religion, as our Lord informs us, is comprehended in two things; the love of God, and the love of our neighbour.

Let us then inquire into the love of God. Suppose a person filled with admiration of the divine perfections as exhibited in the works of creation, must not that be a pleasant exercise of mind? Suppose him rising yet higher to the works of redemption, and contemplating the justice and the mercy, the truth and the love, the wisdom and the goodness of the Deity, as united, and harmonizing, and glorified in the cross of Christ; suppose him, I say, contemplating these with rapture, till he burst forth in songs of praise similar to those uttered by the angels at the birth of Christ, or those which are now sung around the throne of God: would there be no pleasure in such an employment? Suppose him yet further meditating upon the mercies of God vouchsafed to himself in particular, and adoring

the triune God for all the wonders of electing, redeeming, sanctifying grace: must not such a frame be pleasant?

Inquire, next, into the love of our neighbour: suppose one to be exercising all those dispositions towards him which his relation to us or his situation demand: suppose one to be rejoicing with him in his prosperity, or to be weeping over his adversity in tender sympathy: suppose one to be stretching out the hand of charity for his relief, or administering consolation for his support;—is there no pleasure in all this? Surely he has not the heart of a man, who can question this obvious, indubitable truth.]

2. In its most difficult and painful duties—

[Repentance is a principal duty of religion: but can we find, it may be asked, any pleasure in that? We answer, Yes: only view repentance in its proper light, and we will affirm that it is pleasant. Suppose that one of us had by mistake swallowed somewhat that was poisonous: that we felt the deadly venom preying on our vitals; and that our medical attendant informed us, that, unless removed from our stomach, the poison would destroy us in a few hours; should we deem the exertions necessary for the removal of it a painful task? Should we not gladly renew them, till we had accomplished our end? Should we not, instead of regretting the pain occasioned by them, feel thankful that we had an opportunity to use them? And would not the success that accompanied our efforts turn our pain into a pleasure? Such then is repentance; it is a painful exertion to get rid of sin, which, if not expelled from our hearts, will utterly and eternally destroy us: and, though we do not say that pain can ever be pleasure, yet we affirm, that the very pangs of contrition, considered in a complex view, as consonant with our wishes and conducive to our good, are really pleasant: and for the truth of our assertion we will appeal to all who ever experienced those pangs: we will ask whether the seasons of their deepest humiliation have not been the sweetest seasons of their lives? We fear no contradiction upon this point, unless from those who are wholly ignorant of the matter.

Self-denial is another, and a very important, duty. But this, it should seem, precludes, in the very nature of it, the idea of pleasure, because it is a thwarting our own inclinations. We must however include this also among the ways that are ways of pleasantness. That the gratifying of a corrupt inclination is pleasant to flesh and blood, we cannot deny: but that the mortifying of it is abundantly more pleasant, we do not hesitate to affirm. Suppose a person tempted to yield to the solicitations of lust, or to gratify a no less keen appetite for revenge; would not a victory over his evil passions afford him more pleasure than a compliance with them? would not the mortifying of an unchaste desire be attended with a pleasure more pure and refined than could be attained by the indulgence of it? And, granting that the overcoming of evil with evil would be pleasant, (for revenge, they say, is sweet,) would not the “overcoming it with good” afford him incomparably sublimer happiness? Let us illustrate each of these positions by an example. Joseph, we know, resisted the importunity of his mistress: but were his sensations less pleasing when he had got out of the reach of temptation, than they would have been if he had consented to her wishes? David, when enraged at the ingratitude and insolence of Nabal, went to avenge himself by his destruction: but when stopped and pacified by Abigail, did he regret the loss of any satisfaction which he would have felt in executing his cruel designs? No: he blessed her, and blessed God for her; and found infinitely more delight in the exercise of a forgiving spirit than the completest revenge could ever have afforded him. We maintain it then, that the self-denial which religion calls for, is a source of real pleasure to the soul.

The bearing of the cross is another duty inculcated on all the followers of Christ. And can this be pleasant? Yes, we must affirm that this also is a source of pleasure to the true Christian. Doubtless the contempt and hatred which we must expect from an ungodly world are not pleasant in themselves: to be shut up in prison, and scourged, and put to a cruel and lingering death, are not pleasant in themselves: but, as endured for the sake of Christ, they are pleasant. To ascertain this, inquire of those “who took joyfully the spoiling of their goodse;” or those who, with their feet in the stocks and their backs torn with scourges. “sang praises to God at midnightf:” or those who, after their imprisonment, “rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for the sake of Christg.” Ask what our Lord meant, when he taught his followers to “rejoice and be exceeding glad.” whenever they should be called to sufferh? and inquire of all the primitive saints who had learned, through grace, to “glory in tribulationi.” Inquire of him, who suffered more than any other of the Apostles, and who, speaking of his expected martyrdom, exults in it as a matter of the warmest congratulationk. The experience of all true Christians is the same at this day: they “count themselves happy when they are called to endurel:” and look upon it as a special honour conferred upon them, when “it is given them to suffer any thing for their Redeemer’s sakem.” In a word, religion raises us so much above earthly pains and pleasures, as to render us altogether independent on them for our happinessn.

Seeing then that even the most painful duties of religion are sources of pleasure, we may confidently affirm the same respecting “all her ways.]

To this blessed account of wisdom’s ways, we may add, that they are,

II. Peaceful in their issue—

Mark the influences of religion on all who walk in her ways: mark them,

1. In life—

[None know any thing of “peace,” except the true Christian. As God has said, so experience proves, that “there is no peace to the wickedo.” The cisterns to which they go for refreshment, are polluted: or rather, they are “broken cisterns that can hold no waterp.” All that they possess is more “vanity and vexation of spirit.” “Even in laughter their heart is sorrowful; and the end of their mirth is heavinessq.” But is it thus with the true Christian? Has not he peace in his soul, and “joys, with which the stranger intermeddleth

notr?" Yes, he "has already entered into rests:" he has a tranquillity arising from the subjugation of his passions: he has a holy composure of mind springing from the testimony of a good conscience: he has many sweet manifestations of God's love to his soul: he has that within him which mitigates every sorrow, enhances every enjoyment, and supplies his every want. In a word, from committing his soul, and all his concerns, to God, he has "a peace that passeth all understanding." This peace, we say, flows from the very exercises of religion, and is, more or less, an inseparable attendant on them. To this effect the inspired writers uniformly speak. The Psalmist observes, "Great peace have they that love thy law, and nothing shall offend them." To the same purpose Isaiah also says, "The work of righteousness is peace, and the effect of righteousness is quietness and assurance for ever:" and St. Paul confirms their testimony, saying, "To be carnally-minded is death; but to be spiritually-minded is life and peace."]

2. In death—

[Even in the time of health the ungodly cannot bear to think of death: conversation upon that awful subject is irksome and disgusting to them: they avoid it, because it makes them melancholy. If they be attacked with any fatal disease, their friends do all that they can to abate their fears, and to hide from them the real state of their disorder. When at last they come to feel their danger, then they are full of alarm and terror; and, however much they despised the duties of religion before, will then begin to pay attention to them. There are some indeed so blinded by their own delusions, that they believe themselves safe; while others are so callous as to be altogether insensible of their awful condition. But if men are not wholly blinded by conceit, or hardened by wickedness, they cannot but tremble at the approach of death: and then the hopes which they once fondly entertained, give way to painful forebodings, even to "a fearful looking-for of judgment and fiery indignation." On the contrary, he who hath walked in wisdom's ways, is enabled in the midst of life to look forward to death, (like a bridegroom to his approaching nuptials,) as to the period, when all his desires shall be fulfilled, and his joys consummated. As he beholds death approaching, he rather chides its tardiness, than deprecates its advent. He "knows in whom he has believed;" and, in the hour of his departure, commits his soul with confidence into the hands of his ever-living and adorable Redeemer. Thus Stephen, thus Paula, and innumerable others, have died: and David tells us, that it is the privilege of all true believers to expect and enjoy such a death as this: "Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright; for the end of that man is peace."]

3. In eternity—

[As soon as the ungodly enter into the eternal world, whether they were conceited or callous, whether confident or trembling, they know the truth of all that God's word has declared. The Rich Man that fared sumptuously no sooner breathed out his soul, than he understood and felt the evil of neglecting his eternal interests; he then found his misery irremediable, and incapable of the smallest alleviation. He knew his five surviving brethren were living in the same thoughtless way, and hastening to the same fatal end: and wished that they might be apprised of their danger, ere it were too late: he knew by bitter experience that to those who lived and died in sin, nothing remained but unintermitted everlasting misery; "they drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of his indignation; and the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever; and they have no rest day nor night." How different is the state of true Christians! They enjoy "the rest which here remained for them:" they rest in the bosom of their Saviour, free from all sin and temptation, from pain and weariness. The peace which they enjoyed in this world, was but a taste of that banquet on which they feast continually, a drop of "those rivers of pleasure which are at God's right hand for evermore."]

ADDRESS—

1. The votaries of pleasure—

[There are two fatal mistakes under which you labour: the one is, that you think religion according to the Scriptural representation of it, will afford nothing but pain: the other is, that it will consist with an enjoyment of all the pleasures of the world. With respect to the former of these, we hope that nothing need be added to what has been already spoken: we hope that religion, if it have a dark and gloomy side, has also, like the pillar and cloud, a bright and cheering aspect: it is only on God's enemies that it casts a gloom: to his friends it affords a reviving light, a refreshing shade, a sure and safe directory to heaven. With respect to the latter idea, namely, that of its countenancing worldly pleasures, surely no one can deliberately put such a construction on our text. If Religion's ways be pleasant, must therefore Pleasure's ways be religion? If so, what can be meant by St. Paul, when he says, "She that liveth in pleasure is dead while she liveth?" What could St. John mean, when he said, "If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him?" And what could our Lord mean, when he said, "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world?" Be not deceived, as though carnal and worldly pleasures were the only sources of enjoyment; but be assured, that the renunciation of them will contribute more to your happiness than the indulgence; and that real pleasure is to be found in God alone.]

2. The disciples of Christ—

[The wicked know that you profess to find more pleasure in religion than they can obtain in the world: give them not then any reason to think that you are disappointed in your expectations. If they see you lukewarm in religion, will they not conclude that it has not charms sufficient to allure you, or benefits sufficient to reward your labour? And if they see you joining in their company and vain pursuits, will they not, however they may encourage you in such a conduct, suppose that religion is not able to make you happy, and that you are forced, after all your professions, to come and borrow of their carnal pleasures, in order to eke out the scanty pittance

that religion has bestowed? O bring not such disgrace upon your holy profession. Shew that you despise the vanities of this world, and that you have no appetite for husks after living upon “the bread that is in your Father’s house.” Our Lord has said, “My yoke is easy, and my burthen is light;” show therefore that you feel it so; and let it be seen by your zeal in religious duties, that they are not a weariness to you, but a delight. Thus will you recommend to others the paths you tread, and prove to them that “your feet are guided into the way of pence.”]

DCCLX

TRUE RELIGION DELINEATED

Prov. 3:21–24. My son, let not them depart from thine eyes: keep sound wisdom and discretion: so shall they be life unto thy soul, and grace to thy neck. Then shalt thou walk in thy way safely, and thy foot shall not stumble. When thou liest down, thou shalt not be afraid; yea, thou shalt lie down, and thy sleep shall be sweet.

IN the book of Proverbs, “wisdom” is generally put for religion: in some places, perhaps, it may be interpreted as representing Christ himself, who is “the wisdom of God and the power of God:” but in our text there can be no doubt of its importing piety, or the influence of true religion in the soul. And though in the Book of Proverbs the doctrines of religion are not very distinctly specified, the general character of it is developed with peculiar richness and beauty: and this gives to the Proverbs of Solomon an importance far beyond what would belong to a mere collection of moral lessons. We have, in the passage before us, what I might almost call a full-length picture of religion, both in its character and effects: and in these two points of view, we shall, in conformity with our text, proceed to consider it.

I. In its true and proper character—

Doubtless religion admits of an infinite diversity of description. But in no place can we find a juster representation of it than in that before us. It is,

1. “Wisdom” in the heart—

[Were we to define “wisdom.” we should say, It is the seeking of the best ends by the fittest means. And were we to declare what true religion is, we should say, It is the seeking of the salvation of the soul through the mediation and intercession of Jesus Christ.

Now, then, I would ask. What end is there for us to propose to ourselves, that can be compared with the everlasting salvation of our souls? The pursuit of crowns and kingdoms would be unworthy of an effort in comparison of this——Truly it is “the one thing needful.”

Again I would ask. What means are there fitted for the attainment of this end in comparison of those which are proposed to us in the gospel of Christ? There we find a Saviour precisely suited to our necessities: One who has made an atonement for all our sins: One who “ever liveth to make intercession for us” in heaven: and One who, as the Head of all vital influence, is “able to save to the uttermost all who come unto God by him.” By the simple exercise of faith in him, we become partakers of all his blessings: and, therefore, it is our one aim from day to day to “live by faith upon him,” and to “receive out of his fulness” all the blessings which we stand in need of.

Now, compare with this any other mode of salvation that can be devised; and its wisdom will shine forth as the sun, which eclipses, and, as it were, blots from the firmament, all the lights of heaven——]

2. Discretion in the life—

[When once religion occupies the soul, it implants a principle there which thenceforth regulates the whole man. No longer does an anxiety about earthly things distract the mind. Pleasure, riches, and honour, are all subordinated to the welfare of the soul; and the will of God is the one only rule of conduct to him. A regard for God’s honour, too, will then operate, so as to give to all circumstances, whether of time or place, their legitimate influence, and to secure to him who is under its influence the approbation of the wise and good. He illustrates in his life that saying of Solomon, “I, Wisdom, dwell with Prudence.” In a word, to approve himself to God is the one object of his life: and that one object being ever before his eyes, he is kept from every corrupt bias, and from the inconsistencies which an unhallowed principle would produce.

Of course, it must not be supposed that a person, naturally weak and foolish, will pass in a moment to a comprehensiveness of mind and soundness of judgment: that is not to be expected: on the contrary, inasmuch as a principle of piety infinitely outweighs every earthly object, it may be expected, that, on its first entrance into the soul, it will operate rather in a way of extravagance, and cause a person to overlook the minor considerations of prudence and discretion. But this must be imputed not to religion itself, but to the weakness of him in whom it dwells: and the effect of religion will be to correct his errors, and to induce habits of wisdom, which no other principle would ever have been able to form within him.]

Let us now proceed to consider it,

II. In its just and necessary effects—

Religion is not a mere principle; nor does it consist in any peculiar practice without a principle: it is an operative principle, producing,

1. Life in the soul—

[I cannot give any juster view of religion, than by saying, It is that in the soul which the soul is in the body. Without the soul, the body is dead; and without religion, the soul is dead. By the soul the body is animated, and performs all the functions of the animal life; by religion the soul is quickened, and performs all the functions of the spiritual life. By the union of the soul with the body, all the powers, both of body and mind, are called into activity: and by the operation of religion in the soul, the understanding, the will, the affections, the memory, the conscience, perform their respective offices, in subserviency to God, for the promotion of a man's spiritual and eternal good. The soul, pervading the whole body, acts with ease and regularity, and with so little ostentation, that its operations, though effectual, attract no notice: and so it is with religion in the soul; it brings into easy and harmonious use all its different faculties and powers, governing the whole man, and subjecting even the thoughts themselves to the obedience of Christ. In a word, it is, as my text has said, "life to the soul." If we were to understand by this expression, that it tends to lengthen out the existence of man on earth, it would be true, and an important truth: but we cannot so contract the sense, or comprehend less in these words than what we have expressed. Religion makes a man a new creature: "old things pass away, and all things become new."]

2. Gracefulness in the deportment—

[Well is it said by the Apostle, that "a meek and quiet spirit is, in the sight of God himself, an ornament of great price." Through the operation of divine grace upon the soul, all the tempers and dispositions will be kept in order: so that none shall prevail to the injury of other men, or to the dishonour of the man himself. The discipline of religion is not unlike that which prevails in reference to the body amongst the higher ranks of society. In persons untaught, there is an awkwardness, as it were, apparent in their whole gait; whilst those who have mixed in polished society have a comparative ease and elegance in all their motions. So, if you see a person uninstructed in religion engaged in religious exercises, he is not at home in any of them: his occupation sits not easy upon him: and if he attempt to assume the posture of real piety, he betrays his want of true feeling by the very motions in which he attempts to express it. But let a contrite and devout soul draw nigh to God, and there is a correspondence between his looks and attitude, his words and professions. His every motion is such as befits the employment in which he is engaged: yea, there is a symmetry in every part of the spiritual man, so that his whole demeanour is simple, uniform, becoming. He exemplifies in his life that expression of the Psalmist, "I will beautify the meek with salvation:" and he shews in his deportment what that inspired writer meant by that petition, "Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us." The more of real piety any man possesses, the more of this image will be stamped upon him: and the more he communes with his God, the more will a divine glory surround his head, and beam forth from his countenance in the sight of all who behold him.]

3. Stability in the walk—

[The man of sound wisdom takes heed to his ways: he desires to see his path clear before him: if he be in doubt, he will take "the word of God as a light to his feet, and a lantern to his paths." If his path be slippery, he will cry unto his God, "Hold thou up my goings in thy paths, that my footsteps slip not!" And in answer to his prayer, "God will give his angels charge over him, to keep him in all his ways, that he dash not his foot against a stone." Of these advantages the unconverted man has no experience. He ventures into scenes of temptation, without being aware of his danger: nor has he any guidance or strength but his own. What wonder, then, if he fall? But the man who, with wisdom in his heart, and discretion in his life, "suffers not these" guardian angels, as it were, "to depart from his eyes," will be kept amidst all the most trying scenes in which he can be engaged, and "will be preserved blameless unto the kingdom of his God." "The Law of God is in his heart, and therefore his footsteps do not slidea."]

4. Peace in the heart—

["What man is he that feareth the Lord? His soul," says the Psalmist, "shall dwell at ease." A man without religion may pass through the day with some degree of comfort, because of the variety of occupations that engage his thoughts. But when he comes to lie down at night, and he has time for reflection, some painful occurrence will dwell upon his mind, and agitate his spirits, and disturb his rest: and when he wakes in the morning, the same unpleasant feelings will haunt him, and destroy that serenity which sleep was calculated to convey. Or, if nothing particular have occurred to distress him, he lies down and rises up without any other feeling than that which he possesses in common with the beasts. But not so the truly religious man. He, when retiring to rest, calls to remembrance the mercies with which he has been encompassed during the day, and renders thanks for them to his heavenly Benefactor; to whom also he commends himself for protection during the defenceless hours of the night. Shall I speak too strongly if I say, that he lies down, as it were, in the bosom of his God, saying, "I will lay me down in peace, and sleep; for thou, Lord, only makest me to dwell in safety?" In the morning, too, when he awakes, he finds that "his sleep has been sweet unto him;" not to his body merely, but to his soul; for his soul, at the first resuming of its powers, finds God present with it, in a way which the merely natural man has no conception of: so true is that expression of the Psalmist, "When I awake, I am still with thee." So true, also, is that encouraging promise of Solomon, "Bind the commandment upon thine heart, and tie it about thy neck: when thou goest, it shall lead thee; when thou sleepest, it shall keep thee: and when thou awakest, it shall walk with thee."]

APPLICATION—

1. Are there now any present, who are prejudiced against religion?

[Know what true religion is. It is not by any means that thing which prejudiced persons are ready to imagine. "It is wisdom, sound wisdom, and discretion." There are doubtless in the Gospel many things which surpass our comprehension. But so there are also in all the other works of God, whether of creation or providence. But if there are truths at which a proud man will stumble, there is not one which will not commend itself to an humble and childlike spirit. And as far as it operates upon the soul, it induces discretion in every part of a man's conduct, and assimilates him to the very image of his God. Who amongst us will say that the Saviour's example was not good? Yet his enemies condemned it, and accounted him worthy to be crucified as the vilest malefactor. And may there not be a measure of the same prejudice in you, a prejudice that blinds your eyes, and makes you to hate those whom you should love and honour? But, at all events, know this: whatever corresponds not with religion, as described in our text, we disclaim. If there be folly and indiscretion in any who profess the Gospel, let them bear the blame, and not religion. But if you will condemn the care of the soul as a needless preciseness, and a cleaving unto the Saviour as an enthusiastic and vain conceit, you shall bear the burthen: for, blame these things as ye may, know that "Wisdom will be justified of all her children."]

2. Are there those here who profess to love religion?

[Beware, lest by any thing imprudent ye "cause the way of truth to be evil spoken of:" yea, seek rather to the utmost of your power to "adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things." On your conduct much depends. Men will not judge of religion so much by what we say, as by what we do. In vain shall Solomon himself describe it as forming such lovely characters, if you contradict his statements in your life and conversation. However we may expose the folly of so doing, men will identify religion with the conduct of its professors: and will take occasion, from any thing that is unbecoming in you, to cast reflections upon religion for your sake. But, knowing this propensity in them, you should be doubly careful not to cast a stumbling-block in their way. See to it, then, that ye "walk worthy of your high calling." If ye be children of the light, let it be seen by the holiness of your conversation: and, wherever ye go, be ye epistles of Christ, known kind read of all men; so that all who behold you may be constrained to say, "We will go with you; for we see that God is with you of a truth."]

DCCLXI

THE REWARDS OF WISDOM AND OF FOLLY

Prov. 3:35. The wise shall inherit glory; but shame shall be the promotion of fools.

A DESIRE of distinction and a fear of shame are powerful incentives to the human mind, and produce, in every department of life, exertions far beyond those to which mere natural inclination would prompt us. The soldier on the field of battle finds those principles stronger than the fear of death: nor is the student insensible of their influence upon his mind: on the contrary, the nearer the time approaches for a judgment to be passed upon him, the greater are his anxieties respecting it. Now, these feelings being founded in nature itself, God is pleased to call them into action in reference to things of far higher moment than those which too generally engross them. Disgrace or honour are awarded to men, even in the present life, on moral and religious grounds, and much more will they in the life to come: and I wish that a due concern may be felt in reference to them, whilst I point out the influence of wisdom,

I. On our present state—

Wisdom may fitly be described as a conformity to the mind of God; and folly, as any aberration from it. But it is the Gospel alone that places these in their true light. Let us,

1. Distinguish the two characters—

[The Gospel is a proclamation of mercy to perishing sinners, through the blood and righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ; nor is there any way of salvation for fallen man, except that which is there revealed. All who are not interested in that Saviour must perish under the guilt of their sins——

Now, who is wise, but he who labours to secure that salvation? or who is a fool, but he who neglects it? Suppose that means of escape from a sinking vessel, or a house in flames, were offered to one in danger of instantaneous destruction: would any person in the universe hesitate to assign the proper and distinctive epithets to him who availed himself of them, and to him who disregarded them? Yet would their conduct but very faintly shadow forth that which is exhibited under the Gospel dispensation: and the terms used to designate that conduct would very faintly describe its appropriate character. Let the two characters, then, be properly distinguished. Where is the man who, with all humility of mind and entire devotion of soul, seeks an interest in the Saviour?—— Him we may safely designate as "wise." Where, on the other hand, is the man who neglects the Saviour?——Whatever excuses he may allege in vindication of his conduct, we need not hesitate to assign to him the humiliating appellation of a "fool."]

2. Declare their proper award—

["The wise" shall even here "inherit glory." Every one, whatever his own practice may be, has within his own bosom a witness in favour of those who are religious, provided their conduct be uniform and consistent. In outward profession, I grant, the world may brand religion with the name of folly: but their consciences in secret give a very different testimony: nor is there any man, however ungodly, so wicked, but that he reverences in his heart a pious character, and wishes, if it were possible, to be found in his place at the day of judgment. Herod, in the midst of all his impiety, "feared John, because he knew him to be a just and holy man." And so it is with the ungodly world: they venerate the very man whom for his piety they hate and persecute. On the other hand, vain and thoughtless as art the world at large, and interested in upholding each other in their various pursuits, there is not one among them, who, in his moments of reflection, does not see the emptiness and vanity of worldly things; and who would not regard it as an inconsistency in a religious character, if he should betray an eagerness in the prosecution of them. The truth of these observations will be manifest beyond either contradiction or doubt, if only we bear in mind the conduct of the Scribes and Pharisees of old, who, whilst persecuting our blessed Lord even unto death, "built the tombs of the prophets, and garnished the sepulchres of the righteous," whom their forefathers had put to death. Precisely thus we also at this time honour the memory of the Apostles, and of our own reformers too, for who does not honour the names of Cranmer, and Latimer, and Ridley?) whilst we hate, revile, and persecute the living saints, who walk in their steps: and the names of the Scribes and Pharisees of old are odious to us, whilst we pay respect to those who sustain the same character amongst ourselves. All this clearly shews, that whatever our outward behaviour may be towards the two different parties, both of them have an inward witness in our own bosoms; "the wise inheriting the glory" that is due to them, whilst "shame is the only promotion of fools."]

But still more effect will wisdom have,

II. On our condition in the eternal world—
There the conduct of all will be rightly appreciated—

[In this world there are many things which obscure the wisdom of the wise, and which serve to palliate the folly of fools. The weaknesses of many good men excite a prejudice against their sentiments and conduct, and do really cast an air of folly over their very profession. This is deeply to be lamented: but, whilst there is so much folly bound up in the heart of man, and in many the seed of Divine Grace is but as a grain of mustard-seed, it is not to be wondered at that such stumbling-blocks should occur: indeed, unless a miracle were wrought to turn babes at once into young men and fathers, it is scarcely possible that offences of some kind should not arise from the injudicious deportment of weaker brethren. On the other hand, amongst those who are not devoted to the Saviour, there are many eminent for their attainments in science, and abounding in every species of worldly wisdom; and amidst so much that is amiable and good, it is difficult to mark with becoming severity the folly of which they are guilty. But God will judge righteous judgment: he will distinguish infallibly between the errors of the judgment and the bias of the heart: and to those who sought him, though in much weakness, he will give a testimony of applause; but on those who sought him not he will denounce his sentence of eternal condemnation.]

Then will wisdom and folly appear in their true light—

[Behold the saint approved of his God, and seated on a throne of glory! Will any one think he sacrificed too much for this, or laboured too hard for this? Will there be any difference of opinion respecting him, amongst the hosts of heaven, or even in the regions of hell? No; there will be but one testimony respecting him. Every creature in the universe will pronounce him wise. See, on the other hand, the most successful and distinguished of the human race banished from the presence of that Saviour whom he would not seek, and of that God whom he refused to serve! Will there be any difference of opinion respecting his folly? Nay, will not he himself be the very first to accuse himself, and to curse the folly which once he so fondly cherished? Yes: we are told that, in hell, men will "weep, and wail, and gnash their teeth" with anguish: and I cannot doubt but that their self-reproach will be one of the bitterest ingredients in the cup which will there be given them to drink. When they see in what their love of "promotion" has issued, and that it has brought nothing but a pre-eminence in "shame" and sorrow, they will set their seal to that once-despised truth, that "wisdom excelleth folly, as much as light excelleth darkness."]

Permit me now to RECOMMEND to every one amongst you,
A retrospect of your past lives—

[What is your estimate now of your past life? If there one amongst you who would not rather that it should have been under the influence of wisdom, than that it should have been so devoted to folly, as in the great majority of cases it has been? I suppose there is scarcely any one that has not, at some season or other, had moments of reflection, and formed some faint purposes of amendment. Let the humiliation then experienced have been ever so transient, do you not at this time look back upon it as the best hour of your lives? and do you not regret that it so speedily passed away? And, however deeply you may have drunk of the cup of pleasure, do you not now feel that it is all vanity, and that nothing of it remains but the dregs, which have a bitter taste? Where is there one amongst you, who, if he should hear it dying man glorying in having lived altogether to the flesh and to the world, would not be shocked at it as an excess of impiety and folly? Or who, if he were himself in dying circumstances, would not wish for a far different frame of mind to prepare him for his great account? I make this appeal with confidence, and am content to rest the whole of what I have said on the testimony of your own consciences. Yes, beloved Brethren, you shall be constituted judges in your own case: and I will abide by the decision which you yourselves shall give. Let your convictions, then, be now realized: and let the Lord

Jesus Christ be now sought by you without delay.]

2. A prospective view of futurity—

[Soon you will be convinced, at all events, whether you will listen to good instruction now, or not. Soon you will “see whose word shall stand—the world’s, or God’s.” Depend upon it, God’s word will not change. What he has designated as wisdom by the mouth of Prophets and Apostles, he will pronounce to have been so, when he shall sit on his throne of judgment. Why will ye not then anticipate that sentence? And why will ye not consider what your reflections will be, when all your present opportunities of turning unto God shall have passed away? This only do I ask of you: ‘Act now, as you will then wish you had acted.’ Methinks this is a reasonable request: it is a request which every one acknowledges to be good in reference to the things of time; and surely it cannot be less good in reference to eternity. May God enable all of you, then, to comply with it! and may you all not only become wise, but be made wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus!]

DCCLXII

THE NATURE AND EXCELLENCE OF TRUE WISDOM

Prov. 4:7. Wisdom is the principal thing: therefore get wisdom; and with all thy getting, get understanding.

THE inspired volume is no less useful in rectifying the prejudices of education, than it is in restraining the indulgence of forbidden appetites. As far as relates to the grosser violations of moral duty, the advice of parents and teachers is in unison with the Holy Scriptures; but we are very rarely exhorted to follow that which is the main end and purpose of life. Get wealth, get honour, are the lessons inculcated on all the rising generation. David however sets us a better example: he earnestly entreated his son above all things to cultivate true religion. And Solomon, having reaped much advantage from those instructions, has left them on record for our benefit. We shall endeavour,

I. To shew the nature and excellence of true wisdom—

That which is usually termed wisdom is far from being the object so extolled in the text—

[We mean not to depreciate the attainments of art or science. They are valuable in themselves, and, if duly improved, may, like the Egyptian gold, enrich and beautify the sanctuary of God. But the wisdom spoken of in the text, has respect entirely to spiritual things.]

True wisdom is the proposing of the best ends and prosecuting of them by the fittest means—

[There is no end so worthy to be pursued by a rational creature, as the sanctification and salvation of his own soul. Nor are there any means of attaining it so proper, as those prescribed in the holy Scriptures. To repent of all our sins, to flee to Christ for the pardon of them, and to seek the renovation of our hearts by the Holy Spirit, are represented as the only effectual means of salvation. These things, it must be confessed, are often called folly: but they are called so only by those, who have never known them by experience. Not one among the holy angels would account it folly to love and serve God. None of the redeemed in heaven regret that they were once so strenuous in the exercises of religion. The saints on earth are precisely of the same mind with those in heaven. Hence conversion to a holy life is called “a turning of the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the justb.” Even devils and damned spirits would confess that devotedness of heart to God is the truest wisdom. Careless sinners are the only beings who dissent from this truth: and they in a little time will assuredly alter their opinionc.]

Such wisdom is justly termed “the principal thing”—

[There are many other things which are important in their place: but this is far superior to them all. Riches cannot be put in competition with itd. Pleasure, honour, or even life itself, are not worthy to be compared with ite. It excels every thing else as much as light excelleth darknessf. This exclusively deserves the name of wisdom, God himself being witnessg. It is “the good part:h” and he alone can be called truly wise, who, like Paul, accounts every thing but loss for that unspeakably excellent attainmenti.]

Its excellency being thus established, we may proceed,

II. To urge upon you the diligent pursuit of it—

In the text, with the preceding context, we may see the utmost fervour that language can express. May we be animated with the same, while we labour to impress the subject on your minds by the following considerations! Consider then,

1. This wisdom is both more easily, and more certainly, to be attained than any thing else—

[With respect to other things, every one has not a capacity for making great attainments; nor have all, who possess good abilities, an opportunity of cultivating them to advantage. Nor can great industry united with great talents, always ensure successk; but no man ever sought this in vain. The poor fishermen of Galilee were as capable of comprehending it, as the philosophers of Greece and Rome. We attain it, not by the mere exertion of our own powers, but by the teachings of God’s Spiritl. Nor will he ever refuse that heavenly gift to any who seek it with a teachable and childlike dispositionm. This thought may well encourage all. May we be stirred up by it to seek the unction that shall teach us all thingsn! Then will God bestow upon us his promised blessingo; and make us wise

unto salvation through faith in Christp.]

2. There is nothing else which will so conduce to our present happiness—

[The creature is justly represented as a cistern that will hold no waterq. All who seek happiness in it are disappointed. Even science itself, which is the most rational of all earthly pleasures, is often a source of sorrow and vexationr; but true wisdom is an overflowing fountain of joy. In prosperity, it adds a zest to all our comforts; and in adversity, a balm to all our sorrows. In a time of pain and trouble more especially its excellency appears. What can earthly things do to assuage our anguish or compose our mindss? But religion enables us to see the rod in our Father's hand, and to know that all is working for our goodt. St. Paul found it to be wealth in poverty, joy in sorrow, life in deathu. And such will every Christian experience it to be in the hour of trialx. Shall not this consideration then quicken our diligence in the pursuit of it?]

3. There is nothing besides this that can in the least promote our eternal welfare—

[Our duties, when performed with an eye to God, are a part of religion itself; but, independent of the respect which we have to him in the performance of them, they are of no value in his sight. A person may do many things that are beneficial to society, and yet be dead in trespasses and sins. But Solomon, specifying the supreme excellency of wisdom, affirms, that it giveth life to them that have ity. No man can perish that possesses wisdom; nor can any man be saved who is destitute of itz. Shall we not then be prevailed upon to seek it? Shall we disregard the commendations that David and Solomon have given of it? And shall their importunity be treated by us with coldness and neglect? Surely such a conduct may well expose us to the most severe of all reflectionsa.]

“Suffer then a word of EXHORTATION”—

[The wisdom here spoken of is not the only thing in the world that is desirable; nor the only thing that you may laudably pursue. There are innumerable other things which demand our attention: and which our several conditions in life render necessary. The text itself supposes, or rather enjoins, that we should labour to get other things; but wisdom is indisputably “the principal thing:” and “with all our getting we must be mindful to get understanding.” Whatever else be neglected, this must not: it is “the one thing needful.” Therefore, “get it, get it, get it, get itb.” “Forsake it not, neither forget it: exalt it, love it, and embrace it: so shall it be an ornament of grace to your head, and a crown of glory to your soul.” For whoso findeth it findeth life, and shall obtain favour of the Lordc.]d

DCCLXIII

THE CHRISTIAN'S PATH COMPARED TO THE LIGHT

Prov. 4:18. The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day.

HABITS, of whatever kind, are strengthened by exercise; the more congenial they are with our natural feelings, the more easily are they confirmed. Hence the wicked, without any express purpose on their part, are daily more and more riveted to the world and sin. The righteous too increase in love to the ways of God in proportion as they endeavour to fulfil his will. They have indeed a bias, which, if they were left to themselves, would soon turn them aside. But God will not leave them destitute of needful succour: he pledges himself that their path shall resemble the shining light. This is found true by happy experience. Their path is,

I. Beautiful in its appearance—

The rising sun is as beautiful an object as any in the whole creation—

[At its first approach it tinges the distant clouds with light. On its first appearance it gilds the summits of the woods and mountains: then, dispelling all the shades of night, it illumines the whole horizon. How delightful is this to every one that beholds ita!]

Thus is the path of the righteous exceeding beautiful—

[“The just” are they who are renewed and sanctified by the Spirit of God. Their path in the very outset is beautiful to behold. Their simplicity of mind, and teachableness of spirit, endear them to us; their lowliness and humility attract the notice of the very angels themselvesb. The fervour of their love engages both our admiration and esteem. The very shades in their character serve as a contrast to shew the excellence of the change that has passed upon them. As they proceed their graces are more matured. Their course is justly described by the Apostle Paulc. Surely such a conduct must be beautiful in the eyes of God and man. They are justly spoken of as “beautified with salvationd: they even reflect a lustre upon the Gospel itselfe.]

While their path is so amiable, it resembles the light further, in that it is

II. Beneficial in its influence—

The sun does not shine with unproductive splendour—

[It enables the several orders of men to return to their respective callings. In the darkness they could not go without stumblingf; but now they follow their occupations without fear or difficulty. The productions of the earth also feel the genial influence of the sun, and are matured by means of its invigorating beams.]

Nor is the Christian unprofitable in his course—

[The wicked are stumbling on every side of him; but the Christian affords a light to the benighted souls around him. He shines in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation: he is an epistle of Christ, known and read of all men. The account given of Job, describes his course, as far as his situation and circumstances will allow. Thus by his conduct he puts to silence the ignorance of foolish men. He even wins some, perhaps, whom the word alone would never have converted, and causes many to glorify his heavenly Father.]

The comparison yet further holds, in that the path of the just, like that of the sun, is,

III. Constant in its progress—

The sun invariably pursues its wonted course—

[From the instant it rises, it hastens toward the meridian. Sometimes indeed its splendour is intercepted by clouds, and sometimes it may be partially, or even totally eclipsed; still, however, it proceeds in its appointed path, and is sure to arrive at its meridian height.]

The Christian too goes forward towards perfection—

[He never rests as though he had attained the summit. He determines to be ever pressing forward for higher attainments. He may indeed for a season be involved in clouds: yea, perhaps, he may through the violence of temptation, suffer an eclipse: but, if he be really “just” and upright, his light shall break forth again. God has ensured this by a solemn promise. Jeremiah illustrates it by the very allusion in the text: nor is this progress the privilege of some only. David speaks of it as belonging to Israel of old. Paul represents it as enjoyed by every true Christian: and Peter shews us whence this stability proceeds. None indeed arrive at absolute perfection in this life: but soon the just will be changed into Christ’s perfect image, and shine above the sun in the firmament for ever and ever.]

IMPROVEMENT—

1. For conviction—

[We are in a world that lieth in darkness and the shadow of death; and, if we be Christians indeed, we are shining as lights in a dark place. Do our consciences testify that this is the case with us? Are we examples of holiness to those of our own age and rank? Do we reprove all works of darkness, instead of having fellowship with them? If not, how can we ever be numbered among the just? Shall we say that we once were such, but are now under a cloud? Or that our light is at the present eclipsed! Let us beware lest we prove only as a fleeting meteor. Our light must be steady and increasing, like that of the sun. The tree is known by its fruit; and the just by their light; and a false profession will deceive us to our eternal ruin.]

2. For consolation—

[There are many true Christians who do not enjoy much comfort, and the darkness of their minds sometimes makes them doubt whether they be upright before God; but they often write bitter things against themselves without a cause. Distress, whether temporal or spiritual, argues nothing against our integrity. Job never shone brighter than in his trouble; nor Christ, than in the depths of his dereliction. Let him then that is in darkness, stay himself upon his God. It is to such persons that God sends us with words of comfort. To them in particular is that delightful declaration addressed. Wait then the Lord’s leisure, ye afflicted souls, and trust in him. Soon shall your “light rise in obscurity, and your darkness be as the noon-day;” nor will God be glorified less in your patience, than in more active services.]

DCCLXIV

KEEPING THE HEART

Prov. 4:23. Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.

IT is certainly of infinite importance that we be deeply convinced of our utter inability to do any thing that is good, and of our entire dependence upon God for the effectual aids of his Holy Spirit. But we must not imagine, that, because we have no sufficiency of ourselves to do the will of God, we are not bound in duty to do it, or not to be exhorted and stimulated to the performance of it. Our duty is the same, whatever be the circumstances to which we have reduced ourselves; and it is in, and by, our personal exertions, that God has promised to “work all our works in us.” Hence, in the Scriptures of Truth, we are continually exhorted to serve our God in the way of his commandments. It is obvious that we cannot preserve the life of our bodies for one single moment; yet God expects, that we keep ourselves from those things which would destroy life, and use all proper means of preserving it: so neither can we, of ourselves, preserve the life of our souls; yet are we bound to “keep our heart with all diligence; since out of it are the issues of life.”

It is indeed supposed here, that a new heart has been given to us; because from the unregenerated heart no good thing can issue: but inasmuch as even the renewed heart has still innumerable corruptions within it, we must keep it with all diligence.

To impress this duty on our minds, let us consider,

I. The duty enjoined—

"To keep the heart" is indeed an arduous task. To assist you in the performance of it, we will offer such suggestions as appear suitable to the occasion:

1. Fortify it with good principles—

[A city unfortified is open to assault on every side: and so is the heart, if not duly fortified by the principles of true religion. As a sinner redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, and sanctified by his Spirit, I am the Lord's peculiar property: I live by him; and I must live for him: "having been bought with a price, I am not my own, but his" who bought me: and I have nothing to do but to "glorify him with my body and my spirit, which are his." When therefore any thing attempts to gain possession of my heart, I must keep it for Him; for Him wholly; for Him alone. Nothing is to break in upon this principle. Let earth and hell assault me, I must oppose them in this impregnable bulwark; "Depart from me, ye evil-doers; I will keep the commandments of my Goda." The Christian is furnished by God with armour for this contestb; and, clothed in this panoply, he must maintain the conflict even unto deathc.]

2. Watch all its most secret motions—

[A citadel, however strong, if filled with traitors waiting for an occasion to open it to the enemy, needs to be guarded with peculiar care: the professed defenders of it must themselves be watched. So it is with the heart, notwithstanding it be at present garrisoned for the Lord. It is inconceivably difficult in many instances to distinguish between the loyal and the treacherous. They are both habited in the same uniform; and both make the very same professions: both too appear actuated by the same holy zeal. The Apostles, when disputing with each other who should be the greatest, and forbidding others to cast out devils, because they followed not with them, and desiring to call fire from heaven to avenge their Master's cause, appeared as faithful as men could be: yet were they in reality actuated by pride and envy, in the garb of zeal and love: and, had not these corrupt passions been checked at first, who can tell, "how great a matter this little fire might have kindled?" There is not a motion of the heart but must be strictly marked: its associates must be carefully noticed; its tendencies examined; its professions scrutinized; lest Satan himself be found there, under the semblance of an angel of lightf.]

3. Combine all its energies in the service of your God—

[The Psalmist has a remarkable expression on this subject; "Unite my heart, O Lord, to fear thy nameg." If the powers of the soul be scattered, they will be as inefficient as soldiers that are dispersed. It is by a combination of efforts for a preconcerted end, and by simultaneous movements for its accomplishment, that success is attained. The various powers of the soul must act in unison: the understanding, the will, the affections, the memory, the conscience, must all have the same object in view, each defending its proper post to the uttermost, and ready to succour the other with all its might. If, whilst the understanding is occupied about spiritual and heavenly things, the will and the affections are running after earthly and carnal things, what can be expected, but that the enemy shall soon gain undisguised and permanent possession of the soul? Every one knows, that "a house divided against itself, falleth;" and a divided heart must become a prey to the great adversary of God and man. All its powers must center in God, if God is to inhabit it as his temple, and to possess it as his inheritance.]

4. Call in for it the most effectual aid—

[Human efforts, unassisted by God, will be of little avail. Indeed we can do nothing but as we are assisted by "the Captain of our Salvationh." To him then must we look to "strengthen us with might by his Spirit in our inward man;" we must go forth against our enemies, as David did against Goliath, not in dependence on an arm of flesh, but in the name of the Lord God of Israel: we must "be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his mightk." Then we may defy all our adversaries: we may boldly ask the greatest amongst them; "Who art thou, O thou great Mountain? Before Zerubbabel thou shalt become a plain." See how Paul taught the first Christians to triumph, whilst yet in the midst of all their conflicts: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No: in all these things we are more than conquerorsl:" so then may the weakest of us triumph, if we call in our blessed Lord to our aid: for "through Christ strengthening us, we can do all thingsm.]"

But to form a right judgment of our duty, we must yet more distinctly notice,

II. The particular instruction relating to it—

We must keep our heart "with all diligence." Our attention to it must be,

1. Earnest—

[It is not a slight or superficial attention to it that will suffice. The work is too great to be effected in such a way. To keep the heart from sin amidst so many temptations on every side, and to keep it in the exercise of all holy and heavenly graces, from every one of which it is by nature alienated; this is a great work indeed, and requires the utmost possible exertion on our part. The metaphors by which the Christian's life is set forth, sufficiently shew what efforts are called for on our part. A race is not to be won without straining every nerve: an adversary, whether in fight or in wrestling, is not to be overcome without putting forth all our strength. Can we then suppose, that, when our contest is not with flesh and blood only, but with all the principalities and powers of hell, the victory can be gained without the most strenuous exertions? No; it cannot: and our Lord plainly tells us that it cannot: "Strive," says he, "to enter in at the strait gate: for many shall seek to enter in, and not be able." Know then, that whatever you have to do in the keeping of your

heart, you must “do it with all your might.”]

2. Constant—

[The work which we have to do, is not like that of a painter or a statuary, who may leave his work for a time, and find it afterwards in the state in which he left it: it is rather like that of one who is rolling up hill a stone, which will return upon him, as soon as ever he intermits his labour. Our hearts of themselves are “bent to backslide from God,” ever ready to “start aside as a deceitful bow:” and Satan is ever on the watch to draw us aside. If he intermit his labours, it is in appearance only, and not in reality: for he is ever “going about, as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.” His wiles and devices are innumerable: and, if once he can find us off our guard, he will assuredly avail himself of the occasion to deceive and, if possible, to destroy us. We therefore must be always “on our watch-tower,” according to that direction of our blessed Lord, “Watch and pray; lest ye enter into temptation: and, what I say unto you, I say unto all, Watch.”]

3. Persevering—

[There is no state at which we can arrive in this world that supersedes the necessity of continued vigilance and care. Were we as eminent as Paul himself, we must still, like him, “keep our body under and bring it into subjection, lest by any means, after having preached to others, we ourselves become castaways.” Let our circumstances be ever so favourable, we know not but that we shall fall the very next moment. Hezekiah was but just recovered from a dangerous illness, and that by miracle; yet when the Babylonish ambassadors came to offer him their master’s congratulations, he fell, and offended God by “the pride of his heart.” Peter also was but just descended from Mount Tabor, where he had beheld his Lord transfigured, and shining forth in all his glory, when he acted Satan’s part in dissuading his Lord from completing the work assigned him: so that he drew forth from his Divine Master that just reprimand, “Get thee behind me, Satano.” We may add too, that there is no wickedness so great, but we may be drawn to the commission of it. Who can reflect on David’s adultery and murder, or on Peter’s denial of his Lord with oaths and curses, and not see reason to cry continually to God, “Hold thou me up, and I shall be safe!”

Thus then we see, it is not enough to keep our hearts, but we must “keep them with all diligence,” engaging in the work with earnestness, and maintaining it with constancy and perseverance to the latest hour of our lives.]

Let us now attend to,

III. The reason with which both the one and the other are enforced—

The heart may in some respects be considered as the seat of vitality in the human body, because from thence issues the blood that circulates through the whole frame. But still more may it be said of the heart in a spiritual view, that out of it are the issues of life. For,

1. It is the proper source of all evil—

[There are many evils to which our corrupt nature is apt to yield: some are spiritual, and some are fleshly: but the womb where all are generated, and from whence they proceed, is the heart. Adultery, and murder, and theft, with many other evils, might be supposed to arise rather out of external circumstances connected with our outward man: but they are all traced by our blessed Lord to the heart: “From within, out of the heart of man, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: all these things come from withinp.” Now, if the heart be the fruitful spring of such evils, ought it not to be watched? ought it not to be kept with all diligence? It is evident that, without continual care, the whole man would soon be inundated with evil: should we not then watch the sluices? should we not guard the banks, and keep them in good repair? In other words, should we not do all in our power to prevent such fatal effects? Let it never be forgotten, that the smallest breach in a bank will soon yield to the torrent, and, by its extension, bid defiance to any remedy that can be applied: consequently, if we would not be overrun with all manner of evil, we must guard against the irruption of any. “A little leaven will soon leaven the whole lump.”]

2. It is the proper seat of all good—

[Grace is planted in the heart: it has no other residence: it may operate by the members: but its seat is in the heart. Repentance flows from thence, even from “the broken and contrite heart.” Faith has there its first formation. “With the heart man believeth unto righteousness.” Love combines and concentrates all its powers: “We are to love God with all the heart;” yea, “Christ himself dwells in our hearts by faith.” Whatever then proceeds not from the heart, is of no value: all our best services for God are no other than hypocrisy, if the heart be far from him. Must we not then keep the heart with all diligence, to see that it be duly influenced by divine grace, and that all which we do is the result of gracious principles implanted there? Truly, if “a man may give all his goods to feed the poor, and his body to be burned, and, after all, be no better than sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal,” because his actions proceed not from a principle of love in the heart, we are called upon to watch over our hearts with all imaginable care, that they be duly stored with all that is good. This is the plain and obvious inference from what our Lord himself hath distinctly affirmed in those memorable words. “The evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is evil; and the good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good:” in both cases the produce is “from the abundance of the heart:” and “the tree is known by its fruits.”]

3. By it shall our state be determined in the last day—

[Even in courts of judicature amongst ourselves, it is not so much the act, as the heart, that is the object of investigation. Murder itself is not accounted murder, if it was not attended with a purpose of heart to injure and destroy. Much more therefore may it be expected that God will inquire into the designs and purposes of our hearts: "He looketh not on the outward appearance, but at the heart:" and "he searcheth the heart, and trieth the reins, on purpose to give to every man according to the fruit of his doings." For this end "he will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the heart." To our hearts then must we look, if ever we would give up our account with joy: for, as our hearts are, so shall we appear in his sights. Let us then not only search and try ourselves, but beg of God also to "search and try us, and to see if there be any wicked way in us, and to lead us in the way everlasting."]

APPLICATION—

1. Grudge not your labour in the way to heaven—

[You cannot make any attainments in this life without labour: how then can you hope to attain without it the glory and felicity of heaven? True it is, that heaven is a gift of God; a gift altogether of his free and sovereign grace: but it is also true, that we must labour for it, according to that direction of our Lord; "Labour not for the meat that perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you." Labour then with all earnestness, and constancy, and perseverance. If you be frequently foiled, still return to your post, and increase your vigilance in proportion as you discover the deceitfulness and wickedness of your hearts: and be assured, that, however great your toil may be, heaven will be an abundant recompence for all.]

2. Doubt not but that your labour shall at last be crowned with success—

[Were your success dependent on an arm of flesh, you might well despond: but your God and Saviour is pledged to "carry on in you the work he has begun," and to "perfect that which concerneth you." Your enemies may renew their assaults as often as they will; but they shall not prevail: for God has said, that "No weapon that is formed against you shall prosper:" and again. "The law of God is in his heart: his footsteps shall not slide." Go on then: "watch ye: stand fast in the faith; quit you like men: be strongy:" and know for your comfort what the all-gracious and unchanging God hath spoken: "Be not weary in well-doing: for in due season ye shall reap, if ye faint notz."]

DCCLXV

SINNER'S RETROSPECT

Prov. 5:12, 13. How have I hated instruction, and my heart despised reproof; and have not obeyed the voice of my teachers, nor inclined mine ear to them that instructed me!

A TIME of reflection must come to all: if men shake off all thought till the hour of death, they will not be able to do so when once the soul is separated from the body: their ways will then be brought to remembrance: and all the powers of their minds be fixed upon the contemplation of them. Happily, with many this season arrives before it is too late: and, not unfrequently, the very enormities which have been committed are the means of exciting in the soul a salutary remorse. Sometimes the present consequences of sin press heavily upon the mind, and awaken the energies of a sleepy conscience. Thus Solomon supposes many to be affected after they have brought trouble on themselves by their licentious courses: and he urges this very consideration as an argument for guarding against all temptations to sin, that, however pleasurable a life of sin may be, the retrospect will be painful in the extreme: and the now thoughtless debauchee "will mourn at the last," in the review of the mercies he has abused, and will say, "How have I hated instruction, and my heart despised reproof!"

We shall not confine our attention to the particular subject treated of in the context, though in every congregation, it is to be feared, there are but too many to whom it would be applicable: but shall rather take occasion from our text to set before you in a more enlarged view,

I. The sinner's retrospect—

That we may bring home the subject to every man's bosom, we shall consider men under two distinct classes;

1. Those who already feel some painful consequences of their past conduct—

[Amongst these we must first notice the persons more immediately referred to in our text, namely, those who have wasted their property, and injured their constitution, in habits of criminal indulgence. What reason for regret have they! How glad would they now be, if they had restrained their appetites, and not purchased a momentary gratification at so high a price!—Next to these we may mention the spendthrift, and the gamester, who through covetousness or the love of pleasure have dissipated their fortune, and involved themselves in ruin. How common is it for persons so circumstanced to destroy their own lives, and to seek in suicide a remedy for the evils they have entailed upon themselves!—To these we may add the persons who by any disgraceful act have blasted their reputation, and rendered themselves obnoxious to just reproach: to such the seasons of reflection are bitter. They

attempt perhaps to divert their thoughts by business or pleasure; but they can never cease to rue the day in which they brought upon themselves so heavy a calamity. There are times when all who have entailed misery on themselves will bring to mind the instructions given them in early youth; and then they will, inwardly at least, complain, "How have I hated instruction, and my heart despised reproof!"]

2. Those who, though they feel no present pain arising from their sins, are yet sensible that they have not answered the great ends of life—

[The necessity of turning unto God, and the means of acceptance with God through the atonement of Christ, have been distinctly set forth from time to time; so that, supposing persons to have diligently attended to the word that has been preached to them, and to have "mixed faith with it," it would have been impossible for them to have continued in the ways of sin and death. But how many are at this moment as far from God as they were years ago! How many have reason to regret that they have ever heard the Gospel, which, instead of being a savour of life to them, has, through their neglect of it, been made a savour of death unto death! Our blessed Lord told his hearers, that "if he had never come to instruct them, they would not, comparatively, have had sin; but that now they had no cloak for their sin." So must it be said to many amongst us: "that having been exalted to heaven" in their privileges, they have reason to expect that they shall, with Capernaum, "be cast the deeper into hell" for their abuse of them. It is a small matter that their sins have not been such as to expose them to shame and reproach among men: their neglect of Christ, their want of love to his name, and of zeal in his service, must be reckoned for at the last day, when he will say, "Bring hither those that were mine enemies, who would not that I should reign over them, and slay them before me." O painful retrospect! O afflictive prospect! Brethren, take a review of your past lives; and seek "the things belonging to your peace, before they be for ever hid from your eyes."]

What then remains to be done by these distinct, but perishing, classes? To both the one and the other we would say, Consider,

II. The sinner's alternative—

There is but one alternative for any child of man: we must either attend to the voice of instruction given us in the Gospel, or we must carry with us unchanging and unavailing remorse into the eternal world.

Are we willing to spend eternity in self-condemning reflections!

[They must follow us, if we die in our sins. God himself will remind us of the benefits which here we neglected to improve: "Son, remember, that thou in thy life-time hadst such and such advantages." What anguish of mind will be occasioned by such thoughts as these; 'I once had the same offers of salvation, as they had who are now before the throne of God: I enjoyed the same heavenly instruction as they; but I despised it, and would not hear the voice of the charmer, how wisely soever he endeavoured to charm me!' This will be the ground of our heavier "condemnation, that light came into the world, but that we loved darkness rather than light, because our deeds were evil:" and our reflections upon this will be "a never-dying worm," gnawing our conscience to all eternity. Whether our sins were more or less flagrant, this will be the source of our greatest torment, that we despised the instructions given us in the Gospel, and trampled under foot that very Son of God who came into the world to seek and save us.]

If we would not spend an eternity in these bitter reflections, we must now attend to the things which are revealed to us in the Gospel

—
[If our teachers speak out of their own minds, we may refuse to hearken to them: but, if they speak to us the very word of God, then it is at our peril to turn a deaf ear to their instructions. The word of God is sufficient to "make us wise unto salvation through faith in Christ." It bids us flee to Christ, as to a strong hold, where we shall be safe from the assaults of sin and Satan. It assures us, that "Christ is able to save to the uttermost all that come unto God by him;" that "his blood will cleanse us from all sin;" that "his grace is sufficient for us;" and that "he will cast out none who come unto him." Follow these directions, and you are safe: give yourselves up to him; live altogether by faith upon him; improve for his glory the grace which you receive out of his fulness; and you have nothing to fear. Instead of remorse and sorrow, you shall be filled with peace and joy. In the midst of life it shall be a matter of "rejoicing to you, that you have the testimony of a good conscience;" in a dying hour you shall look back with comfort in the thought of having "fought a good fight, and finished your course, and kept the faith;" and to all eternity shall you glory in the mercies and privileges which you here enjoyedb.

Here then is your alternative: Despise this instruction, and you shall perish: Obey it, and you shall live for ever.]

ADVICE—

1. Endeavour to view every thing in the light of eternity—

[If you think of time only, the value of present enjoyments will be unduly magnified: but think of eternity, and nothing will be deemed important but the salvation of the soul——]

2. Endeavour so to spend each day, as you will wish you had spent it, when you shall be standing at the judgment-seat of Christ

—
[We know what the wishes are of men who are condemned to death for their violations of the law: and we may be sure that such will be our wishes when we are summoned to meet our Judge: 'O that I had lived a very different life!'——Now then cleave unto Christ with full purpose of heart, and devote yourselves to him without reserve. So shall you behold his face in peace, and be partakers of his glory for evermore.]

THE CAPTIVATING POWER OF SIN

Prov. 5:22. His own iniquities shall take the wicked himself, and he shall be holden with the cords of his sins.

THE force of habit is well known: it operates as a second nature; so constant is it in its exercise, and so imperious in its demands. There is this difference however in habits of piety, and habits of sin: that the one are easily lost; but the other are with great difficulty overcome. Nor is this difficult to be accounted for; seeing that the one is against the course of nature, and the other conformable to all its propensities: the motion of the one is a continual ascent; the other is downward on a declivity. But it is not merely as a natural consequence that sin, when indulged, has so great a power: there is an additional influence given to it by God himself, as a judicial act, and as a just punishment for indulging it: so that in a judicial, no less than in a natural sense, our text is true: "His own iniquities shall take the wicked himself: and he shall be holden with the cords of his sins."

Let us consider,

I. The declaration itself—

In a two-fold view it may be noticed;

1. As a judgment inflicted—

[It is inflicted on the whole human race. There is not a sinner in the universe who cannot from his own experience attest the truth of it. Every sin has a power to enslave the mind, and to lead captive him who has indulged it. But we will instance this in some particulars.

The man addicted to drinking previous to the formation of his habit, had perhaps no particular love to strong drink, or desire after it: but he has been drawn into company, he has there acquired a taste for conviviality, and at last, by repeated excesses, he has contracted such a thirst for intoxicating liquors, that he cannot deny himself the use of them, or use them in moderation. He can see his character sinking in the estimation of all the sober part of the community, his health impaired, his fortune injured, his family suffering, and his eternal interests sacrificed: and yet he cannot cast off the habit which he has contracted: his soul is bound with it as with a cord, and he cannot burst his bonds.

In a similar plight is he who has given himself up to the gratification of his lusts and passions. They, at least as far as the mind is concerned, are increased by indulgence, so that every object calls forth desire, and "the eyes of the libertine are full of adultery, and cannot cease from sin." His very soul, as it were, is sensualized, and, whether sleeping or waking, his imagination roves after the gratification of his lawless appetites.

Nor must I omit to mention the gamester, in whom the text is most awfully verified. Nothing can induce him to abandon his ruinous pursuits. Domestic ties of wife and children have no influence at all. The ruin of himself and family are all suspended on a card or die. Not even the experience of ruin will reclaim him. Let his losses be repaired again and again, and again and again will he return to the fascinating object, like the moth, and hover round it, till he is consumed.

I have mentioned these instances, as being more obvious and acknowledged: but the declaration is equally verified in the gay, the worldly, the profane; yea, and in the superstitious and self-righteous also. They all "feed on ashes; and a deceived heart hath turned them aside, so that they cannot deliver their souls, nor say, Is there not a lie in my right hand?"]

2. As a warning given—

[In this view more especially the declaration in our text is introduced, to guard young men against the temptations to which they are exposed. And a most awful warning it is: it shews us how earnestly we should guard against our besetting sins. Every man has some "sin which more easily besets him," and by which he is more in danger of being enslaved. Now every man should find out what this peculiar temptation is; and should watch and pray against it; lest, by yielding to it, he provoke "God to give him over to a reprobate mind," and to say, "He is joined to idols; let him alone." We should labour to say with David, "I have kept myself from my iniquity;" and, with Job, "Thou knowest I am not wicked," not deliberately and habitually wicked. We should dread lest that be inflicted on us which is spoken in the text; a judgment far heavier than any other that can be inflicted on us even by God himself, as long as we continue in this present life; because it is a certain prelude to everlasting misery, and the means of augmenting it every day and hour: for, if we are delivered over to our own lusts, we do nothing but "treasure up wrath against the day of wrath," and accumulate mountains of guilt to sink us deeper and deeper into everlasting perdition. Our employment will be like that of those mentioned by the Prophet Isaiah, who "drew out iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin as a cart-rope;" for, as a rope is spun out continually to an indefinite length by the constant addition of fresh materials, so will our sin be drawn out to an endless extent, till death shall cut it short, and the deserved punishment be awarded to it.]

It would be improper to pass over such a declaration as this without drawing your attention to,

II. The reflections which it naturally suggests—

1. How thankful should we be for the Gospel of Christ!

[Heathens are in the bondage above described, and have no conception of any way of deliverance from it. But in the Gospel a Saviour is proclaimed: who came on purpose to “preach deliverance to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.” His power no lusts can withstand. As he delivered Peter from prison, causing his chains to fall off, and the prison doors to open of their own accord, so can he liberate the slaves of sin and Satan from their bondage, and bring them forth into the glorious liberty of the children of God. Diseases, devils, elements, all obeyed his voice in the days of his flesh: and at his word the most deep-rooted lusts shall be plucked up, and the most inveterate habits changed. The day of Pentecost sufficiently attests the truth of this assertion. The hands of the men who had crucified him were yet reeking with his blood, yet in an instant were their hearts renewed, and they became altogether new creatures, “the wolf being as harmless as the sheep, and the lion as gentle as the lamb.” However inveterate then your habits may have been, despair not: but look to “that Mighty One on whom your help is laid,” and who is able to save “to the uttermost all who come unto God by him.”]

2. How watchful should we be against the first incursions of sin!

[As we know not “how great a matter a little fire will kindle,” so we know not what evils one sin may introduce. Every evil habit originated in one sin. Judas little thought in what his first act of dishonesty would issue: and millions, who are now gone beyond the hope of redemption, once thought as little to what a state they should be ultimately brought, as we now do. Say not, This angry temper is a light evil: It is murder in the seed and embryo; and may terminate in the very act of murder much sooner than you imagine. Say not, This impure thought or look is venial: it is constructive adultery; to which it lends, and in which, ere you are aware of it, it may soon issue. The same I would say of envy, hatred, malice, covetousness, ambition, and the whole catalogue of spiritual lusts: the admission of them into the heart is as is leak in a ship, which will sink it ultimately, if it be not stopped in time. A mariner will not neglect that leak, though it be but small; because he knows the consequences: he knows that if it be neglected, his efforts to preserve the ship will ere long be vain and ineffectual. It is not possible to look around us without seeing, in numberless instances, what dominion the evil tempers of men have gained, and what misery they diffuse throughout their respective families and spheres. Had they been checked in their commencement, how much sin and misery would have been prevented! If then we would not forge chains for our own souls, let us guard against the first risings of sin: for, whatever we may think, “we shall reap according to what we sow: he that soweth to the flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit, shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.”]

3. How constant should we be in waiting upon the Lord Jesus Christ, both in his public ordinances, and in secret prayer!

[None but Christ can afford us any effectual help: for “without him we can do nothing.” To him we must carry our every trial, and every temptation: and we must plead with him for help, as the Apostle did, till he answer us, and say, “My grace is sufficient for thee.” Let us never forget that it is in vain to resist sin in our own strength. None but God himself can subdue it in us. “Our sufficiency even to think a good thought must be of him.” If he help us, it is well: “We can do all things through Christ who strengthened us.” But if we address ourselves to the purifying of our hearts in our own strength, we shall fail, as the Apostles did, when in self-confidence they attempted to cast out a devil, which “could only be ejected through the influence of prayer and fastings.” Let us look simply to Christ to purge us both from the guilt and power of our sins; and then we shall find, that “according to our faith it shall be done unto us.”]

DCCLXVII

THE SLUGGARD REPROVED

Prov. 6:6–10. Go to the ant, thou sluggard: consider her ways and be wise: which having no guide, overseer, or ruler, provideth her meat in the summer, and gathereth her fool in the harvest. How long wilt they sleep. O sluggard? when wilt thou arise out of thy sleep? Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep: so shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth, and thy want as an armed man.

FORESIGHT in relation to temporal concerns, though not universally practised, is universally approved: and it is a ground of thankfulness that those classes of society who have hitherto scarcely known how to secure any little sums which they might save, have now, by the establishment of Provident Banks, encouragement to provide for themselves against the day of adversity. Happy would it be if a similar zeal were now exerted in relation to the concerns of eternity. But here, alas! there is still a sad indifference amongst us. The wants which we are sure to feel in the eternal world are not anticipated: nor is the importance of providing for them generally felt. In relation to these things, all around us are cast, as it were, into a deep sleep, from which they need to be roused by the most solemn warnings. This address therefore of Solomon to the sluggards of his day may well serve us as a foundation for a similar remonstrance with those who are yet sleeping in security and sin.

Addressing ourselves to persons of this description, we will speak,

I. In a way of humiliating reproof—

Justly does Solomon observe, that “a sluggard is wiser in his own conceit, than seven men that can render a reasonb.” The more careless men are about their souls, the more confident they are of their future safety. But how confident soever they may be, they may go and learn wisdom of the meanest insect.

There is scarcely any thing in the whole creation from which we may not derive the most valuable instruction. The ox and the ass, the crane and the swallow, are brought forward by God himself to teach and reprove us: and here we are referred for instruction to the ant. She collects in summer the food that is necessary for her subsistence in the winter. She does it with incredible labour, dragging to her cell grains of corn, that one would scarcely conceive she should be able to move. And this she does “without any guide” to direct her, or “overseer” to watch her, “or ruler” to call her to account. And, that her labour may not ultimately prove vain, she bites off, we are told, the ends of every grain, to prevent it from vegetating in the ground.

Go now to the ant, thou sluggard, and consider her ways: consider,

1. Her wise foresight—

[Has she a time approaching, against which it is needful for her to provide; and hast not thou? Is there not a time coming, when thou must stand in the presence of thy God, and give an account of every thing that thou hast done in the body, whether it be good or evil? And hast thou not now to provide a righteousness wherein to appear before God, even the righteousness of our Lord Jesus Christ, wherein alone thou canst ever stand in the presence of a holy God? Hast thou not a new nature also to obtain, in order to fit thee for the enjoyment of the heavenly world?——And is not the present the only time when this provision can be made? If thou neglect the present opportunities, wilt thou find them in the eternal world? Is there “any work or device to be executed in the grave, whither thou goestd?”——If her work, which relates only to the short transient life of the body, is important, is not yours, which relates to the eternal interests of the soul, much more important!——Go then to the ant, and learn wisdom of her.]

2. Her voluntary labour—

[She has none to direct her: she is guided by instinct alone. But you have reason to guide you, and to assure you of the certainty and importance of those things which you have not yet seen with your eyes. You have God himself also inspecting every thing that you do, and pledged to call you into judgment for it, and to assign you your everlasting portion according to it. Should not you then exert yourselves with all diligence? Are you not convinced, that to prepare for eternity is “a reasonable service.” yea, that it is, in fact, “the one thing needful?”——Will you then grudge your labour? Will you not put forth willingly and habitually all the powers of your souls in this blessed work?——]

3. Her prudent care—

[Is she careful to prevent her labours from ever proving abortive: and should not you prosecute your work to a successful issue? Yet Solomon justly observes, that “the slothful man roasteth not that which he took in huntinge:” yea, that “his very desire killeth him, because his hands refuse to labourf.” Some kind of pains we all have taken in attending ordinances, and in complying with outward forms: but there we have rested, without any persevering efforts to render those means effectual for the salvation of our souls. We feel somewhat of a general desire after eternal happiness: and with that consciousness of desire we are satisfied, without pressing forward for the attainment of the things desired: and thus is fulfilled in us another declaration of Solomon. “The soul of the sluggard desireth, and hath nothingg?” If good desires would suffice, the sluggard would get to heaven as well as others: but if great and persevering exertions are necessary, he will rather forego the prize, than use the diligence necessary for the attainment of it. In a word, instead of “looking to himself that he lose not the things that he has wrought, but that he receive a full rewardh,” he suffers Satan to take out of his heart the seed that has been sown in it, and to keep him, like the foolish virgins, from providing oil for himself, till it is too late. Say, thou sluggard, whether these things be not true of thee, and whether thou hast not need to go and learn wisdom of the diminutive and despised ant?]

We will yet further prosecute our address,

II. In a way of solemn warning—

As a man who has no provision independent of his labour, and no disposition to exert himself, must soon feel the pressure of poverty and want, so, sluggard, shalt thou feel these evils in relation to thy soul—

1. Reflect on the awfulness of thy state—

[The consequences of thy sloth are coming upon thee: they are coming gradually indeed, but irresistibly. “A traveller” comes not to his journey’s end all at once, but gradually, and almost imperceptibly, by many successive steps. So neither wilt thou find the fatal consequence of thy sloth all at once: but every day and hour brings them nearer towards thee; and that too so clearly, that, if thou wouldst stop to examine, thou shouldst see evident symptoms of their approach. Who has not found, that the longer he lives in any sin, the more he becomes addicted to it, and enslaved by it? The truth is, that as a man by indulging sloth, whether of mind or body, becomes daily more unfitted for exertion, so the man who is remiss and negligent in his spiritual concerns becomes daily more alienated from God, and more averse to those efforts that are necessary for his salvationi. The curse which is denounced against him seems so distant, that it will never come: but it is advancing as fast as the wings of time can carry it; as St. Peter says, “Their

judgment now of a long time lingereth not, and their damnation slumbereth notk.” O sluggard! remember this: thou mayest “linger, like Lot in the plain;” but “thy judgment lingereth not; thou mayest slumber on yet a little while, but thy damnation slumbereth not:” the time is fast approaching when God will say to thee, as to him who hid his talent in a napkin, “Thou wicked and slothful servant!” and will give orders concerning thee, “Cast the unprofitable servant into outer darkness, where shall be weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teethl.”

These judgments too shall come upon you irresistibly. You well know how entirely a man unarmed and sleeping is at the mercy of “an armed man” that seeks his life. And such will be your state, in the day that God shall deal with you, and visit you for your sins. You may call on the hills to fall upon you, and the rocks to cover you, from the wrath of your offended God; but they cannot perform for you this friendly office: no creature in the universe can help you: “though hand join in hand, you cannot pass unpunished.” Reflect on this, thou sluggard! Now thou mayest “puff at God’s judgments:” but ere long thou wilt bitterly regret that thou didst not improve the opportunities afforded thee to escape from them.]

2. Reflect also on the vanity of thine excuses—

[There are none so hardened as to avow a fixed determination never to seek after God: on the contrary, there is in almost all an indistinct purpose to turn unto the Lord at some more convenient season, which they hope is at no very great distance. Hence to those who would rouse them to exertion, they say, “A little more sleep, a little more slumber, a little more folding of the hands to sleep.” They acknowledge in general terms the propriety, and even the necessity, of exertion; but they wish a little more time for indulgence to the flesh, before they set themselves in earnest to mortify and subdue it. But what has been the consequence of indulgence hitherto? Are you at all more disposed for exertion now, than you were when first you were bidden to arise? Is your ability for God’s service at all increased by deferring your attempts to serve him? Have you not found, invariably, that procrastination has increased your difficulties, at the very time that it also enfeebled your powers? Say not then any longer, “There is a lion in the way,” nor plead any longer for delay: but arise and call upon your God, if peradventure time may be yet afforded you to “work out your salvation,” and to “flee from the wrath to come.”]

ADDRESS—

1. Those who have never yet been awakened—

[Have you no work to do? or is it a matter of small importance whether it be done or not? Is not the present life the only time for doing it? “How long, then, wilt thou sleep, O sluggard? When wilt thou arise out of thy sleep?” Knowest thou not, that if thou sleepest on till this short life be past, thou wilt assuredly awake in hell? What then shall I say to thee? Shall I say to thee, as Christ did to his sleepy disciples, “Sleep on now, and take thy rest?” No: God forbid. Let me rather say, “Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee lightm.” Verily, if thou wouldst now, even now, call upon his name, it should not be too late. Whatever thou wantest, it should be given thee: he would give thee the light of truth to shine into thy heart; the light of joy in his reconciled countenance: the light of holiness to attest thine acceptance with him: and the light of glory to perfect thy felicity. While ye have the light then, walk in the light, that ye may be the children of light.]

2. Those who, though in part awakened, are yet disposed to give way to slothful habits—

[This, alas! was the case both with the wise and foolish virgins: “they all slumbered and slept.” But let me affectionately guard you against yielding to sloth. It is said, and the very best amongst us know the truth of it by bitter experience, that “the idle soul shall suffer hungern.” Who has not heard of the vineyard of the sluggard, where, through inattention, nothing was produced but nettles and thorns? To him is the same warning given as to the sluggard in the texto Guard then against the excuses which ye are ready to make. See the excuses made by the Bride in the book of Canticles; how injurious to her welfare! how destructive of her peacepl “Watch ye then, and pray always.” Had the disciples watched, when they were directed to do it by their Lord, they would never have forsaken him as they did in the hour of his deepest trial. But, if you do not watch and be sober, depend upon it that Satan will prevail against you, and “sift you as wheat.” “Be sober then, and vigilant.” Give not way to drowsiness in your spiritual calling: but “give all diligence to make your calling sure.” And, seeing that ye look for a period when God shall come to judge the world, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot and blameless. And “what I say unto one, I say unto all, Watch.”]

DCCLXVIII

LOVE TO THE HOLY SCRIPTURES INCULCATED

Prov. 7:1–4. My son, keep my words, and lay up my commandments with thee. Keep my commandments, and live; and my law as the apple of thine eye. Bind them upon thy fingers; write them upon the table of thine heart. Say unto Wisdom, Thou art my sister; and call Understanding thy kinswoman.

THROUGHOUT the book of Proverbs, we are strongly reminded of that expression of Paul to Philemon, “Though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient, yet for love’s sake I rather beseech thee.” There is an exquisite tenderness in

the exhortations of Solomon, addressed as they are by a father to a son. Not that we are to suppose that they were intended only for Rehoboam: they were intended for the Church of God, in all ages: and to us, no less than to Rehoboam himself, is the affectionate language of our text addressed. But indeed a greater than Solomon is here. Condescending as the expressions are, they are addressed to us by the Lord Jesus Christ himself, who is Wisdom itself incarnate; and his are the counsels which we are so earnestly entreated to treasure up in our minds.

In discoursing on the words before us, we will shew,

I. The respect which we should pay to the counsels of Divine Wisdom—

By comparing our text with similar language in the New Testament, we see, that by the terms here used we have to understand, not the Decalogue only, but the whole revealed will of God. Now to whatever the counsels of the Deity relate,

1. They should be treasured up with diligence—

[Whatever is of more than ordinary value in our eyes, we lay it up with care in a place of safety; and the more of it we can amass, the richer we feel ourselves to be. Now there is nothing in the whole universe to be compared with the Scriptures of truth, nothing that will so enrich the mind, nothing that will so benefit the soul. In the great mystery of redemption “are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” The precepts too, and the promises, and the histories, and the examples, O! who can estimate them as they deserve?—To treasure these up in our minds should be our daily and most delightful employment. Not a day should pass without adding to this blessed store. We should always furnish ourselves with some fresh portion, on which to ruminate. Not that it is merely in the mind and memory that we are to store up this wealth, but, as Moses tells us, in our heart and in our soul; “Ye shall lay up these my words in your heart and in your soul:” this is the proper seat of Divine knowledge; and here should we endeavour to amass the only true wealth, “the unsearchable riches of Christ.”]

2. They should be watched over with care—

[Nature has made peculiar provision for the eye, so that, by an involuntary and instantaneous motion of the eye-lid, it is preserved from innumerable injuries which it must otherwise sustain. Now with the same care that we guard “the apple of our eye,” we should watch over and preserve the treasures of wisdom, which we have accumulated in our hearts. Satan is ever labouring to “take out of our hearts the word of life,” as our Lord has told us in the parable of the Sower: and it requires the utmost vigilance on our part to defeat his efforts. Indeed the heart itself is but too prone to lose its riches through any apertures by which the world has entered; so that we need to “give the most earnest heed lest at any time we should let them slip.” Besides, if we be not constantly on our guard against “the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches,” and other foolish and hateful lusts, we shall find to our cost, that these “weeds and thorns will choke all the good seed that has been sown in our hearts, and will render it unfruitful.” Our care and watchfulness therefore should be incessant, that nothing be permitted to rob us of our good principles, or to weaken their influence on our souls. If, as we are told, God “himself keeps his people as the apple of his eye,” surely we should exercise all possible vigilance to keep his counsels, and preserve inviolate his holy commandments.]

3. They should be kept ready for use—

[It is not sufficient that we have reduced the counsels of God, as it were, to certain heads, and made memorandums of them in our books, so as to be able to refer to them when occasion requires: we should have them “inscribed on the tablet of our hearts,” so that they may be always at hand, ready to direct and regulate our ways. Conscience, by looking inward, should be able to see them in an instant, and to suggest the line of conduct conformable to them. Moreover, we should have them “bound also upon our fingers,” so as both to be reminded of them at all times, and be ever ready to carry them into execution. To this effect Solomon explains his meaning: “Bind them continually upon thine heart, and tie them about thy neck. When thou goest, it shall lead thee; when thou sleepest, it shall keep thee; and when thou awakest, it shall talk with thee: for the commandment is a lamp, and the law is light: and reproofs of instruction are the way of life.”]

4. They should be guarded with the tenderest affection—

[With persons standing in near and dear relation to us, we are accustomed to live in habits of intimacy, consulting them on any occasions of difficulty, paying considerable deference to their judgment, and easily influenced by their opinions. Now in this light we should view the counsels of our God: we should be familiar with them; we should consult them on all occasions, and yield them a willing ascendancy over our hearts. Instead of standing aloof from them as strangers, we should claim, and glory in, our relation to them: we should “say unto Wisdom, Thou art my sister; and call Understanding our kinswoman.” We should, by our conformity to the dictates of Wisdom, prove, and manifest, our relation to her; and constrain all who behold us to acknowledge, that God is our Father, and that Christ, “the Wonderful Counsellor,” is our Friend.]

To encourage this acquaintance with the Divine counsels, we will proceed to state,

II. The benefits which we shall derive from a due attention to them—

In our text itself, the great benefit of complying with the exhortation is stated, in short but comprehensive terms; “Keep my commandments, and live.” But in the verses following our text, a particular advantage is insisted on, namely, the being delivered from the snares and temptations to which we are exposed. That we may comprehend both, we would observe, that by our attention

to the Divine counsels,

1. We shall be delivered from evil—

["From the way of the evil woman" is particularly noticed, both here and in the preceding chapter: and doubtless an attention to the counsels of Wisdom will eventually secure us against those temptations which lead captive so great a portion of mankind. But we need not confine our views to iniquities of one kind only: the advice here given is equally useful in preserving men from snares of every kind. From the inspired volume we learn the folly and malignity of every sin. The temptations of the world, the lusts of the flesh, and the devices of Satan, are all there exposed; and armour is laid up for us, that we may successfully maintain the combat against them. Our blessed Lord himself, in whom was no sin, drew from this armoury the arrows and the shield with which he vanquished the tempter in the wilderness: and from the same source must we also be furnished. Thus David tells us: "Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? Even by taking heed thereto according to thy word:" and again, "Thy word have I hid within my heart, that I might not sin against thee." Would you then be kept from evil tempers, and evil passions, and evil habits of every kind? Study the sacred records: treasure up in your minds the terrors of God's wrath as there revealed, and the declarations of his mercy as there promulgated. There see the wonders of redeeming love unfolded to your view, and the blessedness of those who have been monuments of converting and saving grace. Let every part of God's word have its proper bearing on your hearts and consciences, and it shall be effectual for your salvation. Whatever lusts you have hitherto indulged, you shall, through the influence of the word, and by the power of the Holy Ghost, be sanctified; as our Lord has said; "Sanctify them through thy truth; thy word is truth:" and again, "Now are ye clean through the word that has been spoken unto you."]

2. We shall be carried forward in safety to everlasting life—

[So says our text; "Keep my commandments, and live." So also says our blessed Lord: "I know that thy commandment is life everlasting." We must remember, that it is not of mere morality that we are now speaking, but an impartial attention to the whole revealed will of God. And where this is, God will surely pour out upon the soul his richest blessings. Hear what our blessed Lord says respecting this: "He that hath my commandments and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me, shall be loved of my Father; and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him:" yea, "We will come to him, and make our abode with himg." What unspeakable benefits are these! Favoured with such communications, what can we want?——But it is not in this world only that such persons are blessed: for to them are secured all the blessedness and glory of the world to come; according as it is written, "Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have a right to eat of the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the cityh." This right indeed is not founded on any merit of their own; but solely on the promises of God made to them in Christ Jesus. It is Christ who, by his obedience unto death, has purchased these blessings for us: but it is to his obedient servants only that these blessings shall ever be vouchsafed. They however shall inherit them; nor shall all the powers of darkness be able to rob them of their promised inheritance. Only "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdomi," and you shall never be straitenedk, "nor ever fall; but have an entrance ministered unto you abundantly into the kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christl."]

DCCLXIX

ADDRESS PREPARATORY TO CONFIRMATION

Prov. 8:17. I love them that love me; and those that seek me early, shall find me.

THESE are the words of our blessed Lorda, who, under the name of Wisdom, addresses himself to the children of menb, and urges them to receive instruction from himc. But to the young they are more particularly directed: and it is for their encouragement more especially that I have selected them for our consideration at this time.

Two things they declare to us most explicitly;

I. Who they are that already enjoy God's favour—

God in some respects may be said to love the whole world, even in their present degenerate state: for "he so loved them, that he gave his only-begotten Son for them." But there are some who are more particularly the objects of his favour. Mark,

1. The description given of them—

["They love the Lord Jesus Christ." They know his character, as set forth in the Holy Scriptures; they know him to be the only, and all-sufficient Saviour of fallen man——They have seen and felt their obligations to him, and have sought for redemption altogether through the blood of his cross——They live in daily habits of communion with him——They have a good hope of acceptance with God through him——And his very name "is precious to their souls"——]

2. The love he bears towards them—

["He loves them," and looks with peculiar complacency upon them, "rejoicing over them with joy, and resting in his love, and joying over them with singingd." To them he delights to "manifest himself, as he does not unto the worldf," even to "come and sup with

themf,” and “make his abode with them”

——“He rejoices over them to do them goodg.” imparting all needful supplies of grace and strength to their soulsh, and ordering all things both in heaven and earth for the promotion of their welfarei——He accounts them “his jewelsk” and “his peculiar treasurel;” and esteems the salvation of their souls a rich recompence for all the sufferings he ever enduredm——For them does he interest himself day and night in heaven; ever “making intercession for them” with his Father, and preparing kingdoms for them, which they in due season shall inherit, in glory and felicity similar to his ownn——

O! who amongst you does not desire to partake of this blessedness?——]

But as amongst you there must be many who are not yet in this blessed state, and who yet desire to participate this happy lot, we proceed to shew,

II. Who they are that shall certainly obtain it—

In some respects it may be said, that “He is found of them that sought him not, and made known to them that inquired not after him.” But no person is authorized to hope for an interest in his favour, unless he seek after it. The promise is, “Ask, and ye shall have; seek, and ye shall find.” But

The persons to whom the promise is more especially made, are “those who seek him early.”

[Those who seek the Lord even “at the eleventh hour” shall not be cast outo; but those who in the early dawn of their day are found desirous of entering into the service of their Lord, shall surely be employed by him. The very circumstance of their seeking the Lord while yet they are free from the cares of this life, and before their souls are vitiated with its sinful pleasures, whilst their consciences are yet tender, and their hearts open to every good impression, is a strong presumption in their favour: we should be ready, without any express promise from God, to say, that such persons “shall never seek his face in vain.” But we have an absolute promise in their favour: we can assure them from God himself, that they “shall never fail.”]

“They,” says our Lord, “shall find me”—

[Yes, he will delight to visit them: they are “the lambs which he will carry in his bosomp;” “the little ones, whom he will never suffer to perishq.” Though they be weak both in knowledge and in grace, “he will not despise the day of small thingsr.” He says, “Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.” And when he sees them flocking around him, he will “take them up in his arms, and put his hands upon them, and bless thems”——When he saw only “some good thing towards the Lord God of Israel” in the heart of young Abijah, he noticed it with a distinguishing mark of his favourt: and how much more will he, when he sees “the babes desiring the sincere milk of the word, that they may grow thereby,” and actually growing in stature up to young men and fathers!——Verily their hosannahs, however despised by men, shall enter into his ears with acceptance, and their prayers shall return in “showers of blessings” upon their soulsu——They shall “find him” here an ever-present help, and hereafter their inestimable and everlasting portion——]

ADDRESS—

1. To the Young People here assembled—

[You are about to be confirmed. But do you know what confirmation is? You were consecrated to the Lord in your baptism; and a solemn engagement was then entered into in your behalf, that you should love him, and surrender up yourselves entirely to his service. This vow you are now going to take upon yourselves. And tell me Whether in my text you have not all the encouragement that your souls can desire? Give yourselves to the world, and you will inherit only vanity: but “seek to love the Lord, and you shall inherit substancex.” Think how happy you will be through life, when you are the objects of the Saviour’s care and love——and think how happy you will be in death——O let me not plead with you in vain! but “remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come, in which you shall say, you have no pleasure in themy”——“Seek ye the Lord whilst he may be found: call ye upon him whilst he is nearz”——]

2. To Parents, and those who have an opportunity of influencing the minds of young people—

[This is a favourable opportunity for you to exert yourselves, and to concur with your minister in his labours of love. Be labourers together with him, with all your might——But do not forget that the glorious truths in our text are to be experienced by you also——And, if much of your day is already past, be the more earnest now in “redeeming the time” that yet remains to you——]

DCCLXX

WISDOM’S ADDRESS TO MEN

Prov. 8:29–32. When he appointed the foundations of the earth, then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him: rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth: and my delights were with the sons of men. Now therefore hearken unto me, O ye children! for blessed are they that keep my wags.

THE Proverbs of Solomon are a rich compendium of moral precepts, suited to men in all the various situations of civil, social, and

domestic life. Some intimations indeed there are of Evangelical doctrines; but they are neither numerous, nor distinct: the scope and intent of the author having been, not so much to enlighten the minds of men with respect to principles of religion, as to supply them with a code of sacred ethics, for the regulation of their conduct. Yet, in the chapter before us, the language is so peculiar, as to have induced the most able commentators to think, that there was in the author's mind an intentional departure from his accustomed plan, and a designed reference to Christ, the Saviour of the world. It is not our object to decide this point, but, rather, to exhibit the passage in such a view, as may render it most conducive to our spiritual improvement.

Let us consider then,

I. What is that wisdom which here addresses us—

The two leading views of it will come under our consideration, if we interpret it as importing,

1. Wisdom personified—

[It is evident that, throughout the whole chapter, Wisdom is represented as a person, and it must be spoken of as a person, in order to give scope for such a representation of it as is contained in our texta.

Wisdom was then ever "with God, as one brought up with him." It is an essential perfection of his nature, attendant on him on all occasions as a counsellor, without whose advice not any thing was ever transacted from all eternity. God has never done any thing from the mere impulse of his own sovereign will and pleasure; whatever he has predestinated, has nevertheless been "wrought according to the counsel of his own willb. Wisdom has presided in all his councils; nor has any thing ever been carried into effect without having previously received her sanction.

Her deliberations have been very mainly conversant about the affairs of men. God foresaw that man would fall, and, if left to himself, would perish like the fallen angels. But he greatly desired to save man, if peradventure it might be accomplished consistently with his own perfections. Every one of his attributes concurred in the wish; but with some of them there seemed to be claims, which interfered with that object, and which could not by any means be set aside. Holiness required, that its hatred of sin should be fully known. Justice required satisfaction for the violations of God's law, and could in no wise be induced to relax its demands. Truth also desired, that its honour should not be compromised. It had no objection to the exercise of mercy, if only the sacred word of God might be kept inviolate: but it could never consent, whatever object were to be attained thereby, that the immutable God should be "made a liar." In this difficulty, all looked to Wisdom, to know, whether she could devise any way, whereby the exercise of mercy might consist with the rights of all the other attributes of the Deity. Wisdom intimated, that she had a plan to propose: a plan, whereby Mercy might have free scope for exercise, not only without invading or injuring the rights of any other attribute, but to the great advantage of them all, insomuch that all should be honoured to an infinitely greater extent than they ever could have been, if their demands had been satisfied through the destruction of the whole human race. It proposed, that the Son of God himself should take upon him the sins of the whole world, and suffer, as man's substitute, all that Truth and Holiness had denounced against him, and all that the most rigorous justice could require. Such a sacrifice made to law and justice, to truth and holiness, would put on all of them an honour, which they could never by any other means obtain——

Her proposal, made with infinite delight to herself, was heard with infinite delight by Almighty God. Whilst she was thus, by anticipation, "rejoicing in the habitable part of the earth. and her delights were with the sons of men. she was daily God's delight, and rejoiced always before him." We may be assisted in our meditations on this subject, by considering a philosopher occupied with the deepest investigations, and crowned with unexpected success: what joyous exultation fills his breast! how is he ready to proclaim to all the world, "I have found it! I have found it!" Or perhaps we shall approximate nearer to the point, if we conceive of a physician, on whose skill the life of thousands is depending, discovering an antidote that will arrest the progress of the plague, and a remedy that will restore to health all those who are already infected with it: what pure and holy joy will animate his soul! But the Scripture itself furnishes us with various illustrations of this important idea: the woman finding the piece of money which she had lost, and the shepherd his sheep that had strayed from the fold, are each represented as calling for the sympathetic joys of their friends and neighbours: and, as these are intended to elucidate the joy which our Redeemer feels in the successful execution of his office, they may well serve to illustrate the ineffable delight which the proposals of Wisdom are represented as exciting in her own bosom, and in the bosom of the Deity.

But we have said that Wisdom may also be interpreted as signifying.]

2. Wisdom incarnate—

[Most Commentators think that the expressions in our text refer to Christ, who is called "the Wisdom of Godd:" and who, as the Lagos or Word, declares to men the hidden counsel of the Father.

Of him it is distinctly said, that He "was with God, and was Gode;" that "He made all things; and that without him nothing was made that was made." Here then we have the precise language of our text applied to the Son of God, who was from all eternity "in the bosom of the Fatherf," concurring with him in all that ever he planned or executedg.

How he was occupied in the concerns of men, is familiar to all our minds. Truly "his delights were with the sons of men," whom he determined to rescue from perdition, and to "redeem unto God by his own blood." This was "the joy that was set before him, for which he engaged to endure the cross, and despised all the shame that should ever be poured upon himh." No sacrifice was too great for him to make. Was it necessary that satisfaction should be made for all the breaches of God's law; and that the very nature

that had sinned should suffer? He willingly engaged to lay aside his own glory, and to assume our nature, in order that he might suffer, and, by suffering in our stead, “make reconciliation for our iniquities.”

In understanding this mysterious office, he was filled, as his Father also was, with ineffable delight. What joy the thought of ransoming our fallen race excited in his bosom, we are told by the Psalmist: for when it was declared by the Father, “with whom the council of peace was held,” that all creature-sacrifices would be insufficient for the occasion, he instantly replied, “Lo, I come; (I, thy co-equal, co-eternal Son, come:) I delight to do thy will, O my God! yea, thy law is within my heart.” A corresponding joy sprang up also in the Father’s breast; as the prophet Isaiah tells us; for in the contemplation of the future accomplishment of this mystery, the Father, looking with infinite complacency on his Son who had undertaken the office, and on his people as accepted in and through him, said, “Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth!” And, at the time when he bore an audible testimony to his Son from heaven, it was in these words, “This is that my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” Thus, in reference to this great event, it is said in our text, “I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him:” and in reference to the same we must understand that declaration of our Lord himself, “Thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world.”]

Thus, whether we understand the address as made to us by Wisdom personified, or Wisdom incarnate, we cannot but feel a deep interest in all that it has spoken to us, and set ourselves carefully to ascertain,

II. Our duty in reference to it—

Doubtless we should “hearken to its voice,” and with child-like simplicity receive its loving instructions. We should,

1. Delight ourselves in the contemplation of wisdom—

[Wisdom generally, wisdom universally, should be the object of our continual pursuit: “through a desire of attaining it, we should separate ourselves, and seek, and intermeddle with all wisdom.” The works of creation should, as far as we have a capacity for such subjects, be investigated by us, in order to excite our admiration of that wisdom by which they were framed. The order and harmony of the heavenly bodies, the beauty and richness of this terraqueous globe, the exquisite workmanship of the human frame, together with the powers and faculties of our immortal souls, all open to us such inexhaustible stores of wisdom and knowledge, as, if duly explored, will strike with reverential awe the humble inquirer, and fill with devoutest gratitude the admiring soul. The works of Providence also, if once we are enabled to view them in their mutual relation and dependence, will transport the soul with wonder, and overwhelm it with the deepest sense of gratitude. No book in the universe, except the Bible, will convey half so much instruction to the mind, as may be gathered from a man’s own experience of God’s dealings with him, especially in the concurrence of his providence with the operations of his grace: and the man who has learned to read this book, and become conversant with its contents, has acquired “secrets of wisdom, which are double,” yea, which are tenfold greater than any which are known to the merely natural man. God has said, that “he has abounded towards his people in all wisdom and prudence;” but “his secrets are with those alone who fear him:” none others are at all able to appreciate his love: that “knowledge is plain only to him that understandeth.”

Our chief attention however must be directed to that adorable Saviour, who “spake as never man spake.” and in whom his most inveterate enemies could not find a flaw. In him we have such lessons of wisdom as the whole universe besides does not afford. In tracing all the circumstances of his life, we should do well at every step to inquire, What answer should I have given? what conduct should I have pursued? and, from such examinations frequently repeated, we shall learn at last, how far we are removed from true righteousness, and how much “folly is bound up in our hearts.” In a word, we should sit at the feet of Jesus, as Mary did, drinking in, with insatiable avidity, the instructions of Wisdom, and applying our hearts to them as the clay to the seal. “In Him are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” In Him is revealed to us “the mystery that was hid from ages and generations,” and “which the angels themselves desire to look into;” and the mystery, at the first intimation of which, long “before the worlds were made, the morning stars sang together, and the sons of God, the holy angels, shouted aloud for joy.” No sooner was the commission given to make this known to men, than a host of the heavenly angels left their bright abodes, and came down to earth exulting, “Glory to God in the highest! and on earth peace; good will towards men!”

These are contemplations worthy of our exalted powers, worthy of our high destinies: and to delight ourselves in them is the wisdom, and the happiness of man.]

2. Surrender up ourselves to its dictates—

[In every duty of life there is need of the suggestions of wisdom. Even good men often act a very foolish part, for want of a well-regulated mind. Many have no idea of that important truth, “I, Wisdom, dwell with Prudence.” To “walk in wisdom towards them that are without,” and to “give no offence either to the Jews, or to the Gentiles, or to the Church of God,” come not into the contemplation of many, any more than if no such things were required of us, and no such example had been ever set us. But our determination, through God’s help, should be, under all circumstances, like that of David, “I will behave myself wisely in a perfect wayd.”

In fact, there is no true wisdom but that which is practical. The very end of knowledge is practice: and, however deep or exalted our speculations may be, “if we walk not circumspectly, we are foolse.” But, in order to carry into effect the lessons of Wisdom, we must “watch daily at her gates, and wait at the posts of her doors.” We must bring our views, our desires, our motives, to the strictest scrutiny: we must apply to every thing “the line of judgment, and the plummet of righteousness:” and, above all, we must beg of God

to give us “the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord, and to make us quick of understanding in the fear of the Lordg.” Without this, we shall continually err: without this, we shall inevitably fall.] “Hear then the voice of Wisdom, O YE CHILDREN!” Hear it,

1. Ye children in age—

[Ye can never begin too early to listen to the counsels of Wisdom. It is by them only that you can avoid the snares of a corrupt heart, and of a deceitful world——O! think what dangers are before you: see “what multitudes are walking in the broad road that leadeth to destruction, and how few there are that walk in the narrow path that leadeth unto life!” and remember, that “you must reap according to what you sow: if you sow to the flesh, you must of the flesh reap corruption: but if you sow to the Spirit, you shall of the Spirit reap life everlastingh.” Say not, that you are too young to receive her lessons: for she particularly encourages you by expressing a more than ordinary solicitude for your welfare: “I love them that love me,” says she; “and they that seek me early, shall find mei.”]

2. Ye children in understanding—

[The poor, whose intellectual powers have never been expanded by the aid of education, are ready to imagine that it is in vain for them to explore the depths of heavenly wisdom. But be it known to all, that divine wisdom enters, not by the head, like earthly knowledge, but by the heart: be it known also, that it is not acquired by deep laborious research, as human sciences are, but by the teaching of the Holy Ghost; for “the Lord giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understandingk:” and so far are the poor from having any reason to despair of attaining it, that they are by far the most likely to obtain it, because they are more willing than others to be taught of God. Hence our Lord himself says. “I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes: even so, Father, for so it seemed good in thy sightl.” Pray then to God to “give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of himm,” and be assured “it shall be given youn,” and you shall be made “wise unto salvation through faith in Christ.”]

3. Ye children in grace—

[You have begun to know the value of wisdom: you have a little glimmering view of those great mysteries, of which we have been speaking. “The day-star has arisen in your hearts,” and you have found “the ways of Wisdom to be ways of pleasantness and peace.” But you must “go on unto the perfect day,” even till Christ himself, “the Sun of righteousness, arise upon you with healing in his wings.” O seek to “grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!” Be constant in your attendance on the ordinances of God; search the Scriptures, and treasure them up in your hearts; and, above all, “be instant in prayer” for fresh supplies of the Spirit of Christ: then shall you be guided into all truth; and “the light of the moon shall be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun seven-fold, as the light of seven days.”]

DCCLXXI

THE VALUE OF TRUE WISDOM

Prov. 8:35, 36. Whoso findeth me, findeth life, and shall obtain favour of the Lord. But he that sinneth against me, wrongeth his own soul: all they that, hate me, love death.

IT is common in the prophetic writings to find expressions which really relate to the Messiah, while they apparently speak only of some other person or thing; and while other expressions in the same passage have no proper reference to him at all. It is impossible not to notice this in the 22d and 69th Psalms, and in many other places which are quoted in the New Testament as referring to him. The same mode of speaking, we apprehend, may be observed in the chapter before us. In some parts of it, true religion seems to be characterized under the term “Wisdom;” but in others, Christ himself. From the 22d to the 31st verse, the language cannot well be interpreted as designating religion, nor even an attribute of the Deity: it can only be understood of God’s eternal Son, who lay in the bosom of the Father, and before the foundation of the earth rejoiced in the prospect of becoming an inhabitant of this globe, for the salvation of sinful man. Yet, on the whole, we apprehend, that the exhortation to Wisdom at the beginning of the chapter speaks rather of piety as the proper object of our pursuit. We are sure that this is the general import of the term throughout the book of Proverbs; and that piety, as personified under this name, frequently addresses us. We rather lean therefore to the safe side in our interpretation of the text, than ground upon it any observations which may appear forced, or unwarranted by the text itself.

Two things then we shall be led to notice;

I. The benefit of seeking true wisdom—

Wisdom, whether relating to temporal or eternal things, is never found by chance: it must be sought by persevering inquiries, and be obtained as the fruit of diligent research To those who do find it, it will be productive,

1. Of present happiness—

[By "life" we may understand happiness; and then the first clause of our text will exactly correspond with what is more diffusely stated in the third chapter. Till we have attained true wisdom, we know not what real happiness means: "There is no peace," saith God, "to the wicked." As for the mirth which the men of this world enjoy, it is only "like the crackling of thorns under a pot;" it blazes for a moment, and then goes out in spleen and melancholy. He who knows perfectly what is in man, says, "Even in mirth their heart is sorrowful, and the end of that mirth is heavinessb." But when once they have just views of Christ, and are truly devoted to him, they are filled with "a peace that passeth all understanding," and, at times, with "joy unspeakable and glorified." Now they begin to know what life is: "they truly pass from death unto life." Their former was little better than a state of mere animal existence; but now they see the true end, and taste the true enjoyment, of life: they participate in a measure the blessedness of heaven itself. We appeal to those who have ever known what it is to "live by faith on the Son of God," and to feel the constraining influence of his love, whether one hour of "fellowship with the Father and the Son" does not outweigh whole years of fellowship with sin and sinners.]

2. Of future happiness—

["No favour can we find with God," till we are brought to the possession of true wisdomc. But, instantly on our embracing his dear Son as he is revealed in the Gospel, we are numbered amongst "his peculiar people," whom "he has set apart for himself," and esteems as "his jewels." Then there is no favour that he will not shew them: he will come down and "make his abode with them, and sup with them." He will "keep them with all the care and tenderness with which we keep the apple of our eye:" and he will administer to them, in every hour of trial, whatever shall be most suited to their necessitiesd. In the hour of death especially, "when they are going, as it were, through fire and water, he will be with them:" and, on the instant of their release from this mortal body, he will transport them on the wings of angels to his blest abode, there to behold and participate his glory to all eternity. But who can form any idea of the blessings he will then bestow. It is sufficient for us to know that his word is pledged, and that what he hath promised, he is able also to perform.]

If such be the value of true wisdom, what must be,

II. The folly of neglecting it—

Sin of every kind is an act of hostility against sound wisdom: and, if the sin be wilful, it is an evidence that our hostility proceeds from a rooted hatred of vital godliness. There is the same mutual opposition, and irreconcilable enmity, between sin and holiness, as between darkness and light: they cannot consist together, nor can the love of both find room to dwell in one bosom. If then we allowedly neglect true wisdom,

1. We "wrong our own souls"—

[The soul has strong and just claims, which every sinner resists. As being of a higher nature, and endued with larger capacities, than the body, it claims that the body should submit to its authority. As being the only seat of intelligence, it claims that the body follow its guidance. As being immortal, and doomed to spend an eternity in inconceivable happiness or misery, it claims that the body consult its interests. But when the voice of wisdom is silenced, and sin is permitted to rule in our mortal body, then is the soul wronged in every respect; its authority is slighted; its counsel rejected; its interest sacrificed: it is even made the drudge and slave of the body, to execute its devices and to gratify its lusts. Who does not see, that if any man, for the gratification of avarice, should resist the natural claims of the body for food and raiment, he would be justly and universally condemned? And does he act less foolishly, who, in the manner before mentioned, wrongs his soul? Yea rather, is not his folly greater in proportion as his soul is of greater value? Truly this is a just picture of one who sins against true wisdom.]

2. We "love death"—

[Can any one, it may be asked, love death? We answer. No: not for its own sake; but, as connected with sin, he may. There is an inseparable connexion between life and holiness on the one hand, and sin and death on the other. Could sin and heaven be allied, and enjoyed together, doubtless every sinner would prefer it. But that is impossible. A specific and unalterable option is given us: and every man is perfectly free to choose the one and refuse the other, to adhere to the one and renounce the other. The sinner determines for himself: and by his determination declares his preference: he practically says. "If I cannot have the gratifications of sin without death, welcome death, welcome damnation; for sin I will have, whatever be the consequencee." Now can one reflect a moment on such a choice as this, and not stand amazed at the folly that determines it? Will it bear an argument? Are not the excuses with which it is veiled, mere vain and empty delusions? And does not every one see the folly of them, the very moment he sets himself to serious consideration? Yet this is the conduct which men call wisdom: but which, if it obtained in relation to worldly affairs, they would call downright madness.]

"Suffer now, Brethren, a word of EXHORTATION," while I address myself,

1. To the despisers of true wisdom—

[Consider a little more attentively, what it is that you despise. The thing to which you are exhorted is, to seek acceptance with an offended God; to embrace the salvation which he offers us in the Son of his love: and to devote yourselves to him in a way of holy obedience——Is there any thing in this that merits hatred and contempt? any thing that should make a man choose damnation rather than submit to it? What if an ungodly world has agreed to call it folly: is it therefore folly? Has not God said, "The fear of the

Lord, that is wisdom?" Is there a saint in heaven, or on earth, that does not account it wisdom? Yea, is there a soul even in hell itself that is not now of the same mind? We go farther still, and ask, Whether they who most deride religion now, will not be convinced of its excellence the very moment that their soul is required of them? "How long then, ye simple ones, will ye love simplicity?" "Turn you at my reproof," says God: "O ye simple, understand wisdom; and, ye fools, be of an understanding heart!"——Say not, "It is too soon for me to seek the Lord." It is never too soon to be wise: and they who seek the Lord in their youth, have peculiar encouragement from him to do so: "I love them that love me; and they that seek me early, shall find me."]

2. To those who profess to have found it—

[Men will judge of religion, not by what the Bible says of it, but by what they see in those who profess it: and one instance of folly in the Lord's people will do more to prejudice them against religion, than a thousand good actions to recommend it. I would therefore strongly urge those who profess godliness, to bear in mind how much the interests of religion depend on them. Real piety consists not in talkativeness or eccentricities of any kind, but in a devout regard to God's honour and authority, and a wise, prudent, circumspect deportment before men. It does not countenance us in an officious assumption of the duties of others, but in a punctual performance of those which belong to our own place and station: "I, Wisdom, dwell with Prudence." The not attending to this declaration has caused much offence in the world: and it becomes us to be very careful of casting stumbling-blocks before men, or "causing the way of truth to be evil spoken of." Let us then "walk in wisdom towards them that are without;" "giving no occasion to the adversary to speak reproachfully." And while we adopt the resolution of David, "I will behave myself wisely in a perfect way," let us remember by whose strength alone we can effect this; and pray with him, "O give me understanding in the way of godliness!"]

DCCLXXII

WISDOM'S FEAST

Prov. 9:1–6. Wisdom hath builded her house, she hath hewn out her seven pillars: she hath killed her beasts; she hath mingled her wine; she hath also furnished her table: she hath sent forth her maidens: she crieth upon the highest places of the city, Whoso is simple, let him turn in hither: as for him that wanteth understanding, she saith to him, Come, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine which I have mingled: forsake the foolish, and live; and go in the way of understanding.

IN the New Testament, parables abound. In the Old Testament, they are comparatively rare. But this comes commended to us by peculiar authority, in that our blessed Lord repeatedly borrowed it, if I may so speak, and adopted it on different occasions, for the elucidating of the truths which he wished to convey. In order to unfold it to you, I shall notice separately,

I. The feast prepared—

In the Holy Scriptures, the term "Wisdom" is generally used to signify true religion: but sometimes it is a name given to the Lord Jesus Christ, who is, with good reason, supposed to be characterized by it in the chapter that precedes my text, and who, I think, is intended by it in the parable before us. He is "the Wisdom of God;" and "in him are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge:" and, beyond all doubt, he is the person who, in the parables which he himself has founded on this, both furnishes the feasts and sends forth the invitation.

By Wisdom,

1. The banqueting-house is built—

[Solomon elsewhere speaks of a "banqueting-house," where he had been wont to meet his Saviour: and such buildings have been raised by the great and opulent in all ages, for the entertainment of their guests. This edifice, which was built by Wisdom, was supported by "seven pillars;" which I suppose to intimate, that it was constructed with perfect stability, and adorned with the perfection of beauty. And what is this banqueting-house, but the ordinances of divine grace, which are appointed altogether for the setting forth of this feast, and for the accommodation of all who attend upon it? In them there is room for all: and God will not fail, when they are attended as they ought to be, to manifest himself in the midst of them.]

2. The feast, too, is prepared—

["The beasts," the sacrifices, "are killed;" and "the wine," for the purpose of rendering its flavour more exquisite, is "mingled." The entertainment is, in reality, a feast upon a sacrifice. And what is that sacrifice on which the whole world may feast, but the sacrifice of Christ, "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world?" Precisely such a feast was the passover, which Hezekiah kept unto the Lord. He kept it for the space of fourteen days; during which time not less than two thousand bullocks and seventeen thousand sheep were sacrificed, and all Judah were feasted. But the Lord Jesus Christ, the true Passover, is sacrificed for all, and will afford an ample feast for all, not for a limited time only, but through the endless ages of eternity. As for the wine, which is so essential to a feast, what is that but the consolations of the Spirit, of which all shall partake who eat of this divine repast? For "Christ's body is meat indeed, and his blood is drink indeed:" and in the ordinances of divine grace, both the one and the other are offered to every child of man. In fact, this is the very feast which the Prophet Isaiah spoke of as to be established under the Christian dispensation:

"In this mountain shall the Lord of Hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined:" and in the ministration of the gospel is this now set forth more amply than if "all the beasts upon the mountains were slain for us, or the cattle upon a thousand hills.]"

Let me, then, without further delay, announce to you,

II. The invitation given—

For the preserving of the propriety of the parable, Wisdom, as a Queen, is said to "send forth her maidens." But Christ, whom wisdom represents, sends forth his Ministers to call men to the feast.

The persons invited are, "the simple, and those who want understanding"—

[This, I grant, is a humiliating description; and it seems to designate the poor only and the ignorant. But, permit me to say, that it comprehends those also who stand the highest in their own estimation for wisdom and prudence. For who, in the whole universe, betray their folly more than those who "seek to fill their belly with the husks that the swine eat of, whilst in their Father's house they might find bread enough and to spare?" Yet this is the very state to which the learned, no less than the illiterate, reduce themselves, whilst seeking their happiness in the world rather than in God, and in the perishing vanities of time and sense rather than in the substantial blessings of eternity. I appeal to all of you, whether this be not the conduct of all by nature, and whether experience do not prove to all the folly of it? This is well represented in Scripture, as "filling our belly with the east wind:" and I ask of all, whether such conduct do not merit the imputation east upon it in my text? I ask, too, whether, to persons of this character, the invitation be not most fitly sent? You cannot but confess, however successful you may have been in your pursuit of earthly objects, "in the fulness of your sufficiency you have been in straits!"]

To you, then, is the invitation given—

[To you, says Wisdom, "Come and eat of my bread, and drink of the wine which I have mingled." Your past conduct has involved you in guilt and misery; both of which shall be removed by partaking of the feast provided for you. The sacrifice of Christ was expressly offered as an atonement for your sins; and if you partake of it in faith, your iniquities shall all be blotted out as a morning cloud. "Whoso eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood," says our blessed Lord, "hath eternal life:" yes, he has both a title to it, and the very beginning of it in his soul. As for "the wine that is mingled" for you, not all "the wine in Lebanon" can afford you such consolation and refreshment as the Holy Spirit will to those who receive his gracious communications.

But, of course, you must forsake those habits which you have hitherto indulged, and separate yourselves from those associates who would divert you from Wisdom's ways. For, "what fellowship can righteousness have with unrighteousness, or what communion can light have with darkness? There is a necessity for you to come out from the ungodly and be separate, if you would have God for your father, and enjoy the privilege of his sons and daughters." The whole course of your life must be changed: you must not only "forsake the foolish," but "go also in the way of understanding," approving yourselves worthy disciples of our blessed Lord. In fact, your whole taste must be changed: you cannot "savour the things of the flesh and of the Spirit" too: "you cannot serve God and Mammon" too; or "be the friends of the world and of Jehovah" too. If you come to the Gospel-feast, you must "affect only the things which are above," on which you shall "feast in the presence of your God for ever and ever.]"

APPLICATION—

[Let me now address myself to you, my beloved Brethren. I am sent as Wisdom's servant, as the minister of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, with a message of mercy to every one of you. And let it not be offensive to you to be addressed under the character of those who are here invited. You surely will not deny, that you have sought your happiness in the world, rather than in God. Even though you were the greatest philosophers in the universe, this charge would be as applicable to you as to the meanest of mankind. And, if at this present moment you feel averse to range yourselves under the humiliating term here accorded to you, be assured the time is not far distant when you will designate yourselves by this name with bitter emphasis, and, contrasting yourselves with the Lord's guests, will exclaim, "We fools, counted their life madness, and their end to be without honour: but how are they numbered with the children of God, and their lot is among the saints! Therefore have we erred from the way of truth." Let me entreat you now to humble yourselves before God, and to welcome, as especially suited to your state, the invitation which I now bring you. But that I may be sure to address you in Wisdom's own words, I will adopt the language of an inspired prophet: "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk, without money and without price. Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which satisfieth not? (Here are proofs enough of your folly.) Harken diligently unto me; and eat ye that which is good; and let your soul delight itself in fatness. Incline your ear, and come unto me: hear, and your soul shall live." You will find, at the close of the chapter from whence my text is taken, that folly also has her messengers: A foolish and abandoned woman will cry, "Whoso is simple, let him turn in hither: for stolen waters are sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant. But he knoweth not that the dead are there, and that her guests are in the depths of hell." Yes, these invitations are soon and widely followed; whilst the invitations of Wisdom are scornfully rejected. Truly this is greatly to be lamented; and bitter will be the consequences to those who persist in their folly. Accept the invitations that are gratifying to flesh and blood, and nothing but everlasting destruction awaits you: but accept that which now in Wisdom's name I deliver, and you shall "live:" "forsake the foolish, and live." Fain would I prevail with you, my Brethren, ere it be too late, and the door of her banqueting-house be shut against you. I have it in commission to "compel you to come in." O, resist me not, but let me by holy

importunity prevail; that so the blessings of salvation may be yours, when the contemnners of our message are wailing in everlasting darkness and despair.]

DCCLXXIII

GOD'S CARE FOR THE RIGHTEOUS

Prov. 10:3. The Lord will not suffer the soul of the righteous to famish.

GOD, who is the author and giver of all good, dispenses his blessings no less to the evil and unjust, than to the good and just. But he promises to those who seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, that all other things shall be added unto them. To this effect he speaks also in the passage before us. But though this be the primary import of the text, we must not exclude its relation also to the concerns of the soul.

To elucidate this blessed promise, we shall shew,

I. What reasons the righteous have to apprehend that their souls may famish—
A sense of weakness and of guilt may greatly discourage them: for,

1. They cannot secure provisions for themselves—

[The word of God, and Christ in the word, is the proper food of the soul: and, if a person can read, he need not be wholly destitute. But it is by the public ministration of the word that God principally confirms the souls of his people. Now in many places where Christ should be preached, his name is scarcely heard; and, instead of children's bread, little is dispensed besides the husks of heathen morality. Even where some attention is paid to Christian doctrines, there is often much chaff mixed with the wheat; and "the trumpet that is blown, gives but an uncertain sound." Those therefore who by reason of distance, or infirmity, or other insurmountable obstacles, cannot have access to the purer fountains of truth, have great reason to fear that their souls will famish.]

2. They cannot, of themselves, feed upon the provisions set before them—

[Where all the treasures of the Gospel are fully opened, it is God alone that can enrich any soul by means of them: even "Paul may plant, or Apollos may water, but it is God alone that can give the increase." The very same word is often made a peculiar blessing to one, that was altogether useless to another. God reserves the times and the seasons in his own hands; and "gives to every one severally as he will." When therefore the righteous hear of the effects wrought on others, and feel conscious that they themselves reaped no benefit from the word, they are ready to fear that their souls will famish even in the midst of plenty.]

3. They well know that they deserve to be utterly abandoned by their God—

[It is not only for their sins in general, that the righteous find occasion to humble themselves before God, but more particularly for their misimprovement of divine ordinances. Perhaps there is not any other more fruitful source of self-condemnation to the godly than this. When therefore they see how many opportunities of improvement they have lost, and how much guilt they have contracted by their deadness and formality in the worship of God, they are sensible that God may justly "remove their candlestick," and leave them to experience "a famine of the word."]

But lest a dread of famishing should oppress the minds of the righteous, we shall proceed to shew,

II. What grounds they have to hope, that God will never suffer such a melancholy event to happen—
However great the grounds of fear may be which the righteous feel within themselves, they have abundant reason to "encourage themselves in the Lord their God."

1. He has bountifully provided even for the ungodly—

[The Gospel is "a feast of fat things full of marrow, and of wines on the lees well refined;" and God has "sent out into all the highways and hedges to invite the poor, the halt, the lame, and the blind," and has commissioned his servants to compel men, by dint of importunity, to accept his invitation. Now has he shewn such concern for the wicked, and will he disregard the righteous? Will he not rather "cause the manna to fall around their tents," and "the water to follow them" through all this dreary wilderness? Yes; he would rather send a raven to feed them, or sustain them by a continued miracle, than ever suffer their souls to famish.]

2. He is peculiarly interested in the welfare of the righteous—

[The righteous are God's "peculiar treasure above all people;" they are even "his sons and daughters." If they were left to perish, Jesus would lose the purchase of his blood, and the very members of his body. And can we imagine that God will be so unmindful of them as utterly to forsake them? Did he not on many occasions vouchsafe mercy to his chosen people for his own name sake, when their backslidings had rendered them fit objects of his everlasting displeasure? Thus then will he still be actuated by a regard for his own honour, and "not forsake his people, because it hath pleased him to make them his peopleb."]

3. He has pledged his word that they shall never want any thing that is good—

[“Exceeding numerous, great, and precious are the promises which God has given to his people.” He “will supply all their wants, according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus: he will give them grace and glory; and will withhold no good thing:” their souls “shall be even as a well watered garden:” “bread shall be given them; and their water shall be sure.” And will he violate his word? he may leave his people in straits, as he did the Israelites of old: but it shall be only for the more signal manifestation of his love and mercy towards them. Let them only trust in him, and he “will never leave them, never, never forsake themc.”]

We shall CONCLUDE with a word—

1. Of reproof—

[It is certain that many do not “make their profiting to appear” as they ought. To such therefore we must say, “Wherefore art thou, being a king’s son, lean from day to dayd?” Why art thou crying continually, “Woe is me! my leanness! my leanness!” when thou shouldest be “growing up as the calves of the stallf?” Some part of the blame perhaps may attach to him who dispenses the ordinances among you, as wanting more life and spirituality in his ministrations; yet even this would be no excuse to you, since if your hearts were more spiritual, God would render your mean fare as nutritious as the richest daintiesg. If God should even “give you your desire, yet would he also send leanness into your soulsh,” while you continued to lothe the heavenly manna. Learn then to come with more eager appetite——Be more careful to digest the word afterward by meditation and prayer——And look, not so much to the manner in which the word is preached, as to Christ in the word; since HE is that bread of life which alone can nourish your souls; and which, if eaten by faith, will surely nourish them unto life eternali——]

2. Of consolation—

[Some may put away from them this promise, under the idea that they are not of the character to whom it belongs. Now, though we would by no means encourage any to apply the promises to themselves in a presumptuous manner, and thereby to deceive their own souls with ungrounded expectations, yet we would not that any should refuse the consolation that properly belongs to them. Suppose then that any cannot absolutely number themselves among the righteous, yet, “if they hunger and thirst after righteousness, they are blessed, and shall be filledk.” This is the word of God to their souls; and we would have them expect assuredly its accomplishment in due season——Let them “desire the sincere milk of the word, and they shall grow thereby!”——]

DCCLXXIV

EFFECTS OF SLOTH AND DILIGENCE COMPARED

Prov. 10:4. He becometh poor that dealeth with a slack hand; but the hand of the diligent maketh rich.

IT is certainly true, that men’s circumstances in life depend on their own exertions, so far at least, as to justify the declaration in the text. Sometimes indeed God is pleased to raise men to opulence by labours not their own; and sometimes to withhold success from the industrious. But though this inequality is sometimes found in the dispensations of his Providence, we never see it in the dispensations of his grace. After the first communications of grace to the soul, men’s progress or decay will always be proportioned to their own care and vigilance: the propositions in the text may be advanced without any exception;—

I. Remissness will impoverish the soul—

Many there are who “deal with a slack hand”—

[This may be said of men when they improve not the means of spiritual advancement. God has appointed readinga, and meditationb, and prayerc, and self-examinationd, as means of furthering the welfare of the soul——But, if we be remiss in these, we resemble a man who neglects to cultivate his fields: nor can it be expected that we should ever prosper in our spiritual concerns. It may also be said of them when they shun not the occasions of spiritual decay. God has mercifully guarded us against the carese, the pleasuresf, the company of the worldg; and against the indulgence of any secret sinh——And it is of the utmost importance that we attend to these salutary cautions. But if we are unmindful of them, we certainly shew a very culpable remissness, and give advantage to our enemies to prevail against us.]

Under such circumstances they will infallibly “become poor”—

[They will lose their joy and confidence. Persons living in habitual watchfulness are often full of the most lively joyi, and can look up to God as their Fatherk, to Christ as their Saviourl, and to heaven as their homem. But these divine impressions are tender plants, which, if not duly watered, will soon wither and decayn——]

2. They will also lose their health and strength—

[There is a health of the soul, as well as of the body: and as the one cannot be maintained in strength but by proper food and exercise, so neither can the other. The graces of the soul, if not duly cultivated, will soon languish. The faith will become weak, the

hope faint, the love cold——and whatever good “things remain in us, they will be ready to die.” So poor will every one become, who dealeth with a slack hand.]

While the soul is exposed to such evils from remissness, we are assured, on the contrary, that—

II. Diligence will enrich it—

Christian diligence comprehends far more than a mere attention to outward forms, however regular—

[It imports a seasonable attention to all duties. There are some duties which, in comparison of others, are easy: but Christian diligence makes no distinction on this account; nor does it make the observance of some an excuse for neglecting others; but endeavours to do every work, whether public or private, civil or religious, in its season.]

It includes also a conscientious improvement of all talents. Various are the talents committed unto men. Time, money, influence, together with every mental endowment, are among those which a Christian will feel himself more especially bound to improve. He considers them as given to him for the purpose of honouring God with them, and of rendering them subservient to the good of men. He therefore will not wrap any one of them in a napkin, but will so trade with them as to deliver them up with interest whenever he may be called to give up his account.]

Such diligence will infallibly enrich the soul—

[The exertion of our powers does not command success; but God invariably puts honour upon it, and makes it both the occasion and the means of communicating his blessings. Our diligence in cultivating the land cannot ensure the crop: yet it is by that, for the most part, that God replenishes our barns, and supplies our returning wants. Thus the diligent hand makes us rich in grace, in peace, in holiness, and in glory.]

“To him that hath (that hath improved his talent) shall be given; and he shall have abundance.” Every grace is improved by exercise—
—from that improvement arises a “peace which passeth all understanding”—the whole man is thus progressively renewed after the divine images—and an increased weight of glory is treasured up for the soul, when it shall receive its full reward.]

INFER—

1. What a pitiable state are they in who never labour at all for the salvation of their souls!

[If remissness only will prove fatal, and that to persons who were once diligent, surely they must be poor indeed who have never entered on their work at all! Let the gay and thoughtless well consider this: for every man shall receive according to his own labour. Nor shall it be sufficient to say at the last day, “I did no harm:” the question will be, “What improvement didst thou make of thy talent?” And if we have buried it in the earth, we shall be condemned as wicked and slothful servants.]

2. What reason have all for humiliation and contrition!

[If we consider the greatness of our work, and how little any of us have done in it, we shall find reason to blush and be confounded before God. Yes; while the world condemn us as “righteous overmuch,” we should be condemning, and even loathing ourselves for doing so little. What might we not have attained, if we had laboured from the beginning with the same anxiety and diligence as others manifest in their temporal concerns? How low are the attainments of the best of us, not only in comparison of what they might have been, but of what we once expected they would be! Let us then trace our poverty to its proper cause, our own remissness: and “whatever our hand findeth to do, let us henceforth do it with all our might.”]

DCCLXXV

GOD’S BLESSING, THE GREATEST RICHES

Prov. 10:22. The blessing of the Lord, it maketh rich; and he addeth no sorrow with it.

AMIDST the lessons of practical wisdom which we are taught in the Book of Proverbs, we find a continual reference to God as the source and the end of all. If we attempt to spiritualize the different moral apophthegms, we in fact pervert them, and apply them to a use for which they were never intended: if, on the other hand, we regard them solely in a moral view, without any relation to God, we fall exceedingly short of their true import. In explaining them, therefore, a proper medium must be observed; that we neither strain their meaning, on the one hand; nor enervate it, on the other.

To unfold to you the passage before us, I will shew,

I. In what respects “the blessing of God” may be said to “make us rich”—

This effect may well be ascribed to “the blessing of God,”

1. Because it is in reality the only source of all wealth—

[Men are apt to ascribe their success in life to their own industry, and to the wisdom which they have exercised in the management of their affairs. But this is to rob God altogether of the glory due to him. The people of Israel were guarded against it by God, who particularly cautioned them not, when they should be established in Canaan, to arrogate any thing to themselves; or to “say in their

heart, My power and the might of my hand hath gotten me this wealth:" for that "it was God alone who had given them power to get wealth." Who sees not how often men fail even in their best-concerted efforts? Success depends, in fact, on so many contingencies, which it is altogether beyond the power of man to control, that the wisest and most industrious of men must of necessity rely on God alone; even as the husbandman, who, though he can plough and sow his land, can command neither the clouds to water it, nor the sun to fructify it with his invigorating rays. No man therefore, however successful, should "sacrifice to his own net, or offer incense to his own dragb;" but all must give glory to God alone, "who maketh poor, or maketh rich; and bringeth low, or lifteth up; who raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes, and to make them inherit a throne of gloryc:"]

2. Because it is itself the greatest of all wealth—

[What can be compared with the blessing of God upon the soul? If we succeed in life, it is that which constitutes our chief joy; or, if we fail in our earthly pursuits, it is that which will compensate for the loss of all. The poorest man in the universe is rich, if he have the presence of God with his soul: and the richest man in the universe is poor, miserably poor, if he be destitute of that great blessing. Behold Paul and Silas in prison, their feet fast in the stocks, and their backs torn with scourges; and yet singing praises to God at midnight! Were they poor? They were rich, truly rich; as were the Hebrew youths, when, in the fiery furnace, the Lord Jesus Christ came and walked with themd. To the eye of faith Lazarus was rich, though he subsisted only on the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. And had he been offered an exchange of condition with his opulent benefactor, he would have disdained the offer, and called himself incomparably the richer man. So, in having God for our portion, we are truly rich. St. Paul, under such circumstances, accounted himself the richest man in the universe: and so he was; for, "though he had nothing, yet he possessed all thingse." And in like manner of us also, even though we are at this moment destitute of bread for the morrow, it may with truth be said, that "all things are ours, if we are Christ'sf." Thus, if we can say, "The Lord is the portion of my inheritance and my cupg," we may account ourselves richer than those who have crowns and kingdoms at their command.]

But we are especially informed by Solomon what is,

II. The peculiar happiness of the person so enriched—

With all other riches there is a mixture of sorrow to embitter them—

[As for riches obtained by iniquity, the curse of God is upon themh. But where there has been nothing of rapacity or dishonesty in acquiring them, yet, if the blessing of God be not upon the soul, there is much care in the preserving of them, much grief if they be lost, and little but disappointment and dissatisfaction in the use of them. In truth, they are entitled to no better name than "vanity and vexation of spiriti." Let the whole state of mankind be candidly surveyed, and it will be acknowledged that the most wealthy are far from being the happiest of men: for, partly from the tempers generated in their own bosoms, and partly from the collision into which they are continually brought with persons envious, or proud, or dishonest, or in some way disoblighing, it may well be doubted whether the pain occasioned by their wealth do not far exceed any pleasure which they derive from it. It was a wise petition which was offered by Agur, "Give me neither poverty nor riches; but feed me with food convenient for mek."

But there is another view, in which riches are far from affording any solid satisfaction; and that is, on account of the responsibility attached to them. They are talents to be improved for God: and, whether wasted in extravagance, or hid in a napkin, they will bring down nothing but a curse in the day of judgment. "Go to now, ye rich men," says St. James, "weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you." To those who have amassed wealth, he says, "Your gold and silver is cankered; and the rust of them shall be a witness against you, and shall eat your flesh as it were fire: ye have heaped treasure together for the last days." To those, on the other hand, who have wasted their money on personal gratifications, he says, "Ye have lived in pleasure on the earth, and been wanton; ye have nourished your hearts, as in a day of slaughterl.]"

But where God gives his blessing with wealth, "he addeth no sorrow with it."

[There is then no conscious guilt in the acquisition of it; no anxiety in the preservation: no disappointment in the use; no grief in the loss; no dread of the responsibility attached to it. On the contrary, "God has given to his people all things richly to enjoym:" and they have a rich enjoyment of every thing, because they enjoy God in it. They receive it all as his gift: they taste his love in it. They consider it, also, as a means of honouring God, and of doing good to man. A benevolent steward, who should be sent by his master to dispense his bounties to a famished multitude, would feel great delight in all the comfort which he was thus empowered to bestow; he would view his master as the author of the benefits, and himself only as the instrument; but his pleasure would still be exquisite, yea, and the more exquisite because his master was honoured in all the good that was done. Such a steward the true Christian feels himself to be: and his final account, also, he contemplates with joy; assured that his stewardship shall be both approved and rewarded in that day.]

From this subject I would take occasion to suggest two important LESSONS—

Learn,

1. In what spirit to address yourselves to every duty in life—

[Be not contented to perform a duty; but look for the blessing of God upon every thing you do. Without his blessing you will have but little comfort in your own souls. I will not hesitate to say, that in every line whatever, from the highest to the lowest, the man who acts

to God and for God will be the happiest man. Others, it is true, may exceed him in wealth; but he will have no reason to envy them; for they have sorrows which will not come near him; and he will have “a joy with which the stranger intermeddleth not.”]

2. What to look for as your chief portion—

[Earthly things are not to be neglected. Your worldly calling, whatever it may be, should be diligently followed. But the blessing of God should be the one object to which all others should be subordinated. Nothing, either on earth or in heaven, should, in your estimation, bear any comparison with that. If the question be put, “Who will shew us any good?” your unvaried answer should be, “Lord, lift thou up the light of thy countenance upon us.” Then will you have “durable riches.” And whilst those who seek any other portion will, “in the midst of their sufficiency, be in straits,” you, in whatever straits you are, will have a sufficiency for your support and comfort both in time and in eternity.]

DCCLXXVI

PORTION OF THE WICKED AND THE RIGHTEOUS CONTRASTED

Prov. 11:18. The wicked worketh a deceitful work: but to him that soweth righteousness shall be a sure reward.

TO a superficial observer the wicked appear to have a far better portion than the righteous: for it is certain, that, in respect of earthly things, the wicked have the larger share; whilst the righteous, whether poor or not in this world's goods, are objects of general hatred and contempt. But, if we examine more attentively, we shall find that the advantage is decidedly and universally on the side of the righteous: for the wicked man, how prosperous soever he may be, “worketh a deceitful work,” but to the righteous, however depressed he may be for a season, shall be a sure reward.

Let us notice the contrast which is here formed between the righteous and the wicked;

I. In their characters—

Though “the wicked” are not distinguished in this place by any appropriate description, yet they are sufficiently marked by standing in contrast with the righteous, whose characters are accurately defined. The one “sow righteousness,” which the other neglect to sow.

1. Let us consider this distinction—

[The sowing of righteousness imports, that the person so engaged deliberately and with diligence endeavours to fulfil the will of God; and that he does so with a view to a future harvest. The great “commandment” under the Gospel being, “that we believe in the name of the only-begotten Son of God,” he makes that his first concern. He comes to Christ daily as a self-ruined sinner, and looks to him as the appointed Saviour of the world. He seeks to be washed in his blood from all his sins, and to be renewed by his Spirit after the Divine image. In a word, his daily consolation is, “In the Lord have I righteousness and strength.” The aim of his soul is also to “walk in all things as Christ walked;” to cultivate altogether “the mind that was in him:” and so to approve himself to God in the whole of his conduct, that in the last day that testimony may be given him from the lips of his applauding Judge, “Well done, good and faithful servant; enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.”]

“The wicked,” on the contrary, has no such thoughts, no such desires. An interest in the Saviour is not of any great importance in his eyes, because he feels no need of it, and concludes of course that he possesses all that is requisite for his acceptance with God. As for “mortifying his earthly members,” and “crucifying the flesh with the affections and lusts,” that is a work to which he is utterly averse. He rather studies to gratify himself, and to follow the bent of his own carnal inclinations. He may not indulge in gross sins: but he is altogether earthly: and whatever he may have of religion, it is a mere form, that engages not his heart, not in any respect the delight of his soul.

In a word, the one looks forward to a future harvest, and sows with a view to that; the other looks no further than to this present world, and has all his desires bounded by the things of time and sense.]

2. Let us see how far this distinction is confirmed by the word of God—

[This is the very distinction which St. Paul himself makes between the carnal and the spiritual man; “They that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; and they that are after the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.” The one “seeks his own things, and not the things that are Jesus Christ's:” the other “lives not unto himself, but unto Him who died for him and rose again.”]

It is here particularly to be noticed, that the Scriptures do not make the distinction to consist in outward acts, but in the inward habit of the mind: the wicked is not necessarily distinguished by open irregularities; but he makes self the end, and aim, and object of his life; whilst “the righteous liveth altogether for, and to, his God.”]

A similar difference will be found between them,

II. In their end—

The wicked follows a mere shadow, which eludes his grasp—

[He seeks for happiness, and hopes to find it in the path which he has marked out for himself. But “he worketh a deceitful work,”

which invariably disappoints his hopes. Whatever be the gratification afforded him, it is transient, and brings no solid satisfaction with it. Whether his pursuit be more sensual, or more refined, it still leaves in the bosom an aching void, which the world can never fill. Solomon tried every thing that was within the reach of mortal man, intellectual as well as sensual; and, after a full experience of it all, declared it all to be “vanity and vexation of spirit.” And, if there be a man in the universe who is able from experience to give any other testimony respecting it, we will be content that that man shall walk in his own ways, and not in the ways of God. But we have no fear that this concession will be productive of any evil; for there is not a man in the whole world that will presume to avail himself of it, since there is no man whose conscience does not tell him that the creature altogether is a broken cistern, and that no true happiness can be found, but in Christ the fountain of living waters.]

The righteous, on the contrary, have a sure reward—

[The seed he sows may lie a long time under the clods, and may seem as if it were buried for ever: but it shall spring up in due season, and bring with it a harvest of solid joy. The Scripture attests, that “the work of righteousness is peace,” and that “in keeping of God’s commandments there is great reward.” And so it is invariably found. This “reward is sure” on two accounts: one is, that his success is independent of all casualties: and the other is, that it is secured to him by the promise of God himself. Happiness as arising from earthly things may be altogether destroyed by disease or accident, or pains either of body or mind: but spiritual happiness is independent of all these things, and often derives a zest from those very things which seem most calculated to subvert it.

If we look to a future state, where the wicked, notwithstanding all their neglect of heavenly things, hope to have a portion with the righteous, we shall see the text fulfilled in all its extent. What surprise and anguish will seize hold upon the wicked the very instant he opens his eyes in the eternal world! Conceive of “the Rich Man” summoned from his carnal indulgences into the presence of his God: how little did he imagine but a few days before in what such a life would issue! How deceitful had his work been, and how delusive all his hopes! But the righteous is sure to find his hopes realized, and his highest expectations infinitely exceeded: for God’s express determination is, that “whatsoever any man soweth, that shall he also reap: he that soweth to the flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; and he who soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlastingi.”]

SEE then,

1. The wisdom of true piety—

[Wisdom consists in pursuing the best ends by the fittest means. Now I would ask, What end is to be compared with eternal life? And by what other means can it be sought, than by those mentioned in the text? Let me then entreat you to “walk, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time:” for now is the seed time; and you will to all eternity reap according to what you sow: “if you sow iniquity, you will reap vanityk:” “if you sow the wind, you will reap the whirlwindl:” but if you “plow up your fallow ground, and sow in righteousness, you shall reap in mercy,” both in this world and the world to come. Let me however add, that you must not be sparing of your seed: for, “if you sow sparingly, you will reap sparingly; but if you sow bountifully, you shall reap also bountifullyn.”]

2. The folly of neglecting the immortal soul—

[Men will deride piety, because it is cultivated by few; and applaud worldliness, because its advocates are many. But the broad road is not at all the safer because it is trodden by so many, nor the narrow way the less safe because it is trodden by so few. Each path will have its proper termination, and issue in the state that God has assigned to it. Can any thing then be conceived more foolish than to put our eternal happiness on such an issue, that it cannot possibly be attained but at the expense of God’s veracity? Truly if such conduct were pursued in reference to this world, it would be accounted not only folly, but madness itself. It is represented by Solomon as a “laying in wait for our own blood, and lurking privily for our own livesp,” yea, and as a “being in love with death itselfq. Let me then urge all of you now to seek “the one thing needful:” and let me encourage you to it by this consideration, that, “if you sow in tears, you shall reap in joy: and if you now go on your way weeping, bearing precious seed, you shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing your sheaves with your.”]

DCCLXXVII

CHRISTIAN LIBERALITY ENCOURAGED

Prov. 11:25. The liberal soul shall be made fat: and he that watereth shall be watered also himself.

IF only we be careful to divest our statements of every thing which carries with it the idea of merit, it is scarcely possible to speak too strongly in praise of liberality, as lovely in itself, and as acceptable to God. To speak of it as contributing in any degree to justify the soul before God, would doubtless be a fatal error; but as rewardable, and certain to be rewarded both in this life and the life to come, we ought to speak of it: and the squeamish jealousy which is entertained on this head, and which fears to declare all that God’s blessed word contains upon the subject, is, in my apprehension, extremely erroneous and unbecoming.

The words which I have just read will lead me to shew you,

I. The spirit we should possess—

In my text we see a spirit of liberality, and a spirit of benevolence; the one constituting an internal principle in the soul, the other displaying itself in active exertions towards all within our sphere. Let me call your attention, then, to,

1. A spirit of liberality—

[The liberal hand is good; but the liberal soul is far better: and this it is which every Christian should possess. We should consider all that we have as so many talents committed to us by our heavenly Master, to be improved for him. Our time, our property, our influence, should all be considered his; and nothing as really ours, but the honour and happiness of employing all for God. We can easily conceive what the feelings of an angel would be, if he were sent from heaven to dispense blessings of any kind: there would be no grudging of his time and labour, nor would there be any pride and self-complacency in his mind on account of his fidelity in the execution of his office. He would consider himself simply as God's servant; and find all his delight in doing the will of Him who sent him, and in being instrumental to the welfare of mankind. If this appear too strong an image, I must say, Instead of being too strong, it falls far short of the example which our blessed Lord has set before us: "Ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, though he was rich, yet for your sakes became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich." This is the true standard at which we should aim; even such a delight in advancing the welfare of others, as disposes us to encounter whatever self-denial may be requisite for the attainment of our end. This may properly be called "a liberal soul."]

2. A spirit of benevolence—

[Principles in the heart must shew themselves by actions in the life. To "water others" should be the employment of us all. The whole world is the garden of the Lord. All of us are his plants; and all of us his husbandmen, that should be occupied in watering the plants around us. Whether our capacity for exertion be greater or less, we should endeavour to improve it for God and man. If we have but one talent, we should not hide it in a napkin, but employ it for the Lord. We should consider what it is that every plant around us wants, in order that we may minister, as far as we are able, to its necessities. Does any need instruction, or comfort, or temporal relief? We should adapt our labours to his necessities, and look to God for his blessing on our endeavours. Day by day the earthly husbandman is so occupied; and it is an employment in which we should daily engage, and of which we never should be weary. At the close of every day we should have the same testimony from conscience as holy Job enjoyed: "When the ear heard me, then it blessed me; and when the eye saw me, it gave witness to me: because I delivered the poor that cried, and the fatherless, and him that had none to help him. The blessing of him that was ready to perish came upon me; and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy. I put on righteousness, and it clothed me: my judgment was as a robe and a diadem. I was eyes to the blind, and feet was I to the lame. I was a father to the poor; and the cause which I knew not, I searched out."]

Such being the proper spirit of a Christian, let us consider,

II. The benefits that will accrue to the possessor of it—

However great may be the good which a person of this spirit may do, I hesitate not to say, that he will receive far greater benefits than he imparts: he will receive them,

1. From the very exercise of the principle itself—

[The high-priest within the vail, whilst offering incense before his God, was regaled with the odours of his own offering; a privilege which no other individual was permitted to enjoy. So the person who exercises love will derive from that very employment a blessedness of which no one else can form any just conception. Well is it said, in a foregoing verse of this chapter, "A merciful man doeth good to his own soul." The exercise of liberality and benevolence tends exceedingly to the suppression of evil in the soul, and to the cultivation and establishment of every holy disposition—And is it not a sweet evidence to the soul, that God has wrought a good work within it? No doubt it is: for if we "love, not in word and in tongue, but in deed and in truth," we may, from that very circumstance, "know that we are of the truth, and may assure our hearts before God." Indeed this is no small part of the recompence which God will bestow on those who serve him with fidelity: he would even consider himself as unrighteous and unjust if he did not thus remember our work and labour of love, which we have shewed toward his name in ministering to his saints:" and on this very ground the Apostle says, "We desire that every one of you do shew the same diligence unto the full assurance of hope unto the end."]

2. From the immediate agency of Almighty God—

[God has said, that "what we give to the poor, we lend unto him, and he will repay it again." And this he will do both in this life and in the life to come. Very remarkable is his promise in relation to the present life: "Give, and it shall be given unto you: good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with what measure ye mete withal, it shall be measured to you again." In a spiritual view, more especially, will God recompense his faithful people. Hear the words of the Prophet Isaiah, which remarkably accord with the expressions of our text: "If thou draw out thy soul not thy purse, but thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul, then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noon-day; and the Lord shall guide thee continually, and make fat thy bones; and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not." Nor shall our labours of love be forgotten of Him in the eternal world. He holds forth this as an encouragement to us to exert ourselves in all the offices of love: "Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing

to communicate, laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.” And that no doubt may remain on this head, he tells us expressly, that such persons shall “be recompensed at the resurrection of the just:” and that to those who have administered to the relief of the poor and the distressed, he will say, “Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” Thus freely and thus richly shall “he who watereth be watered also himself;” yea, as the prophet says, “with showers of blessings shall he be blessed[.]”

We may clearly SEE from hence,

1. From whence proceeds that leanness, of which so many complain—

[Many complain, that, notwithstanding the Gospel is so rich in its blessings, they are not happy. But I believe it will be generally found, that they who complain thus live only for themselves. I think it almost impossible that they who live for God and for their fellow-creatures should not be happy. Such circumstances as Job’s may exist, but they are rare; and even he himself endured them but for a time. Examine, then, your state as before God, and see whether you possess the dispositions of which my text speaks: for, if you do not, how is it possible that you should have any blessing from the Lord? Hear what Job would have thought of such a state as yours: “If I have withheld the poor from their desire, or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail; or have eaten my morsel alone, and the fatherless have not eaten thereof; if I have seen any perish for want of clothing, or any poor without covering; if his loins have not blessed me, and if he were not warmed with the fleece of my sheep; then let mine arm fall from the shoulder-blade, and mine arm be broken from the bonem.” What you sow, you must expect to reap: and if you “sow but sparingly,” in the way of love and mercy, “you shall reap but sparingly” of those blessings which the God of love and mercy will bestow.]

2. What encouragement we have to proceed in the work before us—

[The charity which I would propose to your support is worthy of all the aid which you can afford to give it—And for your encouragement, I will appeal to all: Who amongst you ever abounded in liberality, without finding it a source of joy? or who ever watered others, without being himself watered of the Lord?—If I considered only the charity before us, I should urge you to be liberal: but I chiefly urge it because “I desire fruit that may abound to your accounto.”]

DCCLXXVIII

THE WISDOM OF WINNING SOULS

Prov. 11:30. He that winneth souls, is wise.

REAL piety is operative, and influential on the whole life; and discovers itself very principally in labours of love to those around us. “The fruit of the righteous is” very fitly compared to “a tree of life,” which administers to the welfare of all who come under its benignant shade. True, indeed, such persons are often regarded only as weak enthusiasts; and are despised in proportion as they exert themselves for the benefit of their fellow-creatures. But they have a good report from God himself, who says concerning them, “He that winneth souls, is wise.”

This sentence it shall be my endeavour to confirm: and confirmed it will be beyond all doubt, if we consider what may be justly said in vindication of every one who engages in this good work.

I. The object he proposes to himself is most excellent—

[What in the universe is there worthy to be compared with an immortal soul?—And what work can be compared with that which is done for the soul, in its conversion to God?—Think of its being plucked as a brand out of the fire of hell itself—Think of its being restored to the favour of its offended God—Think of its being transformed into the divine image—Think of its being exalted to a participation of all the glory and felicity of heaven—Is there any object that can stand in competition with this? What is the acquisition of crowns and kingdoms in comparison of this?—]

Further,

II. The labour he bestows upon it is most beneficial,

1. To the soul he wins—

[Let the foregoing hints be duly contemplated; and then say what a benefactor he is, “who turns a man from the error of his ways, and saves a soul alivea”——]

2. To the world around him—

[Man, in his unconverted state, is a snare to all around him. By his example at least, if not by any avowed declarations, he teaches men to think that the concerns of this world are most worthy of their attention, and that the concerns of the soul are only of secondary importance.——But, when once he is truly turned to God, the honour of God is dear unto him, and the welfare of immortal souls lies near his heart——For the extension of the Redeemer’s kingdom he prays in secret, and labours according to

his ability in the sphere wherein he moves. "Thy kingdom come," is the language, not of his lips only, but of his heart also. He now lives, not for himself, as heretofore, but for God, for his Saviour, for his fellow-men; and whatever he possesses he considers as a talent to be improved for them——Now, therefore, he becomes "a light in the world;" and, from being an agent of Satan to advance the kingdom of darkness, he is a favoured instrument of Jehovah, to promote in every way the happiness and salvation of the human race——Who can calculate the benefits accruing from such a change?]

3. To himself also—

[Who ever laboured for God without receiving in his own soul a rich rewardb?" "Who ever watered others, and was not himself watered by the Lordc?" The very graces which a man exercises, in winning souls to God, diffuse a sweet serenity, a holy joy, over the whole man, and assimilate him to his Lord and Saviour, and render him meet for the inheritance that is reserved for him. I may add also, his very labour augments for him the weight of glory that is reserved for him in heaven: for God has said, in reference to this very thing, that "every man shall receive according to his own labourd;" and that "they who turn many to righteousness shall shine as the stars, for ever and evere."

Is not he "wise," then, who engages in such a work as this?]

In addition to all this I must say,

III. The end he accomplishes is most glorious—

[This is the end which God the Father had in view, when he delegated to his Son the office of redeeming man——This was the end for which our adorable Saviour "left the bosom of the Father," and assumed into union with himself our fallen nature, and led a life of sorrow upon earth, and at last died for us upon the cross. To this he looked forward, as "the joy that was set before him, for the which he endured the cross and despised the shamef." And when he beholds this as the fruit of his sufferings, he is altogether "satisfied with the travail of his soulg"——The Holy Spirit also regards this as the end for which he performs his part in the economy of redemption. For what does he "strive with rebellious manh?" For what end does he enlighten, quicken, sanctify the souls of men, or refresh and invigorate them with his heavenly consolations? All of this is to "glorify Christ," in the salvation of man. In truth, it is in this work that every person of the Godhead will be glorified to all eternity. What is it that illustrates in harmonious union all the perfections of the Deity?——What is it that is the one subject of praise and adoration amongst all the heavenly hosts? Is not this the song of all that have been redeemed? "To him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto our God, to him be glory and dominion for ever and everk." Even the angels, that never sinned, add their "Amen to this; and sing their praises unto God who sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and everl."

Compare with this work, then, "all the labour that is done under the sun," and it is no better than laborious folly. Not he that accumulates to himself wealth or honour, but "he that winneth souls, is wise."]

What, in CONCLUSION, shall I say? What?

1. Let every one seek the salvation of his own soul—

[Is it wisdom to win the souls of others? What folly, then, must it be to lose our own?——In this labour we have more abundant encouragement. We may seek to save others, and fail in our attempt: but who ever failed, that sought salvation for his own soul? Find, in the annals of the whole world, one who ever looked to Christ in vain? Who ever washed in the fountain of his blood in vain? or for whom did the grace of Christ ever prove inadequate and insufficient? Let the world deride this labour as folly, if they please: they will soon see who it is that is really wise; and will soon condemn themselves, more bitterly than now the most envenomed amongst them condemn the righteous: "WE fools accounted their life madness, and their end to be without honour: but now we see how greatly we have erred from the way of truthm."——Who then is wise among you, let him "give himself wholly" to the concerns of his soul; for "the wise shall inherit glory; but shame shall be the promotion of foolsn."]

2. Let every one seek also the salvation of others—

[There are many ways in which this may be doneo——In particular, let every one attend to his own household. For these, in a more especial manner, is every one responsible——But in whatever way our exertions are called forth, let us remember that they must be used in a wise, discreet, affectionate manner. We must doubtless declare the whole counsel of God: but, if we would succeed in our labours, we must endeavour to "win souls" by love, and not drive them away by severity and terror——]

DCCLXXIX

THE EXCELLENCY OF THE RIGHTEOUS

Prov. 12:26. The righteous is more excellent than his neighbour.

MEN in their external appearance are alike; so far at least, that their moral character cannot with any accuracy be determined by it. But God, who searches the heart, sees an immense difference between different men; such a difference as suffices to arrange them

all under two great classes—the righteous and the wicked. In the righteous he finds an excellency which he in vain looks for in others; and to point out this superior excellency is my object, in this discourse. But here it is proper to observe, that Solomon does not draw the comparison between a righteous and a notoriously wicked man; but between a righteous man and “his neighbour,” however excellent that neighbour may be: for, if there be in any man a want of positive and inherent righteousness, whatever else he may possess, he must be classed with the wicked: and with such only will my present comparison be instituted.

“The righteous man, then, is more excellent than his neighbour;”

I. In his connexions—

A truly righteous man is born of God—

[This is frequently and fully declared in the Holy Scripturesa——and though he be the poorest man upon earth, he is entitled to address his God under the endearing name of Father.]

He is united to Christ—

[He is united to him as a building to the foundationb; as a wife to her husbandc; as a branch to the vined; as a member to the bodye. There is no other union so close and intimate, except that which subsists between God the Father and the Lord Jesusf: for he is not only one body with him, but one spirit alsog: for Christ lives in himh, and is his very lifei.]

The Holy Ghost also dwells in him—

[He is a temple of the Holy Ghostk, who abides in him more manifestly and more effectually than in the whole universe besides: and so desirable a residence is his heart accounted by the Holy Spirit, that, in comparison of it, the temple of Solomon itself was held in utter contemptl.]

He is of the same family with all the glorified saints and angels—

[There is but one family, whether in heaven or earth, of which Christ is the headm: and so far is he from being disowned by them, that there is not an angel before the throne that does not account it an honour to wait upon him, and to minister unto himn.]

What does any worldly man possess, that can be compared with this?

[Whose child is he? “A child of the wicked oneo:” as our Lord has said, “Ye are of your father the devilp.” True it is, that in the last day the holy angels will minister to them also; but it will only be to “gather them together” from every part of the universe, and to “bind them up in bundles,” and to cast them headlong into the fire of hellq. Tell me, then, to which of these the superior excellency belongs?]

Let us trace this,

II. In his principles—

The righteous man is altogether under the influence of faith and love—

[He looks for salvation solely through the blood and righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ. He has no hope whatever, but in the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. As for any righteousness of his own, he utterly disclaims it. He knows, that if he were judged by the best act he ever performed, he must for ever perish. The way which God himself has provided for the salvation of sinners is that which he affects, and in which he glories: the language of his inmost soul is this, “God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom (or by which) the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the worldr.”

At the same time that he looks thus to be saved as a sinner, he labours to walk as a saint, and to “adorn the doctrine of God his Saviour in all things.” Nor is he impelled to this by any slavish fear of punishment: no: “the love of Christ constrains him; because he thus judges, that if one died for all, then were all dead; and that he died for all, that they who live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him who died for them and rose agains.” And as he serves his God from love, so is he actuated by the same principle in all his intercourse with men: “he walks in love, as Christ has loved himt;” and he looks upon this as the best fruit of his faithu, and as the surest evidence of his acceptance with Godx.]

How widely different from these are the principles of the wicked!

[Let it be remembered, that I am not speaking of those who indulge in gross wickedness, but of those only who are not positively righteous. Whatever they may possess in respect of outward morality, they are strangers to the true exercise both of faith and love. They do not fully enter into the great mystery of redemption: they feel not their need of such a Saviour as God has provided for them. That God himself should become a man, and die under the load of their sins, and work out a righteousness wherein they may stand accepted before him—they see no occasion for all this: they think they might be saved on easier terms, or, if I may so express it, at a cheaper rate. They cannot see why they should have so inestimable a price paid for them, when their own repentance and reformation might have well sufficed for all the demands which God had upon them. Nor do they feel their need of the Holy Spirit to teach and sanctify them, when their own wisdom and strength were, upon the whole, adequate to their necessities. At all events, if they assent to the Gospel salvation as true, they do not embrace it with their whole hearts, and rejoice in it as that which alone could give them a hope before God. So also in their obedience, all which they do is from constraint, rather than from love: as clearly appears from hence, that they are satisfied, upon the whole, with what they do; whereas, if they felt their obligations to God for the gift of his only Son to die for them, and of his Holy Spirit to renew them, they would feel nothing but dissatisfaction and grief on account of their short-comings and defects. In fact, all their works are done merely in conformity with the customs of the world, and for the purpose of forming a ground for self-estimation, and for the estimation of those around them.

What comparison, then, will these bear with the characters with which they are here contrasted? They are as inferior to the righteous "as dross is to the purest goldy."]

Let us trace the comparison yet further,

III. In his habits—

The righteous man lives altogether to his God—

[See him from day to day: his whole soul is humbled before God, under a sense of his own extreme unworthiness. Were you to behold him in his secret chamber, you would behold him more abased before his God for an evil thought or desire, than an ungodly man would be for the actual commission of the grossest sin. Oh! the sighs and groans which he involuntarily utters, under the load of that burthen, that body of sin and death, from which he cannot get free! and many are the tears which he sheds in secret, because he cannot attain that perfect holiness which his soul panteth after.

With his humiliation he breathes forth in devoutest accents his prayers and praise. His prayers are no formal service, but a holy wrestling with God; and his praises resemble those of heaven, that are accompanied with the devoutest prostration of soul.

A life of self-denial, too, characterizes his daily walk. He desires to "crucify the flesh, with its affections and lusts;" and it is his incessant labour to "mortify the whole body of sin." "Not a right hand, or right eye," would he willingly retain: he would gladly part with every thing, however dear to him, if only he may but enjoy the testimony of a good conscience, and approve himself faithful to the heart-searching God.

To prepare for death and judgment is his one concern. He lives as on the borders of eternity. He knows not at what hour the bridegroom may arrive; and therefore he "keeps his loins girt, and his lamp trimmed, that he may be ready to enter into the bride-chamber" with his beloved Lord.]

But how is it with the wicked in these respects?

[Are they from day to day humbling themselves in the Divine presence? What cares and sorrows they have are altogether of a worldly nature. To "abhor themselves," like Job, and "to repent in dust and ashes," unless for some wickedness that has exposed them to public hatred and contempt, is no part of their experience before God.

And what are their prayers and thanksgivings? Nothing but a mere lip-service, in which their hearts are not at all engaged.

As for self-denial, they know little about it. Their whole life is a system of self-indulgence. They may not run into gross sins on account of their regard for their character amongst men; but they pursue with unabated ardour those earthly vanities on which their hearts are set. Pleasure, or riches, or honour, occupy all their thoughts, and stimulate all their exertions. They live altogether for themselves, and not for God; for the body, and not for the soul; for time, and not for eternity.

Surely the further we compare the characters, the more will the superiority of the righteous appear.]

It remains that we yet further contemplate the righteous,

4. In his end—

How blessed this will be, no words can adequately describe!

[Were you present with him in his dying hour, and God were to open your eyes, you would see angels attendant on him, to bear upon their wings his departing spirit into Abraham's bosom. Could you follow him, and witness his reception by the Most High God, what plaudits would you hear! "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord!" How would you, then, behold him graced with a crown of gold, seated upon a throne, invested with a kingdom, and shining forth with a glory that would eclipse the noon-day sun! To all eternity will he then live, in the immediate fruition of his God, holy as God himself is holy; and happy, according to his capacity, as God himself is happy.]

Alas! alas! here all comparison must for ever cease—

[The wicked, unhappy creatures! are dragged into the presence of an angry God, in vain "calling upon rocks and mountains to cover them from his wrath." From him they hear that terrific sentence, "Depart accursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels!" and into that fire are they cast, even "that lake that burneth with fire and brimstone," from, whence "the smoke of their torment will ascend for ever and ever." But this is too painful to reflect upon. O that the very mention of it may suffice to confirm the assertion in my text, and to convince you all wherein alone true excellency can be found!]

ADDRESS—

1. Those whom God has classed with "the wicked"—

[You will find, in the words following my text, that the persons contrasted with the righteous are so designated: and of them it is said, "The way of the wicked seduceth them." Now, it must be granted, that "their way" is more easy, and to flesh and blood more pleasant, and more approved by an ungodly world; and, therefore they imagine it to be, on the whole, preferable to the difficult and self-denying and despised path of the righteous. But they are "seduced" by these specious appearances; and "a deceived heart has turned them aside; so that they cannot deliver their soul, or say, Is there not a lie in my right hand?" But be dispassionate, and judge as before the Lord. If you deceive yourselves, you cannot deceive him: he will judge, not according to your own erroneous estimate of yourselves, but according to truth, and to the real state of your souls. Yet methinks you cannot deceive even yourselves, if you will but reflect with any degree of candour upon the comparison that has been set before you. In truth, you have in your own

bosoms a witness for God: for, whether your conduct be more or less moral, there is not one of you that does not say in his heart, especially in his more thoughtful moments, "Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his.]"

2. Those who are disposed to number themselves amongst "the righteous"—

[Many who claim this distinction prove themselves, by their habits, most unworthy of it. It is a melancholy truth, that many professors of religion, instead of being more excellent than their neighbour, are inferior to him in almost every thing that is amiable and praiseworthy. Such self-deceivers will have a fearful account to give at the last day. To every one, then, amongst you I would say, If you profess yourselves to be righteous, let it appear to all around that you are so by the superior excellence of your lives. Our Lord says to his disciples, "What do ye more than others?" More than others ye ought to do; inasmuch as your obligations and assistances are more than others are acquainted with. You are to "shine as lights in a dark world;" and in every relation of life to approve yourselves more excellent than your neighbour. Are you husbands or wives, parents or children, masters or servants, you should fill up your station in life more to the honour of God and the good of the community than any others around you. I conclude, then, with that direction which our blessed Lord has given you: "So let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.]"

DCCLXXX

THE CHARACTER AND END OF THE WICKED

Prov. 13:5. A wicked man is lothesome, and cometh to shame.

THE world in general uphold and countenance one another in their evil ways; some will even "make a mock at sin," and glory in it. But God's testimony respecting the wicked man is, that, whatever be his rank, or talents, or estimation among men, he is indeed "lothesome, and cometh to shame."

In these words we behold,

I. The character of the wicked—

The wicked comprehend all who are not righteous—

[There are but two classes of persons mentioned in the Scriptures; and to one or other of them we all belong. There is no intermediate character. We indeed cannot always determine to which of these classes men belong, because we cannot discern the heart; but God, to whom all things are naked and open, will distinguish them from each other as easily as we do sheep from the goats.

It is of infinite importance that we should have this truth impressed on our minds: for we are ready to rank among the wicked those only who are guilty of great enormities: whereas all are wicked who are not truly righteous; all, who are not converted to God, and renewed in the spirit of their minds.]

God's testimony respecting them is applicable to them all, whether they be more or less wicked in respect of gross sins—

[The openly profane are doubtless exceeding lothesome in the sight of God. Let any one but notice their conversation; how replete is it with lewdness and blasphemy! Let their tempers be marked; what evil dispositions do they manifest on all occasions! Let their conduct be scrutinized, their drunkenness, their whoredoms, and all their other abominations; and who must not confess the justice of that representation, which compares them to swine wallowing in the mire, and dogs devouring their own vomit?

The more decent, it is true, are not so vile in the eyes of men, (yea, perhaps they are honoured and esteemed) but they also are lothesome in the sight of God. What monsters of ingratitude are the very best of unregenerate men! What mercies have they received from God; what inconceivable love has been shewn them by the Lord Jesus Christ; and yet they have never spent one hour in humble and grateful adorations. If they had laboured thus to win the affections of some worthless wretch, and after many years of unintermitted kindness were requited by him as they requite their God, would they not consider him as deserving of utter execration? How lothesome then must they be, whose obligations are infinitely greater, and whose conduct is inexpressibly more vile! Their actions, it is confessed, may have been fair and specious: but what have their hearts been? have they not been a very sink of iniquity? Yes; so depraved are the very best of men, that there are few, if any, who would not rather die, than have all the secrets of their hearts known to men as they are known to God. What then are such persons, but whited sepulchres? No wonder that, however they be esteemed among men, both their persons and services are an abomination to the Lord.]

Conformable to their character must surely be,

II. Their end—

Sin is in itself inconceivably vile, and will bring its votaries to shame,

1. In this world—

[How often are the fairest characters blasted by detection, and exposed to infamy! The deeds of darkness, when brought to light, often reflect such dishonour upon men, as to make them shun society, and put a period to their own existence. And how many are

brought to die by the hands of a public executioner, and to entail disgrace on their latest posterity! Little do men think, when first they yield to temptation, whither sin will lead them. It is a principal device of Satan to conceal the consequences of sin, and to make men believe that they can recede from it whenever they please: but when he has once entangled their feet, they find to their cost, that they cannot escape from his net.]

2. In the world to come—

[There are many who pass honourably through life, and, for their conduct in society, deserve every token of our respect. But God will try the hearts of men in the last day: and “will bring to light every secret thing, whether it be good or evil.” Then what shame will overwhelm the most specious moralist, whose heart was unrenewed by grace! A want of love to Christ now is thought but a light matter: but then it will appear in its true colours, as deserving of God’s heaviest indignatione. Secret lusts too are overlooked, as though they did not at all defile the soul: but they will then be found to have made us altogether lothesome and odious to Godf. Then will Christg with all his saintsh and angelsi unite in expressing their abhorrence of these whited sepulchres; so fully shall that declaration be verified, They shall awake to shame and everlasting contemptk.]

We cannot IMPROVE this subject better than by pointing out,

1. What is that repentance which such persons need—

[It is by no means sufficient to confess that we are sinners: we should feel that we are indeed lothesome; and should be filled with shame on account of the extreme vileness of our heartsm. Nothing less than this will constitute that “repentance which is not to be repented ofn.”]

2. How their character and end may be completely changed—

[Lothesome as we are we may be purified by the blood of Jesus, and be made without spot or blemish in the sight of Godo. Our natures also may be changed by his Spirit, so that we shall possess a beauty that God himself shall admirep. Yea, instead of having shame for our portion, we shall be made to inherit “glory and honour and immortality.” We shall be sons of the living God, and be seated with Christ on thrones of glory. Let us then seek this change, and rely on God’s promises, that by means of them it may be accomplished in usq.]

DCCLXXXI

THE WAY OF TRANSGRESSORS HARD

Prov. 13:15. The way of transgressors is hard.

THE Scriptures abound with weighty aphorisms, which deserve the deepest consideration. For the most part, they will be found directly opposed to the general opinions of mankind. The maxims of men are too often founded on the appearance of things, and on the respect they bear to our temporal advantage; but the declarations of God exhibit things as they really are, and as they will approve themselves to be, if we take into consideration their aspect on eternity. The transgressors of God’s law account themselves happy in having cast off his yoke, and freed themselves from the restraints which his law would impose upon them. But the truth is, that he is under a most desperate delusion, and grievously deceives his own soul. “A good understanding,” regulating the conduct agreeably to God’s commands. “will ensure to a man favour” and comfort, both in this world and the next:” “but the way of transgressors is hard.” Their whole life is a state,

I. Of bondage—

[Whatever be the besetting sin of the ungodly, it has within them the force of a law, to which alas! they yield a willing obediencea.” As the ten tribes “ran willingly after the commandment” of Jeroboam to the commission of idolatry, to which they had an inward and almost invincible propensityb; so do the worldling, the sensualist, the drunkard, follow but too readily, the impulse of their own corrupt hearts. A spring will not more naturally rise, when the power which compressed it is removed, than their lusts will rise to demand their wonted gratification, when an opportunity for indulgence is afforded them. The poor infatuated agents will call this libertyc; but the whole Scriptures designate it bondage: “Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obeyd?” Yes, in yielding to temptation we are “the servants of sine;” and the servants of Satan also: for “he it is who worketh in all the children of disobediencef,” and leads them captive at his willg”. In fact, the whole Gospel takes this for granted: for Christ was sent on purpose to redeem us from this bondageh, and to “make us free indeedi.” But, whilst thus enslaved, are we not in a most pitiable condition? True, we may not be sensible of the bondage, because the service of sin and Satan is in accordance with our own corrupt inclinations: but we are, in fact, the more to be pitied, because of our insensibility: even as a maniac is, whose whole life is occupied in things which tend to the destruction of his own welfare. The transgressor’s life is also a state,]

II. Of disquietude—

[The ungodly man, whatever be his pursuit, finds nothing in which his soul can rest. Possess what he may, "in the midst of his sufficiency he is in straits." There is always a secret something unpossessed; some object which he thinks would make him happy, but which, even when in appearance almost attained, eludes his grasp: and after he has "hewn out to himself a cistern with great labour, he finds it only a broken cistern, that can hold no water!" His continual disappointments fill him with vexation; so that he finds even the objects of his fondest hope prove, in the issue, to be "vanity and vexation of spirit." Not being devoted to his God, he wants those enjoyments and those prospects which alone can afford consolation to him under his trials——To his other pains are added those of a self-condemning conscience. He tries indeed to stifle the voice of conscience; and betakes himself to business, and pleasures, and company, in order to get rid of its remonstrances: but there are times when it will speak, especially a time of sickness and approaching dissolution; and at those seasons he feels regret that he has so long and so entirely disregarded his eternal interests. Gladly at such a season would he consent to have his miserable life protracted to an indefinite period, yea, or to suffer annihilation; not because he could contemplate either the one or the other with pleasure, but because he dreads the judgment for which he has neglected to prepare.

Say, Brethren, whether such away be not hard and painful? Yet I appeal to the conscience of every man, whether that declaration be not verified in his own experience; "The wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. There is no peace, saith my God, to the wickedm." Yes, verily, this testimony is incontrovertible; and it proves beyond all doubt the truth in my text, that "the way of transgressors is hard."

But all this is heightened by the consideration of the transgressors' way as a state,]

III. Of danger—

[In some respect it may be said of every man, that he is exposed to danger, and that "we know not what a day or an hour may bring forth." But, if we be servants of Christ, we have nothing to fear; since He is pledged to preserve us from every thing that shall be really evil, and to make "all things work together for our goodn." Even death itself is a blessing to the pious man, who is privileged to count it amongst his richest treasureso. Far different from this, however, is the state of the ungodly man: he knows not but that the next moment may precipitate him into the bottomless abyss of hell. Death waits but for its commission from on high, and it will in an instant transmit his soul to the bar of judgment, and to the presence of his offended God. What a fearful thought! With what terror would it inspire the unconverted man, if it were contemplated aright! Could we but conceive a transgressor hurried to the tribunal of his Judge, to give up his great account, and to receive his final doom, what a view should we have of the folly of his ways! Oh! the anguish to which he is now subjected under the wrath of an avenging God? what "weeping" under the load of his misery! what "wailing" on account of his folly, in having so wasted his day of grace! and what "gnashing of teeth," with unprofitable execrations against his avenging God! Such is the danger to which the unconverted man is every moment exposed. At his most joyous feasts, this sword is suspended over him by a single hair; which cut or rent asunder, he is instantly consigned to endless woe. Whether the transgressor think of it or not, this is his state; and a miserable state it is: and if he awake not out of it before death shall seize him, it were better for him that he had never been born.]

IMPROVEMENT—

1. How desirable is the conversion of the soul to God!

[Compare the state of a converted soul with that which has been before described. The saint, doubtless, has his trials, as well as the ungodly man: but in him, so far as it prevails, religion makes a most essential difference: "it frees him from the law of sin and deathp;" and he finds all its ways to be the ways of pleasantness and peaceq." If men consulted only their happiness in this life, they would devote themselves to God, whose service is perfect freedom: but if they take eternity into the account, they will confess him to be the only happy man, who enjoys the Divine favour and looks forward with confidence to a participation of the Divine glory.]

2. How infatuated are they who delay to seek it!

[Truly, if men were conscious of their danger in an unconverted state, they could no more sleep than they could in a ship that was on fire, or on a rafter on which they were making their escape to land. I pray you, beloved, consider the shortness and uncertainty of time! Consider how every day's continuance in sin operates to grieve the Holy Spirit of God, to harden your own hearts, to confirm your evil habits, to accumulate your load of guilt, and to augment the misery that awaits you. O! will you delay to turn unto your God? Will you delay one single hour? What if your soul be required of you this very night, and your doom be fixed without a hope or possibility of change for ever? I beseech you, to-day, while it is called to-day, harden not your hearts; but "repent, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin."]

DCCLXXXII

THE FOLLY OF MAKING A MOCK AT SIN

Prov. 14:9. Fools make a mock at sin.

MAN in his first creation was formed after the Divine image; and there was not in his soul the least inclination to evil of any kind. But since his fall, he is become in love with sin: sin is the very element in which he lives: and so unconscious is he of its malignity, that he makes a mock at it. Doubtless all do not carry their impiety to the same extent. Some are openly profane, and given up to all manner of wickedness; not only not being ashamed of their ways, but actually “glorying in their shame.”

We must not however restrict to persons of this description the declaration in our text. The evil that is there complained of is of far wider extent, it more or less attaches to every unconverted man. This will appear, whilst we open to you,

I. The conduct here reprobated—

Let us remember what sin is: “it is the transgression of the law.” Whichever table of the law be broken, or whatever command be violated, the violation of it is sin: and to make light of that transgression, whether it be more or less heinous in itself, is to make a mock at sin. Bearing this in mind, we say, that this evil is committed,

1. By those who live in sin themselves—

[Passing over the drunkard, who says to his companions, “We will fill ourselves with strong drink; and to-morrow shall be as this day and much more abundant;” and the robber, who invites his fellows, “Come, let us lay wait for blood, that we may fill our houses with spoil;” and the unhappy prostitute, who “impudently” assaults with importunity the unwary youth; or a variety of other characters alike notorious and abandoned;—passing by these, I say, (whom to have named is quite sufficient,) let us look to the worldling, who, though walking in a more sober way, lives altogether for himself; or look to the self-righteous, who though admired and applauded as characters of superior excellence, have no true humiliation before God, no earnest desires after a Saviour, no real delight in holy exercises, no fixedness of mind to glorify their God. What shall I say of them all? Have they any just views of sin? Have they any suitable apprehensions of the state to which they have been brought by means of sin? Do not their whole spirit and temper shew, that they think light of it? and, if it were set before them in all its malignity and ill desert, would they not say, that the representation was exaggerated, and that the person who gave them the representation was deceived? They need not utter any words, to betray the thoughts of their hearts: these are sufficiently evident by the absence of all those feelings which a just estimate of sin would create: and exactly as those who imagine that God will never punish sin, are said to “contemn Gode.” so may those, who think that sin will not involve us in misery, be justly said to contemn sin, and, in heart at least, if not in act, to “make a mock at it.”]

2. By those who discountenance piety in others—

[Though a form of godliness will gain us applause, no man begins to experience the power of it without exposing himself to the censure of an ungodly world. Let a person be really broken-hearted and contrite, as every sinner ought to be; let him be seeking the Lord Jesus Christ with his whole heart; let him turn his back upon the vanities of the world, and separate himself from the society of those who would ensnare his soul; let him give himself to reading the holy Scriptures, to devout meditation, to fervent prayer, to a diligent use of all the appointed ordinances of religion; let him join himself to the Lord’s people, and choose the excellent of the earth for his companions; let him, in a word, be in earnest in fleeing from the wrath to come, and in laying hold on eternal life; let him do this, and his nearest friends will instantly dissuade him from such a course: they will represent to him the inexpediency of such extravagant measures; they will complain of him as enthusiastic and righteous over-much. They will impute the change that has taken place in him to weakness, or vanity, or perhaps to hypocrisy and a desire of human estimation. Now then I ask, whence would such a disapprobation of his ways arise? Are they not such ways as are marked out by God? Are they not the very footsteps of the flock who have gone before him? Is not this course precisely such as common sense would dictate, and such as all mankind would approve, if the bodily life were in danger? Who would complain of earnestness in a shipwrecked mariner? Who would deride the cries and fears and efforts of a person endeavouring to escape from a house on fire? Yet in matters relating to the soul and to eternity, no sooner is the importance of salvation felt, and manifested, as it ought to be, than all who have any influence endeavour to quiet the fears, and to discourage the exertions, of the awakened soul. Could this be, if sin were viewed by them as God views it? No: the persons who thus discountenance fervent piety, declare, that they see no occasion for it; that we may very well be saved without it; and that sin has no such terrors but that a moderate degree of attention will not suffice to escape from its threatened dangers. What is this, but to “make a mock at sin?”]

That such conduct may appear in its true light, I proceed to shew,

II. The folly of it—

However much we make a mock at sin,

1. We cannot alter the nature of it—

[Sin is “that abominable thing which God hatesf.” he cannot look upon it, or on those who commit it, without the utmost abhorrenceg. It is, whether we will believe it or not, “exceeding sinfullh.” Now we are told by the prophet, that many will “call evil good, and good evil; and will put darkness for light, and light for darkness; bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitteri.” But if the whole universe should do this, would they alter the essential qualities of these things? Would darkness cease to be darkness, and serve all the purposes of light? or would bitter change its properties to sweetness? So, whatever construction men may put upon sin, and however they may palliate its enormity, it will ever remain immutably the same; a defiling, debasing, damning evil; more to be dreaded than death itself.

We may call it innocent; but it will “bite like a serpent, and sting like an adder.” We may roll it as a sweet morsel “under our tongue; but it will be the gall of asps within us!”]

2. We cannot avert its consequences—

[God has said, “The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God.” Now we may say to sinners, as the serpent did to Eve, “Ye shall not surely die:” but we can never separate the penalty from the offence. We may represent the transgression, whatever it may be, as small; and may expatiate upon the goodness of God, and the impossibility of his visiting such an offence with such a tremendous punishment: but we shall not prevail on him to rescind his decree, or to reverse his sentence. He has said, “The soul that sinneth, it shall die:” and die it shall, even “the second death, in the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone:” nor if the whole universe should combine their efforts to avert the sentence, should they ever prevail in any single instance. “The wrath of God is revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men:” and sooner shall heaven and earth pass away, than one impenitent transgressor escape. How great then must be the folly of making a mock at sin! If we could prevail on God to accord with our views, and to concede that sin should pass unpunished, we might have some plea for our conduct: but if the effect of our representations be only to deceive our own souls, and to rivet the chains with which sin and Satan have already bound us, we must confess that Solomon’s views of such conduct are just, and that they are “fools” who “make a mock at sin.”]

To all of you then I would, in CONCLUSION, say,

1. Make not light of sin yourselves—

[Your souls, your immortal souls, are at stake. Were the consequences of your error only temporary, we might leave you to enjoy your own delusions: but they are eternal. There is no repentance in the grave. “As the tree falls, so it will lie.” If you die under the guilt of sin, your doom is irreversible, your misery everlasting. How do millions that are now in the eternal world curse their folly for making light of sin, in direct opposition to all that God had spoken in his word respecting it! and in what accents would they speak, if they could now have access to you to warn you! I pray you then be wise in time; and seek without delay to obtain “the forgiveness of your sins through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus”——]

2. Regard not the scoffs of those who do—

[Suppose it desirable to possess the good opinion of the world: yet surely to purchase it at the expense of your immortal soul is to pay too high a price for it: it is but for a moment at all events: and though it is valuable so far as it may give you an influence over them for their good, yet it cannot for one moment be put in competition with the testimony of a good conscience, and the approbation of your God. You are taught to expect, that if you will not countenance the world in their ways, they will do all they can to discountenance you in yours. You see that this has been the case from the beginning: from the time of Abel to this hour, “they who have been born after the flesh have persecuted those who are born of the Spirit:” and not even the Lord Jesus Christ himself could escape their reproaches. “If then they called the Master of the house Beelzebub,” wonder not if his servants also be designated by reproachful names. If these things come upon you for righteousness sake, receive them as a token for good, and bless God that you are “counted worthy to endure them.” God permits these things as trials of your faith and love; and if they at any time appear grievous to you, then think of the plaudit of your Judge, and how speedily the very people who now condemn you will themselves “awake to shame and everlasting contempt,” and will be among the foremost to proclaim your praise. “Be faithful unto death; and God will give you a crown of life.”]

3. Endeavour so to walk, that those who mock at sin may have no occasion given them to mock at righteousness also—

[Whilst you in departing from evil “condemn the world,” you may be well assured that they will be glad enough to find occasion against you, and to condemn religion on your account. Endeavour then to “walk wisely before God in a perfect way.” Let the world “have no fault to find in you, except concerning the law of your God.” Let not your regard for the duties of the first table lead you to neglect those of the second; but be careful to fulfil the duty of your place and station towards man, as well as that which consists in the more immediate service of your God: and be careful to avoid all needless singularities, which in the sight of God make you neither better nor worse. As for preventing the world from taking offence, that is impossible. Darkness must of necessity “hate the light:” but take care that the light be that which proceeds from God, and not from any “sparks of your own kindling.” “Walk in wisdom towards them that are without:” “give them no occasion to speak reproachfully:” but so cause “your light to shine before them, that they may be led to glorify your heavenly Father.” Thus, though you should not “win them by your good conversation,” you may at least hope “to put to silence the ignorance of foolish men;” and constrain them, in spite of all their mocking, to confess, that “the righteous is more excellent than his neighbour.”]

DCCLXXXIII

MAN’S EXPERIENCE KNOWN TO HIMSELF ALONE

Prov. 14:10. The heart knoweth his own bitterness; and a stranger doth not intermeddle with his joy.

THE inward experience of men, any further than it is discovered by acts or other outward signs, must of necessity be known to themselves alone. St. Paul puts the question to us, "Who knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him?" Whether a man be filled with sorrow or joy, he alone can be sensible of the measure and extent of his own feelings.

The assertions in my text will be found true,

I. In reference to the concerns of this world—

[Great are the troubles of many, as arising from their own unhappy tempers—from their connexions in life—or from circumstances of embarrassment in their affairs—And who but themselves can fully appreciate their sorrows?—On the other hand, the comforts of many are considerable, as flowing from the exercise of benevolence and love—from the endearments of domestic life—and from that success in their affairs which enables them to supply with ease the wants of themselves and families—And of the satisfaction which they feel, a stranger would form a very inadequate conception—]

II. In reference to the concerns of the soul—

[In matters relating to the soul, the feelings are still more acute. None but the person feeling it can tell "the bitterness" which is occasioned by a sense of sin, with all its aggravations—by the prospect of death and judgment, whilst the soul is unprepared to meet its God—and by temptations to despondency, and perhaps to suicide itself—Job's friends could not at all appreciate his sorrows, as depicted by himself—Nor can any, but the man whose "heart is thus broken," conceive fully what "a broken and contrite spirit is"—]

On the other hand, there are in the heart of a true Christian "joys, with which a stranger intermeddleth not." The peace that is experienced by him, when God speaks peace to his soul, "passeth all understanding"—And "the joys" with which he is transported, in the views of his Redeemer's glory, in the experience of God's love shed abroad in his heart, and in the earnest and foretaste of his eternal inheritance, "are unspeakable and glorified"—These joys are, "the white stone, with a new name written on it, which no man can read, saving he who has received it"—Michal could not understand the exercises of David's mind—Nor can any one fully estimate the blessedness of a soul, when thus admitted to close communion with its God—]

LEARN from hence—

[Contentment—(the very persons whom you envy, are perhaps even envying you—) charity—(we can see the outward act only, and can little tell what passes in the hearts of men, whether in a way of humiliation or desire—) and earnestness in the ways of God;—that you may attain the deepest measures of contrition, with the sublimest experience of joy. The lower we lay our foundation, the higher we may hope our superstructure shall be raised—]

DCCLXXXIV

MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT THE WAY OF SALVATION

Prov. 14:12. There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.

ON no topic do men express a greater confidence than on the subject of religion; whilst that, of all subjects that can be offered to our consideration, requires most care in our inquiry, and most diffidence in our decision. All other subjects, as far as they can be determined at all, may be determined by reason; and in the investigation of them, reason is to a certain degree free, both in its deliberations and decisions. But spiritual things must be spiritually discerned: they are out of the reach of reason. Reason must judge whether the things which are presented to it are revealed: but, when that point is ascertained, they must be apprehended by faith alone. Reason can tell us nothing about the mystery of redemption: it is faith alone that can apprehend that, or any of the other mysteries connected with it. Moreover, whilst reason can do so little in favour of religion, all the prejudices, and passions, and interests of mankind are acting in full force against it. Faith and sense are always at variance with each other, and always striving for the mastery; and unless faith be in lively exercise, sense is sure to triumph. Hence the Church of God is inundated with errors of various kinds: and hence we need to have frequently inculcated upon our minds the truth contained in our text, "There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death."

In illustration of this truth, I will point out some of those ways, which, though right in the estimation of those who walk in them, will assuredly terminate in death. No other issue will there be to the way,

I. Of sceptical indifference—

[There is a great degree of scepticism prevailing, in reference both to the divine authority of the Holy Scriptures, and to all the principal doctrines contained in them: and men of considerable ability have laboured much to invalidate the former, and to explain away the latter. Hence many will say, 'How can I ascertain what is true, amidst such a conflict of opinions?' or, 'How can I depend on any thing, of which so many great and learned men have doubted? Is it reasonable to suppose that God will call us to an account for

not admitting what has been so often controverted, and, in the opinion of some, so successfully refuted? Let us rather hope that God, as a God of mercy, will accept us all, though we do not all walk in that precise way, which those who profess a greater reverence for the Scriptures conceive to be right.'

But these hopes will be found fallacious at the last: for there is far more criminality in unbelief, than men in general are aware of. It does not proceed from any want of evidence in the Scriptures, but from an evil bias in the heart of man. There is "an evil heart of unbelief," which causes us to depart from the living God. Men will not submit to God, but will exalt themselves against him; and think themselves justified in rejecting whatever they, with the short line of their reason, are unable to fathom. What would a philosopher think of a peasant who should argue thus in reference to sciences which he was unable to comprehend? and in what light must God view us, when we presume to sit in judgment thus on the plainest declarations of his word?

But supposing that there were not so much criminality in unbelief, should we be at all the more justified in neglecting our eternal interests? Does not reason itself teach us, that we are amenable to God for our conduct; and that, whether our views of revelation be more or less clear, we should labour incessantly and with all our might to secure his favour? and should we not use all possible means, particularly such as he himself has prescribed, for the attaining of an insight into his revealed will?

However innocent we may imagine our scepticism to be, or however justifiable the indifference connected with it, this way will at last infallibly end in death. The Jews in the wilderness could not enter into the promised land because of their unbelief: and the same cause will operate also to the exclusion of our souls from heaven. The people who denied the Messiahship of Jesus doubtless thought that they were justified in so doing by a want of evidence: but our Lord said to them, "If ye believe not that I am He, ye shall die in your sins:" and in like manner he has commanded it to be proclaimed to every child of man, "He that believeth and is baptized, shall be saved; but he that believeth not, shall be damned."]

II. Of proud formality—

[Multitudes there are, who, like the Pharisees of old, are extremely attentive to the established forms of religion, and are observant of morality also, as far as it is approved by the world. In relation to these things they may be said to be blameless: and so good is the opinion which they entertain of their own state, that they would, without any fear of being confounded, ask, "What lack I yet?" In this state they are approved and admired of men; and therefore they conclude, that they are equally acceptable in the sight of God also. Persons of this description scarcely ever entertain a doubt, or a fear, but that all will issue well with them at the last. But they will find themselves awfully mistaken as soon as ever they go hence. They will then discover, that their obedience was infinitely more defective than ever they conceived it to be: and that, if it had been as blameless as they imagined, it would still have afforded them no ground of hope before God. Had such attainments as these sufficed, St. Paul needed never to have embraced the Gospel at all: or had they been capable of adding any thing to the righteousness of Christ, he never would have desired to be found in Christ, not having his own righteousness which was of the law? How erroneous a way to life this is, will be seen at once in the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. Few of the formalists of the, present day can say so much in their own favour as he could: he could appeal to God that he was not guilty of such sins as were common in the world, and that, on the contrary, he was observant of many religious duties, "fasting twice every week, and giving tithes of all that he possessed." Yet, because he viewed his state with self-confidence and self-complacency, he was dismissed without any blessing; whilst the self-abasing Publican was pardoned and justified from all his sin. But thus it ever will be: "God will fill the hungry with good things, but the rich he will send empty away: "he will resist the proud, but give grace unto the humble."]

III. Of intolerant bigotry—

[There are not wanting those who imagine that all religion consists in zeal for their own particular sect or party in the Church. Amongst the papists, this error prevails to an awful extent: and happy would it be if it were confined to them; but it is found in protestants also, who are as bitter in proscribing each other, as the papists are in anathematizing them. At what a fearful distance are the churchmen and dissenters separated from each other, from the mere circumstance of their not adopting the same external form of Church government, even whilst they are perfectly agreed in sentiment as to all the fundamental doctrines of Christianity! From the spirit with which they view each other, one would be ready to think that Christ did indeed come to introduce division, not accidentally, but intentionally; not by a separation of his people from the world, but by an alienation of heart from each other. Who has not seen and mourned over the mutual accusations of the two parties, each rejoicing in any evil that can be found in the other, and each wishing the conversion, perhaps I should rather say, the extermination, of the other? And as men hate each other on account of outward forms, so no less are they embittered against each other by a difference in their internal principles; the Arminian hating Calvinists; and the Calvinist despising Arminians! Need I say how much some persons value themselves on the opposition they give to what they call enthusiasm, but what, in fact, is "pure and undefiled religion?" Verily, in persecuting the truth, they think that they do God service: and well pleased they are to render him a service so congenial with the malignity of their own hearts. St. Paul before his conversion was of this very spirit: and our Lord has told us, that in every age such would prove the persecutors and tormentors of his Church. But whoever may be wrong, it is not possible for persons of this description to be right: the very spirit which they breathe shews "whose they are, and whom they serve," even him "who was a murderer from the beginning," and who has been the great instigator of persecution from the time of Cain even to the present hour. Let such persons only see St. Paul's review of his own conduct in relation to this matter, and he cannot doubt one moment whither this path must lead. Or if this

convince him not, let him know, that if he possessed all the knowledge and faith and zeal of angels themselves, he would be only as “sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal,” because he is destitute of that prime Grace grace is essential to the very existence of true religion in the soul, the grace of love.]

IV. Of lukewarm attachment to the Gospel—

[Where the Gospel is preached with fidelity, it commends itself to many as true, whilst they yet experience not its saving power on their souls. Yet the very circumstance of their discerning and approving; of it is to them in the place of vital godliness, and an evidence that they are in the way to heaven. But religion is not a mere matter of opinion: it is a principle that pervades the soul, and operates upon all its faculties and powers. See how it wrought in the converts on the day of Pentecost; what new creatures they immediately became! And such will all become, as soon as ever they receive the grace of God in truth. The metaphors by which the Christian life is designated in the Scriptures, sufficiently shew how mistaken they are who rest in a mere approbation of the Gospel without feeling its constraining influence upon their souls: if the running of a race, or wrestling for the mastery, or fighting for one's life, have any just signification as applied to the Christian's state, it is impossible for those to be in the way of life who bear no resemblance whatever to persons so engaged: and the total want of anxiety and of exertion which they betray, proves, beyond all doubt, that they are not in the narrow way which leadeth unto life, but in the broad road that leadeth to destruction.]

V. Of unsanctified profession—

[Amongst the little company of the Apostles themselves, there was a Judas: and in all the Apostolic Churches also there were some who “professed that they knew God, but in works denied him.” It must not be wondered at therefore if such exist in the Church at this present day. Indeed the parable of the Sower, and that also of the Tares, teaches us to expect, that Satan will sow tares amongst the wheat, and that it is not possible for man to separate them the one from the other. Unhappily, the persons themselves who are unsound at heart are not conscious of it. Satan so blinds their eyes, that they cannot distinguish between the unallowed infirmities of their nature, and the indulged corruptions of their hearts. Their evil tempers which are unsubdued, are regarded as light and venial frailties: their carefulness about the things of this world is softened down to necessary prudence: and the reigning impurity of their hearts is closed under the veil of temptation. Whatever be their besetting sins, they find some excuse for them; and, because they have a zeal for the Gospel and make some sacrifices for it, they conclude that all is well with them. Having “a name to live,” they have no conception that they can be really “dead.” But such persons need to be reminded of what our blessed Lord has so plainly and forcibly declared, namely, that one single lust retained in the soul, though dear as a right eye or necessary as a right hand, will infallibly plunge the soul into that lake of fire that never shall be quenched. Our blessed Lord has warned us, that the “saying, Lord! Lord!” however confidently we may repeat it, will never avail us, whilst we do not the things which he says: and, that though we may have “cast out devils in his name,” we shall find no acceptance with him in the day of judgment, if we have not really, and unreservedly, mortified the whole body of sin. Let all professors of religion know assuredly, that “without holiness, real and universal holiness, no man shall see the Lord:” and that, whatever estimate they may form of their own state, “not he who commendeth himself shall be approved, but he whom the Lord commendeth.”]

Seeing then that so many mistake the way to heaven,

I will ADD a few words,

1. To guard you against all erroneous ways—

[There is one great evil which more or less pervades all descriptions of men, and that is, an undue confidence in their own opinions. If they “think a thing to be right,” they conclude that it is right, and will take no pains to ascertain the truth or falsehood of their judgment. They think not of the deceitfulness of sin, or of the blindness of their own hearts, or of the subtlety of Satan; but go on confidently, as if they were in no danger of self-deceit. But why has God so often repeated that admonition, “Be not deceived,” if we are not in danger of being carried away by our own delusions? We are told of many whom a deceived heart hath turned aside, so that they cannot deliver their souls, or say, Is there not a lie in my right hand?” And why should not this be our state, as well as the state of others? We actually see it in others: why then should we not suspect it in ourselves? It is certain that a man may “seem to be religious, and yet deceive his own soul, and have all his religion vain,” because of some one sin that is unsubdued, and unperceived within him? I can never therefore too earnestly impress upon your minds the necessity of diffidence in all that relates to your souls. There is but one standard of truth: and by that must every opinion be tried. If the way which you think right will stand the trial of God's word, it is well: but, if it accord not with that, it will prove delusive in the end, and issue in the everlasting destruction of your souls. Be it ever so specious, it cannot deceive God. To all then I would say, Act in reference to your souls as the mariner does in navigating a dangerous sea: he consults his chart and his compass continually; and, not contented with thinking himself right, he puts his thoughts to the test, and seeks for evidence that he is right. Then may you hope to avoid the rocks and quicksands on which so many thousands perish; and to reach in safety the haven you desire.]

2. To point out the only true way—

[There is a way, which seemeth indeed wrong to the greater part of mankind, which, however, is surely right, and the end thereof are the ways of life. This is the way of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; as Christ himself has told us; “I am the way, and the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father but by me.” This indeed is not approved by the world at large: “to the Jews it is a stumbling-

block, and to the Greeks foolishness:" but it is "the good old way, wherein whosoever walks shall find rest unto his soul." Let it not be any matter of astonishment that this way is not generally approved: for it is too humiliating for our proud hearts, and too self-denying for our low and grovelling spirits. Men do not love to renounce all self-dependence, and to have all their wisdom, all their righteousness, and all their strength treasured up in another for their use, to be received daily out of his fulness in answer to urgent and believing prayer. Nor do they like to have that high standard of holiness, which he gives to his disciples as the rule of their life, mid the test of their attainments. But, beloved, this is the only true way to heaven: we must believe in Christ, and live altogether by faith in him, going forward in his strength, and "growing up into him in all things as our living head." Then, though regarded by men as self-deluding enthusiasts, we shall be approved of our God, and receive at last "the end of our faith, even the salvation of our souls."]

DCCLXXXV

THE VANITY OF CARNAL MIRTH

Prov. 14:13. Even in laughter the heart is sorrowful; and the end of that mirth is heaviness.

WE are apt to imagine, that whatever is sanctioned by the approbation and practice of the world at large, must be right: but we cannot have a more erroneous standard than popular opinion. This is sufficiently evident from the estimation in which mirth and laughter are generally held: they are supposed to constitute the chief happiness of man; whereas they are far from producing any solid happiness at all. To this mistake Solomon refers, in the words preceding the text; and in the text itself he confirms the truth of his own position.

We shall,

I. Demonstrate the vanity of carnal mirth—

We mean not to condemn all kinds and degrees of mirth: there certainly is a measure of it that is conducive to good, rather than to evil; "A merry heart maketh a cheerful countenance," and "doeth good like a medicine." But carnal mirth is distinct from cheerfulness of disposition; inasmuch as it argues a light frivolous state of mind, and indisposes us for serious and heavenly contemplations. Of this mirth we affirm, that it is,

1. Empty—

[Let us examine the mirth which we have at any time experienced; let us weigh it in a balance; let us compare it with that sobriety of mind which results from scenes of woe, and with that tenderness of spirit which is the offspring of sympathy and compassion; and we shall confess, with Solomon, that "it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting:" yea, the more we examine it, the more shall we be constrained, like him, to "say of laughter. It is mad; and of mirth, What doeth it?" It may be justly called, "a filling of our belly with the east windc."]

2. Fictitious—

[The gaiety which is exhibited in worldly company is often assumed, for the purpose of concealing the real feelings of the heart. They who appear so delighted to see each other, have frequently no mutual affection: even the nearest relatives, who seem to participate each other's joys, have so little real cordiality at home, that they can scarcely endure each other's conversation; and would be heartily glad, if the knot which binds them together could be dissolved. Truly "in their laughter their heart is sorrowful;" their pride, their envy, their jealousy, their private piques, their domestic troubles, or their worldly cares, make them inwardly sigh, so that they can with difficulty prevent the discovery of the imposture which they are practising. The very emptiness of their pleasure fills them often with disgust; and they are constrained to acknowledge, that "they are feeding on ashes, and that they have a lie in their right handd."]

3. Transient—

[Suppose it to have been for more substantial than it has, yet how speedily has it vanished away! What trace of it remains? It is like a dream when one awaketh: in our dream we thought of satisfaction; but when we awoke, we found ourselves as unsatisfied as ever. If we thought by repeated participation to protract the pleasure, we weakened the zest with which we had partaken of it; and thus diminished, rather than increased, the sum of our enjoyment.]

4. Delusive—

[We hoped that the ultimate effect of all our mirth would be an easy comfortable frame: but has it always been so? Has not the very reverse been often experienced by us? Has not "the end of our mirth been heaviness?" An excessive elevation of spirit is naturally calculated to produce depression. Besides, we cannot always shake off reflection: and the thought of having so foolishly wasted our time, instead of improving it in preparation for eternity, will sometimes produce very uneasy sensations. Such warnings as Solomonf, and our Lordg, have given us, will frequently obtrude themselves upon us, and make us almost weary of life, while at the same time

we are afraid of death: so justly is this mirth compared to “the crackling of thorns under a poth;” the one, after an unprofitable blaze, terminating in smoke and darkness, the other, after a senseless noise, expiring in spleen and melancholy. In fact, there are no people more subject to lowness of spirits, than they who spend their time in vanity and dissipation.

What will be “the end of their mirth” when they come into the eternal world, is inexpressibly awful to consider. Fearful indeed will be the contrast between the festivities of their present, and the wailings of their eternal state! Would to God that man would learn this from a parable! but, if they will not, they must realize it in their own experience.]

That we may not appear as if we would deprive you of all happiness, we shall—

II. Shew how we may attain more solid mirth—

There is evidently a contrast intended in the text: for when it is said that “the end of that mirth is heaviness,” it is implied, that there is another species of mirth that shall end in a very different manner.

The Gospel is a source of mirth to all who embrace it—

[The Gospel is called “glad tidings of great joy to all people.” It proclaims salvation to a ruined world; nor can it fail of creating the liveliest emotions of joy wherever it is received——]

And the mirth resulting from it, is the very reverse of carnal mirth—

[It is solid.—Behold the change wrought in the first converts! see them turned from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God! see them enjoying peace with God and in their own consciences! see them filled with love to each other, and with admiring and adoring thoughts of their beloved Saviour! Can we wonder that they ate their bread with gladness and singleness of heart, blessing and praising God? Yet precisely the same grounds of joy has every one that truly believes in Christm. The Prodigal fancied that he was in the road to joy, when he was wasting his substance in riotous living: but he never tasted real happiness till he returned to his father’s house: then “he began to eat, and drink, and be merry.”

It is permanent.—It will consist with trials and tribulations; yea, it will even arise out of them: we may be “sorrowful, yet alway rejoicing.” And, as it is not interrupted by the occurrences of life, so neither will it be terminated by death: it will then be augmented a thousand-fold: and continue without interruption to all eternity——]

ADDRESS—

1. The young and gay—

[Follow your career of pleasure as long as you will, you will be constrained to say at last, with Solomon, not only that it was all “vanity,” but also “vexation of spirit.” Yet think not, that in dissuading you from these lying vanities, we would deprive you of all happiness: we wish only that you should exchange that which is empty and delusive, for that which will afford you present and eternal satisfaction. Even your past experience may suffice to shew you, that “in the fulness of your sufficiency you have been in straits;” try now what the service and enjoyment of God can do for you; and you shall find that religion’s “ways are indeed ways of pleasantness and peace.”]

2. Those who profess godliness—

[In avoiding carnal mirth, you must be careful not to give occasion to the world to represent religion as sour and morose. There is a cheerfulness which recommends religion, and which it is both your duty and privilege to maintain. Yet, on the other hand, beware of levity. Live nigh to God, and you will easily find the proper medium. “God has certainly given you all things richly to enjoyr:” yet it is in himself alone, and in the light of his countenance, that you must seek your happiness. There you are sure to find it; and while you find it in him, you will shine as lights in a dark world, and recommend the Gospel to all around you.]

DCCLXXXVI

THE DANGER OF BACKSLIDING

Prov. 14:14. The backslider in heart shall be filled with his own ways: and a good man shall be satisfied from himself.

THOUGH God does not select those as objects of his mercy, who are most diligent in external duties, yet he increases his favours to those whom he has chosen, in proportion as they themselves are earnest in improving what he has already bestowed upon them. In the dispensations of his providence it is generally found, that “the diligent hand maketh rich:” but in the dispensations of his grace, this seems to be an unalterable rule of his procedure: “his ways with respect to these things are equal;” “whatsoever a man sows, that he may assuredly expect to reap:” “to him that hath, shall be given, and he shall have abundance.” To this effect are the declarations before us; in which we may observe,

I. The danger of backsliding—

Open apostasy is confessedly a certain road to destruction: but we may also perish by indulging the more specious and equally dangerous habit of secret declension. Not that every variation in our frame constitutes us backsliders in heart; (for who then could

be saved?)

but,

We come under this description,

1. When we are habitually remiss in secret duties—

[It is possible we may once have run well, and enjoyed much blessedness in the service of our God; and yet have been so hindered in our course, as to have relapsed into a state of coldness and formality. The word, which was once precious, may have lost its savour; and prayer, which was once delightful, may have become an irksome task. Both public and private ordinances may have degenerated into an empty form, in which God is not enjoyed, nor is any blessing received. Where this is the case the person must surely be denominated a “backslider in heart.”]

2. When we habitually indulge any secret lusts—

[Whatever attainments a man may have made in religion, if his heart be not whole with God, he will sooner or later decline; and that which was his besetting sin in his state of ignorance, will regain its ascendancy, and (as far at least as relates to its inward workings) recover its dominion over him. He may still, for his profession sake, restrain sin, in a measure, as to its outward exercise, while yet its inward power is unsubdued. Was he naturally addicted to pride, envy, malice, covetousness, lewdness, or any other sin? If he allow it to return upon him after he has been once purged from it, if he be averse to have the evil of it pointed out to him, if he justify it, or cover his fault with excuses, instead of endeavouring earnestly to amend it, he certainly is a backslider in heart—]

In either of these states we are exposed to the most imminent danger—

[There are a variety of ways in which God will punish sin, but none so terrible as that specified in the words before us. If God were to fill the backslider with acute and long-continued pain, or visit him with some other temporal affliction, it might work for good, and bring him to consideration and repentance: but if he give him up to his own heart's lusts, and leave him to be “filled with his own ways,” nothing but a certain and aggravated condemnation can ensue. Was he far from God? he will be further still: was he addicted to any sin? he will be more and more enslaved by it: nor can there be a doubt, but that God will give us up to this judgment, if we “leave off to behave ourselves wisely,” and return to the indulgence of wilful neglects and secret sins—]

But we shall see a strong additional motive to persevere, if we consider,

II. The benefit of maintaining steadfastness in religion—

The “good man” is here put in contrast with the backslider—

[As every occasional declension does not denominate a man a wilful backslider, so neither does every transient inclination to virtue denominate a man good. To be truly good, he must set out well, and “hold on his way,” causing his “light to shine more and more unto the perfect day.”]

Such an one shall find much satisfaction both in and from his way:

He shall have the comfort of seeing that he is advancing in religion—

[The testimony of a good conscience is one of the richest comforts we can enjoy. Hezekiah pleaded it before God in a dying hour, not indeed as a ground of justification before him, but as a ground whereon he might hope for some favourable indulgence with respect to the continuance of this present life. And Paul, in the near prospect of the eternal world, found it a source of unutterable joy. Now this satisfaction every upright soul shall enjoy. If he cannot distinctly see the progressive steps of his advancement from day to day, he shall have a testimony in his own conscience that he is on the whole advancing: he shall feel himself more and more fixed in his “purpose to cleave unto the Lord,” and increasingly desirous of approving himself faithful to his God and Saviour.]

He shall also enjoy more abundant manifestations of God's love—

[God will not leave his people without witness that he is pleased with their endeavours to serve and honour him. “He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.” If he behold any persons striving to please him, “he will love them and come unto them, and sup with them, and manifest himself to them as he does not unto the world:” and the more diligent he sees them in doing his will, the more richly will he impart to them the tokens of his love, and the more abundantly communicate to them the blessings of grace and peace.]

His prospects, moreover, of the eternal world shall be more bright and glorious—

[To many does God vouchsafe, as to Moses from Mount Pisgah, delightful prospects of the heavenly Canaan. He draws aside the veil, and suffers them to enter into the holy of holies, that they may behold his glory, and receive a foretaste of the blessedness which they shall one day enjoy in his presence. But on whom are these special favours bestowed? on the slothful, the careless, the inconstant? No. It is “the faithful man that shall abound with these blessings;” it is “him that rejoiceth in working righteousness, that the Lord will meet” in this intimate and endearing manner.]

INFER—

1. How much more ready is God to shew mercy than to execute his judgments!

[Had God been extreme to mark what is done amiss, who is there amongst us, whom he would not often have abandoned in an hour of secret declension? But he is full of compassion; and “judgment is his strange work,” to which he is greatly averse. At this very moment does he follow the backslider with the most earnest invitations, and most gracious promises, saying, “Return, ye backsliding

children, and I will heal your backslidings, and love you freely!." Let us thankfully acknowledge his long-suffering and forbearance; and seek that happiness in the service of our God, which we shall in vain look for in any deviations from the path of duty.]

2. What need have we to watch over our own hearts!

[We are bidden to "keep our hearts with all diligence, because out of them are the issues of life and deathm:" and indeed we have need to guard them well, because they are so "bent to backslide from God." It will be rarely, if ever, found, that the watchful Christian is left to fall into any gross sin. Men decline from God in secret, before he withdraws from them his restraining grace: they have chosen some evil "way of their own," and deliberately followed it in their hearts, before God leaves them to be "filled with it." If then we would not be swept away with a deluge of iniquity, let us be careful to stop the breach at first; for, if left a little time, it will widen, till it defies our utmost exertions. The present satisfaction, as well as the future salvation, of our souls depends on a stead-fast walk with God. Let us then "hold fast the profession of our faith, and the practice of our duty, without wavering:" and "let us look to ourselves that we lose not the things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full rewardn."]

DCCLXXXVII

THE FEAR OF THE LORD A SOURCE OF MUCH GOOD

Prov. 14:26. In the fear of the Lord is strong confidence; and his children shall have a place of refuge.

IN the Holy Scriptures there is often much contained in a small space. Hence we read them frequently without discerning one half of their beauty and importance——In the passage before us, we have in a concentrated form the benefits arising from the fear of God. They are two:

I. Confidence——

Before we speak of the benefit itself, we must endeavour to attain accurate views of that from which it flows. By "the fear of the Lord," I understand such a fear as brings us to his footstool; and such a fear as stimulates us to an unreserved surrender of ourselves to him. It is clear that it must comprehend these, and cannot possibly exist without them——Now, wherever this is found, there is "a strong confidence" of acceptance with God; a confidence founded,

1. On the general character of God——

[There is, in the mind of every one who has the least knowledge of God, a persuasion that "he delights in mercy:" and though this of itself is not sufficient to warrant a confidence of our acceptance with him, it is a strong confirmation of our confidence, when we have really come to him with a humble believing, and obediential fear——]

2. On the Scripture account of him, as revealed to us in Christ Jesus——

[There we see his assumption of our nature, his death upon the cross as an atonement for our sins, his ascension to heaven, to govern all things for the good of his Church and people. O! what confidence must such wonders of love and mercy inspire! Can we turn to him in faith and fear, and doubt his willingness to receive us? Impossible. It cannot be but that our "confidence" in such a God must be "strongb"——]

3. On the express promises which he has given us in his word——

[These are "exceeding great and precious," and fully commensurate with all our wants. There is no state in which we can be, that has not a promise especially adapted to it. Only let those be embraced, and the most desponding soul must be comfortedc——] To them, under all circumstances, is afforded,

II. Safety——

They stand in the relation of "children" to God, who "is not ashamed to be called their God" and Father. And to them there is ever open "a place of refuge,"

1. From the calamities of life——

[True, the saints are exposed to calamities like other men; but they see that every thing, whoever be the instrument, proceeds in reality from their Father's hand, who sends it only for their good. Hence the very character of the visitation is changed; and instead of being an occasion for mourning, it is welcomed as a blessing in disguised——]

2. From the assaults of Satan——

[Doubtless Satan will exert himself to the uttermost to harass and destroy them: but they are furnished with armour to withstand his fiercest assaults; and they have an impregnable fortress ever open to them, even "the name of the Lord, which is to them as a strong tower, wherein they are safe." And, after maintaining their conflict the appointed time, they are sure of beholding "him bruised under their feeth."]

3. From the fears of death—

[Death is still an enemy: but they triumph over him, saying, “O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?” They are enabled to number him amongst their friends and treasurei; and to long for his arrival, to introduce them into the more immediate presence of their Godk——]

4. From all the penal consequences of sin—

[At the very bar of judgment itself they stand with great boldness. The curses of the Law infuse no terror into their minds; because they can point to “Him who has redeemed them from its curse, having himself become a curse for theml.” “To them there is no condemnationm:” to them remains nothing but unbounded, everlasting bliss——]

ADDRESS—

1. Those who have confidence without fear—

[This is the state of the world at large——But such confidence is presumptionn: it is “the broken and contrite soul, and that alone, which God will not despise;”——To them, therefore, would I say, “Awake, and arise; and Christ will give you lighto.”]

2. Those who have fear without confidence—

[Brethren, you should not so dishonour your Lord and Saviour. If only you have such a fear of God as humbles you before him, and makes you desire truly and unfeignedly to serve him, what reason have you to entertain any doubt of his willingness to save you? Has God become a man for you, and died upon the cross for you; and is he ordering every thing for you, both in heaven and earth; and should you not trust in him? Be ashamed of entertaining such unworthy thoughts of him, and cast yourselves altogether upon him both for time and for eternity——]

3. Those who have the happiness of uniting both—

[This is the state in which you should both live and die. It is the due mixture of fear and confidence which will bring you to that holy frame in which God most delightsp. He would have you ever to “rejoice with trembling,” and to tremble with rejoicing——]

DCCLXXXVIII

THE OMNIPRESENCE OF GOD

Prov. 15:3. The eyes of the Lord are in every place, beholding the evil and the good.

THE omnipresence of the Deity is plain and obvious to all, who have learned to acknowledge the unity of God. The heathens indeed, who worshipped a multitude of gods, assigned to each his proper limits, conceiving that they who could exert their power in the hills, were destitute of power in the neighbouring valleys. But this absurd idea arose from their polytheism; and vanishes the very instant we confess the true God. The Scriptures place this matter beyond a doubt: every page of the inspired volume either expressly asserts the omnipresence of God, or takes it for granted as an unquestionable truth. In the words before us, Solomon not only affirms it, but declares, that God is actively employed throughout the whole universe in inspecting the ways of men.

In discoursing on his words we shall shew,

I. The truth of his assertion—

[One would suppose that reason itself might discern the point in question: for, if God be not every where present, how can he either govern, or judge, the world? His creatures, if removed from the sphere of his observation, would be independent of him: and, if withdrawn from his sight, would cease to feel any responsibility for their actions; since, being ignorant of what they did, he would be altogether unqualified to pass upon them any sentence of condemnation or acquittal.

But, to proceed on surer ground, let us notice the declarations of holy men, and especially of God himself, respecting this point.

If we look into the Old Testament, we shall find, that the testimony of all the prophets is in perfect correspondence with those words of David, “The Lord searcheth all hearts, and understandeth all the imaginations of the thoughtsa.” Sometimes they assert this matter as a thing they know, and are assured of; “I know,” says Job, “that no thought can be withholden from thee b.” Sometimes, with yet greater energy, they make it a subject of appeal to the whole universe, defying any one to gainsay, or even to doubt, it; “Doth he not see my ways, and count all my steps c?” Sometimes they labour to convey this truth under the most impressive images: “His eyes behold, his eye-lids try, the children of mend.”

In the New Testament, the same important truth is inculcated in terms equally clear and energetic. Not to mention mere assertionse, or acknowledgmentsf, that “God knoweth all things,” the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews represents the perfect insight of the Deity into the hearts of men under the image of the sacrifices, which, when flayed and cut down the back-bone, were open to the minutest inspection of the priests: “All things are naked and opened unto the eyes of Him with whom we have to dog.”

But let us now turn our attention to God’s own declarations. He is peculiarly jealous with respect to this attribute. In reference to

“places” and “persons,” he says, “Am I a God at hand, and not a God afar off? Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him? saith the Lord: do not I fill heaven and earth? saith the Lordh.” Again, in reference to things that might be supposed most beyond his reach, he says, “I know the things that come into your mind, every one of themi.” And when an atheistical world have entertained doubts respecting this, and said, “Thick clouds are a covering to himk;” “he cannot see, he will not regard us;” he has risen with utter indignation to vindicate his injured honour; “Understand ye brutish among the people; and, ye fools, when will ye be wise? He that planted the ear, shall he not hear? he that formed the eye, shall he not see?”]

To multiply proofs of so plain a point is needless.

We shall therefore pass on to shew,

II. The concern we have in it—

[Here the text directs and limits our views. “The evil and the good” are objects of his unwearied attention; and consequently, both the one and the other are equally interested in the subject before us.

Let “the evil” then consider their concern in this momentous truth. God views them all, at all times, in all places, under all circumstances. If they come up to worship in his sanctuary, he sees their impious mockery, while “they draw nigh to him with their lips, but are far from him in their hearts.” He follows them to their families, and observes all their tempers, dispositions, and conduct. He enters with them into their shops: he inspects their weights and measures; he examines their commodities; he hears their bargains: he marks their deviations from truth and honesty. He retires with them to their chambers, and “compasseth about their beds,” (for “the darkness and light to him are both alike”) and notices their every thought. If they were to go up to heaven, or down to hell, they could not for one moment escape his all-seeing eye.

But for what end does he thus “behold” them? Is he a mere curious or unconcerned spectator? no: “he pondereth all their goings,” in order to restrain that excess of wickedness which would militate against his sovereign appointments; to confound their daring attempts against his church and peoples; to over-rule for the accomplishment of his own purposes the voluntary exercise of their own inveterate corruption; and finally to justify himself in the eternal judgments, which he will hereafter inflict upon them.

O that the wicked would consider these things, and lay them to heart, while yet they might obtain mercy!

Next let “the good” consider their concern also in this truth. “God’s eye is on them also: and his ear is open to their prayers.” He meets them in his house of prayer: if there were but one broken-hearted sinner in the midst of a whole congregation, God would fix his eye in a more especial manner upon him. When they go forth into the world, he follows them as closely as their shadow. When they retire to their secret chamber, he “draws nigh to them,” and “manifests himself to them as he does not unto the world.”

And wherefore is all this solicitude about such unworthy creatures? wherefore is all this attention to their concerns? “Hear, O heavens; and be astonished. O earth.” God has deigned to inform us on this subject, and to declare, that he “beholds the good,” to protect them in danger; to comfort them in trouble: to supply their wants; to over-rule for good their multiplied afflictions; lastly, he notices them, to observe the workings of his grace in them, in order that he may proclaim before the assembled universe the secret exercises of piety in their hearts, and give a lively demonstration to all, that in exalting them to a participation of his glory, he acts agreeably to the immutable dictates of justice and equity.

Let the righteous then “set the Lord always before them.” Let them “walk circumspectly,” that they may not grieve him; and actively, that they may please him well in all things: and, whatever difficulties they may have to contend with, let them proceed boldly, and “endure, as seeing him that is invisible.”]

DCCLXXXIX

THE UPRIGHT ALONE ACCEPTABLE TO GOD

Prov. 15:8. The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination unto the Lord: but the prayer of the upright is his delight.

THE language of Scripture is often extraordinarily emphatic. This not unfrequently arises from the strength of the metaphors that are used to express the mind of the writer: and frequently from his speaking of God in terms, which, in their strict sense, are applicable only to men. Of course, we are not to conceive of God as possessing either parts or passions; and when either the one or the other are ascribed to him, we must regard it only as a condescension to our weakness, which is incapable of comprehending any thing respecting God, except by a sort of comparison of him with man. Of all his natural perfections, such as immensity and eternity, we know nothing at all: that is to say, our knowledge is merely negative. And respecting his moral perfections, as justice, mercy, truth, we know as little, except as we transfer to him the notions which we have formed of such perfections as exist in the human mind. We associate very distinct ideas with those attributes as applied to man: and by the help of those terms we express what we conceive to regulate the actions of God in the moral government of the universe. In like manner, when we speak of any thing being “an abomination” or “a delight” to God, we mean only, that he will act in reference to that thing as we should towards any thing which excited such feelings in our minds. This is clearly understood by all. No man needs to be informed, that God is not susceptible of such feelings, or capable of those emotions which such feelings import: we therefore, in conformity with Scripture, shall proceed to speak of God in the same figurative language: and we pray God that your minds may be suitably impressed by it, whilst we consider,

I. The truths here asserted—

1. “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord”—

[Where so strong an assertion is used in reference to any character, it is obvious, that we ought to understand, very clearly and distinctly, who they are that are designated by that character. For instance, suppose that under this general term. “the wicked,” we were to comprehend those only who are grossly and openly immoral, we should release all others from any participation in the feelings which the assertion respecting them is intended to create. But this we cannot do: for Solomon himself has accurately defined the character which he is here speaking of: and after defining it, has annexed to that very definition the same declaration as occurs in my text: “He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even HIS prayer shall be abominationa.” You will observe then, that the wicked is one who is inattentive to the commands of God in his word, and averse to comply with the requisitions of his Law and of his Gospelb——

Now such an one, even though he be guilty of no flagrant sins, is an abomination to the Lord. The rebellious state of his mind is most offensive to God: and therefore every thing that he does is hateful to him: “A high look, and a proud heart, and even the ploughing of the wicked, is sinc.” No act can be more innocent than that of ploughing: but the most innocent acts of such a person participate in the guilt of his general state and habit of mind.

His most religious acts too are hateful to God: his very “sacrifices” are an abomination. In the first chapter of Isaiah’s prophecies, the Jews are represented as bringing the offerings appointed by the Law, as bringing the best too, and in great number, and at the seasons ordained by God himself: and as accompanying those sacrifices with fervent prayer; and yet as being, at the same time, objects of God’s utter abhorrence, because their conduct was altogether at variance with their professionsd. In another chapter he speaks of them as “taking delight in approaching to God,” and as abounding in the self-denying exercises of fasting and prayer; and yet as altogether hateful in his sighte. The prophet Amos speaks strongly to the same effectf. To what an extent the services of such persons are abhorred, God himself has told us: “He that killeth an ox, is as if he slew a man: he that sacrificeth a lamb, as if he cut off a dog’s neck: he that offereth an oblation, as if he offered swine’s blood: he that burneth incense, as if he blessed an idol.” I pray you, Brethren, to mark these expressions, and to apply them to yourselves whilst living in an unhumbled and unconverted state: for, “whilst you regard any iniquity in your heart, the Lord will not hear youg: your very prayers are turned into sin.]

2. “But the prayer of the upright is God’s delight”—

["The upright" is he who truly and unfeignedly gives himself up to God, to be saved in his appointed way,——and to serve him with a pure heart and mind——Of such an one God approves: and both his person and his services are accepted of him: “The prayer of such an one is God’s delight.” In itself it may be no more than a few broken accents, or a desire expressed only in sighs and groans: but it enters into the ears of the Lord of Hosts, and shall be answered by him to the full extent of its import. It is, in reality, the voice of his own Spirit in the suppliant: and as “he knows the mind of the Spirit,” so he cannot but delight in every petition that is dictated by himh. Besides, in the prayer of the upright there are dispositions exercised, which are “in the sight of God of great pricei” The suppliant himself perhaps is mourning as though he could never hope for acceptance: but God listens to him with unspeakable delight: he loves “the prayer that goeth not out of feigned lipsk:” above all, he delights in the prayer of the upright, because it gives scope for the exercise of love and mercy towards the poor suppliant, and for a rich communication of all spiritual blessings to his soul. God “will be inquired of by his peoplel,” before he will impart to them his promised blessings: and the moment they do pray to him, he is like a mother that hears the cry of her beloved infant, whom she instantly presses to her bosom, and in administering to whose necessities she finds relief, as it were, to her own soul. See this exemplified in his dealings with repenting Ephraim: “Surely I have heard Ephraim bemoaning himself thus: Thou hast chastised me, and I was chastised as a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke: turn thou me and I shall be turned; for thou art the Lord my God.” “Is not Ephraim my dear son? is he not a pleasant child? for since I spake against him, I do earnestly remember him still: yea, my bowels are troubled for him; I will surely have mercy upon him, saith the Lordm.” Here we see a true picture of what every upright soul shall experience. Let us only be “Israelites indeed, and without guile, and our blessed Saviour will see us under the fig-tree,” or in our most secret retirements, and visit us in due season with the most endearing expressions of his love.n.]

Such are the truths asserted in our text. We now proceed to suggest,

II. Some obvious deductions from them—

From these truths it is evident,

1. That God’s views of sin are widely different from those of men—

[Men, if free from gross sin, imagine, that they have little cause for self-reproach. They see no evil in the general course of this world: the pleasures, the gaities, the amusements of it, are all accounted innocent; and if a man perform respectably the different offices of social life, they think he has nothing to apprehend in the eternal world. But “God’s thoughts are widely different from theirs.” We will suppose, for argument sake, that there is nothing flagrantly sinful in conviviality, and a round of pleasurable amusements; yet inasmuch as such a state argues a departure of the soul from God, and strengthens its habit of rebellion against him, it is highly sinful: and should be so esteemed by all who would not deceive their own souls. For, if the very best actions of such persons are

hateful to God, if the very sacrifices with which they attempt to honour him are an abomination in his sight, what must those actions be which have no respect to him, but which tend to banish him from their thoughts, and from the world? I tell you, Brethren, that “to walk according to the course of this world, is to walk according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience.” You cannot be of the world and of Jesus Christ at the same time: “you cannot serve God and Mammon too.” You may as well imagine light can have communion with darkness, and Christ with Belial, as that a person truly “upright” and believing, can find pleasure in the society of “the wicked” and unbelieving. “The friendship of the world is” essentially, as well as constructively, a state of enmity against Gods.” Whatever therefore may be pleaded in extenuation of those habits in which the more respectable part of the world are living, they are all, whether social or personal, civil or religious, one continued act of sin, as long as the soul continues alienated from God, and not altogether devoted to his fear: and the man who thinks himself safe because he is in a path frequented by the great mass of his fellow-creatures, will find himself fearfully mistaken the moment he comes to the termination of it.]

2. That the provisions of the Gospel are admirably suited to our necessities—

[Here is “a wicked man:” he offers “a sacrifice” to his offended God: that very sacrifice is “an abomination to the Lord. Must the man then be left to perish? No: the Gospel reveals to him a sacrifice which is pleasing and acceptable to God, and which shall avail for the salvation of all who trust in it, even the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus, who “presented himself an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet smelling savour.” Again; Man, though originally made upright, has fallen, and become utterly averse to God and his law. As for creating himself anew, he can no more do it than he could create himself at first. Shall he then perish? No: the Gospel proclaims to him a promise from almighty God, that “he will give him a new heart, and renew a right spirit within him;” so that, as the most guilty may be forgiven through the atonement that has been offered for him, so the most polluted may be “transformed into the very image of his God in righteousness and true holiness.” Thus may those who were odious as the fallen angels, become as accepted and as happy as the angels that have never sinned. O! Brethren, when will you study this blessed Gospel? when will you search into it, to find a remedy for your diseases, and a supply for your wants? Behold it is “a fountain opened,” and ever flowing for the relief of sinful man: and every sinner in the universe is invited to “come and drink of it without money and without price.” I would that you should no longer be “an abomination” to your God! I would that he should look upon you with “delight,” yea, that he should “rejoice over you with joy, and rest in his love, and joy over you with singing!”]

3. That by the heart, and not by the mere acts, will God form his estimate of us in the last day—

[I know that our actions will be brought into judgment, and be adduced as evidences of our state before God, and as grounds of the sentence that shall be passed upon us. But it is not merely as acts that they will be either rewarded or punished; but as evidences of the real state of our souls. Even in human judicatories the object inquired into is, the intent of the mind. It is malice premeditated that constitutes murder: where that did not exist, the act of killing is not accounted murder: but where that manifestly did exist, there the attempt to kill, though unsuccessful, has the penalty of murder attached to it. Thus at the bar of judgment, the sacrifices of a wicked man, how numerous or costly soever they were, will be regarded as of no value: whilst the mere sighing of an upright soul shall not lose its reward. Let that then which is chiefly marked by God, be chiefly attended to by us. Let us endeavour to get our “hearts right before God.” Let us remember, that, whether evidenced by overt acts or not, he can discern its real state: for “he searcheth the heart and trieth the reins.” “To him all things are naked and opened;” as the sacrifices of old, when flayed and cut open, were to the eye of the priest who inspected them. “Hell and destruction are before him: how much more then the hearts of the children of men!” “He weigheth the spirits,” and discerns exactly how much there is of every different motive that may operate to the production of every act. Watch, therefore, and examine carefully the state of your own hearts: and as “he requireth truth in the inward part,” cease not to pray day and night, that, being “perfect and upright before him,” you may have light in darkness, peace in death, and glory in eternity.]

DCCXC

INSTRUCTION TO BE OBEYED

Prov. 15:32. He that refuseth instruction, despiseth his own soul.

THE Scriptures speak plainly, and represent things as they really are. Perhaps there is no man that would acknowledge he despised God: yet does God lay that sin to the charge of all who question his retributive justice: “Wherefore doth the wicked contemn God, while he doth say in his heart, Thou wilt not require it?” So none would confess that they “despise their own souls:” yet is that the real character of all who refuse the instruction which God sends to them by his written word, and by the ministration of his faithful servants. And this will appear, if we consider,

I. The need that every man has of divine instruction—

Much may be known to man from sensation and reflection: he may gather much from observation and experience, and the mere

force of reasoning, without any revelation from heaven: but without divine instruction,

1. He can never know the extent of his wants—

[He cannot know his fall in Adam, or the depravity of his fallen nature, or his utter incapacity to restore himself to God's favour. If told that "his carnal mind is enmity against God," and that "without Christ he can do nothing," and that God alone can give him either to will or to do any thing agreeable to the divine command, he would think it all a libel upon human nature. It is revelation alone that can give him any just views on these subjects——]

2. He can still less know how those wants are to be supplied—

[Who could ever have thought that God himself should become incarnate, and live and die for the express purpose of supplying the necessities of his fallen creatures? Who could ever have imagined that God's righteousness should be imputed to man? and that the Spirit of the living God should ever dwell in man, for the purpose of revealing the Saviour to him, and of imparting to him the divine image? A man not instructed in these things can know nothing about them. They are all matters of pure revelation, and directly contrary to those methods of salvation which uninstructed man would have adopted for himself——]

3. He can never avail himself of those offers which God has made to him in the Gospel—

[In the Holy Scriptures are contained "exceeding great and precious promises," yea, promises confirmed by an oath, and ratified by an everlasting covenant. These promises relate to every want of fallen man, and make over to him a supply of every want by the simple exercise of faith on the part of man. How can the unenlightened man obtain an interest in these? How is it possible for him to lay hold of them, and rest upon them, and plead them before God, when he has never been instructed in relation to them?——It is obvious, that without divine instruction he must for ever lie under the guilt and power of his sins, and endure the punishment due to his unrepented and unpardoned transgressions.]

What then must be,

II. The light in which he must be viewed, who refuses instruction?

We use by no means too strong an expression, if we say, "He despises his own soul." For,

1. He grievously underrates its value—

[Who can estimate the value of an immortal soul, a soul capable of knowing, honouring, and enjoying, the Most High God: and actually assured of that honour, if only it obtain the knowledge of Christ, and repose all its confidence in him? But, to judge of its value aright, we must take into account the love that God has borne towards it, and the price which our adorable Lord and Saviour has paid for its redemption. Contemplate its nature and its capacity, its estimation by God, and its eternal destinies: and then say. Whether the man who refuses the instruction whereby he is to be made happy, does not altogether betray an ignorance of its true value?——]

2. He shamefully disregards its interests—

[Without an attention to the concerns of the soul, it is in vain to hope that it can ever be happy in the eternal world. The man that refuses divine instruction, does in reality inflict upon his soul the heaviest judgment that it can sustain in this life: he says, in fact, 'Let me alone, that I may go on to increase my guilt, and "treasure up for myself wrath against the day of wrath." ' What would be thought of a man who should so trifle with his temporal interests? Would there be any term of reproach too harsh or too contemptuous whereby to designate so foolish a character? What, then, must we say of a man who so neglects the interests of his soul?——]

3. He casts it away for a thing of nought—

[Give to sensual gratifications all the importance you will, they are only as the small dust upon the balance when weighed against the soul. Yet for these does the man who refuses instruction sell his soul. Truly, if Esau "despised his birthright," when he "sold it for a mess of pottage," much more do they pour contempt upon their own souls, who, for any consideration whatever, abandon all reasonable hopes of heaven, and subject themselves to the infliction of everlasting misery in hell——]

ADDRESS—

1. Avail yourselves now of the opportunities that are afforded you—

[There has been declared unto you from time to time, so far as I have been enabled to declare it, "the whole counsel of God." Think what improvement you have made of these instructions——and what will be your reflections in the eternal world, if you reject themc——Indeed, whilst disregarding the instructions given you, you greatly "wrong your own souls," and act as persons that are "in love with deathd." O that ye may be wise ere it be too late! For, "if they escaped not, who refused Moses who spake on earth, much more shall not ye escape, if ye turn away from him, even the Lord Jesus, who now speaketh to you from heavene."]

2. "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves"—

[Instruction, if it abide in the understanding only, will be of no profit. To be really useful, it must descend into your hearts, and operate in your lives. Our blessed Lord's warning upon this subject deserves your deepest attention. I would have you not only wise, but "wise unto salvation." I would not that you should erect a house upon the sand; and that, after all your labour, it should fall upon your

heads, and crush you; but rather, that you should build your house upon a rock, and find it able to shelter you from all the storms and tempests that ever can assault it. This will shew that “you have real love to your soul;” and richly shall you “be recompensed at the resurrection of the just.”]

DCCXCI

MAN'S ESTIMATE OF HIMSELF AND GOD'S CONTRASTED

Prov. 16:2. All the ways of a man are clean in his own eyes: but the Lord weigheth the spirits.

AMONGST the purest joys of a Christian is “the testimony of a good conscience;” and all the labour that can possibly be bestowed on the attainment of it will be well repaid by the acquisition. But we must not forget, that man is a fallen creature, and that his mind and conscience partake of the defilement which sin has brought upon all the faculties of his soul. Hence it is necessary to try even the verdict of conscience itself, and not to trust too implicitly to its representations. To “put evil for good, and good for evil; bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter; darkness for light, and light for darkness;” is, alas! but too common, and more especially in forming an estimate of our own character and conduct. So has Solomon informed us in the words which we have just read: from which we shall take occasion to shew,

I. Whence it is that men have such an over-weening confidence respecting the rectitude of their own ways—

We can know little of mankind, if we do not know that men of every character and every class go forward in their respective ways with a considerable measure of self-confidence, and self-approbation: and, as Solomon elsewhere observes, that “every way of a man is right in his own eyes.” Now whence does this arise? How is it that all, notwithstanding the vast difference there is in their habits and conduct, yet think themselves right? We apprehend that it arises from hence:

1. They judge themselves by a wrong standard—

[Every man has a standard of his own, suited to the views and habits of the class among whom he moves. Some allow themselves in a very great latitude, both of principle and practice; and never condemn themselves, unless they grossly violate the code that is established amongst their own particular associates: they are “clean in their own eyes,” as long as they keep within the bounds of purity which their own friends prescribe. Others are far more strict, as Paul in his unconverted state was. “As touching the righteousness of the law, he was, in his own estimation, blameless:” so blameless, as to be quite sure of his acceptance before God: “I was alive without the law once.” His very zeal, which was so hateful in the sight of God, and so directly pointed against the Lord Jesus Christ himself, furnished him with an occasion for nothing but self-applause. Though he did not altogether lay aside the law of God in forming his estimate, he used it only to confirm his own delusions, limiting its injunctions to the mere letter, instead of entering into its spiritual import. None but the truly enlightened Christian brings himself fairly to the test of God’s holy law: all others have a defective standard: a standard of their own, fitted for their own ways: and this is the first great source of the delusion specified in our text.]

2. They turn their eyes from things that have a doubtful aspect—

[Men, if they suspect that all is not right, are very averse to a strict examination of their case: they content themselves with looking at one side of the question only. Whatever tends to justify their conduct, is dwelt upon with pleasure; but whatever tends to cast a shade upon it, is passed over in silence: “they hate the light, and will not come fairly to it, lest their deeds should be reproved.” This is very observable in the conduct of the Apostles, when our Lord touched upon their mutual contentions about worldly preference and distinction: they instantly shifted off the blame, by turning the discourse to another subject. A true picture this of the generality of men, not excepting those of whom better things might be hoped!]

3. They use all possible artifices to obtain a favourable testimony from their own conscience—

[Many are not ashamed to justify what yet they know in their consciences to be wrong: “It was expedient: it was even necessary under existing circumstances: they were constrained to it, and could not do otherwise.” It was in this way that Saul justified his impious intrusion into the priestly office. He cast the blame on Samuel, for not coming so early as he had expected; and affirmed, that, however contrary to the divine law his conduct had been, it was expedient, and necessary, and good; since the Philistines would otherwise have come upon him, before he had sought by proper offerings the protection of Heaven. But notwithstanding all his specious arguments, Samuel told him plainly, that he had “done foolishly,” and grievously provoked the Lord to anger.

If they proceed not in their self-vindication to this extent, yet they will excuse what they cannot justify. ‘True, it was not altogether right; but they were compelled to do it; and the fault was rather in others than in them. It was done in haste, and without due consideration. It was a mistake; or was done to prevent a greater evil; or to answer some valuable end.’ Here again we may see in the same unhappy monarch the evil we are speaking of. He had spared Agag, and the best of the flocks and herds, which he should have utterly destroyed: yet, when he saw Samuel, he boasted that “he had fulfilled the commandment of the Lord.” But, on Samuel’s inquiry into the reasons of the flocks and herds being spared, he excused himself by saying, that he had reserved them for

sacrifices; and, when further reprov'd, he cast the blame on the people, asserting, that they had taken of the spoil without his consent or privy.

When their conduct is too plainly reprehensible to admit of such replies, they will then palliate what they cannot excuse. Satan will never leave them at a loss for something whereby to extenuate their faults, and to silence the reproaches of a guilty conscience. 'It was not so bad as is represented: the intention was good: it was done only once, and that under circumstances that might well account for it.' But there is no end to the suggestions of self-love. There is not a man under heaven, except the broken-hearted penitent, that will acknowledge his faults in all their real malignity, and with all their attendant aggravations. All will cast some veil over their ways, to hide their deformity, and to make them appear "clean:" and will put such a colour even on their basest actions, as to leave in them scarcely any criminality at all.]

But, whilst we thus varnish over our own ways, so as to make them clean in our own eyes, it is of infinite importance for us to know,

II. How God will form his estimate of them—

Certainly he will not judge as we do: he will scrutinize our actions more narrowly, and will weigh as in a balance every thing that pertains to them. He will weigh,

1. Our actions themselves—

[Every thing we do is put, as it were, into a balance, even "the balance of the sanctuary." God will examine with infallible accuracy what the motives were, and the principles by which we were actuated; for by these, and not by the mere external appearance, must the quality of our actions be determined. He will examine how much there was of love to his name: how much of gratitude to the Lord Jesus Christ: how much of humility, of self-denial, of love to our fellow-creatures: and how much of zeal for the honour and glory of our God. Precisely according to the measure of these things will be his estimate of our actions: all else will be only as dross that is blended with the gold, and which the fire will consume.]

2. Our excuses—

[These, for the most part, when put into his scales are found lighter than the dust upon the balance. By means of them we impose upon ourselves, and upon our fellow-creatures; but we cannot impose on him: "he cannot be deceived:" and the very excuses which we urge with such confidence, will be rejected by him with scorn. See how strongly he has cautioned us on this head. He supposes us to have made some rash vow, and then to excuse ourselves from performing it, by saying that we were under a mistake: "Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin; neither say thou before the angel, that it was in error: wherefore should God be angry at thy voice, and destroy the work of thine hands?" It is on this account that we so often meet with this warning: "Let no man deceive you with vain words:" "Be not deceived; God is not mocked." In truth, so far are we from satisfying him by our vain pleas, that the more confident we are of the validity of our own excuses, the more we provoke his wrath and indignation: "Thou sayest, Because I am innocent, surely his anger shall turn from me: behold, I will plead with thee, because thou sayest, I have not sinnedh.]"

3. The disposition and habit of our minds—

[It is not so much the transient act that determines our character, as the rooted habit of the mind. This we are apt to overlook: and if we see not any glaring faults in our conduct, we think that all is well with us. But God views us as creatures, who by the very law of our creation are bound not to live to ourselves, but unto him. He views us too as redeemed creatures, who, having been bought with the precious blood of his dear Son, are bound by this further tie to "glorify him with our bodies and our spirits which are his." By this test will he try us: and according to the result of this scrutiny will he determine our eternal state. In particular, he will mark, What degree of candour there is in us whilst examining our own ways; and, Which is our predominant feeling, a partial desire to think our "ways clean," or an impartial desire to find out every atom of uncleanness that adheres to them. He will further notice what means we are using to ascertain the truth, and to escape from all kinds of self-delusion; whether we candidly consult others who are more impartial than we can be supposed to be; and whether we are crying mightily to Him to search and try us. Both these are necessary; because, whilst, on the one hand, we may too easily rest in the favourable opinion of friends, we may, on the other hand, be determinately holding fast our confidence against the judgment of friends, even whilst we are pretending to ask counsel of our God. Truly "the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked;" and one of the principal dispositions that God will expect to see in us is, a holy jealousy over ourselves, and a willingness rather to die than be left under a mistaken confidence of our own purity. Where this is wanting, there is a radical defect in the character; a defect which, if not rectified, will exclude us from the number of true Israelites, whose character is, that "they are without guile.]"

ADDRESS—

1. The careless worldling—

[You will not believe that you are wrong. But consult the Scriptures, and see. Find, if you can, one single word that sanctions a life of carelessness and indifference. To what purpose is it to be saying, "Peace, peace! when there is no peace!" Did you never hear what God replies to those who say, "I shall have peace, though I walk after the imaginations of my heart?" "The Lord, it is said, will not spare that man; but the anger of the Lord and his jealousy shall smoke against him; and all the curses that are written in this book shall lie upon him: and the Lord shall blot out his name from under heaveni." Go on, if you are determined so to do: but know, that

“whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap: he that soweth to the flesh, shall of the flesh reap corruption; and he that soweth to the Spirit, shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.”]

2. The self-righteous moralist—

[Solomon justly observes, “There is a generation that are pure in their own eyes, but are not washed from their filthiness!” And such is the character of those whom we are now addressing. They are ready to say, “I have kept all the commandments from my youth up: and what lack I yet?” But, like that deluded Youth, they lack the one thing needful, namely, “to forsake all, and follow Christ.” This they do not: this they will not do: they hold fast their own righteousness, and will not renounce it for an interest in his. Such was Paul in his unconverted state: but when his eyes were opened to see the plan of Salvation revealed in the Gospel, then “he counted all things but dung and dross that he might win Christ, and be found in him, not having his own righteousness, but Christ’s.” Know then, Brethren, that, if you trust in the law, you shall be tried by the law, and suffer all its penalties for your infractions of it: but if you will embrace the Gospel, and seek for acceptance solely through the Lord Jesus Christ, you shall find that “in him you shall be justified, and in him shall you glory.”]

3. The professed believer—

[Much blindness yet remains within us after we have believed in Christ: and the most eminent believer still needs to maintain a godly jealousy over his own deceitful heart. The Apostles themselves at one time “knew not what manner of spirit they were of.” But where shall we find any amongst ourselves that suspect this to be their own case? Alas! we all are more or less blinded by self-love: and, when most confident of our own integrity, we still need to say with Paul, “I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified; but he that judgeth me is the Lord.” We entreat you to guard with all possible care against the delusions of your own hearts; for they will assuredly, if persisted in, betray you to your everlasting ruin. The express declaration of God on this subject is, “If thou sayest, (in reference to any duty neglected, or sin committed,) Behold, we knew it not; doth not he that pondereth the heart consider it? and He that keepeth thy soul, doth not he know it? and shall not he render to every man according to his works?” Yes: His estimate will not be regulated by your opinion of yourselves, but by his perfect knowledge of your real character. May God enable us so to lay these things to heart, and so to act upon them, that “we may be found of him in that day without spot and blameless!”]

DCCXCII

TRUSTING IN GOD

Prov. 16:3. Commit thy works unto the Lord, and thy thoughts shall be established.

WE all believe in the existence of a Supreme Being, and in a general way acknowledge his agency in the government of the world: but his particular care of us individually we find it extremely difficult to imagine. This, however, is most clearly revealed in the Holy Scriptures; and our duty is so to realize it, as, under all circumstances of trial and of difficulty, to look to him for his gracious interposition, and to expect from his hands whatever shall most conduce to our real benefit.

In the words before us we see,

I. A state supposed—

[It is here supposed that we may be in a state of great perplexity, so as not to know what to do for the best. This is often the case with nations, especially when menaced by a potent enemy—Nor is there scarcely an individual to be found, who does not, at some time or other, experience an oppression of mind, arising out of difficulties with which he has to contend, and troubles which he knows not how to avert—Even in relation to men’s spiritual concerns, the same trials are felt. Many, in a season of deep conviction, have poured out their complaints like Israel of old—And many, under grievous temptation, have been reduced to the desponding frame of David—At such times their thoughts are altogether distracted; and they are, like the persons so beautifully described in the 107th Psalm, brought, as it were, “to their wit’s end.”]

But in all such cases there is abundant consolation, if only we use,

II. The remedy prescribed—

The remedy is both simple in itself, and invariably efficacious: “Commit your works unto the Lord”—

[Believing that God both knows your trials, and is willing to afford you the help you need, carry them to him, and spread them before him, as Hezekiah did the letter of blaspheming Rabshakeh. Then plead his promises, which are so “exceeding great and precious:” and “roll on him” your entire burthen, assured that “he will sustain you,” and accomplish your most enlarged desires. This is the direction given to every living man: and.]

In the performance of this duty you will find effectual relief—

[Nothing can be more fluctuating than the thoughts of men, especially in seasons of great embarrassment. But the very instant we commit our works to God, “our thoughts” become composed, and peaceful, and “established.” God has taught us to expect this: and to what an extent he fulfils his word, we may see in Hezekiah; who, from a state of the most extreme distress, was filled in an instant

with the liveliest joy and most confident exultationk——]

OBSERVE, then, with humble and adoring gratitude,

1. How exalted are the privileges of the true Christian!

[It is your privilege, Brethren, to be “without carefulness,” both in relation to your temporal concernsm, and even in respect to your immortal soulsn. All your care, whether for the one and the other, should “be cast on God, who careth for youo.” Then, though you will have many trials to bear, you shall be able to say with Paul, “We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken: cast down, but not destroyedp.” Be your trials what they may. “you shall be more than conquerors over all.”]

2. How marvellous is the condescension of our God!

[From low thoughts of God, we are apt to fear that he will not exert himself for us. But he will attend to us, if we trust in him, as much as if there were not another creature in heaven or on earth to attract his notice. Nor is it in great things only that he will interpose for us, but in the smallest that can possibly be imagined. In fact, there is nothing great or small with him; nor indeed is there any thing small as it respects us. Let any one see in Scripture what good arose from the accidental opening of some national records by King Ahasuerus, or what evil arose from David’s accidental glance at Bathsheba, and we shall see that we need the divine care in every thing: and in every thing it shall be afforded us, if only we commit our ways to God, and place all our confidence in him. Not so much as a hair shall fall from the head of any of his saints, but according to his all-wise appointment; nor any circumstance occur which shall not be overruled for their everlasting goodq.]

DCCXCIII

THE BENEFIT OF EXPERIMENTAL RELIGION

Prov. 16:23. The heart of the wise teacheth his mouth, and addeth learning to his lips.

THE depths of human science can be explored by few, because few have either leisure or ability for learned investigations. The same observation is true with respect to theology also, considered as a science: a very considerable knowledge both of history and ancient languages is required, in order to a full understanding of the various branches of sacred literature. But the spiritual and most essential parts of divine knowledge are totally distinct from these subjects; nor is that species of erudition, which the learned only can possess, at all necessary for the obtaining of a clear and accurate acquaintance with them. There are two books, if we may so speak, and two alone, which we need to know; and they are, the Bible and our own hearts. Till the latter be opened to our view, the former will be only “a sealed book:” but a discovery of our own hearts will throw an astonishing light upon the sacred oracles; and make innumerable passages, which once seemed obscure and inexplicable, so plain, that “he who runs may read” and understand them. To this effect Solomon speaks in the words before us; in elucidating which we shall inquire,

I. Who are here meant by “the wise?”

Solomon certainly did not intend to limit his assertion to those who were possessed of literary attainments—

[Human knowledge, when sanctified by grace, is a valuable instrument in the hands of its possessor, inasmuch as it will qualify him for discharging many duties, which, without it, he would not be able to fulfil. Moses, by being “learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians,” was better fitted to stand forth as the deliverer of Israel: and Paul, notwithstanding he declined using “the words of man’s wisdom,” was the better furnished for his work by his learned education, and his uncommon proficiency in the studies of his age and nation. Nevertheless it is not such learning that will form our minds to true wisdom. On the contrary, if unsanctified, it will be as inimical to religion as even the most inveterate lusts would be. The more we have of it, the more will “the things of the spirit appear foolishness unto us;” and the greater will be our backwardness to seek that spiritual “discernment” which alone can qualify us to judge of them arighta; and it is on this very account that God so often pours contempt upon it and confounds itb.]

Nor was it of persons eminent for worldly prudence that Solomon spake—

[There can be no doubt but that true wisdom will make us prudent, for the voice of inspiration says, “I, Wisdom, dwell with Prudencec.” But there are many who are “prudent in their own sight,” and in the eyes of the world, who are considered by God as altogether destitute of wisdomd. The Rich Man, who had so judiciously cultivated his grounds as to obtain large crops, and who, to preserve the produce, enlarged his storehouses, would have been accounted prudent by the world; but God gave him most deservedly the appellation of a fool; “Thou fool, this night shall thy soul be required of thee.”]

The persons characterized in the text as wise, are they who are endued with heavenly wisdom—

[Some there are, whose “eyes have been enlightened” by the Spirit of God, and whose hearts are regulated by his lively oracles. They have been taught of God to know their own state, and have been formed to a disposition and temper suited to their real characterf. These are the wise, the only wise in the sight of God. And they are truly wise, even though they should be the most illiterate upon earth. We do not hesitate to say that the fishermen of Galilee possessed more true wisdom than all the heathen

philosophers that ever existed.]

Their superiority to others will soon appear, if we inquire,

II. What are those subjects of which they are so well able to speak?

Their spiritual views do not at all qualify them to speak on matters of science and philosophy. But there are many things relating to Christian doctrine and experience, of which they can speak more truly, and more accurately, than any other people upon earth:

1. On the deceitfulness and depravity of the heart—

[This is a subject with which they are well acquainted; nor are they afraid of declaring it in its full extent. They have found on ten thousand occasions how fatally their heart has deceived them, what false glosses it puts upon any thing which it is desirous to retain, and what specious pretexts it will suggest for rejecting any thing that is distasteful to flesh and blood. They have seen the deep-rooted enmity of their hearts against God, their aversion to all holy exercises, and their proneness to do every thing that was evil. In speaking on these points, they speak not by hearsay, or according to a received system, but according to the word of God, confirmed as it has been by their own experience.]

2. On the suitableness and excellency of the salvation provided for us—

[They no more doubt that they need a Saviour, or that the Saviour provided for them is exactly such a one as they want, than they doubt their own existence. They know full well that they could not fulfil the law; they know also that Christ has satisfied all its demands by his obedience unto death; and that by believing in him they shall be interested in all that he has done and suffered. They perceive that in this way of salvation God gives all, and we receive all: and though the pride of their hearts formerly revolted at this, they are now disposed, not only to acquiesce in it, but to thank and adore God for so gracious a dispensation—]

3. On the way in which sinners are brought to the knowledge of Christ—

[Here they can point out, as in a map, the country which they themselves have travelled over. They have been convinced of sin; they have seen the refuges of lies which they fled to in succession, one after another, till God sent home the law in all its spirituality to their hearts. They have thus been made to despair of saving themselves, and have, like the wounded Israelites, looked simply to him that was lifted up upon the cross. And though there is a great variety in the experience of different persons with respect to these things, yet these are the general outlines in which all true Christians are agreed; and therefore they can speak of them with truth and certainty.]

4. On the nature of the spiritual warfare—

[They are daily engaged in maintaining a conflict with sin and Satan. They have within them the two principles of flesh and spirit, which are continually struggling, as fire and water, to subdue each other. They know the discouragements and fears with which the Christian is assailed, and the consolations and joys with which he is revived. Nor are they “ignorant of Satan’s devices,” having often “withstood his wiles,” and “repelled his fiery darts.” On these subjects their mouth is taught, and learning is added to their lips.]
The world are often struck with this fact, and ask with amazement,

III. Whence it is that they have attained this knowledge?

Experience, under God, is the best teacher; and it is from experience that they know these things—

[They derive not their knowledge from books: for many either cannot read, or never have studied the writings of men upon those subjects. Nor have they received their instructions from man: for though God taught them by man, yet God alone made the word effectual to open their eyes: and the very truths, perhaps, which they had heard frequently before without any profit, are suddenly applied to their souls, and made the power of God to their conviction and salvation. In short, it is not merely in their heads, but in their hearts that they know these things: and in speaking of them they can say with the apostle, “What our eyes have seen, and our ears have heard, and our hands have handled of the word of life, the same declare we unto you.”]

Hence it is that their knowledge of these things is so superior to that of others—

[Others cannot comprehend any one of the foregoing truths. If they should attempt to speak of them, they would only expose their own ignorance. Yea, though they may write well on the theory of religion, they are totally in the dark with respect to the nature of Christian experience. The poorest and meanest of God’s people have incomparably greater penetration in these things than the wisest philosopher. This is plainly declared by the Apostle, “He that is spiritual judgeth all things; yet he himself is judged of no man.” It is confirmed also by that expression of Solomon, “The rich man is wise in his own conceit; but the poor man that hath understanding searcheth him out;” that is, discovers his ignorance, and is able to rectify his errors. As a man who has experienced any great pleasure or pain has a juster idea of what he has felt, than another has who only speaks of such things by hearsay; so, in a far higher degree, has the experienced Christian a clearer insight than others into divine truths, because he has the archetype and image of them in his own heart.]

APPLICATION—

1. Let none attempt to excuse their ignorance by saying that they are no scholars—

[Nothing is more common among the lower classes of mankind than to offer this as an excuse for their ignorance. But such excuses

are vain: God has told us that he has chosen them in preference to the rich and learned, and that he has revealed to them what he has hid from the wise and prudent. Let the blind then pray that they may receive their sight; so shall they “understand all things,” and be made “wise unto salvation.”]

2. Let us improve our conversation with each other for the purpose of spiritual edification—

[Too apt are we to trifle away our precious hours. But the tongue of the wise is justly compared to choice silver that enriches, and to a tree of life that nourishes us with its precious fruits. Our words, if rightly ordered, might “administer grace” to each other. Let us then endeavour to obtain “the tongue of the learned, that can speak a word in season unto him that is weary.” Thus, we may “speak profitably out of the abundance of our hearts,” and approve ourselves truly “wise by winning souls” to God.]

DCCXCIV

ERRONEOUS VIEWS OF RELIGION REFUTED

Prov. 16:25. There is a way that seemeth right unto a man; but the end thereof are the ways of death.

THE testimony of an inspired prophet respecting the human heart is, that it “is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.” This testimony, as far as it respects the world at large, we all are ready to confirm. We see that in the great mass of mankind there is a propensity to deceive, not others only, but themselves also. They are often unconscious of principles by which they are manifestly actuated: and as often take credit to themselves for virtues which they do not really possess. Persons who have made considerable attainments in self-knowledge, are yet by no means free from this infirmity: the Apostles themselves, on more occasions than one, betrayed by their conduct, that “they knew not what spirit they were of.” Nor does this proneness to self-deceit discover itself only in relation to individual acts, wherein men may be supposed to be biassed either by their interests or passions: it extends itself to men’s whole character, and leads them to form a most erroneous judgment of their state: it leads them to “call evil good, and good evil; to put darkness for light, and light for darkness; to put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter.” But it may be thought, that, if a man be deceived by his own heart, a less degree of criminality will attach to his actions, and he will have less reason to apprehend the displeasure of God. This however is not true: for we are responsible to God for the judgment we form of good and evil: and if we err, after all the means of information he has given us, we must be willingly deceived, and abide the consequences of our folly. To this effect Solomon speaks in the words before us: he concedes that “a way may appear right to a man;” but he tells us, nevertheless, that “the end thereof will be death.”

This assertion of his is not to be understood of one particular way only: it is a general assertion, that is applicable to a great variety of cases, or rather, I should say, to every kind of way that is followed by man and condemned by God. Of course we cannot enter into all the cases which might be specified: it will be sufficient to notice two or three ways, which are the most commonly followed, and most fatal in their issue.

I. The first way to which we would call your attention is that of gay licentiousness.

We cannot suppose any person so ignorant as really to think that licentious gaiety is right: but there are millions who do not think it materially wrong. Criminal excesses and indulgences are palliated by the mild appellations of conviviality and youthful indiscretion: and they are deemed necessary to the well-being of society. They are even made subjects of boasting; and persons who through age and infirmity are disabled from pursuing their former courses, will yet repeat them in effect, by glorying in the remembrance of them, and encouraging others in the same career. So far from condemning these things in their minds, the generality will laugh at those who are scrupulous enough to doubt the lawfulness of such courses: and if any one were bold enough to bear a decisive testimony against them, he would instantly be characterized by some opprobrious name. To suppose that such indulgences, if restrained within moderate bounds, would subject a man to the wrath of Almighty God, would be considered as bordering on insanity: and every one is encouraged to regard such innocent liberties (as they are called) as perfectly compatible with a well-grounded hope of salvation.

Let us then inquire what foundation there is for such a confidence. Does God say nothing in his word respecting the issue of such ways? or does he speak of them in the same gentle terms? No: not a syllable of this kind is to be found in all the sacred records. A general caution is given us by Solomon in reference to carnal indulgences of every kind: “Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth, and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment.” The general warning given by St. Paul is plainer still; “If ye live after the flesh, ye shall die.” Lest we should mistake his meaning, he frequently enumerates the works of the flesh: “Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: these,” says he, “are the sins, of the which I tell you before, that they who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.” But because men are ready to offer vain pleas and excuses for such things, he particularly guards us against laying the smallest stress on any surmises of our own, or any suggestions of others: “Let no man,” says he, “deceive you with vain words: for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience.” But Moses, and after him the Prophet Jeremiah, meet the case

in the most pointed terms: "It shall come to pass," says Moses, "when a man shall hear the words of this curse, and shall bless himself in his heart, saying, I shall have peace though I walk in the imagination of my heart: the Lord will not spare him: but the anger of the Lord and his jealousy shall smoke against that man; and all the curses that are written in this book shall come upon him, and the Lord shall blot out his name from under heaven."

Now permit me to ask, For what end are these things written? is it merely to alarm and terrify us? Can we conceive that God would falsify, in order to keep us within some decent bounds? Is there any necessity for him to resort to such an expedient; or could he do it in consistency with his own perfections?

Here then we are reduced to this dilemma; either to believe that the word of God is full of the most palpable falsehoods from one end to the other, or to acknowledge that the confidence of ungodly men is unfounded, and their hope delusive. Choose ye the former alternative if ye please: but you must excuse me if I embrace the latter. Believing as I do the word of God to be true, I must believe, and must exhort you also to believe, that they who make light of sin "shall not inherit the kingdom of God." The drunkard, the swearer, the whoremonger, in short the careless sinner, may "think his ways right;" but, if there be any truth in the word of God, they shall end in death. The express declaration of God concerning them is, "The end of those things is death."

II. The next way to which I would call your attention, is that of proud unbelief.

Associated with loose morality will be found, for the most part, a contemptuous disregard of the Gospel. Ungodly men feel no need of it; they see no excellency in it; they consider it as unworthy of their attention; and they leave it as a proper field for the discussion of angry disputants, or the contemplation of wild enthusiasts.

If any urge the necessity of faith in Christ, they either contend, that, having been educated in the belief of Christianity, they have all the faith that is necessary; or they cut the matter short, and tell us in a word, "His faith cannot be wrong, whose life is in the right." As to the idea of their salvation depending on the exercise of faith, they cannot for one moment endure it: nothing is too bad to be spoken of so preposterous an opinion: and all who maintain such a sentiment are set down as designing hypocrites, or as gloomy fanatics.

Thus confident are they that their way is right.

But what saith the Scripture to these things? Does God himself lay no stress on the exercise of faith? Does he leave us at liberty to embrace or reject his Gospel as we please? Having given us his only-begotten Son to die for us, and set him forth to be a propitiation for sin through faith in his blood, does he attach no guilt to unbelief? Does he represent the contemners of his Son as in the same predicament with those who receive him? Nothing of this kind can be found in all the book of God. It may be called candour: but there is no such candour in the inspired volume. That calls every thing by its proper name, and assigns to every thing its proper character: and the unbelief which is thought a matter of so much indifference by the world at large, is declared to be the infallible source of ruin to all who indulge it. But let the Scriptures speak for themselves: "He that believeth on Christ is not condemned: but he that believeth not, is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only-begotten Son of God:" and again, "He that believeth on the Son, hath everlasting life: but he that believeth not the Son, shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him." In conformity with these declarations is the whole tenour of sacred writ: "I am the way, the truth, and the life," says our Lord: "no man cometh unto the Father but by me." "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden! and I will give you rest." "Ye will not come unto me, that ye might have life." To the same effect is the testimony of his Apostles: "Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ." "There is not salvation in any other: there is no other name under heaven given among men whereby we can be saved, but the name of Jesus Christ."

What now shall we say to these things? Is there any difficulty in understanding these passages? I know, it is fashionable with many to represent the doctrines of the Gospel as so abstruse and intricate that no one of common discernment can understand them. But what intricacy is there here which the most unlettered man in the universe may not understand? Men may invent subtleties on any subject: and on this among the rest: but there is nothing here which is not plain and easy to the most common apprehension. Christ has made an atonement for our sins: and he calls us to seek salvation through his blood and righteousness. He tells us, that "having no sin of his own, he was made sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" And when he sent his disciples to go and preach this Gospel to every creature, he added, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, and he that believeth not shall be damned."

What shall we say then? Shall we believe what the Lord Jesus Christ has so strongly affirmed? or shall we believe the surmises of ungodly men, and, as St. John expresses it, "make God a liar?" Even if there were no such strong assertions to guide us, our own reason might tell us, that God, after having given his only dear Son to die for us, would never leave it a matter of indifference whether we believed in him or not: but when we find the testimonies of Scripture so plain and so express on the subject, we must conclude, that the unbelief which men so proudly and impiously justify, will issue in the everlasting confusion of those who indulge it.

III. The last way to which we shall direct your attention, is that of cold formality.

Many who have respect for the Gospel as a system, content themselves with yielding to it a bare assent; and persuade themselves that they receive it aright, even though they never are stimulated by it to any extraordinary exertions. As for all that zeal and love and diligence in the service of the Lord Jesus which they behold in some few around them, they account it all a needless preciseness; and they impute it, for the most part, to ostentation or vanity in those who dare to maintain it. To be regular in their

attendance on public worship, to fulfil the duties of their station, and to do unto others as they would be done unto, this is enough for them, and more than this they utterly despise. Speak not to them of loving God, of living by faith on the Lord Jesus, of maintaining fellowship with him in the exercise of prayer and praise: speak not to them of walking as Christ walked, of bearing the cross after him, and of rejoicing that they are counted worthy to suffer for him: speak not to them of receiving out of his fulness, of living to his glory, or of growing up into his image: such ideas are quite foreign to their minds: they sound only as the reveries of an over-heated imagination: to aspire after such things would be to be righteous over-much: if such exertions were necessary for the attainment of heaven, what must become of all the world? Their religion lies in a much narrower space; they do as they would be done unto, and they mind their proper business in life: if this will not save them, nothing will: and they have no fear but that, when they shall have finished their course. God will say to them, "Well done, good and faithful servants: enter ye into the joy of your Lord."

But if these views of a Christian's duty be right, whence is it that the Christian course is represented in Scripture as so arduous, that the most "righteous persons are scarcely saved," and with great difficulty? How comes it, that the divine life is compared to a race, that calls for such exertion: a wrestling, that requires such skill: a warfare, that is attended with such labour and danger? What is there, in the kind of life which has been described, that at all corresponds with such images as these? If the way to heaven be so easy that people can walk in it without any material difficulty, how comes it that our Lord has represented the path of religion as strait and unfrequented, and has bidden us to strive to enter in at the strait gate, because many seek to enter in, and are not able? St. Paul, when enumerating many classes of ungodly persons who should arise in the latter days, mentions those who have "a form of godliness without the power;" and in those very words describes the characters which we are now considering. The persons of whom we are speaking, particularly value themselves upon their moderation in religion: as though it were a virtue to love God moderately; to serve our Lord and Saviour moderately; and to seek the salvation of our souls moderately. This was the religion of the Laodicean Church: they determined to guard against all extremes: they would not neglect the service of God altogether; nor would they, on the other hand, engage in it with all their might. And what says God unto them? Does he commend this boasted moderation? No: he says, "I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot! So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth."

Let me not be understood as though I would vindicate any thing that was really enthusiastic: God forbid! The only thing for which I am contending is, that God is to be served, not in a cold, lifeless, formal manner, but with unfeigned delight, and with all the powers and faculties of our souls. We must "yield ourselves living sacrifices to him:" we must endeavour to "walk worthy of him;" and strive to the uttermost to "glorify him with our bodies and our spirits, which are his." This is the holiness to which we are to attain; and "without this holiness no man shall see the Lord."

Having specified some of those ways which seem right to the generality of men, but will assuredly end in death, namely, the ways of gay licentiousness, proud unbelief, and cold formality, we would entreat you to contemplate the state of those who walk in them, at that period when they are about to be undeceived.

Whilst they are in health, and the world smiles upon them, their religion, such as it is, will suffice; and their confidence will bear them up. But when sickness comes, and they draw near to the chambers of death, a doubt will not unfrequently arise in their minds, whether they are prepared to meet their God. To dispel these thoughts, they betake themselves to business or pleasure or company, or perhaps to strong drink: but in spite of all the means used to allay their fears, their suspicions will recur with greater force, and excite a wish to know the opinion of some one better informed than themselves: but they are afraid to suggest their doubts, lest they should create an alarm in the minds of others, and impress them with an unfavourable apprehension of their state. The recurrence of these thoughts makes them cling to life: not that life is pleasant to them; but they are afraid to die. Compelled at last by inward uneasiness, they perhaps put to some friend a question respecting the evidences of our acceptance with God. They are then answered in the most confident manner, that, as they have done no harm, and have been very attentive to their duties in life, they have no cause of fear. The satisfaction founded on such an answer as this, soon passes away; and their former fears return. Now perhaps they would be glad to see some person, whose piety they have heretofore ridiculed as needless preciseness: but they are afraid, lest a conversation with him should confirm, rather than remove, their doubts and fears. They wish, but cannot make up their minds, to send for him. Perhaps they suggest the idea to their attendant, but are dissuaded from encouraging it: they are told with increasing confidence, that all is well with them. Perhaps they persevere in their wishes, and a faithful monitor is sent for. The servant of God deals tenderly with them, but at the same time points out the errors they have fallen into, and the importance of seeking salvation in another way. This disquiets them for a time, and makes them doubly earnest about their souls. The faithful monitor repeats his visit: but the officious friends have barred the door against him; or perhaps have over-persuaded the dying man to decline all further interviews, and to venture his soul upon his own delusions. Any excuse is offered: the dying man is asleep, or too ill to see any one: and thus the only remaining hope for the poor man is banished. Such consolations as are founded on error and presumption are administered to the last: and at length the disembodied spirit rushes unprepared into the presence of its God.

But who can conceive the surprise and horror of the soul at the instant of its separation from the body? Methinks it shrinks back, wishing if possible to hide itself in its former tenement of clay. But the time is come for it to be undeceived. Now it sees the weakness and futility of all its former hopes. Now it sees how erroneous were its views of sin, and its conceptions of true religion. Now it sees that the representations which God had given in his word were true. The self-deceiver now can no longer doubt to what an end his former ways were leading, or whither they will come who follow the paths he trod. To indulge a wish for another period of probation, or even for the smallest mitigation of his misery, now were vain. Gladly would he go back for a moment to the world he

has left, to warn his surviving friends, lest they also come into the same place of torment: but that cannot be admitted. The sacred volume is given them for their guide; and if they will follow their own delusions in preference to it, they must abide the consequences. Now despair and anguish seize hold upon him; and he is delivered up a prey to all those horrors, which once he ridiculed as idle tales.

Would we avoid this awful end, let us turn from the paths that lead to it. Let us remember, that the assertions of men, however confident, are of no value, any further than they are founded on the word of God. Let not their light thoughts of sin lead us to tamper with it, or to doubt its issue. Let not their excuses for rejecting Christ prevail on us to neglect his great salvation. Rather, let us embrace him, and glory in him, and cleave to him with full purpose of heart. Let not their standard of religion be ours: let us go "unto the word and to the testimony:" let us see how Christ and his Apostles walked: and though we be ridiculed as precise and righteous over-much, let us persevere in following the path of duty. Let us "stand," as the prophet speaks, "and ask for the good old way, and walk therein." Let us seek instruction wherever we can find it: and let us remember, that the broad and frequented path is, according to our Lord's express declaration, a way that leadeth to destruction; but that the path to life is narrow, difficult, and unfrequented; for "few there be that find it." In short, let us look forward to the end of our journey. At that we shall soon arrive: and then it will be of no consequence whether we have been honoured for keeping the world in countenance, or despised for putting them to shame. The only thing that will then be of any consequence, will be, whether we be approved of our God. Let this end then be kept in view: let us regulate our ways in reference to it: and let us both by precept and example endeavour to undeceive the world around us. Then shall we be blessings to the generation in which we live, and shall attain that glory which ought to be the one object of our constant pursuit.

DCCXCV

GOD IS THE DISPOSER OF ALL EVENTS

Prov. 16:33. The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord.

THOUGH we would not be unnecessarily fastidious in condemning the use of any particular term, where we knew that in its popular sense it was not very exceptionable, yet we cannot altogether approve the use of such terms as 'luck,' and 'chance,' and 'fortune:' for though we know, that the persons who adopt those kind of expressions do not intend to deny the doctrine of a superintending Divine Providence, yet we cannot but think that such language tends exceedingly to weaken a sense of God's Providence upon the soul, inasmuch as it excludes his agency from the affairs of men, and regards them as left to mere and absolute contingency. With the Scriptures in our hands, we are perfectly assured, that all things, however casual or contingent with respect to man, are under the controul of a Superintending Providence; or, as it is said in our text, that, "when a lot is cast into the lap, the whole disposal thereof is of the Lord."

In confirmation of this truth, we shall shew,

I. That God is the disposer of all events—

Events, of whatever kind they be, are equally under the direction of Almighty God. He disposes of,

1. The things which are most dependent on human agency—

[In the government of kingdoms all the powers of the human mind are called forth and concentrated: but the time for their commencement and continuance is altogether under the direction of a superior power. The success of all human plans, whether relating to military enterprises, or commercial speculations, or agricultural pursuits, or matters of inferior moment and of daily occurrence, depends entirely on him——It was he who directed to Ahab's heart the bow drawn at a venture, and to Goliath's forehead the stone out of David's sling. In a word, he "worketh all things after the counsel of his own will;" and "his counsel shall stand, and he will do all his pleasure."

2. The things that are most independent of human agency—

[Nothing has less dependence on human skill or foresight than a lot. As far as respects the determining of that, an idiot is on a par with the wisest man in the universe. But it is entirely at God's disposal; as all who acknowledge the existence of a Deity have confessed, by resorting to it on emergencies which nothing else could determine. Saul, and all the people of Israel, resorted to it, in order to learn from God who it was that had displeased him; and again, to determine the same matter between Saul and Jonathan his son. In like manner the Apostles had recourse to it, in order to know whom God willed to be the successor of Judas in the Apostolic office. Even the heathens themselves had a persuasion, that, when matters were solemnly referred to Him in a way of lot, he would make known to them the point which they wished to ascertain. But as in these instances the event, though supposed to have been directed of God, might have been casual, since the chances against it were not very great, we will adduce one, which marks beyond all possibility of doubt the Divine interposition; since, in the language of chances, it was above a million to one that the lot did not fall on the person to whom God infallibly directed it. Here is a striking illustration of that passage, "Evil shall hunt the

wicked man to overthrow him.” The hounds see not their prey in the first instance, but trace it by its scent, and follow it with certainty in all its turnings, till at last they come in sight of it, and overtake it, and destroy it. So it was in regard to this pursuit of the man who had troubled the camp of Israel: the lot fell on the right tribe, then on the right family of that tribe, then, on the right household, and lastly on the right individual in that household:—and to every human being it speaks in this awful language, “Be sure your sin will find you out.”]

That we may see how important a truth this is in a practical view, we shall proceed to shew,

II. That in this character he is constantly to be regarded by us—

His hand and his will we should trace,

1. In every thing that is past—

[Have we been loaded with benefits? they must be received as from Him, “from whom cometh every good and perfect gift.” It matters nothing whether our blessings came to us by inheritance, or were the fruit of our own industry: to God, and to God alone, must they be referred, as their proper source. Have we, on the other hand, been visited with afflictions? We should know, that “they did not spring out of the ground,” but proceeded from his gracious hand; since “there is no evil in the city, but the Lord himself hath done it.” Thus Job viewed all his diversified trials; he overlooked the second causes, and fixed his eyes on God alone: “The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away.”]

Now in all this we see the great importance of tracing every thing to the Lord; for by our blessings we are inflamed to gratitude, and by our troubles are softened to submission.]

2. In every thing that is future—

[If nothing can occur without his special appointment, how safely may we commit to him our every concern: and how confidently may we expect a happy issue of every occurrence! Can we do better than leave ourselves at his disposal? Were it possible that he should err, or that, having devised any thing, he should be unable to accomplish it: or that, having begun to accomplish it, he should, through versatility, change his purpose, and alter his dispensations; we might then not feel so well satisfied with having every thing subject to his disposal: but when infinite wisdom and goodness concur to direct all our concerns, and infinite power also engages to overrule every thing for our good, we may well dismiss every fear, saying with the Apostle, “I know whom I have believed, and that he is able to keep that which I have committed to him.” We may be as composed as Hezekiah was when surrounded by Sennacherib’s army, or as Elisha, when surrounded by the army of the king of Syriap. “Having God for us,” we may rest assured, that “none can effectually be against us.”]

Let us SEE from hence,

1. The excellency of faith—

[This is the principle which, far beyond any other, honours and glorifies God. By faith we are prepared to receive every thing as from him, and to say, “It is the Lord; let him do what seemeth him good.” Mere reason, though it may acknowledge these truths, can never enable us to realize them: but “by faith we see Him that is invisible;” and learn to acknowledge him, as much “in the falling of a sparrow,” as in the ruin of an empire. Seek then this blessed principle; yea, seek it in its highest and noblest exercises, that “being strong in faith, you may give glory to God.”]

2. The blessedness of the true Believer—

[Whatever confederacies may be against you, it is your privilege to know, that “no weapon that has been formed against you can prosper.” God has said, that “all things shall work together for your good:” and they shall do so, however much you may be at a loss to conceive in what way the good shall be elicited. Only take care that “Christ is yours;” and then you may be sure that all things else are yours. If Christ is yours, all the perfections of God are so far yours, that they shall all be exercised for your good. Having “Christ for your sanctuary,” you shall be inaccessible to the fiery darts of Satan: and having “your life hid with Christ in God, you shall, at his second coming, assuredly appear with him in glory.”]

DCCXCVI

THE NAME OF THE LORD A STRONG TOWER

Prov. 18:10. The name of the Lord is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe.

IN the Proverbs of Solomon we must not expect to find long and accurate statements of Divine truth, nor elevated strains of devotion founded upon it: the scope of the book is rather by brief sentences to fix upon the mind truths already acknowledged, and to shew the excellency of them in their effects. The passage before us is very instructive in this view, namely, as illustrating the blessedness attendant on true piety. But it commends itself to us yet more forcibly, by exhibiting a contrast between the dispositions and habits which religion inspires, and those which are indulged by the whole ungodly world. The text informs us what “the righteous man”

does: the verse following our text informs us what the worldling does: the one makes God his refuge; the other trusts in his wealth, or some other idol equally vain: the one founds all his hopes on God, as made known to us in the Scriptures of Truth; the other, on some vanity, that has no title to confidence but “in his own conceit.”

It was to mark this contrast that the blessedness mentioned in our text was confined to “the righteous.” Solomon did not mean to intimate, that an unrighteous man, if he would flee to this tower, should be shut out: for the most unrighteous man in the universe is invited to come to it: and, like the cities of refuge, its gates stand open day and night for the admission of all who desire to flee to it for refuge. But the truth is, that none but the righteous will run to it: none but they who are sensible of their guilt and danger, and are fleeing in earnest from the wrath to come, will enter in. All others deny the necessity of submitting to so humiliating a measure: they think they are safe enough without it. The believing penitent, on the contrary, is thankful for such a refuge, and is in the habit of running to it on every occasion: and therefore to him, and to him alone, is the security confined.

To elucidate the passage, we will endeavour to unfold,

I. The character of God—

By “the name of the Lord” we are not to understand the mere word, Jehovah, as though that would afford us any security. This is a vain and foolish superstition, that has no foundation whatever in the Oracles of God. But, by “the name of the Lord” we must understand his character; as we learn from that expression of David, “They that know thy name,” i. e. thy character, “will put their trust in thee.” Consider then the character of Jehovah,

1. As described by himself—

[God, in infinite condescension, was pleased to make himself known to Moses, and by an audible voice to “proclaim his nameb:” “The Lord passed by and proclaimed, The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth; keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, and that will by no means clear the guiltyc.” Now we would ask the trembling sinner, What character he would wish Jehovah to bear? Would he wish God in no instance to testify his displeasure against sin, but to treat all men alike, putting no difference between “the guilty” who are going on in all manner of wickedness, and the penitent, who are turning from all iniquity? No: there is not a penitent in the universe that would wish God to act in a way so unworthy of his Divine Majesty. But if he desire to be assured of mercy to returning penitents, it is not possible that any words he could devise could more richly portray this attribute, than those which God himself has used. Consider them distinctly and separately,——and see how constantly they have been verified towards you hitherto, and how abundantly they contain all that you can desire.]

2. As revealed to us in Christ Jesus—

[The Lord Jesus Christ is “Emmanuel, God with us;” and he is particularly called, “The image of the invisible God.” because in him the whole character of the Deity is made, as it were, visible to mortal men. He is “the brightness of his Father’s glory, and the express image of his person;” and his whole character is marked in the name given him before he was conceived in the womb. The name “Jesus” is the same with Joshua, or “Jehoshua,” that is, Jah Hosea, Divine Saviour. What a glorious and comprehensive name is this! All that he has done and suffered for us, and all that he has promised to us, is contained in it; together with his perfect sufficiency for all that he has undertaken to effect. The trembling sinner finds in the very name of Jesus a pledge of all that he wants. Besides, whilst we contemplate him in the whole of his work and offices, we are expressly authorized to apply to ourselves the benefit of them all, and to call him, “The Lord our Righteousness.” Follow this idea in all its bearings, and what unsearchable mysteries of love and mercy will it unfold to our view!]

Such being the name and character of God, let us contemplate,

II. The interest we have in it—

It is indeed “a strong tower”—

[Consider every perfection of the Deity: there is not one which is not “a chamber where we may hide ourselves till every calamity be overpastf.” The wisdom, the goodness, the love, the power, the faithfulness of Jehovah—who that is encompassed by them does not feel himself in an impregnable fortress? Truly they are not merely a wall, but “a wall of fire” round about the righteous; of fire, which whilst it protects the fugitive, will devour the assailant.——What a tower too is the Lord Jesus Christ in the whole of his work and offices! Well is he said to be “a strength to the poor, a strength to the needy in his distress, a refuge from the storm, a shadow from the heat, when the blast of the terrible ones is as a storm against the wallg.” Yes, “the man” Christ Jesus, in his Mediatorial character, is such “a hiding-placeh,” where no adversary shall “ever penetrate.”]

All who run to it shall “be safe”—

[Who shall ever approach “to harm” those who are thus protectedi? Surely “they shall be kept in perfect peace.” They are “safe:” safe from the curses of the broken law: for “there is no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesusk”——They are safe too from the assaults of Satan; for “their lives are hid with Christ in God,” where Satan can never come——In a word, they are safe from every kind of evil: for God has said of those who make the Most High their habitation, that “no evil shall befall themm”——The persecutor may touch their body, but cannot reach their soul: they shall sooner be fed with ravens, than be suffered to “want any manner of thing that is goodo.” And if any thing occur that has the semblance of evil, they may be assured that it shall work for their

present and eternal goodp. Like Elisha, they are surrounded with horses of fire and chariots of fire: and any assaults made upon them shall only terminate as in Elijah's case, with the confusion and ruin of their enemies.]

"Suffer now a word of EXHORTATION"—

1. Study much the character of God—

[“To know God, and Jesus Christ whom he hath sent, is,” as our Lord informs us, “eternal life.” All other knowledge is mere vanity in comparison of this. Without this we have nothing to warrant our hopes, or to dissipate our fears——“Acquaint then yourselves with God, and be at peace”——]

2. Maintain constant and intimate communion with him—

[You know how a child runs to his parent on every occasion: do ye in like manner run unto your God. This is the very character of the true Christian; “The righteous runneth unto God as his strong tower.” Get to him under every fear, and every want, and every distress: and “cast your care on Him who careth for you”——]

3. Assure yourselves of the safety which you are privileged to enjoy—

[Well may you say, “If God be for me, who can be against me?” See how David exulted in his security!——and learn like him to glory in your God: for it is God's desire that you should enjoy all possible consolation. Your Saviour has assured you, that “none shall pluck you out of his hands:” lie there then in peace and safety, “knowing in whom you have believed, and that he is able to keep that which you have committed to him”——When he has lost his power to save, then, and not till then, shall any enemy prevail against you.]

DCCXCVII

A WOUNDED SPIRIT

Prov. 18:14. The spirit of a man will sustain his infirmity: but a wounded spirit who can bear?

MAN being placed in a world where troubles of various kinds continually await him, he is endued with a firmness, of mind suited to the occasion, so that he is enabled to bear them with a considerable measure of composure and ease. Previously to the arrival of afflictions, they appear more formidable than they really are. We should suppose that poverty, and sickness, and pain, and losses of friends and relatives, would produce a permanent depressure of mind: but this is not found to be the case: time soon heals the wounds that are inflicted by them; and habit soon reconciles men to the burthens which they are called to sustain. Where piety is superadded to natural fortitude, and the grace of God is in full activity, a man can support any load, however heavy. What an accumulated weight of afflictions came on Job! yet he not only blessed God for them, but, when his wife urged him to renounce his allegiance to God on account of these visitations, he, with wonderful composure, answered, “Shall we receive good at the Lord's hands, and shall we not receive evil?”

Yet there are bounds beyond which a man cannot go, without almost miraculous assistance. The spirit, like the body, may be borne down by a weight beyond its strength: and when the spirit, which ought to support a man under all his other trials, is itself broken, he must fall of course.

Now there are many things which inflict so deep a wound upon the spirit, as to destroy all its energy, and incapacitate it for its proper office: and that we may provide an antidote against them, and afford some consolation under them, we will,

I. Consider the case of a wounded spirit—

A spirit may be deeply wounded,

1. By nervous disorders—

[The mind may be disordered, as well as the body, and indeed through the medium of the body: and it is certain that there are disorders which so operate upon the nerves as to weaken and depress the animal spirits, and to sink a man into the very depths of despondency. This is often mistaken for religious melancholy: but it frequently has nothing to do with religion: it is found in persons who never turned their minds at all to the subject of religion: and, as it comes with, and by, a bodily disease, so it ceases with the removal of that disease. But in its effect it is inexpressibly painful, unfitting persons for every duty, indisposing them for all the proper means of relief, and leading them to put away from themselves all manner of consolation. They constrain their kindest friends to apply to themselves that proverb. “As vinegar upon nitre, so is he that singeth songs to a heavy heart.”]

2. By great and long-continued afflictions—

[Job himself, who had so nobly sustained all his complicated afflictions, sank at last, and cursed the day of his birth. Nor is it at all uncommon for men of the greatest fortitude thus to sink. To produce this, is the tendency of calamities of any kind, personal, domestic, or public. See the Apostle's caution to the Church of Corinth respecting their conduct towards a member whom they had

excommunicated from among them. As they had been formerly too backward to punish his offence, so now they were too backward to restore him; on which occasion St. Paul says to them, “Ye ought rather to forgive him, and to comfort him, lest perhaps such an one should be swallowed up with over-much sorrowb.” Here the grief was purely personal: but in Jacob it was of a domestic nature. He had, in his own apprehension, lost his favourite son, Joseph; and now he was afraid of losing Benjamin also: that, he said, would fill up the number of his sorrows, and “bring down his grey hairs with sorrow to the gravec.” How many at this day have ground to adopt this complaint, in reference to their children! Public calamities, it is true, do not so often press with an unsupportable weight upon the mind: yet have we several instances of their depressing, almost to the lowest ebb of sorrow, persons of the strongest and the holiest minds. How were Moses and Joshua discouraged, when unexpected circumstances arose to render doubtful the ultimate success of their missiond! Nor was it a love of life, or a fear of death, that made Hezekiah so extremely dejected at the prospect of his approaching dissolution, but an apprehension of the evils that would accrue to his country in the event of his removal; and that one consideration reduced him to such a state of grief as would in any other view have been utterly unworthy of him as a saint of Gode.]

3. By guilt upon the conscience—

[What terrible effects did this produce on the mind of the traitor Judas! He could not retain the wages of his iniquity, nor bear his own existence; but sought in suicide a termination of the sorrows he could no longer enduref. Nor is it at all uncommon for persons who once “made a mock of sin,” to feel so bitterly the torments of an accusing conscience, as to be driven by them to habits of intoxication, and even to death itself, as a refuge. Even good men, previous to their having received a renewed sense of God’s pardoning love upon their souls, have been brought to such terrors and despondency, as to find within their own souls a foretaste of hell itself. David’s experience in this particular is a just, but lamentable, exhibition of this painful truthg——]

4. By violent temptations—

[Satan, though he can no longer possess the bodies of men as formerly he did, has yet great power over their souls. “His fiery darts” can inflict the deadliest wound. Paul himself was not able to endure “the buffetings” of that malignant enemy, till, by repeated cries to his Divine Master, he had obtained from him augmented supplies of grace and strength. As for Job, though he was a perfect man, yet he sank entirely under the assaults of this great adversaryi——Even the Lord of Glory himself, when he had assumed our feeble nature, was so exhausted in his first conflicts with Satan, that he needed to have “angels sent from heaven to strengthen himk.” And in his last hours, when all the powers of darkness made their united assault upon him, he was constrained to say, “My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death.” What wonder then if Christians of ordinary stature be on some occasions unable to bear up under the wounds which he inflicts upon them?]

5. By spiritual desertion—

[This, after all, is the most overwhelming to a pious soul. With the presence of his God a man may bear any thing: but when “God hides his face from him, he must of necessity be troubledl.” In this respect also David shews us what an insupportable affliction this is, and how impossible it is for the strongest or most pious mind to endure itm——But in our blessed Lord himself we see the most awful exemplification of this truth: for when all his other afflictions together had not been able to extort from him one complaint, this forced from him that heart-rending cry, “My God! my God! why hast thou forsaken men?” Seeing then that many may be fainting under the agonies of “a wounded spirit,” we will,

II. Administer some balm for its relief—

There is no wound that can be inflicted on the soul in this life, which may not, by an application of the proper remedies, be healed. Consider then,

1. There is no affliction which is not sent by God for our good—

[Afflictions, of whatever kind they be, “spring not out of the ground:” they are all appointed by God, in number, weight, and measure, and duration. If it be disease of body, it is he that inflicts the wound: if the trial come from any other quarter. it still is his chastening rod that strikes us, with a view to our spiritual good, “that we may be made partakers of his holiness.” Convictions of sin are the work of his Spirit, to prepare us for the final restoration of his favour: and Satan himself, as in the case of Job and of Peter, is restrained by God, so as ultimately to display the triumphs of divine grace, and to benefit the souls which he endeavours to destroy: and God himself, in the hidings of his face, seeks only so to humble and purify our souls as to prepare us for the fuller manifestations of his love and mercyo——]

Now it must be granted, “that afflictions are not for the present joyous, but grievous: nevertheless, afterwards they work the peaceable fruits of righteousness unto them that are exercised thereby.” “If we be in heaviness through manifold temptations,” God sees that there is “a needs be” for themp; and that by putting us into the furnace, we shall be purged from our dross, and come out of it as vessels better fitted for his serviceq. Well therefore may the consideration of the end for which they are sent, and of the benefit to be derived from them, reconcile us to the pressure of them, and dispose us patiently to wait for the removal of them. Could Job have foreseen the issue of his troubles, they would have been deprived of more than half their weight.]

2. Our afflictions, of whatever kind they be, will endure but a little time—

[The Apostle speaks of all, even the heaviest afflictions, as light and momentary. Even life itself is but as a shadow that declineth; or a weaver's shuttle, which soon finishes the piece that is to be severed from the loom. And when once this frail life is ended, there is an everlasting termination of all our sorrows. If only we have believed in Christ, and sought an interest in him, we enter immediately into "his presence, where is fulness of joy for evermore." Into that blissful world nothing that is afflictive can ever enter to disturb their peace: "all tears are wiped away from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away." And, as no created evil can then impair their bliss, so no created good can add to it: "The city has no need of the sun, neither of the moon to lighten it; for the glory of God does lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof." How little will the transient clouds that once occasioned a momentary gloom be remembered, when our dwelling is for ever fixed in the full splendour of the Sun of Righteousness. Surely we need not be much cast down at trials, however painful to flesh and blood, when we consider that their duration is but as the twinkling of an eye, and that they will so soon terminate in inconceivable and everlasting felicity.]

3. There is in Christ a full sufficiency for every wound—

[We need not go to the eternal world for consolation; for we may find it here. What says the Prophet Jeremiah? "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no Physician there? Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?" Did we but cry to Jesus, as Paul did, we should find "his grace abundantly sufficient for us." "If we cast our burthen upon him, he would sustain us." See the experiment tried by David, and the account which he gives of the result: how soon was he "taken out of the horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and a new song was put into his mouth, even praise unto our God!" The very office which our blessed Lord undertook, was that, not of a Redeemer only, but of a Comforter: "to comfort them that mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness." Let all then look unto him, whatever their affliction now be: even though, like David, they were under the depths of dereliction, they shall soon, with him, have occasion to say, "Thou hast turned my mourning into dancing; thou hast put off my sackcloth, and girded me with gladness."

The Lord Jesus "will not break a bruised reed, or quench the smoking flax, but will bring forth judgment unto victory;" and, if we confide in him, "our heaviness may indeed continue for a night, but joy shall come in the morning."]

DCCXCVIII

DIVINE KNOWLEDGE MOST DESIRABLE

Prov. 19:2. That the soul be without knowledge, it is not good.

THERE is nothing so highly prized as knowledge. No pains are deemed too great for the acquirement of it; no expense too large——It is that which, more than any thing else, raises a man in public estimation, and gives him influence in the world——There is, however, a knowledge which is far from being duly appreciated; I mean, that which relates to the concerns of the soul. Yet is this, beyond all comparison, more important than the other. For this, St. Paul counted all things but as dross and dung. Without the attainment of human sciences, a man may be both holy and happy; but without divine knowledge he can have

I. No directory for his ways—

[Reason is very inadequate to guide our steps. We know not of ourselves how to walk and to please God. The wisest of heathen philosophers were but blind conductors in the paths of real holiness: they understood not what holiness was. Of humility, which is the very foundation of holiness, they had no just ideas. So it is with unenlightened Christians. They see little beyond forms and external duties. The exercise of spiritual affections is beyond their attainment or their aim. Of an entire superiority to the world, and a total surrender of themselves to God, they have no conception; unless, indeed, it be in a way of monastic institutions, where the duties of social life are overlooked, and form is substituted in the place of vital power. Of a life of faith in particular, a person uninstructed in the Gospel can have no proper views. Being ignorant of Christ, he cannot see what a fulness there is in him of wisdom and righteousness, and sanctification and redemption; or what necessity there is for the sinner to receive supplies from it, by the daily exercises of faith and prayer. In a word, from a man ignorant of the Gospel, every thing that constitutes vital godliness is concealed. He has no higher principle than that of fear; no better standard than that of heathen morals; no nobler end than that of saving his own soul. As for being constrained by the love of God, or aspiring to a full conformity to the divine image, or living altogether for the glory of God's name, he knows it not; yea, he regards it rather as fanciful, enthusiastic, impracticable, and absurd. Not feeling his obligations to his Redeemer, he wants the entire spring of vital godliness, and can rise no higher than to the low attainment of heathen morals. Tell me then whether he be not in a truly pitiable state.]

II. No remedy for his sins—

[Every man feels himself to be a sinner, and to stand in need of forgiveness with God. But a man ignorant of the Gospel, seeks remission only in a round of duties, or in mortifications of human origin. He sees not his need of a Mediator, through whose obedience unto death he is to obtain acceptance with God. He knows not of "the fountain which was opened for sin upon" the cross;

and therefore he cannot wash in it. He knows not of a righteousness wrought out for him; and therefore he cannot clothe himself with it. The great and precious promises which God has given us in his word, have, in his mind, but little weight, little reality. His repentances, his reformations, his alms-deeds and works of charity, these form his chief dependence, and these administer to him his principal consolation. Hence he never acquires any solid peace. He always has a secret misgiving that he has not obtained peace with God: and he has no conception of what is meant by “the joy of faith.” The true Believer “rejoices in the Lord with joy unspeakable and full of glory.” But to this the poor blind moralist can never attain: and therefore he can never enter into “the glorious liberty of the children of God.” In what a lamentable condition then is he!]

III. No support in his troubles—

[“Man is born to trouble, as the sparks fly upward.” But to those who have received the Gospel, there are consolations that bear them up above all their afflictions. They know from whence all their trials spring, even from the hand of God himself. They see them to be the fruit of a Father’s love, sent for the production of the most gracious ends. They feel within themselves their humbling, sanctifying efficacy. They perceive that they are instrumental to the carrying on of God’s work within them, and to the augmenting of that weight of glory which shall be accorded to them at the last day. But of all this the man who is uninstructed in the Gospel is altogether ignorant. He has little except the principles of philosophy for his support. He feels that he cannot ward off affliction: and that to repine under it, is only to augment its pressure: and that, consequently, patience is his truest wisdom, But to “glory in tribulation,” and be thankful for it, and “take pleasure in it,” are attainments of which he has no conception, Truly “to be thus ignorant, it is not good.”]

IV. No strength for his duties—

[An unenlightened man, of necessity, engages in duty depending only on his own strength. He knows not what union with Christ is; or what is that vital energy which is derived from him, as from a vine to its branches, or from the head to the members of a body. Nor is he acquainted with the operations of the Holy Spirit, so as to be “strengthened with all might by the Spirit in his inward man.” In consequence of this, if he go forth to mortify sin, or conflict with Satan, or engage in any spiritual duty, he fails, and is ready to consider success as utterly unattainable. Being a stranger to “the mighty working of God’s power, which wrought in Christ to raise him from the dead, and to set him above all the principalities and powers whether of heaven or hell,” he conceives that similar conquests are not to be expected by mortal man; and that to rise thus superior to sin and Satan, is an object to be desired rather than attained. Hence he satisfies himself with the poor performances of outward duty; and never dreams of being “changed into the image of the Lord Jesus, from glory to glory, by the Spirit of his God.” “Through the strength of Christ he might do all things:” but, being ignorant of Christ, he is left to his own resources, and “can do nothing.” Say, Brethren, whether in this view also he does not fearfully illustrate the truth contained in my text.]

V. No hope in his end—

[At the approach of death, an unenlightened man is in a truly pitiable state. He has no other hope but what is founded on the uncovenanted mercies of his God, and a persuasion that he has done his duty to the utmost of his power. As for an assurance of faith, or a spirit of adoption enabling him to cry Abba, Father, he knows not of it; nor can imagine how it is that some attain such joy in the prospect of eternity. Of the covenant of grace, and of all its blessed provisions, he, alas! is ignorant. He cannot take hold of the promises of the Gospel, or rely on the faithfulness of God. He sees not how a title to heaven may be attained, or with what confidence it may be pleaded at the throne of grace. He sees not Christ as his forerunner, that is gone to prepare a place for him, and has engaged to come and take him to himself. Hence he clings to life even to the last; and never reckons death amongst his treasures, or accounts it gain to die. St. Paul well describes the state of such an one; that being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and going about to establish his own righteousness, and not submitting himself to the righteousness of God, he perishes at last under the guilt of all his sins. Whatever his exertions be in the pursuit of righteousness, he fails, “because he seeks it by works, and not by faith only; for he stumbles at that stumbling-stone;” and thus, as God has said, “he is destroyed for lack of knowledge.” The unhappy man living all his days “without Christ,” dies at last “without hoped.” Who will doubt now the truth of Solomon’s assertion, that for the soul to be without knowledge is the greatest calamity that can befall a man on this side the grave?]

And now, Brethren, what shall I say unto you? O, LEARN,

1. To pity those who are in ignorance of the truth of Christ—

[You would surely pity your friends and relatives, if you saw them destitute of the common faculties of men: but, believe me, they are still greater objects of pity, if, possessing all the faculties of men, they are ignorant of the Gospel. In what an awful state are they who have no directory for their ways, no remedy for their sins, no support in their troubles, no strength for their duties, and no hope in their end! Yet is this, indeed, the condition of all who are ignorant of Christ. They may be endued with human wisdom, and may be placed on the highest pinnacle of human glory; but yet a poor Lazarus, that is destitute of all that man values, is happier than they. Consider this, I pray you, and exert yourselves to the utmost of your power for the bringing of their souls to God——and pity the heathen world, who are yet sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death. Pity also God’s ancient people, who have yet a veil upon their hearts, and who still reject that Saviour whom their fathers crucified. Concur in all the methods that are used for the enlightening of this benighted world: and if you see, indeed, that “for immortal souls to be without knowledge is not good,” address

yourselves with all energy to the dispelling of the darkness that reigns throughout the world, and to the “turning of men universally from darkness unto light, and from the power of Satan unto God.”]

2. To improve the means of grace which are afforded you—

[Permit me to say, that you have the light set before you, and “the whole counsel of God faithfully declared unto you.” Do not then trifle with the opportunities which you enjoy. They are sent of God to “make you wise unto salvation:” and, if they be disregarded, they will greatly augment both your guilt and condemnation. In truth, if you had not such instructions, your guilt would be comparatively light, and your condemnation tolerable: but, with your advantages, your state will be worse than that of Sodom and Gomorrha, if you make not a suitable improvement of them. In attending on divine ordinances, learn to regard them as Bethesda’s Pool, where, unless the waters be stirred, you will attend in vain; and beg of God to accompany them with power from on high, and to give them a saving efficacy to your souls.]

3. To make a good use of the knowledge which you possess—

[Be careful that you do not “hold the truth in unrighteousness.” The servant who knew his Lord’s will, and did it not, was beaten with more and heavier stripes than he who erred through ignorance. And you may be sure, that if the Lord Jesus Christ will be revealed at last in flaming fire, to take vengeance on them that knew not God, and obeyed not the Gospel; much more will he take vengeance on those who have trodden under foot his blood, and done despite to his Spirit of grace. If God have shined into your hearts, to give you the light of his Gospel, you must walk as children of the light and of the day. It is in this way only that you can shew the excellency of the Gospel, or convince the world that the knowledge you possess is of any real value. But, to make this improvement of the Gospel, much consideration will be necessary. The word of Christ must be treasured up in your minds, and must “dwell in you richly in all wisdom.” A mariner who will not consult his compass will derive no benefit from it: nor will you, if you do not take “the word as a light unto your feet and a lantern to your paths.” Solomon, in the words following my text, justly says, “He that hasteth with his feet, sinneth:” and so I say to you; If you will have your way acceptable unto God, you must apply to him constantly for fresh supplies of his grace, and must “take heed unto your ways according to his word.”]

DCCXCIX

THE SINFULNESS OF MURMURING AGAINST GOD

Prov. 19:3. The foolishness of man perverteth his way, and his heart fretteth against the Lord.

THE wickedness of the heart is deep and unsearchable. They who do not watch its motions, have no idea of its depravity; but they who diligently examine it may discover many evils, and by the light of God’s word attain considerable knowledge. The disposition mentioned in the text deserves special attention. We will,

I. Illustrate the disposition here spoken of—

The careless and ungodly world are ever ready to cast blame on God,

1. On account of their sins—

[They give the rein to every evil thought and desire; they expose themselves to every kind of temptation; they lay innumerable stumbling-blocks in their own way; and thus become enslaved by vicious lusts and appetites: against these iniquities God denounces his judgment: but the slaves of sin continue hardened in their evil ways; they condemn even God himself as the author of their sins. This was the conduct of Adam immediately after the fall, and is it too often imitated by his guilty descendants—]

2. On account of their sorrows—

[Sorrow is entailed on all as the punishment of the first transgression: but most of the afflictions which men suffer are brought on them by their own folly. Some involve themselves in distress through sloth or intemperance; others ruin themselves by imprudence and extravagance. Others bring themselves into difficulties by the tempers which they exercise, and the habits which they form: but all under their calamities “fret against the Lord.” They are full of invectives against those that have been the more immediate occasions of their trouble; they consider their lot as hard and severe; and thus do they reflect on Providence rather than on themselves. Cain, the first-born of Adam, indulged this malignant spirit; nor are there any sons of sorrow who do not more or less follow his example.]

Nor are believers themselves wholly free from this disposition—

[They watch and pray against their besetting sin, yet are sometimes brought under the power of it. On these occasions they are tempted to fret against the Lord; they are ready to expostulate with him like those of old; they forget how justly they might have been eternally forsaken: and that the remaining power of their sins is the consequence both of former habits, and of present neglects. Under afflictions also they feel too much proneness to murmur. What sinful impatience did the holy Elijah manifest! Even Job himself preserved not wholly a becoming temper.]

This disposition however is most hateful in the sight of God.

II. Point out the evil of it—

It betrays the most deplorable ignorance—

[God is not, nor can be, the author of sin. He maintains in all things the character given of him; hence St. James shews the folly of casting blame on God; nor can God punish any of us more than our iniquities deserve: hence the expostulation of the prophet is unanswerable. Besides, to fret against God is not the way to interest him in our behalf, nor will it tend to the peace and composure of our own spirits. It is as unprofitable to us as it is unjust towards him. True wisdom would teach us to humble ourselves in his presence, and to renew our supplications with greater earnestness. This conduct is as sure to succeed, as the other is to fail of success.]

It manifests the most obstinate impenitence—

[Both sins and sorrows ought to produce humility. When they increase our rebellion, our state is almost desperate. How awfully does such a temper characterize God's enemies! and make us resemble those that are consigned over to perdition! Surely nothing more heinous can be laid to our charge, nor any thing more speedily fit us for destruction.]

It evinces the most consummate arrogance—

[To fret and murmur is, in fact, to reprove God. God himself considers it as a direct attack upon him; and can any thing be more presumptuous in such words as we? St. Paul reprobates this impiety with holy indignation, and every one who allows himself in it, must answer it at his peril.]

We conclude with suitable ADVICE—

1. Let us search into the occasions of our sins and sorrows—

[We may be surprised into sin by a sudden temptation, but may trace our fall to preceding unwatchfulness; nor can we expect God to keep us, if we neglect to keep ourselves. We are rarely earnest enough in using the means of safety. We are too backward to meditation, prayer, and fasting. Our afflictions also may have come without any misconduct on our part: but who has not merited them by his sins? Men should only be considered as instruments in God's hands: and the consideration of his will should silence every murmur.]

2. Let us always be careful to justify God—

[We may not always be able to account for his dispensations, but we should not on that account doubt the equity of them: whatever we suffer, we should not "charge God foolishly." Under the darkest dispensations we should say as the Psalmist. If we wait we shall see the wisdom of many things which now seem utterly inexplicable; we may rest assured that David's assertion shall be verified.]

3. Let us see what improvement may be made of our troubles—

[There is no rod which has not a voice to us. Our very sins may be permitted, in order to humble us, and to make us more thankfully cleave to the Saviour. Our trials, of whatever kind, are to purge away our dross, and to fit us for our eternal rest. To view them in this light will greatly compose our minds; instead of fretting against the Lord, we shall be thankful to him: and instead of increasing our misery, we shall make it a source of joy.]

DCCC

THE CONSEQUENCE OF SLOTH

Prov. 20:4. The sluggard will not plow by reason of the cold: therefore shall he beg in harvest, and have nothing.

ARGUMENTS from analogy, when the analogy itself is just, are easy of apprehension, and well calculated to convince the mind: and one distinguished excellence of the Book of Proverbs is, that it abounds with such arguments: and without any formal statement of premises and conclusions, presents the truth to us in short, sententious aphorisms, that are plain, obvious, incontrovertible. Whoever has made the least observation on human affairs, must have seen the evil consequences of neglecting our proper business in life, whether in husbandry, or trade, or any other line: and it is easy to infer from thence, that similar consequences must attend a neglect of our Christian duties. Nor is it necessary that this analogy should be always pointed out to us: the whole scope of that divinely inspired book naturally leads us to make a spiritual improvement of the hints, which, in their literal sense, apply only to the things of this life.

Let us then in this view consider,

I. The sluggard's conduct—

The duties both of the husbandman and the Christian require industry—

[It was a part of the curse introduced by sin, that man should obtain his bread by the sweat of his brow: nor will the earth yield us any thing but briars and thorns. unless we bestow much pains in the cultivation of it. Our attention to it must be unremitted: it is not the

labour of a month or a year that will suffice: we must repeat again and again the same processes, in order to guard against the noxious weeds that would overrun it, and cherish the good seed, which we want it to produce. Thus also must the Christian exert himself in order to bring forth the fruits of righteousness. His heart is prolific in what is evil, but barren in what is good: he must therefore daily counteract its natural propensities, and foster the holy desires that have been sown in it. The same work of repentance and faith must be continually renewed, till the Lord himself shall come to gather in his harvest.]

Yet are we ever ready to neglect our work on frivolous pretences—

[A regard to temporal interest will often overcome men's natural sloth, and excite them to diligence in their several vocations. Yet are there many instances, where the indulgence of sloth makes men blind to their own happiness, and deaf to the cries of their distressed families. With respect to spiritual concerns, an indisposition to labour universally prevails. The work of the soul is irksome and difficult; and every one either deems it altogether unnecessary, or desires to defer it as long as possible. But it is observable that the sluggard does not absolutely say, "I hate my work, and therefore will not do it;" much less does he say, "I am determined never to plough at all:" but he finds some excuse for neglecting what he is averse to perform; and fixes on some plea, which, in certain circumstances and to a certain extent, might be sufficient. Thus the Christian does not say, "I hate repentance and faith in Christ; much less does he resolve never to repent and believe: but he always has some reason at hand for deferring this unpleasant work, and promises himself a more convenient season, before the time for ploughing; be entirely passed away. He has the cares of a family, or a pressure of business, or something that serves him for an excuse: but, upon examination, it will either be found a mere excuse, or a reason, on which he lays a very improper stress; making use of it to justify a total and habitual neglect, when, at the most, it would only account for a partial and occasional omission. But as a husbandman who should yield to such a disposition, is denominated by God himself, "a sluggard," so we are sure, that he, who on such frivolous pretenses intermits his Christian duties, will receive no better appellation at the day of judgment than that of a "wicked and slothful servant."]

But in whomsoever such conduct is found, he will at last have reason to deplore,

II. The consequences of it—

As industry and wealth, so idleness and want, are very closely connected—

[Circumstances occur in this world to interrupt the natural operation of causes and effects: but in general, where any man's subsistence depends upon his labour, the consequences of sloth or activity will be such as might be expected. In spiritual things the rule is absolute and invariable. Every man's progress will be according to his labour. Some indeed may enjoy more of comfort than others, from other causes than their own diligence: but every person's real proficiency in grace will be proportioned to the improvement he makes of the talents committed to him: without detracting at all from the grace of God, we may safely affirm, that the difference between one Christian and another in respect of victory over sin, and happiness in the divine life, must be traced in a very great measure to their different degrees of watchfulness in secret duties.]

This truth however will not appear in its full extent till the day of judgment—

[At the time of harvest the care or negligence of the husbandman will very clearly appear; and, if we should suppose a man to have wholly neglected the cultivation of his fields, he would find himself destitute, while others were satiated with abundance: nor, if he were reduced to beggary, would he find any one to pity his forlorn condition. But his situation, deplorable as it would be, is not to be compared with that of a negligent Christian in the day of judgment. He will see others reaping a glorious harvest, while he is not permitted even to glean an ear: he will behold others "crowned with glory and honour and immortality." while nothing remains for him but "indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish." The foolish virgins, who slept while they should have been procuring oil for their lamps, came and pleaded in vain for admittance, when the door was once shut against them: none but the wise virgins were suffered to participate the nuptial feast. In the same manner, the Rich Man, who lived only to the flesh, sought in vain for one drop of water to mitigate his anguish, while Lazarus, who had lived to nobler purposes, had a fulness of joy in Abraham's bosom. Thus also will it be with all, when the great harvest shall arrive: they, who had improved their season of grace, will be partakers of glory; while they, who had wasted it in sloth and self-indulgence, will reap the fruits of their folly, in deserved shame, in perpetual want, in unalleviated, unpitied, everlasting misery.]

APPLICATION—

1. Let us, in the view of this subject, take shame to ourselves—

[How long has our season of grace been protracted: and what little improvement have we made of it! How apt are we to yield to sloth, and to defer the most important of all duties on slight and frivolous pretences, which we know beforehand will never satisfy our Judge! But what can ever equal this folly? A sluggard in temporal things may find some one to pity his distress; and may learn from his experience to amend. But who will ever pity the self-ruined sinner? Or what further opportunity for amendment will be afforded him? Let us then begin, and prosecute without remission, the work of our souls. Let us "plow up the fallow ground, and sow in righteousness," knowing assuredly, that "the diligent hand shall make us rich," and that, "if we sow in tears we shall reap in joy."]

2. Let us look forward with earnestness to the future harvest—

[The husbandman waits with patience, in expectation that the harvest will compensate his labours. And will not our harvest repay all the exertions we can use, and all the self-denial we can exercise? Let us then put forth all the energies of our souls in preparing for

that day. Let us not suffer any difficulties or discouragements to abate our ardour; but “whatever our our hand findeth to do, let us do it with our might,” “and so much the more as we see the day approaching.”]

DCCCI

TRUE PIETY IS RARE

Prov. 20:6. Most men will proclaim every one his own goodness; but a faithful man who can find?

IF we were to apply to every individual of mankind for his own character, and to form our estimate of the world from the aggregate report, we should soon find, that self-knowledge is a rare attainment, and that men are but partial judges in their own cause. Hence it is, that the more intercourse we have with the world, the more we learn to distrust the professions of men, and to suspend our judgment of them, till we have more substantial ground whereon to form it. Some indeed, from seeing unsuspecting youth so often become a prey to designing men, and frankness and candour so often fall a sacrifice to deceit and treachery, have been led almost to expel charity from their hearts, and practically to reverse its most established laws. Charity would require that we believe every man honest, till we have evidence to the contrary: but they exempt no man from their suspicions, till a full experience of his integrity has constrained them to revere his character. But between the extremes of blind confidence and uncharitable suspicion, there is a medium, a cautious reserve, which prudence dictates, and religion approves. Such a reserve seems naturally, and as it were necessarily, to result from the observation in our text; an observation humiliating indeed to our proud nature, but justified by the actual state of mankind in all ages; and fitly calculated to guard us against an undue confidence either in ourselves or others.

This observation we shall confirm, by shewing,

I. That a profession of goodness is common—

The virtues of truth, honour, integrity, benevolence, friendship, liberality, are claimed by every one as the inherent and characteristic qualities of his heart: and even piety itself is, if men's opinions of themselves be true, an inmate of every bosom. “Goodness” is not only approved by all, but claimed as the property of all:

1. Of the profane—

[They do not indeed boast of their goodness; they will say, as hypocrites do, that ‘they are as good as their neighbours. It is true, they are not always quite so correct in their conduct as they might be; yea, they are sometimes betrayed into follies which they cannot justify: but they mean no harm; they injure nobody; they have good intentions, good dispositions, good hearts’——The fruit is bad, they acknowledge: but they will have it, that the tree is good.]

2. Of the moral—

[These have some more pretensions to goodness, it may be thought: but their estimate of their own character is scarcely less erroneous than the judgment of the profane. They are observant of many duties; and oftentimes are really eminent for honour and integrity in their dealings. But they omit from their catalogue of duties all that pertains to the spiritual life, and content themselves with a system of heathen ethics. Humility and contrition, faith and love, heavenly-mindedness, and communion with God, are scarcely considered by them as forming any part of true goodness: on the contrary, they allow themselves in self-esteem, self-preference, self-righteousness, and self-dependence; and, when full of these hateful dispositions, they will be “thanking God (with the Pharisee) that they are not as other men,” and will, in the habit of their minds at least, say to a repenting publican, “Stand off; come not near to me; I am holier than thou.” Of these St. Paul says, that “they have the form of godliness, but deny the power thereof.”]

3. Of the unsound professor—

[No one stands higher in his own conceit, than the person who has learned to talk about the Gospel, but not to practise its precepts. Because he has a zeal for some religious tenets, or for his own particular party in the Church, he is ready to conclude himself a true, perhaps an eminent, Christian; though his religion is seated altogether in his head, and has never descended to his heart. He never stops to inquire into his spirit and conduct, or to examine whether his tempers and dispositions accord with those of Christ. It is highly probable that he is guilty of very shameful neglect in many of his social and domestic duties: as a master he is proud and imperious; as a servant, inattentive and impatient of rebuke; as a parent, remiss in the instruction of his family; as a child, wilful and disobedient to his parents; in conversation, censorious; in dealings, unfaithful; and in the whole of his demeanor, conceited, forward, petulant, morose. Yet behold, this man, because he can talk about religion, arrogates to himself the title of good. Truly this man, whatever he may think of himself, belongs to “the generation that are pure in their own eyes, but are not washed from their filthiness.” He “professes to know God; but in works denies him.”]

But however common a profession of goodness may be, it must be confessed,

II. That a life suited to this profession is very rare—

We have seen what opinion we should form of the world, if we implicitly received men's record of themselves. But, if we apply to those who have been most conversant with the world, what shall we think of it then? Will they not tell us, that scarce any man is at all to be trusted, where his own interests are at stake: that it is scarcely possible to have dealings in any branch of commerce without meeting with numberless frauds and impositions: and that, if you rely on men's professions of disinterestedness and friendship, you will, as soon as you come into any great trouble, find yourself in the predicament of one, "who has a broken tooth, or a foot out of joint;" being not only deceived in your expectations of succour, but deriving great pain from your endeavours to obtain it?

Even in reference to these virtues to which all lay claim, and to be destitute of which they would account it the greatest disgrace, we may apply that humiliating question, "A faithful man who can find?" We must not indeed understand this question as importing that no such person can be found: but only, that there are very few. But we must not limit the question to mere heathen virtues: we must extend it to all the obligations, which, as Christians, we acknowledge. Who then is faithful,

1. To his principles?

[As Christians, we profess to lie low before God, to live by faith on his dear Son, to devote ourselves unreservedly to his service, and to seek our happiness in communion with God. But where are they whose lives correspond with these professions? Are they not so few, that they are even "signs and wonders upon earth?"——As for the generality, they will commend departed saints, but revile and persecute the living ones: they will applaud goodness in general, but decry and discourage it in its most exalted particulars.]

2. To his promises?

[In our baptism we all promised to "renounce the devil and all his works, the pomps and vanities of this wicked world, and all the sinful lusts of the flesh." When we were confirmed, we renewed these promises, and confirmed, by our own personal consent, the engagements that had been before made in our behalf. If we have attended at the Lord's Supper, we there also solemnly dedicated unto God ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and lively sacrifice to him; to be employed in his service, and, if he see fit, to be consumed for his glory. And how have we fulfilled these promises? Has the world been under our feet? Have all the desires of the flesh been mortified? Have the service and enjoyment of God been the one business of our lives?——]

3. To his convictions?

[There is no one so thoughtless or obdurate, but he has at some times a conviction arising in his mind, that he ought to repent, and turn to God, and to stand ready for death and judgment. Even the most advanced Christians feel many secret reproofs in their consciences, and are constrained to acknowledge, that they should be more meek and humble, more earnest and vigilant, more pure and spiritual. But who is faithful to his convictions? Who makes the advances that he ought, or the advances that he might? ——]

Let us LEARN then from this subject,

1. To be jealous over ourselves—

[If there be so much self-deceit in the world, who are we, that we should be altogether free from it? Have not we a great measure of self-love within us, as well as others? Are not we liable to be biassed in our judgment by passion and interest? and is not our heart, no less than the hearts of others, "deceitful above all things and desperately wicked?" Surely we have need to tremble, when we hear God saying to us, "There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, and the end thereof are the ways of death:" and again, "That which is highly esteemed among men, is an abomination in the sight of Godh." Let us then be on our guard against the overweening conceit of our own goodness: let us bring ourselves to the touchstone of God's word: and let us beg of God to "search and try us, to see if there be any wicked way in us; and to lead us in the way everlastingi." "Not he that commendeth himself is approved, but he whom the Lord commendethk."]

2. To seek the influences of God's grace—

[It is no easy matter to be a Christian indeed, "an Israelite without guile." We may be free from gross sin, and yet far enough from that state in which we ought to be. Our own efforts (so to speak) may suffice to "keep the outside clean;" but who, except God, can cleanse the heart? None, but he who formed the universe at first, can create our souls anew: nor unless "chosen and called by him," shall we ever be found "faithful" in the last dayl. Let us, under a full conviction of our own insufficiency, cry mightily unto him; that he would "put a new spirit within us, and cause us to keep his statutes and his commandments, to do themm." It is "he who must work all our works in us;" it is he alone that can make us "sincere and without offence until the day of Christ!"]

3. To value and trust in the righteousness of Christ—

[Who amongst us would dare to found his hopes of salvation on his own faithfulness? Who is not sensible that he has, in instances without number, been unfaithful to his principles, his promises, and his convictions? If we presumed to stand on that ground, God would say, "Out of thine own mouth will I judge thee, thou wicked servant." But, if we were not conscious of any unfaithfulness, we still could not venture to make that the foundation of our hopes; because we are so ignorant of ourselves, and so prone to self-deceit. We could even then only say with the Apostle, "I know nothing by myself, yet am I not hereby justified: but he that judgeth me is the Lord:" yes. we must then cast ourselves altogether on the mercy of God in Christ Jesus. Let this then be done by every one of

us: and, instead of proclaiming every one his own goodness, let us all humble ourselves before God in dust and ashes, and say with the Church of old, "In the Lord alone have I righteousness and strengthn."]

DCCCCII

NO ABSOLUTE PERFECTION HERE BELOW

Prov. 20:9. Who can say, I have made my heart clean, I am pure from my sin?

THE great characteristic of the Proverbs is wisdom; as that of the Psalms is piety. They were the result of much thought and observation: and the instructions contained in them were such as a father might be supposed to give to his children. Occasionally, however, according as his mind had been occupied, the tenour of his observations was varied; and they assumed, what may be rather called, a vein of piety. We suppose, that, when he penned the passage before us, he had been led into some unexpected discovery of the corruptions of his own heart; and from thence had been drawn to contemplate in a more extended view the general depravity of human nature, not merely as evinced by the ungodly, but as manifested by the remains of sin in the most eminent saints. However this may be, his observation is deep, and of singular importance. It is a challenge to the whole world, to find, if they can, a perfect man. Let us consider,

I. The truth that is here intimated—

There have been, and yet are, persons in the Church of Christ who boast of sinless perfection. But they are awfully deluded. In order to maintain their favourite system, they reduce exceedingly the requirements of God's law; they deny many things to be sin, which most assuredly are sin; and, after all, they shut their eyes against many things which they know to be sinful in their own hearts and lives, but which they will not acknowledge to be sinful, lest they should overturn the system which they are anxious to defend. But it is a certain truth, that no man is sinless in this world. And this appears,

1. From express declarations of Holy Writ—

[Both the Old Testament and the New concur to establish this truth. Solomon, at his dedication of the temple, expressly asserted, that "there was no man that lived and sinned nota:" and more strongly does he elsewhere affirm, that "there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth notb." To this agree also the testimonies of the inspired Apostles: St. John says, that "if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in usc;" and St. James says, that "in many things we offend alld." The whole Scripture uniformly attests this awful truth.]

2. From such instances as are undeniable—

[Among the most distinguished of God's people, were Abraham, and Moses, and Hezekiah, and Paul: yet all of these, even when they had arrived at the summit of human excellence, fell into sin. Abraham, purely through fear, twice denied his own wife, and thereby subjected her and others to temptations, which might have issued in the everlasting destruction of their souls. Moses, the meekest man upon the face of the earth, gave way to wrath, whereby he provoked God to exclude him from the earthly Canaan. Hezekiah, than whom no man upon the whole ever more honoured God, yet yielded to pride and creature-confidence, when he shewed all his treasures to the ambassadors of the king of Babylon. And Paul, after he had preached for twenty years, and attained an eminence in the divine life, not inferior to that of any of the children of men, was so carried away by his own spirit under a sudden trial and temptation, that he reviled God's High Priest, which he himself acknowledged to be a violation of an express command. Who then, after viewing these, will "say, that he is pure from sin?"]

3. From the confessions of God's most eminent saints—

[Job, previous to his trials, was pronounced by God "a perfect man;" yet, after his trials, confessed, "Behold, I am vile!" Paul occupies a whole chapter in his epistle to the Romans in describing the internal conflicts of his mind; sin and grace mutually striving to overpower each other, and disabling him from fully vanquishing the one, or carrying into effect the dictates of the other. "In his flesh," he says, "dwelt no good thing:" but there was, notwithstanding all the attainments of his renewed mind, "a law in his members warring against the law of his mind, and bringing him into captivity to the law of sin which was in his members." Will any other then of the children of men say, "I am pure from all sin?" From the dominion of sin every saint may affirm that he is freed; yea, and from the wilful and allowed indulgence of any. David justly appeals to God respecting his perfect freedom from sin, as to any intention and purpose to commit it; as Job also does respecting the extinction of its reigning power: "Thou knowest, that I am not wickedf." But, if any man should go farther, and say, that sin was not still living within him, and operating occasionally to the polluting of his soul, he must stand self-convicted, and self-condemned; just as Job has said, "If I justify myself, mine own mouth shall condemn me: if I say, I am perfect, it shall also prove me perverseg."]

Such being the state of our fallen nature, it becomes us to consider,

II. The improvement we should make of it—

This truth should never be lost sight of for one moment: it should regulate every feeling of the heart: it should never cease to call forth and to augment,

1. Our humiliation—

[We are sinful creatures at the best; and are in the situation of wretched captives, who, having a dead body fastened to them, were compelled to drag it about, till they themselves were destroyed by its pestilential vapoursh——This, it must be acknowledged, is a most humiliating truth, and not unfittedly expressed in the general Confession of our Liturgy, “There is no health in us.” Hence, when we are taught to “lothe ourselves for our iniquities and our abominations,” we must remember that it is not for the actions only that are long since past, but for the taint also which they have left behind them, that this self-abasement is necessary. So Job thought, and so Isaiah, and so Paul: and, if we know ourselves aright, we shall find no terms more suited to express our real state, than those in which the prophet Isaiah described the Jews of his day; “The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint: from the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in us, but wounds, and bruises, and putrifying sores.”]

2. Our watchfulness—

[A magazine wherein there was a large store of combustible matter that might produce extensive injury by an explosion, would be guarded with all possible care: and can any care be too great, when we consider how many thousand things there are on every side ready to kindle a destructive flame in our hearts, and how incessantly our great adversary is striving to make use of them for our destruction? We know not what a day or an hour may bring forth. We may be as far from thinking of evil as at any moment of our lives, and yet evil may arise from some unexpected quarter, and produce upon us the most painful consequences. We are never safe for one moment, but whilst we are upheld in the arms of our Almighty Friend. We should therefore be continually crying to him, “Hold up my goings in thy paths, that my footsteps slip not!” at the same time that we should be striving continually to “put off the old man, and to put on the new.” This is the advice given us by our Lord himself; “Watch, and pray, that ye enter not into temptation:” for however “willing the spirit be” to approve itself to God, “the flesh is weak.”]

3. Our gratitude—

[What a miracle of mercy is it, that, with so much corruption about us, we are preserved in any measure from dishonouring our holy profession! The wonder is not that any fall, but that any are “kept from falling.” And to whom is it owing that any of us are enabled to maintain our steadfastness in the divine life? is it to ourselves? No: Peter shews us, what we should soon be, if left to ourselves: Satan would soon “sift us all as wheat,” if our blessed Saviour did not intercede for us, and give us fresh supplies of grace and strength. Let us then be sensible of our great and unbounded obligations to Him, who has said, that “he keepeth the feet of his saints.” Let us bear in mind to whom it is owing, that, notwithstanding the bush is ever burning, it is yet unconsumed: and let us give all the glory of our stability to God, saying with David, “My foot standeth in an even place; in the congregations will I bless the Lord.”]

4. Our love to Christ—

[Notwithstanding in ourselves we are so corrupt, in Christ we are accepted, and beloved of the Lord. Washed in his blood, and clothed in his righteousness, we are presented unto the Father “without spot or wrinkle, or any such thing; yea, holy, and without blemish.” O! how “precious” ought this Saviour to be to all our souls! How continually should we go to him, and plunge beneath “the fountain of his blood, which was opened for sin and for uncleanness,” and which is able to “cleanse us from all sin!” How should we delight ourselves in him, and “cleave to him,” and “glory in him,” and devote ourselves to him! Yes, Brethren, this is the tribute which we owe to our blessed Lord. We must “not continue in sin, that grace may abound,” but turn from sin because grace has abounded; and, “because He has bought us with the inestimable price of his own blood, we should strive to glorify him with our bodies and our spirits, which are his.”]

DCCCIII

DESIRE IS NOTHING WITHOUT LABOUR

Prov. 21:25. The desire of the slothful killeth him; for his hands refuse to labour.

IT is the duty of a minister to “comfort the Lord’s people,” and on no account to “make the heart of the righteous sad.” Our blessed Lord “brake not the bruised reed, nor quenched the smoking flax:” and in this respect all who minister in his name must follow his example, never “despising the day of small things,” but “carrying the lambs in their bosom, and gently leading them that are with young.” But there are occasions whereon they “must change their voice, especially when they stand in doubt of any,” or judge it necessary to give a salutary warning to their flocks. Now there is an error against which I would wish affectionately to guard you, and that is, the laying of an undue stress upon good desires without pressing forward for the attainment of the object desired. To this line of instruction I am led by the passage before us; from which I will take occasion,

I. To shew you the influence of good desires.

It is plain that, in Solomon's opinion, good desires, which when duly cherished and improved, will be productive of the happiest effects, may through sloth and indolence issue in self-deception and ruin. That we may have a just view of this important subject, I will mark the influence of good desires,

1. In the bosoms of the diligent—

[This, though not expressly mentioned, is evidently implied, since it is in the slothful only that good desires can have a fatal issue. Now we need only see how desire operates in diligent men, whatever their vocation be, whether in trade, or agriculture, or science; and that will shew us how it will operate in reference to religion: it will stimulate men to such exertions as are necessary to the acquisition of the object desired—For the attainment of heaven, we must exert ourselves in away of "repentance towards God, and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ:" and, if our desires after heaven be sincere, they will render us earnest and laborious in the pursuit of these, and never suffer us to pause till we have actually attained them—Thus accompanied with diligence, they will bring us to the enjoyment of peace and holiness and glory—]

2. In the bosoms of the slothful—

[In them good desires may justly be said to occasion death. They do so indirectly, because they are not productive of suitable exertions. It is said, "The slothful man roasteth not that which he took in huntingb." And this is precisely the case with those whose conduct we are considering. They have, in consequence of their good desires, pursued and obtained the knowledge of religious truth; but in consequence of their sloth they have neglected to follow their advantages, and to improve their attainments for the benefit of their souls. Hence "their vineyard is overgrown with thorns, and the stone wall thereof is fallen down; yea, and poverty comes upon them (gradually) like one that travelleth, and want (irresistibly) like an armed man:" so true is that declaration of Solomon, "He that is slothful in his work is brother to him that is a great wasterd."

But this is by no means the full sense of our text. It is not in an indirect way only that in the slothful man good desires operate to the production of death: no; they have a direct influence towards the destruction of his soul. The man in whose bosom good desires arise, is conscious of them; and takes occasion from them to entertain a good opinion of his state before God. He puts them in the place of good attainments; and, because he hopes that they shall at some future period accomplish their proper work, he overlooks the necessity of immediately experiencing that work, and conceives, that God will, if I may so speak, accept the will for the deed. To countenance this delusion, he applies to himself such promises as these; "The Lord will fulfil the desire of them that fear him:" "The desire of the righteous shall be grantedf." He forgets that the end is connected with the means; and that, however we may acknowledge our obligations to God for ability to will what is good, we can have no hope of acceptance with him, unless we exert ourselves with all diligence to do it, and to "work out our salvation with fear and tremblingg." Hence he is a living witness of that melancholy fact, "The soul of the sluggard desireth, and hath nothing, whilst the soul of the diligent is made fath." Yes, to all eternity will he be a monument of that mysterious truth. "The desire of the slothful killeth him."]

Having marked the operation of good desires, I now proceed,

II. To offer some salutary counsel in relation to them—

Doubtless good desires must take the lead, yea, and must move us, in the whole of our Christian course: but, as "faith itself is dead without works," so are good desires of no value any farther than they are productive of holy lives. I say then, if God have given to any of you good desires, see to it that those desires be,

1. Abiding—

[There are few persons so depraved but they have felt on some particular occasion the risings of good desire. But to what purpose are such emotions in the soul, if they "pass away like the morning cloud, or as the early dew" To know what is good, and not to do it, involves us in the heavier guiltk, and will prove a ground of heavier condemnation to the soul; as God has said, "This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men have loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds are evil." If then you would derive real benefit from the desires which God has mercifully implanted in you, see that they take root within you, and become living and active principles in your souls.]

2. Operative—

[You desire to obtain salvation. It is well: but to what purpose will this desire be, if it do not stimulate you to action? Will a desire of knowledge render any one a philosopher, if he neglect his studies? Will a desire of a harvest enrich a man, if he neglect to cultivate his land? How then can you hope that a desire of heaven will ever bring you thither, if you neglect the concerns of your souls? You must read the Holy Scriptures with meditation and prayer: you must search out your sins, and mourn over them before God: you must get views of Christ as the only Saviour of the world, and must go to him continually that you may receive out of his fulness the grace that shall be sufficient for you. You must be gaining an increasing victory over the world, and the flesh, and the devil, and be growing more and more like unto your God and Saviour in righteousness and true holiness. You must be living more for God in the midst of this corrupt world, and be bringing glory to his name by your exertions in his sacred cause. It is in this way that your good desires must work, if you would have them productive of any saving benefit to your souls. The stony-ground hearers, whose desires

were only temporary, perished, notwithstanding the fair appearances which for a season they assumed; as did the thorny-ground hearers also, because they “brought forth no fruit to perfection.” And you also must not only begin well, but “endure unto the end,” and “be faithful unto death,” if ever you would be saved in the great day of the Lord Jesus. The “slothful,” be they who they may, shall be condemned in that day as “wickedm.”]

3. Supreme—

[“You cannot serve God and mammon.” The world may have your hands; but God must have your heart, your whole heartn. He will not accept a divided hearto. “The world must become crucified to you, and you unto the worldp.” “Your affections must be set on things above, and not on things belowq:” and “your conversation must be altogether in heavenr.” “There must be nothing either in heaven or earth that you desire besides Gods.”

You must resemble David, who says, “This one thing have I desiredt” and St. Paul, who says, “This one thing I dou.” Then shall God fully answer you in the desires of your heart, and your efforts be crowned with glorious success.]

DCCCIV

THE FEAR OF GOD ALL THE DAY

Prov. 23:17, 18. Be thou in the fear of the Lord all the day long: for surely there is an end; and thine expectation shall not be cut off.

THE men of this world, feeling but little restraint from the voice of conscience or the fear of God, gratify, each in his own way, their natural inclinations; and therefore they appear happy: and the people of God, especially under troubles and persecutions for righteousness sake, are almost ready to look upon them with an eye of envy: and, if this world only were considered, and temporal enjoyments were the proper standard of happiness, perhaps they might on the whole be congratulated as possessing a happy and an enviable lota. But the righteous, under whatever disadvantages they may lie, have no just cause to “envy sinners;” seeing that nothing but disappointment awaits the children of this world; whilst the servants of God, who look forward to heavenly bliss, can never be disappointed of their hope. On this assurance the exhortation in my text is founded; and for the fuller elucidation of the subject, I will set before you,

I. The duty inculcated—

“The fear of the Lord” is, especially in the Old Testament, a common expression, comprehending in its import the whole of practical religion. And when we are bidden to live under its influence “all the day long,” we must understand the precept as enjoining us to maintain, throughout the whole course of our lives,

1. A sense of love to God, as our Father—

[Jehovah, as reconciled to us through the Son of his love, stands in the relation of a Father to us; for all, the very instant they believe in Christ, have “the privilege of becoming the Sons of Godb.” Till we come to God by Christ, we have no filial fear of him in our hearts. A slavish fear of him we may have; but we neither have, nor can have, “a Spirit of adoption, emboldening us to call him Father:” for “the Holy Spirit can never bear witness with our spirit, that we are the Lord’sc,” till we are made his by faith in Christ Jesusd. But when we are become his children, then we must go in and out before him with holy confidence, exactly as duteous children before a loving parent——To walk thus before him was the perfection of Abraham’s attainmentse; and it is that which is held forth to us also as the summit of a Christian’s duty and privilegef——]

2. A sense of duty to him, as our Master—

[This is united with the former by God himself: “A son honoureth his father, and a servant his master: if, then, I be a father, where is mine honour? and if I be a master, where is my fearg” Now, what is the conduct of a good servant? When he rises in the morning, he asks himself, ‘What have I to do for my master? and through every part of the day, even to the close of it, the same question recurs to his mind, and calls forth suitable exertions for the discharge of the duties required of him. And if, when engaged in executing his master’s commands, he were solicited by any one to embark in some other pursuit, he would immediately reply, as our blessed Saviour did, “I must be about my Father’s business:” nor could any consideration tempt him to neglect his duty. He would, under all circumstances, regard his master’s work as claiming a just preference at his hands, and his master’s approbation as that which, above all, he was anxious to obtain. Let it be thus, then, with you in every situation of life; and make it your one business to approve yourselves good servants of Jesus Christ.]

3. A sense of responsibility to him as our Judge—

[Never are you to lose a sense of this. It is quite a mistake to call this legal. St. Paul, and all the Apostles, acted with a direct reference to the future judgment; and sought so to demean themselves that they might welcome the second coming of their Lord, and stand with boldness before him at that awful dayh. This will secure the obedience of the heart: for in that day shall “the secrets of men’s hearts be disclosed,” and, “their inmost counsels be made manifest:” and, to secure his approbation then, you must be

upright, and without any allowed guile. Let every place then bear, as it were, this inscription, "Thou, God, seest me;" and take heed to your thoughts, no less than to your actions, that so you may be found "sincere and without offence until the day of Christi.]" And, lest such a constant attention to duty should appear irksome to you, let me shew you,

II. The encouragement given us to the performance of it—

The whole Scripture declares, that, "verily, there is a reward for the righteous;" and this, I conceive, is the true import of my text. The ungodly expect to find happiness in their ways of sin; but they pursue a phantom, and embrace a shadow. But not so they who fear the Lord: they shall "have a sure reward;" as God hath said, "The hope of the righteous shall be gladness; but the expectation of the wicked shall perish." What, then, my Brethren, do ye expect? Do you expect pardon of sin?

[This shall surely be accorded to you: for "in the fear of the Lord there is strong confidence; and his children shall have a place of refuge." Yes, verily, however numerous your sins may have been, "they shall all be blotted out, even as a morning cloud." Will God cast out one who comes to him in his Son's name? Will he spurn from his footstool one humble suppliant? No: "to this man will he look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and that trembleth at his word;" and "to him will he give beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness."]

Peace of conscience?

[This also shall you possess. Hear what David says: "What man is he that feareth the Lord? Him shall the Lord teach in the way that he shall choose; and his soul shall dwell at ease." Peace is the legacy which Jesus has bequeathed to all his redeemed people, saying, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give unto you." "To the wicked there is no peace: "but for you is there "a peace that passeth all understanding."]

Strength for duty?

[Doubtless you may have many difficulties to encounter: but God himself promises that "your strength shall be according to your day." His very covenant with his people is, "He will put his fear in their hearts, that they shall not depart from him." This is a principle which cannot but operate, and cannot but be effectual for the mortification of all sin, and for the performance of all duty. See its operation in the Apostle Paul. Under trials as severe as man could well be called to endure, he said, "I know that this shall turn to my salvation, through your prayer, and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and my hope, that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but that with all boldness, as always, so now also, Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life or by death." Thus you may encounter all difficulties without fear; and, knowing in whom you have believed, may assure yourselves that no enemy whatever shall be able to prevail against you.]

Comfort in death?

[This also is secured to you: "Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright; for the end of that man is peace." I say not that you shall have joy: for there may be in the very nature of your disorder much to prevent that buoyancy of mind which is a necessary attendant on joy: but peace shall assuredly be your portion, if only you trust in God: for God has said, "I will keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on me, because he trusteth in me."]

Glory in eternity?

[This also shall be yours. Your expectations cannot be too enlarged, if you walk in the fear of God as you are here enjoined: "I know the thoughts that I think towards you, saith the Lord; thoughts of good, and not of evil, to give you an expected end." And in this you differ widely from the sinner, who casts off the fear of God. To persons of this latter description God says, "What fruit had ye then of those things whereof ye are now ashamed? for the end of those things is death. But now, being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness and your end everlasting life."

Tell me now, Brethren, whether ye have not encouragement to fear the Lord?——and whether there be any sinner in the universe whose portion can be compared with yours?——]

APPLICATION—

[As for you who fear not God, whatever ye may possess of this world, or whatever gratifications ye may enjoy, ye have a miserable portion indeed: and though ye abounded with every thing, like the Rich Man in the Gospel, yet were a pious Lazarus, that was destitute of all things, or even a martyr at the stake, in a preferable state to yours: and well may ye envy the poorest, the meanest saint on earth. Where will ye look for pardon, for peace, for strength, for comfort in a dying hour, and for glory in eternity? Think ye of your misery ere it be too late; and beg of God to implant in your hearts that fear of his name, which is the certain and the only prelude to his final approbation.]

DCCCCV

BUYING THE TRUTH

Prov. 23:23. Buy the truth; and sell it not.

THE rich variety of metaphors contained in the Holy Scriptures gives an endless diversity to the most simple truths: and the

commonness of those metaphors brings home to our minds the deepest truths, with a clearness that cannot be misinterpreted, and a force that cannot be withstood. The idea of buying and selling is familiar to every mind; so familiar, that many would be offended at the application of it to the concerns of the soul. But we should not affect a squeamishness which the Inspired Writers did not feel; except, indeed, in reference to subjects which, though not offensive to Jewish ears, the refinement of modern ages has justly deemed indelicate. Permit me then, without offence, to shew you,

I. What it is that is here commended to us—

Truth, abstractedly considered, is of great value; and the acquisition of it in science and philosophy is counted worthy of the most laborious researches. In astronomy, for instance, the ascertaining of the motion and mutual relation of the heavenly bodies is justly regarded as a rich recompence for a whole life of labour. But this is not the truth of which my text speaks: for that, once gained, remains with us: whereas the truth which is here commended to us may be sold as well as bought.

“The truth” here referred to is the Gospel—

[The Gospel was revealed to Abraham, as well as unto us; and it was made yet more fully known to Moses and the Israelites; though, from their “not mixing faith with it, it did not profit them.” On us it shines in its meridian splendour: it exhibits to us a Saviour, even, our incarnate God, living and dying for sinful men; and marks our path to heaven so plainly, that “a way-faring man, though a fool, cannot err therein”——]

This truth is of incalculable importance to every child of man—

[There is much truth which the philosopher alone can appreciate or understand. But “the truth, as it is in Jesus,” may be understood by all. It is not by strength of intellect that its wonders are discerned, but by a spiritual perception, which God alone can impart; and which he often does impart to “babes and sucklings, whilst he withholds it from the wise and prudentb.” And to every human being it is of equal importance: none can be saved without it, and by it every creature in the universe may be saved. Our blessed Lord has assured us of this: “Ye shall know the truth; and the truth shall make you freec.” Nothing but that will impart freedom: but that will make us free indeed; delivering us from all the guilt we have ever contracted, and from all the bondage under which we have groaned. Let us only “receive the truth in the love of it,” and we shall be brought by it into the “glorious liberty of the children of God.”]

This view of the truth may prepare us for,

II. The advice given us in relation to it—

“Buy the truth”—

[It must be purchased: freely as it is given, I say again, it must be purchased: it must be bought with, labour, and with the sacrifice of every thing that can stand in competition with it. The fruits of the earth, though given us entirely by God through the genial influence of the heavens, must be sought and laboured for: nor can we hope to obtain “the fruits of the Spirit” without similar exertions. Solomon tells us, that, notwithstanding it is “the Lord who giveth knowledge,” “we must cry after it, and lift up our voice for it, and seek it as silver, and search for it as for hid treasures: and that then only can we understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of Godd.”]

Nor is it less necessary that we be ready to part with all earthly interests in order to secure it. Our Lord compares the Gospel salvation to “a treasure hid in a field,” and to “a pearl of great price: which whosoever finds, should go and sell all that he has and purchase ite.” If, like the Rich Youth in the Gospel, we refuse to part with all, we never can possess the salvation of God. St. Paul is our pattern in this respect. He possessed more of what was really valuable than any unconverted man ever did before him: but “what things were gain to me,” says he, “those I counted loss for Christ: yea, doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord.” Nor does he give this as a sentiment which he was ready to maintain, but as one which he had already carried into effect: “for whom,” adds he, “I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung that I may win Christf.” And it is worthy of observation, that amongst the things which he despised thus, are to be reckoned, not his temporal interests only, but his own carnal wisdom and his legal righteousnessg which, to a man of Pharisaic habits, are far more dear than all the world besides. After his example, then, we must renounce all that is pleasing to flesh and blood, and take “Christ for our Wisdom, our Righteousness, our Sanctification, and our complete Redemption.”]

2. “Sell it not”—

[We shall be continually tempted to part with it: but we must “hold fast what we have, that no man may take our crown.” We must “never, after having once put our hand to the plough, look back again.” In seasons of prosperity we may be lulled asleep; and Satan may rob us of our prize. And in times of persecution we may be intimidated, and draw back through fear. But “nothing,” however terrible, “should move us.” We should “be ready, not only to be bound, but also to die, at any time, and in any manner, for the name of the Lord Jesus.” If called to suffer for his sake, we must “rejoice that we are counted worthy” of so high an honour: yea, we must even “leap for joy,” because we are thereby rendered conformable to Christ, and because “God is glorified in us.” We must “be faithful unto death, if ever we would obtain a crown of life.”]

ADDRESS—

1. Examine whether you have “the truth” set before you—

[In purchasing any commodity, you endeavour to ascertain that it is good and genuine. And so must you do in relation to the Gospel.

You must not take any thing for granted. You have a touchstone, by which you must try whatever is offered to you for sale, St. Paul speaks of a false Gospel, as finding an extensive currency in the Galatian Church; and such a Gospel is but too often commended to us at this day. Examine, then, what ye hear; and bring it all to the test of God's blessed word. The salvation which we offer you, is that which Christ purchased for us on the cross; a salvation altogether by grace and through faith Christ. It is that, and that only, that we call on you to buy. And our counsel is that which is given to every one of you by our Lord himself: "I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eye-salve, that thou mayest see." Ascertain, I say, that this is the very truth of God; and then hesitate not to buy it, though at the price of all that you possess.]

2. Inquire whether any who have bought it ever repented of their purchase—

[I know, indeed, that you may find stony-ground hearers in every place where the Gospel is preached; yea, and many a Demas too. But the former are persons who never had the root of grace within them; and the latter carry back with them into the world a self-condemning conscience, that will embitter their whole lives. Could you ask of Moses, whether he now regrets, or ever did regret, the having sacrificed all the treasures of Egypt for that apparently worthless portion, the reproach of Christ; or, could you consult the myriads who "came out of great tribulation," and who "loved not their lives unto death;" would you find one amongst them all that thought he had ever paid too dear for this heavenly prize? No: there is no such thought in heaven; nor is there any such feeling upon earth amongst the faithful followers of the Lamb. Be not ye afraid, then, to pay the price demanded of you: for, as "the gain of the whole world would be a poor matter in exchange for the soul;" so the sacrifice of life itself will be found to have been unworthy of a thought, when the glory purchased by it shall have been accorded to you.]

3. Lose not the opportunity that is now afforded you—

[What would millions that are now in the eternal world give, if they could have but one more offer of that salvation which they once despised? And soon you yourselves also will be filled with bitter regret, if you close not with the offer now made to you——Say not that you are poor, and cannot pay the price: for you are invited "to buy it without money and without pricek". O that I might but prevail upon you, ere it be too late! Refuse not, with Herod, to give up your Herodias; nor, with Agrippa, to become altogether Christians: but now forsake all for Christ; and expect, both in this world and the next, a rich and glorious equivalentl.]

DCCCVI

THE DUTY OF GIVING THE HEART TO GOD

Prov. 23:26. My Son, give me thy heart.

THIS address, however it may be considered in some respect as delivered by Solomon to his son, must certainly be understood as proceeding from Him who is Wisdom in the abstract, Wisdom personified, even from the Lord Jesus Christ: and as directed generally to all the children of men, but especially to those who regard him as their Sovereign Lord. And though the more immediate object of the address may seem scarcely suited to this view of it, (because those who are possessed even of incipient piety may seem less likely to fall into the snare which is there spoken of,) yet the caution is necessary for youth of all descriptions; and, as a general lesson, it teaches us, that there is no snare whatever into which we may not fall, if our hearts be not given up to God; and that the only sure way of being kept from sin of every kind, is, to give the heart to God.

Taking the words then as addressed by the Lord Jesus Christ to all who acknowledge his paternal authority, we will proceed to mark the extent and reasonableness of this command.

I. The extent of it—

To give our heart to God, implies that we give him,

1. The affections of the soul—

[These should all center in him, and in him alone. Him we should desire as our supreme good, and in him should we delight as our chief joy——should be able to say with David, "Whom have I in heaven but Thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire besides thee,"]

2. The confidence of the mind—

[If there be any thing besides God in the whole universe, on which we rely, we do not really give our heart to him. To trust, though in ever so small a degree, in an arm of flesh, argues a departure of heart from God. We should confide altogether in his wisdom to guide, and his power to uphold us, in his goodness to supply our wants, and his truth to fulfil to us the promises of his word. We should "trust in him with all our heart, and not lean either to our own understanding" or strength: we should consider him as alone able to help us, and as all-sufficient for our utmost necessities.]

3. The service of the life—

[Without this, all else is vain. Obedience is the certain fruit of love to God; yea, it is altogether identified with it: "This is the love of God, that ye keep his commandments." To the man that has given his heart to God, no commandment can be grievous.]

The extent of the command being ascertained, we proceed to shew,

II. The reasonableness of it—

To surrender up our whole selves to God, is called by St. Paul, "a reasonable service." And reasonable indeed it is;

1. Because of his right over us as our Creator—

[God "made all things for himself: all that we are, and all that we have, was given us by him, to be improved for his glory. How then can we with propriety alienate any thing from him? A potter feels himself entitled to the use of the vessel which his own hands have made: and has not God a right to all the services that we can render him? Of all that have truly given their hearts to God, it may be said, "No man liveth to himself; and no man dieth unto himself: but whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore or die, we are the Lord'sh."]

2. Because of his mercies towards us, as our Redeemer—

[The Lord Jesus Christ has "redeemed us to God by his own blood;" and by this has acquired a new right over us. To this effect the Apostle says, "Ye are not your own; ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God with your bodies and your spirits, which are his." And in another place he gives this as the duty of every man according to the dictates of his most deliberate judgment: "The love of Christ constraineth us, because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead; and that he died for all, that they who live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him who died for them, and rose againk." Was he mistaken in his judgment? and are we at liberty to alienate from him what he has purchased at so great a price?]

3. Because of his relation to us, as our Father—

[If we profess to have been born again, and begotten to God by his word and Spirit, then are we yet further bound to him by the relation he sustains towards us: "What manner of love is this, wherewith the Father hath loved us, that we should be called the sons of God!" Can we have learned to cry, "Abba, Father!" and doubt whether the giving of our hearts to him be a reasonable service? The utmost then we can do to serve and honour him is no more than our bounden duty.]

4. Because of the utter worthlessness of all his competitors—

[What is there worthy to be compared with him? The whole creation is but as "a broken cistern that can hold no water." Shall we then, "for any thing that is in it, forsake the Fountain of living waters?" Survey the choicest blessings that the world affords; and they are all "vanity and vexation of spirit." Are these then to stand in competition with him who is the unfailing and only source of all blessedness? The more we see the vanity of all created good, the more we shall see the reasonableness of giving our hearts to God alone. We must not only not love our father or mother more than him, but must "hate every earthly relative, yea, and our own lives also, in comparison of him!"]

ADDRESS—

1. In a way of affectionate invitation—

[In this view we may take the words of our text, even as an invitation to us from the Lord Jesus Christ to set our affections on him alone. And how astonishing is it that he will accept such hearts as ours! If we of ourselves had presumed to offer them to him, how justly might he have rejected and despised the offering! Yet behold, he solicits it at our hands! And what can such an offering add to him? Does he need any thing from us? or can we add any thing to him? O then admire and adore this astonishing condescension; and let him not woo your souls in vain.]

2. In a way of authoritative injunction—

[This command of Almighty God is not to be trifled with. Let none presume to withstand it, or to delay their obedience to it: for if we obey it not, we never can behold his face in peace. Attend to it then; and see that ye obey it in truth. Give not to your God and Saviour a divided heart; for such an offering he will not accept: but give yourselves wholly to him; and so shall that promise be fulfilled to you; "I will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty."]

DCCCVII

THE FOLLY OF VAIN EXCUSES

Prov. 24:11, 12. If thou forbear to deliver them that are drawn unto death, and those that are ready to be slain; if thou sayest, Behold, we knew it not; doth not he that pondereth the heart consider it? and he that keepeth thy soul, doth not he know it? And shall not he render to every man according to his works?

OFFICIAL influence is a valuable talent: but to use it aright is often very difficult, and painful to the feelings. Hence those who are possessed of it, are apt to shrink back, when the exercise of it is likely to involve them in much trouble; and they will connive at abuses, which they cannot easily prevent. For such connivance they have excuses ever ready at hand; "They were not aware of the circumstances;" or, "They thought their interposition would be to no purpose." But power and responsibility are inseparable: and the magistrate who neglects his duty, must give an account of such neglect to God, and have his excuses weighed in the balance of the sanctuary. To succour the needy, and to relieve the oppressed, is a sacred duty, which no man can neglect, but at the peril of his soul: and to deceive ourselves with vain excuses is folly in the extreme.

We shall not however limit our views of this subject to magistrates, but shall extend them generally to all those excuses which men make for their neglect of acknowledged duties; and shall consider,

I. The excuses by which men deceive their own souls—

None are so hardy as to deny their obligation to serve God: yet the great mass of mankind will plead excuses for their neglect,

1. Of religious duties—

["They have not time to attend to their spiritual concerns." Not time? For what then is their time given them? and what other business have they in comparison of this? But, if they would speak the truth, is not their disregard of religion to be traced rather to their want of inclination to spiritual things—their want of faith in the divine records—their want of all fear of God. and all concern about their souls?—How vain then their plea of want of time, when their neglect arises from a total alienation of their hearts from God!]

2. Of moral duties—

[The duties of sympathy, of compassion, of activity in succouring the distressed, are mentioned in our text. Now for the neglect of these duties, such as the visiting of the sick, the instructing of the ignorant, the relieving of the needy, and the comforting of the afflicted, men will plead ignorance, inadvertence, forgetfulness, inability. But is there not a great degree of criminality attaching to us, if we do not search out the poor and afflicted, on purpose to alleviate their distresses?—and is not the true cause of our supineness, that we have no love to our fellow-creatures, no zeal for God, no gratitude for redeeming love?—It is in vain to think that our neglects are venial under any circumstances, and more especially when they originate in cowardice, and sloth, and selfishness.]

Seeing then that such excuses are vain. let us mark,

II. The folly of resting in them—

Were there no God to call us into judgment, our delusions would be of less consequence: but there is a God by whom all our excuses will be weighed; and he,

1. Will judge with truth—

[He looketh not at the outward appearance: "He searcheth the heart and tries the reins," and is privy to the most secret workings of our minds. We may easily deceive ourselves; but him we cannot deceive. See how forcible is the appeal made to us in our text. Can we have any doubt whether he sees our conduct, or forms a correct estimate of it? Let us remember, that "he will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and make manifest the counsels of the heart:" and that, whatever our judgment be, his will be according to truth.]

2. Will award with equity—

[Here again the appeal is strong, and carries conviction with it. We are sure that "God will judge the world in righteousness," and "give to every man according to his works. "Whatsoever we have sowed, that shall we also reap: if we have sowed to the flesh, we shall of the flesh reap corruption; but if we have sowed to the Spirit, we shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting."]

Let this subject TEACH us,

1. To be jealous over ourselves with a godly jealousy—

[We are apt to think that conscience is a safe guide, and that we may rest satisfied with its testimony. But conscience is corrupted by the Fall, as well as all the other faculties of the soul. It is blinded, bribed, partial, and in many instances "seared as with an hot iron." Hence it is that "every man's way is right in his own eyes." Paul thought he ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus; and was applauded by his own conscience, whilst he was sinning against God with all his might. Be not therefore satisfied merely because you feel no condemnation in your own minds; but beg of God to enlighten your conscience, that it may guide you aright, and keep you from those delusions which would involve you in everlasting ruin.]

2. To live in daily expectation of the future judgment—

[Ask yourselves, not merely, What do I think of this or that conduct? but, What would God say to it, if I were instantly summoned to his tribunal? Such a question as this would often lead you to a very different estimate of yourselves from that which you have formed; and the consideration of his recording every thing in order to a future judgment would tend to keep you vigilant in all your

conduct. Walk then as in his sight, and be satisfied with nothing which you are not well assured will satisfy him.]

DCCCCVIII

THE SLUGGARD'S VINEYARD

Prov. 24:30–34. I went by the field of the slothful, and by the vineyard of the man void of understanding: and, lo, it was all grown over with thorns, and nettles had covered the face thereof, and the stone wall thereof was broken down. Then I saw, and considered it well: I looked upon it, and received instruction. Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep; so shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth, and thy want as an armed man.

IF we have an observant eye, and a mind open to receive instruction, there is not any thing in the creation which may not afford us some useful lessons. We may learn as much from what we see, as what we hear: and as much from what is evil, as from what is good. Indeed it is a mark of true wisdom to exact a tribute, as it were, from every thing which comes within our reach, and to suffer nothing to pass without contributing its quota to our stock of useful knowledge. Solomon has set us a good example in this respect: he saw a vineyard that had been shamefully neglected: and instead of turning away from it, as incapable of affording either pleasure or profit to his mind, he set himself to “consider it well, and to derive instruction from it.” Surely then we cannot be unprofitably employed while we consider,

I. The sight which he observed—

It is not uncommon to see ground ill cultivated, or business neglected; but as persons reprehensible for inattention to their worldly concerns are comparatively few, we apprehend that the remedying of the evils arising from it comes rather within the province of private admonition than of public discussion. We shall therefore take occasion from the text to speak of a vineyard which all ought to cultivate, but which all are too prone to neglect. This vineyard is the soul; which, with the generality, lies,

1. Uncultivated—

[A man possessed of a common vineyard, ought to procure good plants for it, and to water it regularly, and to weed it carefully, in order that it may yield him its fruits of increase. And we have the same labour to perform for our souls. We ought to get it filled with the choicest graces from heaven. We should water it with prayers and tears, and seek to have it nourished with the influences of the Holy Ghost, which when duly sought, will descend on it as the dew, and distil upon it as rain upon the new-mown grass. We should be daily occupied in pulling up the thorns and nettles that spontaneously rise, and which, if suffered to remain, will materially impede the growth of every good plant. But is there not reason to fear that the greater part of us have shewn ourselves “slothful, and void of understanding? Have we not been shamefully remiss in our attention to these great concerns? Have not the fruits produced by us, been “grapes of Sodom, and clusters of Gomorrah?” Have not unbelief and impenitence, pride and anger, envy and malice, covetousness and impurity, with ten thousand other noxious weeds, been suffered to spring up and grow within us, till they have even “covered the face of the ground?” Alas! the proofs of spiritual sloth are but too evident in us all.]

2. Unprotected—

[Whatever care a man should take of his vineyard, he would lose his labour, if he should forget to fence it in; “the wild beast of the field would soon root it up and devour it.” What then can be expected to spring up in our souls, when they are left at the mercy of every enemy that chooses to tread them down? We should long since have fortified them with holy purposes and resolutions. These, it is true, can avail nothing, if made in our own strength; but, if made in reliance upon God, they will be no slight barrier against the invading foe. Joshuab, Davidc, Nehemiahd, Paule, found them useful and effectual for their preservation. We should also have had our souls strengthened by the grace of Christ. That would have proved “sufficient for us:” it would have been even as a wall, yea, “as a wall of fire, round about us.” Above all, we should have taken care to have them encompassed by God’s holy covenant, “which is ordered in all things and sure.” Inclosed by that, we might defy all the assaults of earth and hell.

But have we been careful thus to protect our souls? Have we not rather left them open to the incursion of our enemies, the sport of every temptation, the prey of every lust?]

Such a melancholy sight should make us doubly attentive to,

II. His reflections upon it—

Solomon was more desirous to benefit himself, than to criminate others, even though their conduct was justly reprehensible. His reflections therefore on the sight which he beheld, were of a general nature respecting the evil and danger of sloth. The state of our souls may well lead us to similar reflections, and convince us that sloth is,

1. Deceitful—

[The slothful man does not intend to involve himself in ruin: he only pleads for a little more indulgence of his indolent habits: but, alas! His “little slumber” insensibly becomes a great deal; his time passes away, and his work is left undone. The rest which he

takes, instead of refreshing him, enfeebles all his powers, and indisposes him for action; so that, though he never intends to plunge himself into difficulties, he does it most effectually. And how lamentably does an indisposition to spiritual labour deceive us! No man intends to destroy his own soul: he only pleads for a little more delay, a little more slumber: he thinks he shall awake time enough to do all that is necessary. Thus, while he sleeps, the thorns and nettles grow, and seed, and multiply, and take such deep root, that they can scarcely ever be eradicated: in the mean time, every good desire that may at any time have sprung up within him, is choked; and the decaying wall that should protect him falls to the ground. Ah! how many thousands have perished, like Felix, while they were waiting for “a more convenient season!” There has always been some “lion in the way,” whenever the time came for labour and exertion: and thus they have lost the only season which the great Husbandman had allotted for the performance of their work.]

2. Ruinous—

[The ruin of a man who neglects his farm or merchandize is gradual and irresistible: his circumstances become more and more embarrassed: and at last he is apprehended for debt, immured in a prison, and reduced to utter “poverty and want.” What a picture does this exhibit of a man who neglects his soul! He does not feel the consequences all at once; but “his poverty comes as one that travelleth:” it proceeds gradually step by step: it is not one hour, or day, that makes a very great difference to a man that is travelling many hundred miles on foot: but every step in reality brings him nearer to his journey’s end: and so it is with the man that indulges spiritual sloth; his ruin approaches, though imperceptibly, every day and hour: but though it comes insensibly, yet it will seize upon him irresistibly, even “as an armed man.” How glad would many be in their dying hours, if a portion of the time which they have wasted, could be restored to them! How glad would they be if they could recover the seasons they have lost! But death waits not their leisure: when sent, he executes his office, and transmits them, however reluctant, to the tribunal of their Judge. O that we would endeavour to realize these reflections in our minds, that we may not learn the truth and awfulness of them by bitter experience!]

By way of IMPROVING this subject, we will entreat you all,

1. To inquire into the state of your vineyard—

[Look well, and compare your ground with that of others; not of sluggards like yourselves, but of the Apostles and primitive Christians. And do not mistake, as, alas! too many do, weeds for plants (worldliness for prudence, levity for chchornfulness, formality for devotion, or pride and hypocrisy for zeal and piety;) but consult those who are able to instruct you, and by willing to have your vineyard weeded, your plants pruned, your wall reared, and your habits of indolence subdued and reetigied.]

2. To cultivate it with speed and diligence—

[Had we improved our past time with diligence, how different would have been the state of our souls! O think of the time that is irretrievably lost; and the probable shortness of that which remains! Let not sloth deceive you any more. There is not one amongst us who may not see in his own soul what advanees it has made, and what an increase of work it has occasioned. Let us be thankful that the period for cultivation is not yet ended: and let us henceforth “walk, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil.”]

DCCCIX

RETURNING GOOD FOR EVIL

Prov. 25:21, 22. If thine enemy be hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he be thirsty, give him water to drink: for thou shall heap coals of fire upon his head; and the Lord shall reward thee.

THE morality both of the Old and New Testament is the same. Some have imagined, that because our blessed Lord said, “A new Commandment give I unto you,” he has in his Gospel enlarged the duties of his followers beyond what was required by the moral law. But no command of his was new in itself, but only in its circumstances; as being enjoined from new principles, and illustrated by new examples. Morality does not depend on any arbitrary appointment: it arises out of the relation which we bear to God as our common Parent, and to each other as Brethren: and, irrespective of any express revelation of it, “To love God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength, and our neighbour as ourselves,” must of necessity be the duty of every child of man. Had our blessed Lord increased the demands of the moral law, either the Law must have demanded too little of us, or the Gospel must demand too much. But neither of these is the case: the requirements both of the one and of the other are the same, as far as morals are concerned. Love is acknowledged to be the fulfilling of the Law, and the great commandment of the Gospel also. But to love our enemies is the utmost extent to which this duty is carried, either in the Law or Gospel: yet is this enjoined, as we see, under the Mosaic dispensation; which is a clear proof, that it is not, as many erroneously suppose, a requirement peculiar to the Christian code. The very words of our text are cited by the Apostle Paul, as inculcating all that Christianity itself requires on this head: only there is one point in our text which adds greatly to its interest, and which has determined us to select the original words for our consideration, rather than the Apostle’s citation of them.

From the words before us we shall be led to consider,

I. The duty inculcated—

Certainly the love of enemies was never regarded as a duty by any of the heathen philosophers. Whatever might be occasionally spoken by them in praise of magnanimity, the love of enemies, and the rendering of good for evil under all circumstances, was never admitted by them as a proper principle and rule of conduct. Such a principle is directly contrary to all our natural sentiments and feelings.

By nature we all are inclined to render evil for evil—

[There is not a child that does not manifest this disposition, as soon as it begins to act: nor is there any one whose own experience will not furnish him with unnumbered proofs, that this is the natural bent of his own heart. Circumstances may indeed prevent us from retaliating injuries in an open way: the person that has inflicted the injuries may be out of our reach; or be too powerful for us to contend with; or be so low, as to be deemed unworthy of our notice. But in our hearts, we shall find the vindictive principle strongly operative, disposing us to take pleasure in any evil that may have befallen our enemy, and to decline yielding him any service, which, under the influence of a better principle, we might have rendered him. The man under the workings of hatred scarcely thinks of his enemy but with pain, and with a direct reference to the injuries received from him: and though from want of opportunity he may not retaliate, he has in him the spark, which might soon, by a concurrence of circumstances, break forth into a flame. In proof of this we need only see how this spirit has operated in others; sometimes rankling for years, till an opportunity to gratify itself should offer; and sometimes bursting forth at once into furious resentment. The sons of Jacob, Simeon, and Levi, full of indignation against Shechem for defiling their sister Dinah, formed a plan to murder, not Shechem only, but every male of the city in which he dwelt: and, to put them off their guard, and disable them for resistance, they devised a scheme the most hypocritical, and most infernal that could enter into the heart of man; having succeeded in which, they executed their bloody purpose without pity and without remorse. In Absalom's bosom the determination to avenge the wrongs which his sister Tamar had sustained, and to expiate them by the blood of Amnon, her offending brother, rankled two full years; till by artifice he was enabled to effect his murderous design. More rapid, but not less cruel, was the vindictive wrath of David, when Nabal had refused to recompense his services in the way he desired: he instantly hasted with an armed force to cut off Nabal, and every male belonging to his numerous household. Alas! alas! what is man, when left to the workings of his own corrupt nature? His every thought accords with that Pharisaic principle, "Thou shalt love thy friend and hate thine enemy."]

But religion requires us to render good for evil—

[Every species of revenge it absolutely forbids, even in thought. "Say not, I will do so to him, as he has done to me; I will render to the man according to his work." To this effect were those ordinances of Moses: "Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people: but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." And, "If thou meet thine enemy's ox or his ass going astray, thou must surely bring it back again to him: and if thou seest his ass lying under his burthen, and wouldst forbear to help him, thou shalt surely help him." Thus by the law of Moses the secret alienation of heart was to be counteracted by the exercise of actual kindness and benevolence. But the words of our text are stronger still, and especially as they are cited by the Apostle Paul. The idea conveyed by him is, that we must not merely give our enemy bread and water when he needs it, but must feed him with the tenderness of a mother towards her little infant. O what a victory does this suppose over all the vindictive feelings of our hearts!

We have a beautiful instance of this recorded in the history of Elisha. The prophet was surrounded by an army of Syrians, determined to apprehend and destroy him. By a power communicated to him from above, he smote them all with blindness, and then conducted them into the heart of Samaria. The king of Israel having gained this advantage over them, would have slain them: but the prophet said. "Thou shalt not smite them; but shalt set bread and water before them, that they may eat and drink, and go to their master." Such is the disposition which we also are called to exercise towards our most inveterate enemies. We must "bless them that curse us, do good to them that hate us, and pray for them that despitefully use us and persecute us." If they should have offended against us ever so often, even seventy times seven, we are still to retain the same disposition towards them, and to manifest it the very instant they express regret for the unkindness they have shewn us. Nor are there to be any other bounds to our forgiveness, than those which the Lord Jesus Christ has affixed to his: we are to forgive others "even as Christ has forgiven us:" and, if we refuse to do so, our doom is sealed: "So also shall the Lord do unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses."]

Such is the duty which we are called to perform: but, that we may not be deterred by the arduousness of it, let us consider,

II. The encouragement given us to perform it—

If we act thus, we have reason to hope,

1. That we shall overcome the hatred of our enemy—

[Certain it is, that no enemy was ever yet won by a vindictive conduct. We may, it is true, silence him by power: but we never can gain his affections by any thing but love. And this will, if not always, yet sometimes, prevail: as St. Paul intimates, when he says, "Be not overcome of evils; but overcome evil with good." Indeed, where there is a spark of ingenuousness left, we cannot but hope that such benevolence as this will at last prevail. We have some remarkable instances of this in the life of David. Saul had persecuted him with most relentless and bitter animosity: yet, when David twice had him in his power, and could easily have destroyed him, he

spared his life; and by this generosity constrained his persecutor to confess his own extreme injustice, and to take shame to himself for his own malignant and cruel proceedings—Such effects we also may hope to see produced on our enemies. It is well known that metals are fused, not by putting fire under them, but by heaping also coals of fire upon them: and thus shall the hard hearts of our enemies be melted by accumulated instances of undeserved love. True, we cannot convert their souls by this; for nothing but omnipotence can effect so great a work as the conversion of a soul: but we may reasonably expect to appease their wrath, perhaps also to slay their enmity against us: and one such victory will be a rich recompence for all the forbearance we have ever exercised, and all the love we have ever displayed.]

2. That we shall be rewarded by our God—

[This is plainly asserted in our text; and to all who conform themselves to the direction before us shall the promise be assuredly fulfilled.

It shall be fulfilled here: for such conduct will bring unspeakable peace into the soul. It is said, that revenge is sweet: but with infinitely greater propriety may it be said, that the returning of good for evil is sweet. The one is a malignant pleasure, such as we may suppose Satan himself felt, when he had prevailed, as he thought, against the Lord of life and glory: but the other is such a sacred pleasure as Christ himself felt, when he prayed, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” What satisfaction did David experience, when, in consequence of Abigail’s interposition, he had changed his mind in relation to Nabal, and sacrificed his resentment to a sense of duty! Again and again did he bless her for diverting him from his purpose. And we also, whenever love rises superior to resentment, and enables us to render good for evil, shall find unspeakable comfort springing up in our souls.

But the promise shall be yet more fully accomplished hereafter. Every act of patient self-denial and of generous love will be noticed by God with special approbation; and, if a cup of cold water given to a disciple for Christ’s sake shall in no wise lose its reward, much less shall services rendered to an enemy for his sake pass unnoticed. St. Peter tells us, that we are called to such trials, and carried through them in a triumphant manner, on purpose “that we may inherit a blessing.” But the point is repeatedly asserted by our Lord himself: “Blessed are the merciful; for they shall obtain mercy.” “Forgive, and ye shall be forgiven.” Let this thought occupy the mind; and the performance of the duty will be a delightful task.]

ADDRESS—

1. Guard against those reasonings which favour the indulgence of a vindictive spirit—

[You will be sometimes inclined to think that the exercise of resentment is necessary; and that if some displeasure be not manifested, your enemies will be emboldened to proceed to still further outrages. But look at the command of God; and, if this be clearly on the side of forbearance and love, say to every contrary suggestion, “Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me.”]

2. Set the Lord Jesus Christ before you as your example—

[There are many passages in the Psalms which seem to breathe a spirit of revenge: but these are frequently only prophecies, which might properly have been translated in the future tense: and when they are clearly imprecations, as sometimes they doubtless are, they are spoken in the person of the Messiah, who had a right either to denounce or imprecate judgments on those who obstinately rejected all the offers of his grace. David, when speaking in his own person, manifested the same spirit that becomes us. But David was a fallible man, like unto us: as we have seen in the case of Nabal. Look therefore to the Lord Jesus Christ himself, in whom was no sin. When you were enemies, He left the bosom of his Father for you: yea, “when you were yet enemies, he died for you”—I need say no more. Set him before you, and your way will be clear: and, if you look to him for all needful succour, his “grace shall be sufficient for you,” and you shall be able to do all things through the strength he will impart.]

DCCCX

THE DANGER OF CONCEIT

Prov. 26:12. Seest thou a man wise in his own conceit? there is more hope of a fool, than of him.

THE Scripture seeks not to please the fastidious ear of man, but calls both persons and things by their appropriate names. Sin is declared to be the extremest folly; and those who commit it, are proclaimed fools. In the eleven verses preceding our text, the folly of fools is mentioned no less than ten times: and from this humiliating picture our text derives a force and emphasis which no single expression could give. The import of the text, as connected with the context, is this: The condition of a fool is, as you have seen, awful in the extreme: but “seest thou a man wise in his own conceit? there is more hope of a fool than of him.” This is a solemn declaration, and worthy of the deepest attention. Let us consider it,

I. As a general truth—

Here we may distinctly notice,

1. The character described—

[There is in man a strange conceit, and a proneness to take very undue credit to himself for his abilities and attainments. Some are so confident in their own wisdom, that they seem to think they cannot err; and they would have it supposed that they possess, almost by intuition, what others have attained only by laborious investigation. Persons of this description will not condescend to examine their sentiments by any test; nor will they listen to any statements that are opposed to them. Confidence is to them in the place of proof; and any attempt to controvert their opinions excites only their indignation or contempt.]

2. His hopeless condition—

[Truly pitiable is the condition of “a fool.” He is ignorant of all that constitutes true wisdom: he is also, in a great measure, incapable of receiving instruction; and the instruction he does receive, he is incapable of turning to a good account, or of making a suitable improvement of it. Of such a one there certainly is but little hope: yet is the conceited person in a more hopeless state than he. If in respect of capacity he have the advantage, he labours under a tenfold disadvantage, by reason of his precipitancy, his confidence, his pertinacity. The endeavours used to convince him of his errors do but rivet him the more firmly in them; and opposition to him serves but to increase his obstinacy. Thus, whilst the conceit of his mind indisposes him for the proper exercise of his judgment in relation to truth, it unfits him for the reception of any benefit from the wisdom of others: so that to bring him to sound wisdom and discretion is indeed a hopeless task. If he will not deliberate and weigh matters for himself, or listen to instruction and advice from others; and if the means used to rectify his views do but confirm him the more in his delusions, there is indeed no hope of him: and “you may even bray him in a mortar, and he will remain the same; his conceit and folly will not depart from him.”]

The declaration in our text will be found still more weighty, if considered,

II. With a more especial reference to religion—

A man that carries his conceit into religion is indeed in a most deplorable state—

[Truth, in general, is too pure and refined to obtain ready admittance into such a mind as his; but religious truth is altogether folly in his eyes. “The natural man,” even though not blinded by that measure of conceit of which we have been speaking, “receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.” But where, in addition to the natural blindness of the human mind, there is a large measure of overweening conceit, the state of that man is bad indeed; because every truth of the Gospel not only offends him, but offends him in proportion to its sublimity and importance. The total corruption of our nature, the necessity of a new birth by the operation of the Spirit of God, justification by faith in the Lord Jesus, and an entire dedication of the soul to God, all appear to him extravagant and absurd: he sees no occasion for such humiliating and self-denying doctrines; nor will he believe them, whatever testimony be adduced from the Holy Scriptures in support of them. In vain are God’s express declarations brought before him: he believes his own conceits in preference to them: and every person that would persuade him to examine with candour, he regards as a weak visionary, and a deluded fanatic. Such a person, therefore, is never likely to come to the knowledge of the truth.

But, besides the obstacles which he meets with from the sublimity of the truths, and the blindness of his own mind, he has another source of blindness peculiar to himself: for God is particularly offended by such conduct, in reference to his revealed will; and he will “give such an one up to his own delusions, to believe a lie,” and to harden himself in his impenitence and unbelief: and if once a man have provoked God so to withdraw his Holy Spirit from him, and to surrender him up to the power of sin and Satan, he will never be undeceived, till he shall open his eyes in the eternal world.]

The fool then, I say, is in a more hopeful state than he—

[The fool, notwithstanding his ignorance, may learn: and if he will only submit himself to divine teaching, he shall learn; nor shall his weakness be any bar to his instruction: for God has said, that “What he has hid from the wise and prudent, he has, of his own good pleasure, revealed unto babes.” and so plain shall his ways be made to them, that “a wayfaring man, though a fool, shall not err therein.” Of him, then, we may have a hope, because he will use the appointed means of instruction, and will embrace truth as far as he discerns it; whilst the conceited man will not condescend to be “taught of God,” and therefore must continue ignorant even to the end, and “perish at last for lack of knowledge.”]

On this subject I would found A GENERAL EXHORTATION—

[Conceit, when strongly manifested in relation to earthly things, generally excites pity and contempt; but when exercised in reference to spiritual things, is deemed oracular and wise. But I entreat all to be on their guard against it. It is most dangerous, and fatal to the soul. Humility is at the very root of divine knowledge; nor can any saving acquaintance with the Gospel spring up without it. This, then, I say to all:

Be sensible, that, instead of being “rich and increased with goods, and in need of nothing,” as too many suppose themselves to be, you are in yourselves wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked”——

Bear in mind, that the Scriptures alone are the fountain and standard of truth. Every thing must be brought “to the Law and to the testimony:” and “whoever speaks not according to the written word, he has no light in him”——

Remember, too, that it is by divine teaching only that we can understand the Scriptures. If the eyes of our understanding be not enlightened by the Spirit of God, notwithstanding the light that shines around us, we shall go on still in darkness, even as Paul did, in his unconverted state; and as the twelve Apostles did, in the midst of all their Master’s instructions, till after the resurrection of their

Lordh——

And forget not, that this instruction must be sought by earnest prayer. God alone can give it; and it is only in answer to prayer that he will impart it to usi——

Moreover, after you have been guided into truth, you must still be on your guard against the same propensity which acts so powerfully in the unconverted mind. Many, after all their partial illumination, are drawn aside after “philosophy and vain deceitk.” If you would be preserved in the right way, you must not only “be converted, and become as little children,” but retain a childlike simplicity even to the end. To your latest hour you need to be reminded of that counsel given to the Christians at Rome, “Be not wise in your own conceitsl.” You need to be guarded against “thinking that you know any thing” perfectly; for, whilst you are under such an impression, “you know nothing yet as you ought to knowm.” “If you will be truly wise, it is by becoming fools in your own estimation, that you are to be made wisen.”——If you will not follow this counsel, “God will take you in your own craftinesso”——

I must then, as God's ambassador to you, call your attention to the warning which he has given you by the prophet Isaiah: “Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sightp!” And to all I must recommend those petitions of God's most favoured saints, “Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy Lawq:” and, “What I see not, Teach thou mer.”]

DCCCXI

A CAUTION AGAINST DEPENDING UPON FUTURE TIME

Prov. 27:1. Boast not thyself of to-morrow: for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth.

THE opinions of men are not less opposite to the mind of God in what relates to practice, than in the most mysterious doctrines of our holy religion. We are told, that “the things of the Spirit are esteemed as foolishness by the natural man:” and to what an extent they are so, is visible in the commendation universally given to a worldly spirit, and in the contempt poured upon heavenly-mindedness, as though it were the offspring of folly and enthusiasm. But in the judgment of God there is no truer mark of wisdom than to consider earthly things as transient and worthless, and to place one's-self continually as on the brink and precipice of eternity. To this effect Solomon speaks in the passage before us: in discoursing on which, we shall,

I. Explain the caution here given——

It is of great importance to distinguish between providing for to-morrow, and presuming upon to-morrow: the former is necessary for our very existence, since without it, the whole world would be in a state of stagnation: but the acting as if we were certain of another day, is the error against which we are cautioned.

Now we do this,

1. When our affections are inordinately moved by present things——

[If we feel eager desires after any earthly thing, so as to envy the possessors of it, and account the attainment of it necessary to our happiness; or, if we take such delight in what we do possess, as to forget that this world is not our rest, and that infinitely higher joys are prepared for us above; or if we grieve exceedingly on account of some loss we have sustained; we manifest that we have been promising ourselves many days, and even years to come: for, would a person be very solicitous about a vanity that he thought might very probably last but a day? Or would he so congratulate himself on a possession which he apprehended to be of such short continuance? or would he lay so much to heart the loss of any thing which he had expected to enjoy but a little time? We cannot but see that in proportion as he was impressed with a sense of the shortness and uncertainty of time, and its nothingness in comparison of eternity, his affections would be moderated towards every object of time and sense: he would “rejoice as though he rejoiced not, and weep as though he wept not, and use every thing as not abusing it.”]

2. When we are but little interested about eternal things——

[Every one knows that sin must be repented of; and that, if the guilt of it be imputed to us, we must perish. But this is not all; we must be born again and be made new creatures in Christ Jesus: and though this be not generally understood, every one has an idea that he must become religious before he die, if he would find acceptance with God in the world to come. Now if persons be deferring the great work of religion, whence can that delay arise but from their expectation of some more convenient season, when they shall execute their purposes of reformation and amendment? Or if they commit sin, whence can they be emboldened to do so, but from a secret confidence that they shall live to repent of it; and to rectify what they know to be amiss? Would any man deliberately do what he knows must be undone, or leave undone what he knows he must do in order to his eternal salvation, if he were assured that he had not one day more to live? And would not the probable nearness of death influence him in like manner in proportion as it was felt?]

The whole world standing greatly in need of this caution, we proceed to,

II. Enforce it——

The reason urged by Solomon commends itself immediately to our hearts and consciences:

1. We know not what shall be on the morrow—

[We are to-day perhaps enjoying all that our hearts can wish; our bodies are rigorous, our spirits gay, our friends numerous, our means of gratification greatly diversified, and accessible at all times. To-morrow we may be cast down from our pinnacle of happiness; our honour may be laid in the dust: we may be languishing on a bed of sickness; and deprived of all the comforts of life; and our reverse of fortune may be yet further aggravated by the loss of all our friends. The case of Job, if more recent instances were wanting, would sufficiently shew what may happen to us alla. Shall we then be promising ourselves years of happiness in the enjoyment of earthly things, when we consider how unstable they are? Again: to-day we are sinning in expectation that we shall, at some future period, repent. To-morrow possibly we may, like Nebuchadnezzar, be deprived of reason; or, like Pharaoh, be sealed up by God under final impenitence. Now is it not madness to risk the salvation of our souls upon the hope of having every thing that can conduce to our eternal welfare continued to us to the latest period of our lives? Should we not rather set ourselves to redeem the present time, and to “work while it is day, lest the night should come wherein no man can workb?”]

2. We know not whether we shall even live to see the morrow—

[What man is there that has “made a covenant with death, and an agreement with the grave” so as to be assured he shall live another day? Has he this assurance from within himself, or from those around him, or from God? Not from within himself, since neither youth nor health is any security against the stroke of death: not from others, since physicians, however useful in their place, can afford us no help, when God shall call away our souls: not from God; for though he promised to protract Hezekiah’s life for fifteen years, he has not engaged to preserve ours so many minutes. If, with the Rich Man in the Gospel we are saying, “Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years,” God may say to us, “Thou fool, this night shall thy soul be required of thee.” Who then, that knows the uncertainty of life, will presume upon its continuance? Let us look at the many thousands who, though but lately they seemed us likely to live as ourselves, are gone into eternity, gone too, before they had prepared to give up their account to God; and surely we shall cry with the Psalmist, “Lord, so teach us to number our days, that we may instantly apply our hearts unto wisdomd?”]

This subject naturally leads us to ADDRESS,

1. The careless—

[Is it not sufficient that God has exercised such long-suffering towards you, but will you still continue to provoke him? “O be wise, and consider your latter end.” “To-day, while it is called to-day, harden not your hearts;” lest while you are saying, Peace and safety, sudden destruction come upon youf.]

2. The lukewarm—

[Lukewarmness in religion is as odious to God as an utter neglect of itg. It is not by a round of formal duties, but a strenuous exertion of all your powers that you are to obtain the prize: for though heaven is the gift of God through Christ, it is bestowed on those only who labour for it. Whatever then your hand findeth to do, do it with all your mighti.]

3. The zealous—

[Endeavour to realize more and more the uncertainty of life, that, like the Apostle, you may “die daily.” And, as you know not but that on the morrow you may be numbered with the saints in glory, let nothing be deferred till to-morrow, which you can do for God to-day. Thus will death, however sudden, be welcome to you.]

DCCCXII

ENVY

Prov. 27:4. Who is able to stand before envy?

MAN is an enemy to his fellow man: nor is there any one who does not on some occasion experience reason for this complaint. But, if some find means of aggression, others obtain means of defence; some in their own powers; others in the assistance of friends; others in the arm of the law: others, where all these powers fail them, derive a measure of consolation from submission or flight. The most “cruel wrath, and most outrageous anger,” may, by one or other of these means, be withstood, or tolerated, or escaped. But there is one weapon from which there is no flight, and against which there is no protection; and that is, envy: “Wrath is cruel, and anger is outrageous; but who can stand before envy?”

In order to bring the subject of envy fully before you, I will shew,

I. What an odious principle it is—

1. Consider what envy is—

[Envy, as existing in the soul, is a sense of pain arising from the real or supposed excellence of another, accompanied with a desire to deprive him of it, and to possess it ourselves. The excellence may be either natural or acquired. Any faculty of body or mind which renders a man estimable in the world is a proper object for envy to fix upon, and against which to direct its shafts. So, in like manner, any attainment of wealth or honour will call forth its malignant efforts against the person in whom such a distinction has been found, especially if the distinction so obtained has been an object of desire to the person beholding it, and apparently within his reach: for envy finds scope for operation only between persons amongst whom some kind of rivalry exists. A peasant does not envy either a king or a philosopher; because the dignity of the one, and the wisdom of the other, are altogether beyond a hope, I had almost said a possibility, of his attainment. Envy includes in it a desire of the distinction that calls it forth, and a pain of seeing it possessed by another, when by possibility it might have been possessed by one's-self.]

2. Next mark its odiousness—

[Nothing excites it but what is either really, or in the person's estimation, good; nor does it ever exert itself, but for the destruction of the happiness of him in whom that good is found. It is the happiness of another that gives pain to the envious man; and the destruction of that happiness is the great object that would afford him pleasure. Its actings, indeed, are not open, like those of wrath and anger: on the contrary, they are as secret as possible; and they put on, as far as possible, a specious garb, a garb of candour and of equity. But its inseparable attendants are of the same odious character with itself: namely, "debates, wraths, strifes, backbitings, whisperings, swellings, tumults." Indeed, it is very nearly allied to murder: for, as it is invariably connected with, anger, it is murder in embryo: and hence in the Scriptures it is generally associated with murder: "The works of the flesh," says the Apostle, are hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders:" and in another place he says of unconverted men, that they are "full of envy, murder, debate, deceit, malignity, whisperers, backbiters," and so on. It indeed may appear harsh to load this principle with such horrid accusations; but they are true, and all verified by experience. Wherefore did Cain slay his brother? it was because he saw his brother receiving from God tokens of approbation which were denied to him. And whence was it that Joseph's brethren took counsel to slay him? it was on account of his enjoying higher favour with his father than they, and his receiving more remarkable communications from God. But, in truth, we do not view this principle aright, unless we see in it the very image of the devil himself. No other principle in the heart of man bears so strong a resemblance of the devil as this. See our first parents in Paradise, as happy as it was possible for creatures in a state of probation to be. The devil saw and envied them their bliss, and never rested till he had robbed them of it. Nor does he behold one of their descendants turning to the Lord, without using every effort in his power to divert them from their purpose, and to destroy their souls. And what does he gain by this? Is he himself rendered happier by depriving others of their bliss? No: he only augments his own guilt and misery!; and yet such is the malignity of his disposition, that he can find no employment to his mind but this: and, so far as he is capable of a momentary mitigation of his pains, he finds it only in robbing man of his happiness, and God of his glory. This is the very character of the envious man, whose "wisdom," as St. James says, "is not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish."

The fact is, that so odious is this principle in the estimation of the whole world, that there is not to be found on earth a person who will acknowledge himself to be actuated by it: though the real truth is, that there is not an unconverted man in the whole universe who is not, as I shall have presently to shew, under its baneful influence. But the very circumstance of all persons disavowing it, whilst they will readily acknowledge that they are led captive by pride, or anger, or impurity, is sufficient to shew how odious it is in itself, and how despicable in the eyes of every living man.]

The evil of envy will yet more strongly appear, whilst I shew,

II. What a destructive principle it is—

There is not a person in the universe able to stand before it. Its workings are inconceivably subtle—

[Persons are not always aware what principle it is which stirs within them, when they are under its influence. Joshua conceived that he was only shewing a commendable regard for the honour of Moses, when he desired that Eldad and Medad, who were prophesying in the camp, should be silenced. But Moses reprov'd him, saying, "Enviest thou for my sake? Would to God that all the Lord's people were prophets!" And doubtless those who, in order to grieve the Apostle Paul, preached Christ of envy and strife, gave themselves credit for a purer motive in their performance of that duty. There are a variety of ways by which men contrive to hide it from themselves. They see some evil in the conduct which they blame: or, if it was not evil in itself, it was faulty in the time, or manner, or measure, in which it was done: or, if no fault attach to it in any of those respects, it was from an improper motive. In short, something shall be found in every thing that a person does, either to make it appear blame-worthy, or, at all events, to abate its excellence: and the person judging of these things will not openly condemn them, but only utter praise in a fainter tone, and in more qualified terms, that so the measure of praise accorded to the agent may be diminished, and his merits be comparatively obscured. This, to the person forming the judgment, shall appear only strict justice: but God, who sees the heart, will designate it envy.]

It finds an advocate in every bosom—

[There is in all a wish to be exalted among their equals: and if there be any who have raised themselves by their own merits above the common standard, every mind will be gratified with hearing of something which shall divest them of their imputed excellence, and reduce them to their former level. Hence the envious man finds an ally in every bosom, and a readiness in all around him to

listen to any representation that is of an unfavourable nature; because every one seems to himself elevated in proportion as others are depressed. The means of misrepresentation are infinite in number: and if every statement were carefully investigated before it was received, a man of wisdom and discretion might defy them all: but when every misrepresentation that envy can suggest is listened to with pleasure, and received without inquiry, who must not fall before it?]

The more excellent any conduct is, the more obnoxious it is to its assaults—

[Even piety itself is not beyond its reach: for Solomon speaks of it as a peculiar vanity and source of vexation, that “for every right work a man is envied of his neighbour.” To say the truth, piety is more the object of envy than any thing else; not because others affect it for themselves, but because, in the common sentiments of mankind, it gives to its possessor a transcendent excellence, and raises him almost into a higher order of beings. This was a peculiar source of Cain’s resentment against his brother Abel; as it was of Saul’s against David; and of the Jews against Christ himself. Take an act of Christ’s, the restoring of Lazarus from the grave; a more benevolent act could not be conceived, nor one which more strongly carried its evidence of a divine mission along with it. Was it possible for envy or enmity to be provoked by that? Yes: the very act instantly produced a conspiracy against the life of Jesus;—against the life, too, of the man who had been raised by him. Was it so, then, that all the wisdom, or piety, or benevolence of our blessed Saviour himself could not elude this detestable enemy of God and man? No: not even he could stand before it; but, as the Evangelist informs us, he fell a prey to its insatiate rager. Against all his disciples, too, it raged in like manners: and it is in vain for any one, who will serve God with fidelity, to hope for an escape from its virulent assault.]

It thinks you are now prepared to hear,

III. What a damning principle it is—

God has marked his indignation against it even here—

[Greatly does this principle embitter the life of him in whom it dwells. Its operation is not momentary, like that of anger: it lurks in the bosom; it corrodes the mind; it makes a man completely miserable. We may see its operation in Saul. Saul heard the women, out of all the cities of Israel, celebrating the praises of himself and of David; saying, “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands. And Saul was very wroth, and the saying displeased him; and he said, They have ascribed unto David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed but thousands: and what can he have more, but the kingdom? And Saul eyed David from that day and forward. And on the very next day did Saul cast his javelin at David twice, in order to kill him:” and throughout all the remainder of his life used every possible effort to destroy him. This may enable us to understand what Solomon meant, when he called “envy, the rottenness of the bones.” For as the corporeal system must be altogether enfeebled and destroyed when the bones are rotten; so the moral constitution of the soul is rendered one entire mass of corruption, when a man lies under the dominion of this hateful principle. He is, in fact, as near to the consummation of his misery in hell as the other is to the termination of his life on earth.]

But who can tell with what judgments it shall be visited in the eternal world?

[It is not possible that a person under the dominion of it should ever behold the face of God in peace. “God is love:” love is his very nature and essence: but envy is hatred in its most hateful form, as terminating upon an object, not for any evil that is in him, but for the good which he manifests, and for the success he meets with in the exercise of what is good. How can two such opposites meet together? As well might light and darkness coalesce, as God and an envious man delight in each other in heaven. It is said in God’s blessed word, that “without charity, whatever we possess, or do, or suffer for God, we are only as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.” But in that very place we are told, that “charity envieth not.” What, then, are we to infer from this, but that, as envy proves an entire want of charity, so it proves, equally and unquestionably, a state of mind that is wholly incompatible with the favour of God and the felicity of heaven. But, that we may be assured of God’s indignation against it, let us see what God said to Edom by the Prophet Ezekiel: “As I live, saith the Lord God, I will even do according to thine anger, and according to thine envy which thou hast used out of thy hatred against them: I will make myself known amongst them, when I have judged thee.” True indeed it is, that in this passage God is only denouncing temporal judgments: but it amply shews what are his sentiments respecting the principle which we are speaking of, and what will be his judgment upon it in the day that he shall judge the world.]

Having thus exposed, in some measure, the true character of envy, I beg leave to suggest to you some cautions in relation to it. Be careful,

1. Not needlessly to excite it—

[Knowing, as you do, how common an evil it is, and how deeply rooted in the heart of man, you should guard against every thing which may call it into action. Whatever you possess, either of natural or acquired excellence, make not an ostentatious display of it; but rather put a veil over it, as it were, that its radiance may not offend the eyes of those who behold you. The less value you appear to put upon your attainments, and the less you arrogate to yourselves on account of them, the less will others be disposed to grudge you the enjoyment of them, and to despoil you of the honour due to them. It was unwise in Jacob to mark his partiality towards his son Joseph, by “a coat of many colours;” and he paid dearly for it by the sufferings it entailed. For your own sakes therefore, as well as for the sake of others, it will be wise in you to bear your honours meekly, and to shew that you are “little in your own eyes.”]

2. Not wickedly to indulge it—

[Envy is a principle in our fallen nature far more powerful than men in general are apt to imagine. “Do you think that the Scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy?” If you will watch the motions of your own hearts, you will find a sad

propensity to it, whenever a powerful occasion arises to call it forth. Suppose a person, whom you have regarded as inferior to yourself in industry and talent, has got before you, and attained a higher eminence than you in your own peculiar line; are you not ready to ascribe his success to chance, or to the partiality of friends, rather than to his own intrinsic merit? and would it not be gratifying to you to hear a similar judgment passed on him by others? Suppose he were by any means to fall from his eminence; would not his degradation give you pleasure? If you praise him, is it with the same decisive tone as you would have wished for, if the praise had been conferred on you? It is when your own honour or interest comes in competition with that of another, that envy betrays its power over you: and if you have been observant of the workings of your own mind, you will be no strangers to the operation of this principle within you. But remember what has been said of its odiousness and enormity; and cry mightily to God to deliver you from its baneful influence. Remember how transitory is all distinction here; and content yourselves with the honour which cometh from God, and will endure for ever.]

3. Not basely to fear it—

[Though you are not to make an ostentatious display of any excellence you may possess, and especially of piety, you are not to put your light under a bushel, through the fear of any hostility which a discovery of it may provoke. Whatsoever your duty is, whether to God or man, that you are to do; and to leave all consequences to the disposal of an all-wise Providence. It should be in your mind “a very small matter to be judged of man’s judgmentc.” If you have “the testimony of your own conscience that you are serving God in simplicity and godly sincerity,” that should bear you up against all the obloquy that the envy or malignity of others can heap upon you. You must expect that “they who render evil for good will be against you, if you follow the thing that is good:” and you must commit yourself to Him who judgeth right, and who will, in due season, both vindicate your character, and make your righteousness to shine forth as the noon-day.]

4. Not angrily to resent it—

[Supposing you to be traduced and injured in a variety of ways; “what temptation has befallen you but that which is common to men?” Instead of grieving that you are persecuted for righteousness sake, you should rather regard the hatred of men as a homage paid to your virtue; and should “rejoice that you are counted worthy to suffer shame for Christ’s sake.” You will remember the prayer of our blessed Lord for his murderers: “Father, forgive them: for they know not what they do.” This is the pattern which it becomes you to follow. Your envious neighbours really do not know what they do: they are not aware by what spirit they are actuated, or what evil they commit. Instead, therefore, of being angry with them for the evil they do you, you should rather pity them for the evil they do to themselves. This was the way in which David requited Saul, sparing him when he had him in his power, and mourning for him when he was removed to another world. Your rule, under all circumstances, must be this: “Not to be overcome of evil, but to overcome evil with good.”]

DCCCXIII

THE HEARTS OF MEN ALIKE

Prov. 27:19. As in water face answereth to face, so the heart of man to man.

THERE are many things which are justly considered as axioms, of the truth of which we are fully convinced, because they are the result of observation and experience: yet, being declared also by the voice of inspiration, they come to our minds with authority, and demand from us an unhesitating acquiescence. Such is the truth which we have just read from the Book of Proverbs. Any man conversant with the world, knows that human nature is, to a certain degree, the same in every age and in every place. But there are, amongst men, so many discrepancies arising out of incidental circumstances, and so many changes too in the same persons, that if the heart-searching God himself had not determined the point, we should scarcely have ventured to speak respecting it in terms so strong and unqualified as Solomon has used in the passage before us. His words, beyond all doubt, are true: but yet, if not well understood, they are capable of much misapprehension and perversion. In discoursing upon them, I will,

I. Explain his assertion—

It needs explanation: for if we were to take it as importing that all men in all circumstances manifest the same dispositions and desires, it would be the very reverse of what we see and know to be true. It is evident, that, though Solomon does not make any distinction, he does not intend to confound all persons in one common mass, and to affirm that, under all their diversified conditions, they are all alike: he supposes, that, amongst the persons so compared, there exists a parity, which may render them proper objects of comparison. He takes for granted, that there is in them a parity,

1. Of age—

[If we take men in the various stages of human existence, from infancy to old age, we know that there exists in them a vast diversity of sentiment. To imagine that amongst them all there should be found the same views, desires, and pursuits, would be to betray an ignorance and folly bordering on fatuity. Old men and children can no more be supposed to accord with each other in such respects,

than light and darkness. Children must be compared with children; young men with youths; and old men with those that are advanced in years.]

2. In character—

[There is in the natural constitution of men a great difference. Infants at their mother's breast display an astonishing variety of character; some being mild, gentle, placid; others, on the contrary, being filled with the most violent and hateful dispositions. Education, too, will operate very forcibly on men, and lead them to habits widely different from each other. One who is brought up in the unrestrained indulgence of every vicious appetite, cannot be supposed to resemble one who has been well instructed in all virtuous principles, and subjected to all salutary restraints. Still less can the godly and the ungodly be supposed to agree. Divine grace puts men far asunder, and induces sentiments and conduct widely different from any that are found in unconverted men. In comparing these different persons, a due respect must be had to their several characters; or else our judgment concerning them will be extremely erroneous.]

3. In condition—

[What community of sentiment, generally speaking, can there be between a prince and a peasant? or what between an unlettered countryman and a sage philosopher? Take a man under the pressure of disease, poverty, disgrace; and what will you expect to find in him that accords with the feelings of one who is living in the fullest enjoyment of ease, and opulence, and honour? Look at even the same person, when, either in a way of elevation or depression, he is changed from the one condition to the other; and you will find in him, for the most part, a corresponding change of views and habits.

I say then, that, to apprehend our text aright, we must consider it as declaring, not that all persons, whatever their circumstances may be, are alike; but that all persons under the same circumstances, due allowance being made for any difference existing from constitution, age, education, habit and grace, will be found to bear a very strong resemblance to each other.]

Taking the assertion of Solomon in this qualified sense, I proceed to,

II. Confirm it—

The reflection of a countenance from water will bear a strict resemblance to him whose countenance it is. And a similar correspondence will be found between the hearts of men, who, according to the foregoing limitations, are fit objects of comparison. It will be found in all,

1. Whilst in an unenlightened state—

[All unenlightened men agree in this; they affect supremely the things of time and sense. In this also they agree; they disaffect things spiritual and eternal. Here we may range through all the gradations of men, from the prince to the peasant; and through all their ages, from infancy to old age; yea, and through all the different periods of time, from the beginning of the world to the present hour; and we shall not find so much as one differing from the rest, unless indeed a very few, who have been sanctified from the womb. The testimony of Almighty God is this: "They that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; and they that are after the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the Law of God, neither indeed can be." Here both of these points are asserted, with equal clearness, and with unquestionable authority. If the point be doubted, look for a person who, from his youth up, has shewn a superiority to the pleasures, honours, interests of this world, and sought his happiness in communion with God, and in the exercises of prayer and praise. Alas! not one such person will you find: the hearts of all have been in perfect agreement with each other, even as the face that is reflected, with the face that inspects the mirror.]

2. When awakened to a sense of their perishing condition—

[Let but the eyes of any one be opened to see his real state, and he will begin immediately to tremble before God. No sense of earthly dignity will uphold a man at that hour. Felix on the throne of judgment, and Belshazzar in his drunken carousals, become weak as other men; and betray the convictions of their mind, that "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." Not the most obdurate sinners in the universe can any longer defy the arm of justice: the very instant they see themselves obnoxious to its stroke, their spirits sink within them. Even the murderers of our blessed Lord, whilst yet their hands were reeking with his blood, cry out in agony of mind, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?"

In another thing, too, they all agree: they all, without exception, seek, in the first instance, to conciliate God's favour by some works of their own. They will repent; they will reform their lives; they will perform the duties which they have hitherto neglected; they will exercise benevolence to the utmost of their power: they will do any thing, if by any means they may recommend themselves to God as objects of his mercy. Those amongst them who have been somewhat better instructed will allow to Jesus Christ the honour of saving them; but still they must do something to entitle them to come to him, and to warrant their hope in him. None, in the first instance, see, nor, if they were instructed, would they approve, the Gospel method of salvation, simply by faith in Christ. To renounce every kind and degree of hope in themselves is, to their proud hearts, an act of humiliation, to which they cannot submit. They think, so entirely to set aside good works, is to disparage them, and to countenance a neglect of them; and therefore they cannot cast themselves wholly and entirely on the merits of a crucified Redeemer. This reluctance to glorify Christ is, indeed, overcome sooner in some than in others: and in this respect "the publicans and harlots for the most part enter into the kingdom sooner than the Scribes and Pharisees," because they are sooner convinced that they have nothing of their own to rely upon: but in

all is there the same tendency to establish a righteousness of their own, and a difficulty in being brought to “submit to the righteousness of Christd.”]

3. When truly converted to the faith of Christ—

[To every one, without exception, “is Christ precious,” even preciousness itself. Find one to whom he is not “fairer than ten thousand, and altogether lovely.” You might as well look for one in heaven itself, as on earth. It is not possible to have “tasted how gracious He is,” and not love him, and serve him, and glory in him. Equally characteristic also of the believer is the love of holiness. Sin is no longer that pleasant morsel which they would roll under their tongue: it is hateful and abominable in their eyes: and they would gladly have it crucified within them. The divine image is that which they now affect; and after which they pant, as the hart after the water-brooks. In all, indeed, these marks are not alike visible, because all are not alike gracious; but in all, according to their measure of the gift of Christ, is this grace found: and if there be a professor of religion in whom it is not found, I hesitate not to say, that he belongs not to the class of whom I am speaking, but must take both his name and portion with the hypocrites. Of course, when I speak of the love of holiness, I comprehend it in all its parts, and consider it as extending equally to both the tables of the Law. The man who has a scriptural hope in the Lord Jesus Christ will not fail to “purify himself, even as Christ is pureg.”]

Now this subject is not one of curious speculation; but of real use, of most important USE,

1. For our humiliation—

[See the portrait of human nature as drawn in the first chapter of the Epistle to the Romans. See it as again exhibited in the third chapter: “There is none righteous, no, not one: there is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way; they are together become unprofitable: there is none that doeth good; no, not one. Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips: whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness: their feet are swift to shed blood: destruction and misery are in their ways: and the way of peace have they not known: there is no fear of God before their eyes.” But it may be asked, What can these passages hare to do with the more moral part of the community? I answer, that “whatsoever things the Law saith, it saith to them who are under the Law; (as every child of man is;) that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world become guilty before Godh.” Take this glass then, Brethren, and behold your own faces in it; and say, whether you have any reason for self-admiration and self-complacency? The true character of your hearts is this: “They are deceitful above all things, and desperately wickedi:” and, if there be any superiority in the conduct of any, you owe it, not to the superior quality of your hearts, but to the preventing and assisting grace of God. And the best amongst you may look upon the vilest of the human race and say, ‘Such an one might I have been, but for the grace of God!’]

2. For our consolation—

[When under peculiar temptations, we are ready to think that there is no one like us, and that no one was ever tempted as we are. But “there has no temptation taken any one of us, but what is common to mank.” And when we know this, it is a rich source of consolation to us. Not that the trials of others can do us any good: every man must bear his own burthen, whether it be greater or less: but, when a man supposes that he alone is subjected to any peculiar trouble, he is ready to imagine that he is an outcast from the Lord, and that there is no hope for him in God. The removal of this painful apprehension, however, raises him from his dejection, and emboldens him to maintain the conflict with all the enemies of his salvation. He will then chide himself, and say, “Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? Hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise Him, who is the health of my countenance, and my Godl.”]

3. For our encouragement—

[If in the Scriptures we see what human nature is, we see also what divine grace is, and what it can effect in the heart of man. After a most horrible description given by the Apostle, of persons who were to be excluded from the kingdom of heaven, he says to the Corinthians, “And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our Godm.” And the change wrought, on the day of Pentecost, on the murderers of our Lord, abundantly shews what may be expected by all who believe on him. The same holy joy shall animate their souls; and the same Almighty power renovate them after the divine image. It was to Christians scattered throughout the world that Peter said, “Through believing in Christ, they rejoiced with joy unspeakable and full of glory; receiving even now the end of their faith, even the salvation of their soulsn.” What, then, may not we also expect, if we truly believe in Christ! Verily, as in water face answereth to face, so shall our hearts respond to the hearts of the primitive saints, in all that is good and great. Our victories shall be the same as theirs, as shall also be our triumphs and our joys. Let this encourage us to go forward in our heavenly way, expecting assuredly that we in due time shall “see the good of God’s chosen, and rejoice in the gladness of his nation, and glory with his inheritanceo.”]

DCCCXIV

THE EFFECTS OF PIETY AND IMPIETY IN THE WORLD

Prov. 28:4. They that forsake the Law, praise the wicked; but such as keep the Law, contend with them.

MAN, as a social being, has an influence on those around him: and his actions should be considered, not merely as they affect himself, but, in their social aspect, as tending to make an impression upon the minds of others. In this point of view, a great measure of responsibility attaches to us, far beyond what, at first sight, we should be ready to imagine. Our good or evil conduct operates as an example, and countenances a similar conduct in others: so that, in our daily actions, we, though unconscious of it, are doing good or evil to an unknown extent. This is proclaimed in the words before us: "They that forsake the Law, praise the wicked; but such as keep the Law, contend with them."

From these words I shall be led to shew the effects of piety and impiety on the surrounding world. And,

I. Of impiety—

Whatever be men's line of conduct, they must, of necessity, "have pleasure in those who pursue the samea." Those they will of course choose for their companions; and if for no other reason, yet in their own vindication they will approve of and applaud their ways. The proud will commend the proud, and "call them happyb;" as will the worldling also "bless the covetous, whom God abhorrethc." Indeed, it may be laid down as a general rule, that if only you "do well to yourself," by studying your own ease, interest, and honour, "all men will praise you," as men that are wise, and worthy of imitationd. It is a matter of course that "the world will love its owne." This, however, is a very partial view of our text; the true sense of which lies much deeper. The praise which an ungodly man will give to those who are like himself, is bestowed not only occasionally with the lips, but uniformly and without intermission in the life. A man who refuses submission to the will of God, and "forsakes his Law," does by that very act tacitly, though most intelligibly, declare to all around him,

1. That obedience to God's Law is unnecessary—

[He will acknowledge the Scriptures to be a revelation from God; and would be greatly offended, if his belief in that revelation were questioned. But his faith in it is nothing more than a speculative assent: he regards not the authority of God in it; and by his contempt of that authority he says, in fact, that a submission to it is unnecessary. The language of the heart and of the life is interpreted in this way by God himself: "Ye have said, It is vain to serve God: and what profit is it that we have kept his ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the Lord of Hostsf? "And this construction is just; for what a man avows to be unnecessary for himself, he must be understood as maintaining to be unnecessary for others.]

2. That not even the Gospel itself entails any obligation upon us—

[Many who profess to believe the Gospel, and to make it the ground of their hope towards God, yet feel no constraining influence from all its wonders of love and mercy. They practically say, 'True, the Lord Jesus Christ came into the world, and "died the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to Godg." But what has this to do with the regulation of our lives? We need not be "brought to God" in this world: it will be quite sufficient to be brought to him in the world to come: and we may be sure, even from this very mercy vouchsafed unto us, that God will accept us, even though no change shall have taken place in our hearts and lives. He has sent his Son indeed, as we are told, "to bless us, in turning every one of us from our iniquitiesh:" but we need not be anxious about experiencing any such effect of the Redeemer's mission: we may live to ourselves, and obtain his favour, as effectually and as certainly as if we lived to him.']

3. That the way of wickedness is preferable as it respects this present world—

[Finding pleasure only in the things of time and sense himself, he encourages the same taste in others. For, for what end "has God given us all things richly to enjoy," if we are not to enjoy them? As for a compliance with the precepts of the Law, it is obvious that it must require continual self-denial: and what happiness can there be in that? It must detach us, also, from those who are most able and willing to administer to our happiness: and how can that operate, but to our disadvantage? As for repentance, and holy exercises of every kind, they may be very good in a dying hour; but to a person in health they can be a source of nothing but gloom and melancholy. Thus he sanctions the ungodly in the whole of their conduct, and encourages them in all the delusions by which they are misled.]

4. That no evil is to be apprehended from it in the world to come—

[This necessarily follows from all the rest: for, if he really thought that God would execute his threatenings against the violators of the Law, he would be more attentive to his own ways. But he persuades himself, that God is too merciful to punish any one in the eternal world, or, at all events, for such slight offences as he commits: and, by his open contempt of God's threatened judgments, he says to all around him, that they have nothing to fear, since "the Lord will do neither good nor evili." The exact description of these persons is given by the Psalmist, when he says, "The wicked, through the pride of his countenance, will not seek after God: God is not in all his thoughts. His ways are always grievous: thy judgments are far above out of his sight: and as for all his enemies, he puffeth at themk."]

The very reverse of this is the influence,

II. Of piety—

The man who forsakes the Law, praises the wicked; but the man who keeps the Law, contends with them. He does this,

1. By the silent testimony of his life—

[A godly man is like “a light shining in a dark place.” However unobtrusive his conduct may be, it forms a contrast with that of all around him, and especially with that of those who move in his sphere of life. If he be young, his sobriety is a reproach to all the giddiness and folly of his youthful acquaintance. If he be of a more advanced age, his zeal for God reproves the worldliness and indifference even of his most respected neighbours. Whether we view his abstinence from sin, or his practice of holiness, he equally casts reflections on the great mass of mankind. “They are of the world, and speak of the world: he is of God, and both speaks and acts for Godl.” “He is not conformed to the world” in any of its vanitiesm: “he comes out from the world, and is separate; and will not so much as touch the unclean thingn.” He endeavours so to walk in the world, as to “keep his garments cleano,” and undefiled with any of its abominations. He is even “crucified to the world, and regards it as a man would who was suspended on a cross, and looking for a speedy dissolutionp.” At the same time he gives himself to holy exercises; and determines, with God’s help, to fulfil every duty, as in the presence of his God. He shews that he has other views, other desires, other pursuits, than the world has any conception of; that he belongs to another world; that his conversation is in heavenq;” and that, “though in the world, he is not of the world, even as the Lord Jesus Christ was not of the worldr.”

Now all this, of necessity, attracts notice, and constrains all who behold him to say, “If he is right, we must be wrong.” The effect of his conduct is precisely like that of Noah’s, when he built the ark. It is said of Noah, that “being moved with fear, he prepared an ark to the saving of his house; by the which he condemned the worlds.” How did this act of his condemn the world? He was, it is true, “a preacher of righteousness;” but it was not so much his preaching, as his practice, which was here said to condemn the world. His faith condemned their unbelief; his fear, their security; his obedience, their disobedience. He needed not to say any thing: his conduct spake sufficiently; and the consciences of the beholders made the application. Thus it is, in a measure, with every godly man; he is “an epistle of Christ, known and read of all ment.” The ungodly world may shut their eyes against the light of God’s written word; but him they are forced to see, whether they will or not: and in him they see what is the line of conduct which God requires, and how far they are from walking according to it.

That the world consider themselves as condemned by the godly, is evident, from the indignation which they manifest when the light of God’s truth is made to shine before them. They instantly endeavour, by every possible means, to extinguish the light, or at all events to induce the godly to put their light under a bushel, and to hide it from their eyesu. They will profess to reprobate the sentiments of the godly: but they would never concern themselves about the sentiments of the godly, if they could but induce them to alter their conduct. It is their conduct that reproaches them, and that forms the real ground of their indignation against them. “If ye were of the world,” says our Lord, “the world (whatever your sentiments might be) would love its own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth youx.” Let piety enter into any family amongst us, and we shall see a fulfilment of that word, “Think you that I came to send peace on earth? I came not to send peace, but a swordy.”]

2. By the open avowal of his sentiments—

[A faithful servant of God, in whatever line he move, will not be ashamed of Christ, but will “confess him openly before menz.” This he feels to be a bounden duty. He does not wish to make a parade of his religion: but he is commanded to “let his light shine before mena;” and not only “not to have fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but, when opportunity occurs, to reprove themb.” Hence, though he is cautious, “not to cast pearls before swine, who would only trample them under their feetc,” he is “ready to give to every inquirer a reason of the hope that is in him with meekness and feard.” Nor will he be afraid to reprove sin, where he has any hope that his admonitions will be well received. If he be a minister, he will be “bold in the Lord to speak the Gospel of God with much contentione;” not fearing the face of man, but declaring, before all, and without reserve, “the whole counsel of Godf.” Nor, though he move in a private sphere, will he be backward to exert his influence, so far as it extends, for the suppression of evil, and for the diffusion of piety through the world. This indeed will raise up enemies against him: for men will “hate him that reproveth in the gateg.” They hated our blessed Lord principally on this account; as he himself told them: “You, (who countenance its proceedings,) the world cannot hate; but me it hateth, because I testify of it that the works thereof are evilh.” It was this that incensed Ahab against Micaiah: “I hate Micaiah because he doth not speak good concerning me, but evili. And it was the faithfulness of John, in reproving Herod’s unlawful commerce with his brother Philip’s wife, that brought down the vengeance of that prince upon himk. But, notwithstanding all the odium that such fidelity will bring upon him, the true Christian will exercise it as occasion serves, declaring candidly his conviction, that “the broad road of the world leadeth to destruction, and that the narrow way alone will issue in eternal lifel.”]

From this subject we may clearly SEE,

1. How much guilt attaches to us all—

[I will not now speak of those who have lived in open and flagrant sin; though, of course, all that I shall say will apply with double force to them; but I will speak of those who, though moral and discreet, have not given up themselves unfeignedly to God; or who grew up to maturity before they fully embraced the Gospel. Look back to your early childhood: your example even at that time had an influence on your youthful companions; and said to them, in language which they clearly understood, that there was no occasion for them to seek after God. As you grew up towards manhood, your influence became proportionably extended, and proportionably

more injurious also. Go now to your different companions, and to the thousands who, unknown to you, derived from your example encouragement in sin: go, tell them how you regret the injuries you have done, and how anxious you are to repair the evil, by making known to them the way of life and salvation. Thousands, alas! are gone beyond the reach of any effort, and are already enduring in hell the miseries which you contributed to heap upon them. But of those to whom you may gain access, how many, do you suppose, would listen to your advice? there would scarcely be found one amongst them all that would not laugh in your face, and account you either a fool or mad. King Manasseh, by his influence and example, did evil to as great an extent as any creature that ever lived: but when he exerted his royal influence to reclaim the persons he had seduced to sin, he could not prevail: they would still, notwithstanding all his edicts, and all his example too, continue to “offer sacrifices on their high-places,” instead of conforming themselves to the commandments of their God. Thus, even supposing that we are now walking in the ways of God, the influence of our former lives will continue to operate to the ruin of many souls, and to the unspeakable augmentation of our own guilt. Contemplate this, I pray you, my Brethren; and remember, that though you may never have committed one single sin that should expose you to shame before men, you are guilty in the sight of God, to an extent that no language can paint, no imagination can conceive. Nay, strange as it may seem, the very blamelessness of your conduct before men, inasmuch as it has attracted a greater measure of their admiration, has unhappily contributed, even beyond the example of the generality, to deceive their minds, and to ruin their souls. I must then say to every one amongst you, that the injury which in your days of thoughtlessness you have unconsciously done to the souls of men, should be a ground of the deepest humiliation to you, to the latest hour of your lives.]

2. What a pre-eminent measure of guilt is contracted by the backsliding professor—

[Whilst others, by their ungodly lives, encourage sin in all around them, you do it with far greater effect. For you are understood as speaking from experience; whilst others deliver only, as it were, a hasty and ill-formed opinion. You are considered as proclaiming that there is no excellency, no reality, in religion; that the ways of the world, from which for a season you had departed, are not either so dangerous or so sinful as you had ignorantly supposed; that, in fact, there is no sincerity in those who profess godliness; and that, if all were as honest as you, they would, like you, throw off the mask at once. Ah! think what a stumbling-block you lay in the way of others; how you “crucify the Son of God afresh;” and what cause multitudes will have to curse your very name for ever, whilst they call for vengeance on your souls for contributing so largely to their ruin!]

And here let me speak to those who do not indeed draw back to open sin, but only so far as to conceal their principles in compliment to the world. You may account this prudence: but God will account it treason; and the Saviour, whom “you thus refuse to confess, will refuse to acknowledge you in the presence of his Father.” Consider this; and know assuredly on what terms your sentence shall be passed in the last day: “If you suffer with Christ, you shall also reign with him; but if you deny him, he will deny you. If ye believe not his testimony, yet he abideth faithful; he cannot deny himself;” but will assuredly execute judgment, in perfect conformity to this rule.]

3. What an incentive we have to cultivate piety in the highest possible degree—

[The more our light shines before men, the more shall we put to shame the wickedness of the ungodly, and encourage the exercise of all that is good in the world. And who can tell how far our influence may extend? If we be the means of leading one sinner to repentance, “we save a soul from death, and hide a multitude of sins.” And what may be the ultimate effects on that person’s family, or even on his remotest posterity, who can tell? Let this then operate as an inducement with us to “shine as lights in the world.” I say not but that the saving of our own souls should be our first motive: nevertheless, a strong additional motive we may find in the subject before us. Nor ought it to have light weight on our minds: for, whilst we benefit the world, we greatly honour our God; who is most glorified in those who most reflect his image, and most advance his kingdom in the world.]

DCCCXV

THE LIGHT ENJOYED BY THE GODLY

Prov. 28:5. They that seek the Lord understand all things.

THERE are, in the Holy Scriptures, broad, and, if I may so call them, sweeping expressions, which, if taken in their strict and literal sense, have not so much as even the semblance of truth. Yet are they not liable to be misunderstood, because every candid reader will of necessity supply the restrictions which are necessary for a just interpretation of them. For instance: no one who should read the words which we have just heard, would suppose that Solomon ever intended to assert that all who sought the Lord were at once brought to the knowledge of all arts and sciences, and to an acquaintance with all the languages of the earth. Every expression must of necessity be restricted either by the subject of which it treats, or by the context in which it stands. The words before us are used in a way of contrast with those which precede them. The writer has just said, that “evil men understand not judgment;” that is, they understand not what they are doing, or what they ought to do, or the true end and scope of God’s dealings with them. But they who seek the Lord are well instructed in these things: they may be as ignorant of worldly things as any other people; but of things relating to their spiritual and eternal welfare they have a discernment which no ungodly man either does, or can, possess. Taking the word’s

with this restriction, I shall,

I. Confirm the sentiment—

Here I might enumerate a great variety of particulars, such as the evil of sin, the beauty of holiness, the glory of Christ, which a spiritual man alone can truly apprehend: but, as the expression is broad and comprehensive, so shall my illustration of it be; that so the contrast between the spiritual and carnal man may more forcibly appear. Of those, therefore, who seek the Lord, I will say, they understand,

1. The true state and character of the world around them—

[That every thing bears the appearance of some great change that has been wrought upon it, is obvious to all. The very elements bear this stamp upon them; as does also the whole creation, animate and inanimate, rational and irrational. No one can conceive of the world, or any thing in it, as having preserved that degree of perfection in which it was originally created. The ungodly therefore, as well as others, are sensible that there is a great deal of disorder in the world. But the godly man alone sees this in any degree according to its real extent. He sees that the whole universe is up in arms against Almighty God, under the command of that wicked fiend, who, having himself rebelled against his Maker, is labouring to bring every creature into a participation of his crime; and who, having succeeded in this enterprise, is justly called, “the god of this world.” He sees that this contest is carried on, not by those only who are sunk in open profligacy, but by the most moral and sober of mankind; who, in fact, are as much “alienated from the life of God” as others, and have their own “minds as much at enmity with him” as any other people upon earth. He sees, in a measure, what men ought to be, and what they are; and that all, without exception, are “living to themselves, and not unto their God.” The different orders of men are, in his eyes, only like different parts of one great army; differently habited indeed, and differently employed; some under the very garb of friends, whilst others are arrayed as open and determined foes: but all are acting, in their respective places, for the establishment of Satan’s kingdom, rather than of Christ’s. This, I say, the godly man sees, in perfect correspondence with what St. Paul has declared: “There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none that understandeth; there is none that seeketh after God: they are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable: there is none that doeth good, no, not onea.”]

2. The real happiness of man—

[The world at large conceive of this as consisting in temporal enjoyment. Pleasure, riches, honour, are looked upon as the great sources from whence happiness must flow: and where these are not eagerly coveted, there is something of a temporal nature substituted in their place: some fond conceit, or a mere state of carnal ease, devoid either of any strong emotions, whether of pain or pleasure. But the godly man knows that there is no happiness but in God—in a sense of his favour, in a performance of his will, in a prospect of his glory. There is in his views, and those of an ungodly man, a most perfect contrast with respect to this matter; each coveting what the other despises, and each regarding as contemptible what the other desires. Our blessed Lord’s words will put this matter in the clearest lightb——The rich, the gay, the honoured, are by the one regarded with admiration and envy; by the other, with pity and compassion. The poor weeping and persecuted saint, on the contrary, is by the one despised; whilst the other affects the experience of such an one with the fondest delight. In a word, whilst to the inquiry, “Who will shew us any good?” the ungodly man says, ‘Give me a supply of corn, and wine, and oil;’ the godly man pours out his soul in that petition of the Psalmist, “Lord, lift thou up the light of thy countenance upon me.”]

3. The proper tendency of all that God is doing in the world—

[God is seen both in his word and works; and both in the one and in the other does he appear, to an ungodly world, to obstruct, rather than to advance, the happiness of his creatures. The word is too strict in its requirements to suit our fallen state; and the dispensations of his Providence are calculated only to embitter life by continual troubles or bereavements. Far different from these, however, are the sentiments of a godly man. The whole inspired volume, whether it promise or threaten, prohibit or enjoin, is in his eyes a fountain of good, springing up to everlasting life——And all the diversified afflictions which arise, are regarded by him as blessings in disguise; as messengers sent to “humble us, and to do us good at our latter end,” by weaning us from things visible and temporal, and stimulating us to lay hold on those which are invisible and eternal.

An ignorant novice may dread a cross wind, as calculated only to retard the vessel in which he is embarked: but the experienced mariner will welcome it, as filling all his sails better than a wind that is the most direct; and thus, whilst the ungodly man news afflictions only as calamities which he would most avoid, the godly man welcomes them from God’s hands, in the assured hope that “his light and momentary afflictions will work out for him a far more exceeding and eternal weight of gloryd.”]

Thus, to go no further, it sufficiently appears how much clearer insight the godly man has into God’s word and works, than the ungodly man can pretend to. And now let us,

II. Account for the fact—

I readily concede, that, in point of natural talent or acquired learning, the godly man may be inferior to others; but in spiritual discernment he is superior to the wisest philosopher on earth. Does any one inquire how this should be! I answer,

1. He has God himself for his teacher—

[All God's people "are taught of him;" and it is in consequence of their "having heard and learned of the Father," that they attain to a knowledge which no other person can possess. Were I to say that "the Spirit of God opens the eyes of their understanding," and "brings them out of darkness into marvellous light," I should say enough to justify all the assertions which I have made: nor would any one have a right to ask from me an explanation of the process by which this mysterious work is accomplished. Yet I think that the mode of divine teaching may be in some little measure comprehended by means of a suitable and familiar illustration. There are different ways in which an object which is obscure may be rendered visible: one way is, by bringing it nearer to us; another is, by removing intervening obstacles; another, by reflecting stronger light upon it; and another, by strengthening the organs of vision to behold it. Now, without entering into a minute consideration of all these particulars, we may observe, in general, that God's methods of instructing us by his Spirit are somewhat analogous to these; in that he brings home with power to our souls the truths which we hear, and inclines our hearts to embrace them. The telescope, which brings distant objects to our view, and the microscope, which enables us to discern things which are too small to be seen by the naked eye, make no difference whatever either in the objects themselves or in the organs whereby we perceive them: the things themselves, and our faculties also, all remain the same, whether the instruments be used by us or not. So there is no difference in the truths which are heard by different persons, or in the capacity of those by whom they are perceived: the difference is in the manner in which the truths are presented to the mind: and if we, by instruments of human contrivance, are able thus to bring to the sight of men things that are invisible to the naked eye, we may well suppose that God is able to bring home to the souls of men truths which the unassisted mind is unable to apprehend. But I think we may get a juster view of this, by considering how it is that the imperfections of our sight are remedied in common life. When we have an indistinct vision of objects before us, it is for the most part owing to this: through an excess or defect of convexity in our eye, the object before us either falls short of the retina, or goes beyond it: and the use of glasses is, by a suitable medium to bring the object on the retina, that so it may be distinctly impressed thereon, in all its just symmetry and proportions. Now the Spirit of God, by giving to us "an honest and a good heart," imprints upon the tablet of our souls the truths, of which, without his aid, we could have no just perception: and thus we are enabled to understand what others are not able to discern. And thus is fulfilled what St. John has said: "The spiritual man judgeth all things; yet he himself is judged of no man: for who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ," and therefore are qualified to judge both ourselves and others. Now, I rather dwell on this, in order to remove from the minds of objectors the idea that we lay claim to any thing like miraculous inspiration. We do indeed say, that God alone can enable us to discern the things of the Spirit; but we say, also, that he does this through the use of our own faculties, under the direction and influence of his good Spirit: and thus "he reveals to babes and sucklings the things which he has hid from the wise and prudenth."]

2. He has an inward experience of the things which he knows—

[St. John affirms this very thing: "He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself;" that is, he has in his soul a distinct perception of those truths which he has received through the medium of his understanding. And this also, I think, may, through a familiar illustration, be made perfectly intelligible to our minds. We know that our senses are given us for the purpose of discerning the distinctive excellencies of every thing around us. It is not sufficient that one faculty alone be brought to bear upon the object that is set before us: we must exercise upon every thing that very faculty which is pre-eminently formed to discover and appreciate its excellence. Suppose we see, for instance, the sun, without feeling its beams; or a flower, without having our smell regaled by its odours; or honey, without tasting its sweetness; or a singing bird, without hearing his melodious notes; it is obvious that we can form but a very inadequate notion of these things, for want of an acquaintance with their chief excellencies: and, in like manner, we can ill judge of a diamond by the touch, when its brilliancy has never been submitted to our sight. It is through the apprehending of every thing by its appropriate sense, that we attain just and adequate perceptions of it. Now the Apostle tells us, that the godly man "has all his senses exercised to discern good and evil:" and hence it is, that having within himself a perception of them which no other man can enjoy, he possesses also an evidence which no other man can attain. Now this test may be applied to every thing that is of a spiritual nature; and the perception arising from it is fitly called "a spiritual discernment?" and by this, I say again, "we understand all things;" as St. John also has told us; "Ye have an unction of the Holy One, and ye know all thingsm." Here is contained all that I have spoken; namely, the extent of the knowledge possessed by God's people, and the means by which they are enabled to attain it: "We know all things," because God himself is our teacher: and by the unction poured out, that is, by the "eye-salve which he puts upon our eyes," he gives us the actual perception of every thing in our own soulsn, and, consequently, the clear and proper understanding of it.]

Methinks you are now ready to INQUIRE,

1. How shall I attain this understanding?

[I answer, Not by mere study, even of the Scriptures themselves; but rather by "seeking after God" in spirit and in truth. This is the particular point suggested in my text: "They that seek the Lord understand all things." You will remember what our Lord has said: "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of Godo." This is that which I have spoken of before: it supposes that there is in us that "honest and good heart," which alone receives the word aright, and alone enables us to "bring forth fruit with patiencep." I would not depreciate books of human composition, and still less the Scriptures of truth: but we must never forget, that "though Paul should plant, and Apollos water, it is God alone that can give the increasseq." In fact, this is the reason why many hear

the Gospel for years without any saving benefit to their souls: they will not humble themselves before God, and seek for mercy through Christ, and give themselves up unreservedly to God; and therefore they remain for ever without any true understanding of the word, and any sweet experience of its power. You must first be melted by it; and then you will be “poured into its mould,” and attain, by means of it, that knowledge of God which is life eternal.]

2. How shall I manifest it to the world?

[If “God have given you an understanding to know him,” shew it, not by a fond conceit of your own attainments, or a contemptuous spurning of others as blind and carnal—but by a holy life and conversation, such as none but those who are taught of God can maintain. If you know more than others, you should be prepared to answer that question, “What do ye more than others?” “The tree must be known by its fruit:” and, if you have received a superior illumination in your mind, you must “walk worthy of that high distinction,” and “shine as lights in a dark world.” If the Lord, by his Spirit, have written his law upon your hearts, then must you shew forth that law in your lives, and be in the world as “epistles of Christ, known and read of all men.”]

DCCCXVI

ADVANTAGES OF THE RICH AND OF THE POOR COMPARED

Prov. 28:11. The rich man is wise in his own conceit; but the poor that hath understanding searcheth him out.

PROVERBS are, for the most part, very obscure: they are intended to convey an abundance of instruction in a small space: and the truths contained in them are almost always such as escape the observation of unthinking men, and such as militate against their most received opinions. That the rich have greatly the advantage of the poor in reference to knowledge in general, must be confessed: for they have leisure, which the poor cannot command; and instruction, which the poor cannot obtain. Hence it is generally supposed that the rich have the same advantage in reference to divine knowledge. But this is by no means true. On the contrary, the poor have, in reference to divine knowledge, the advantage of them. And this is what Solomon affirms, in the words before us: “The rich man is wise in his own conceit; but the poor that hath understanding searcheth him out.”

In support of Solomon’s assertion, I will shew,

I. That the poor have really the advantage of the rich in reference to divine knowledge—

Elihu, intending to criminate Job, observed, “Great men are not always wisea.” And if this be true in relation to the affairs of this world, much more is it so in reference to the concerns of eternity Nor indeed are the poor always wise in this respect: yet have they, on the whole, the advantage of the rich.

1. They had the advantage in the days of old—

[Look at those who received the testimony of our blessed Lord. It was said with a kind of triumph, “Have any of the rulers and of the Pharisees believed on him?” Whereas we are told, on the other hand, that “the common people heard him gladly.” And such was also the experience of the Apostles: it was chiefly amongst the poor that their ministry was attended with success; as St. Paul observes: “Ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: but God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are; that no flesh should glory in his presence.”]

2. They have also the advantage at this day—

[It was to be one mark of the Messiah’s advent, that “to the poor the Gospel should be preached.” By them, too, was the Gospel to be received, whilst by the rich it should be rejected and despised. Nor did our blessed Lord merely affirm this, but he accounted it a fit subject of praise and thanksgiving: “I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes!” And now look around, and see if it be not thus at this day. Who are they that value the Gospel? Who are they that attend it, wherever it is preached with effect? Some, indeed, there are of the wise and rich; but very few in comparison; so few, that if a man of wealth and learning shew a decided love to the Gospel, he is regarded almost as a phenomenon; and that, too, no less by the Church than by the world itself. The great mass of religious people are of the poorer class; so that at this day, no less than in the apostolic age, when that appeal of the Apostle James is made to us, “Hearken, my beloved brethren, hath not God chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to them that love him?” there is but one answer that can be given to it: we must say, It is even so; it is from among the poor, and not from amongst the rich, that God has formed his Church: it is “of unhewn stones that his altar is made;” and “of these very stones that he has raised up children to Abraham.”]

Seeing, then, that what we have asserted is an unquestionable fact, let us,

II. Account for it—

We might be satisfied with referring it, as our blessed Lord does, to the sovereign will of God: "Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in thy sight," should be quite sufficient for us. But we may trace the fact to natural causes. The rich, from the very circumstance of their elevation in society, are under considerable disadvantages, beyond what are experienced by the poor:

1. They are more blinded by prejudice—

[Into the minds of the higher orders of society prejudices are instilled from their earliest infancy. Religious people are kept at a distance from them; religious books are taken out of their hands; and religious sentiments are branded with every epithet that can render them odious. For one word that would lead them to God, a hundred are spoken to draw them from him. Let them betray a love to earthly things, and no one will offer a sentiment to turn them from such an evil way: but let them betray a decided love to heavenly things, and multitudes will exert themselves in every possible way to divert them from so dangerous a path. Hence their prejudices are all on the side of evil and of the world. And how great the effect of prejudice is, may be seen in the adherents both of Judaism and Popery. One would imagine that the superstitions both of the one and of the other must give way before the light of the New Testament: but prejudice, as has been said, has neither eyes nor ears. Truth has no force, and argument no power, when set before one whose mind is pre-occupied with statements of an adverse nature. The Apostle says of the Jews, that "to this day a veil is upon their hearts: so that, when Moses is read to them, they cannot see the true scope of his instructions." And precisely thus it is also with the rich, when the Gospel is preached to them: "Their eyes are blinded; and they cannot discern" the truth of those things which are proposed to their consideration. But the poor are, comparatively, but little subjected to this influence. People take not so much pains to prejudice their minds; and they are left more to think and act for themselves. Hence, when truth is proposed to them, they are more open to conviction, and more easily brought under its power. And this is one reason why even the "publicans and harlots enter into the kingdom before the Scribes and Pharisees."]

2. They are more enslaved by custom—

[The rich, amidst all their boasted liberty, are the veriest bond-slaves that the world contains. If negroes are afraid of the scourge of their masters, so are the rich afraid lest they should be subjected to the lash of censure amongst their equals. Let an opportunity of spiritual instruction be afforded them, they would be afraid to avail themselves of it, if it were offered at a place not frequented by the rich, or by a person not approved amongst them. Even though in their hearts they would be glad to hear the instruction, they dare not go over the line prescribed by custom and fashion, lest they should bring upon themselves some reproach. They would be ashamed to be found reading the Bible; and would be in perfect horrors if they were discovered weeping for their sins. True, a rich Papist would not blush at being known to follow the superstitious usages of his Church, because other rich persons both approve and follow the same superstitions: but a rich Protestant would not dare to spend a day in fasting and prayer, because the rich of his own community pour contempt on piety, and on the means by which piety is advanced in the soul. But the poor are more free to follow the dictates of their conscience: and when they "have a spiritual understanding," they will follow them: they will not be content to "continue in the broad road, because the many walk there; or to desert the narrow path, because there be but few who find it:" they are more independent of the opinions of the world; and are prepared to say with Joshua, "Let others think or act as they please, I will serve the Lordo."]

3. They are more deluded by conceit—

[The rich, on account of their wealth and influence, have great deference paid to their opinions. The flattery which they receive is extremely grateful to them; and they soon begin to think that they are indeed as wise as fawning sycophants represent them to be. Hence they become very confident in their own opinions, and can ill brook contradiction upon any subject. They suppose, too, that they are as competent to judge of religion as of any other subject; and will lay down the law upon the subject of divine truth as confidently as if they had the wisdom of Daniel or St. Paul. But the poor man, that has been taught of God, sees at once how ignorant these persons are on those subjects on which they presume to dogmatize with such unblushing confidence. The rich conceited man will tell us how erroneous it is to represent our fallen nature as so depraved; and what a licentious doctrine that of salvation by faith alone is; and that a life of entire devotedness to God is no better than wild fanaticism or puritanical hypocrisy. But "the poor man, that hath understanding, searcheth him out:" he has within himself the evidence of those truths which the conceited man decries. St. John says, "He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself:" and this internal evidence is more to him than all the assertions which conceit can dictate or arrogance maintain. He knows his own depravity: he feels his need of a Saviour: he tastes the sweetness of pure and undefiled religion; and from God he inherits a blessing, whilst the rich contemner of his faith receives nothing but woes at the hand of his offended God.]

IMPROVEMENT—

1. Envy not those who are rich in this world—

[Truly they are encompassed with snares, and exposed to great dangers. The advantages which they possess are very trivial: (what has the richest man beyond food and raiment, which the poor possess as well as they?) but their disadvantages are very great; so great, that "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven." Remarkable, in this view, is that advice of Solomon; "Labour not to be rich: cease from thine own wisdoms." The errors here pointed at are almost inseparable from each other; and every one that is truly wise will be on his guard against them both.]

2. Seek to be "rich towards God"—

[That is true wisdom: and the more you possess of spiritual riches, the more truly humble will you be before God. Indeed, a poor pious man is, in God's estimation, as high a character as exists on earth. When God's only-begotten Son became incarnate, this was the character he assumed. Seek to be conformed to him, and you need not desire any thing beyond. Nothing is of any value without piety; nor can any thing add to piety, when it fully occupies the soul.]

DCCCXVII

TRUE REPENTANCE RECOMMENDED

Prov. 28:13. He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy.

THE subject of repentance offers nothing for the gratification of "itching ears." But it must not on that account be overlooked; since, if less interesting than some other subjects on the score of novelty, it yields to none in point of importance. It is the first act whereby a sinner returns unto his God: and it is an act for which the most eminent saint has occasion from day to day; insomuch that in him it assumes rather the character of a habit than an act. In the more grown Christian, it is the warp, whilst every other grace is the woof: whether the colours interwoven with it be grave or gay, this pervades the whole piece, and is, as it were, the foundation of all the rest.

For the advancing of this work in all our souls, I will shew,

I. The folly of covering our sins—

To conceal our sins from the all-seeing eye of God is impossible: yet

There are various ways in which men attempt to cover them—

[Sin, though it cannot be hidden from God, may be covered from ourselves, by denial, by extenuation, by forgetfulness.

Many, though walking in the habitual violation of the plainest duties, will deny that they commit any sin at all. As "the adulterous woman," of whom Solomon speaks, "eateth, and wipeth her mouth, and saith, I have done no wickedness;" so these, in gratifying their sensual appetites, think that they commit no more evil than if they had merely satisfied the demands of hunger and thirst: and, in their minds, one sinful indulgence is but a prelude to another, whenever opportunity and inclination concur to call for it. Persons of this description, if they receive only a distant intimation of their state, are ready to reply, even against God himself, just as Cain did, after murdering his brother Abel: "Where is thy brother Abel?" "I know not: am I my brother's keeper?" Thus, rather than they will humble themselves before God, they will deny their accountability to him, saying, "Our lips are our own: who is Lord over us?" But this denial of their guilt will avail them nothing. God will reprove them as he did Israel of old; and will surely visit them with his heaviest indignation.

Others cover their sins by endeavouring to extenuate the guilt of them. Thus did Adam and Eve in Paradise. Thus also did Saul, after sparing the king of the Amalekites, and the spoil which he had taken, instead of destroying them utterly according to the direction which he had received from the Lord. He first of all asserted that he had executed the divine command; and that being disproved by the lowing of the oxen, he vindicated himself, asserting, that, in as far as he was implicated in the affair, he had acted under the influence of the people, whom he could not restrain, and dared not to resist. Thus it is also that the generality are acting all around us. They cannot actually deny that what they are doing is contrary to God's revealed will; but they are so circumstanced, that they cannot on the whole act otherwise than they do: the current of the world is so strong against them, that they cannot resist it; and, if they err, the fault is rather in those who have led the way, than in themselves, who have only gone with the stream.

But perhaps the most common way of covering sin is by letting them pass altogether unnoticed. Many are not altogether satisfied that their ways are right: but they go on without much thought, and presently forget any thing which may have made a slight impression on their minds. Forgetting their sins, they suppose that God has forgotten them also. Of such persons God complains; "They consider not in their hearts that I remember all their wickedness." Very beautiful is the description which God gives of such persons, by the Prophet Jeremiah: "I hearkened and heard, but they spake not aright: no man repented of his wickedness, saying, What have I done? Every one turned to his course, as the horse rusheth into the battle." The horse is unconscious of his danger; and so are the mass of ungodly men: "it is a sport to them to commit iniquity;" and, provided it be not of such a heinous nature as to violate the usages of the place wherein they live, they say, "No evil will come unto us!"]

But all who thus attempt to cover their sins are guilty of the extremest folly—

[They "can never prosper." Temporal prosperity they may have as much as others: but in their souls they cannot prosper.

They cannot in this world. They can have no peace with God or in their own consciences; for God has said, "There is no peace to the wicked." They can have no victory over sin: for God will not interpose to deliver them from bonds, which they themselves are pleased with. They can have no delight in holy ordinances, either in the public assembly, or in their secret chamber. They may, like Ezekiel's hearers, be pleased with hearing a man that can play well upon an instrument; but they can have no fellowship with God: for "what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness, or light with darkness?" They can have no bright and cheering

prospects of the eternal world: for they have no evidence within themselves of their acceptance with God, nor any “meetness for the inheritance of the saints in light.”

Much less can they prosper in the world to come. There the impenitent and unbelieving will meet their deserved recompence. No joy awaits them there. They sought not merey and therefore they find it not: they came not weary and heavy laden unto Christ; and therefore they have no part in the rest which he alone can give: they humbled not themselves; and therefore they can never be exalted.]

Let us now contemplate, on the other hand,

II. The benefit of true penitence—

True repentance consists of two parts; a confessing, and forsaking, of our sins—

[Confession is of absolute and indispensable necessity. We never can humble ourselves aright without it. Nor ought we to rest in mere general acknowledgments: we should search out our sins: we should say, “Thus and thus have I done.” We should go farther, and enter into the particular aggravations of our sins, in order the more deeply to affect our own hearts, and to fill our minds with self-loathing and self-aborrence. Not that God needs to be informed: he knows all our iniquities, and all the circumstances with which they have been attended. But by spreading them all before God, we give the more glory to him as a God of infinite mercy and compassion; at the same time that we prepare our own minds for a due reception of mercy at his hands.

But, besides this, we must forsake our sins. If we hold them fast, it is a clear proof that our repentance is not genuine. Nor must we forsake them merely as a man parts with a limb, which, if not amputated, would destroy his life: we may indeed take into our consideration the danger arising from them, as our Lord tells us in the case of “a right hand or right eye,” which, if retained, would plunge us into everlasting perdition: but we must regard them as odious, and hateful, and abominable; and long for deliverance from them as we would for deliverance from the most loathsome disorder.

These two, a confessing, and forsaking of sin, must go together. Supposing we could put away our sins for the future, it would still become us to bewail those which are past: and, if we bewail them ever so bitterly, still must we not rest without gaining the victory over them, it is the union of them both that marks true penitence; and]

Where such repentance is, there God will bestow his richest blessings—

[It is said in a subsequent part of this chapter, that “a faithful man shall abound with blessings.” And this is true of all who deal faithfully with their own souls and with their God, in bewailing and mortifying their most secret corruptions. This is strongly asserted by all the inspired writers. “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.” To such both the faithfulness and the justice of God assure a perfect remission of all sin. Nor will God delay to manifest his love, when once he sees our souls truly humbled for sin. The self-condemning publican was justified even before he left the spot where his confessions were made. And David speaks of the same truth as realized also in his experience. Whilst he forbore to humble himself, he was kept in a state of darkness and misery: but “as soon as he began to confess his sins unto the Lord, the Lord forgave the iniquity of his sin.”]

And need we say what “mercy” God will vouchsafe to penitents in the last day? Surely all the manifestations of his love which he gives to them in this world, are but as a twinkling star compared with that full splendour of the Sun of Righteousness, which in that day every contrite soul shall enjoy. The joy of the Father over the returning prodigal, with all the music, and feasting, and dancing, are but faint images of what shall be realized in heaven over every true penitent through all eternity.]

From hence we may LEARN,

1. Whence it is that men know so little of spiritual prosperity—

[Repentance is a work to which we are very averse. If we did but occasionally set apart a day for solemn fasting and prayer, and set ourselves more diligently to the great duty of humiliation before God, we should have more delightful visits from him, and richer communications of his grace to our souls——]

2. How painful will be the self-condemnation of all who perish!

[The promise in our text will then be remembered with unutterable shame and sorrow. What a reflection will it be, “I might have obtained mercy, but would not seek it:” God said to me, “Only acknowledge thine iniquity:” but I would not deign to acknowledge it. Verily the easy terms on which salvation might have been obtained, will form the bitterest ingredient of that bitter cup which the impenitent soul will have to drink to all eternity.]

3. What obligations do we owe to the Lord Jesus Christ!

[It is through him, and through him alone, that repentance is of any avail. There is nothing in repentance that can merit forgiveness: all the merit is in Christ Jesus, even in his obedience unto death: it is that which cancels all our guilt: it is that which purchases our title to the heavenly inheritance. Whilst therefore we confess and forsake our sins, let our eyes be directed to Him as our only hope, even to him, “in whom all the seed of Israel shall be justified, and in whom they shall glory.”]

THE PORTION OF THE FAITHFUL MAN

Prov. 28:20. A faithful man shall abound with blessings.

ST. PAUL has told us, that “the love of money is the root of all evil: and that many, whilst coveting after it, have pierced themselves through with many sorrows.” In truth, the effects of this principle on the persons in whom it dwells, and on all connected with them, are beyond all conception bitter and injurious. On the other hand, a superiority to the love of money greatly elevates and ennoble those in whom it is found; and conduces, in a very eminent degree, to their happiness both in this world and the next.

This appears to be the precise import of our text, as it stands connected with the words which follow it. But we need not so limit its use. It contains a general truth, which will afford us much profitable instruction. Taking it in this more enlarged sense, I will endeavour to shew,

I. Who are they that answer the description here given us—

Nehemiah, speaking of his brother Hanani, says, “He was a faithful man, and feared God above many:” and he assigns this as his reason for appointing him to superintend the repairs of the city of Jerusalem; since he might be fully depended on for a conscientious discharge of his high office. From hence, then, we see who they are that are entitled to the character of “faithful men.” They are those who are,

1. Faithful to their convictions in things relating to God—

[There is in every man, under the Christian dispensation, a conviction that he is a sinner who stands in need of mercy; that God has revealed to us in his Gospel the way in which alone he will dispense mercy; and that, as responsible beings, who shall soon stand at the judgment-seat of Christ in order to be judged according to our works, it is our duty and our happiness to be seeking for mercy in God’s appointed way. Now, if a man be faithful to his convictions respecting these things, we may justly call him a faithful man; but, if he neglect God, and pour contempt upon the Lord Jesus, and disregard his eternal interests, and labour in every possible way to silence the remonstrances of his own conscience, is he faithful? No, indeed; he is a traitor to God and to his own soul. If he be truly upright before God, he will give to the concerns of his soul and of eternity the attention they demand——]

2. Faithful to their engagements in things relating to man—

[Without supposing any express compact voluntarily entered into between man and man, there is of necessity a mutual obligation lying upon every man to perform the duties of his place and station. As husbands or wives, parents or children, masters or servants, magistrates or subjects, all of us have some line of conduct prescribed to us; and, as members of one great body, are bound to perform our proper office for the benefit of the whole. Every person feels this in relation to others; and would account himself very injuriously treated, if any should violate towards him the duties of their station: and, consequently, every one must owe to others the treatment which he himself claims at their hands. Now, a faithful man considers this, and will labour to do unto others as he, in a change of circumstances, would think it right that they should do unto him. But if a man consult nothing but his own interests and inclinations, and make his own will the only rule of his conduct, can he be called “faithful?” Is he not as much bound to observe the commandments of the second table as those of the first? His obligation to both the one and the other of them is unalterable; nor can either the one or the other in any wise be dispensed with. Religion and morality must go hand in hand. Neither of them can supersede the other; nor can either of them exist without the other: and he who is faithful in one, must of necessity be faithful in both.]

For the encouragement of such characters, I will proceed to state,

II. What are the peculiar blessings reserved for them—

Truly “the faithful man shall abound with blessings”—

[I might here enumerate thousands of blessings, if time would admit of it; but I will specify only three: the approbation of God; the testimony of a good conscience; and a blessed hope of immortality and glory——But how shall I describe these blessings? “In God’s favor is life; and his loving-kindness is better than life itselfc”——As for the testimony of our own conscience, and the witness of God’s Spirit with ours, that we are upright before him, man can have no greater joy on earth than thatd——And who can adequately declare the blessedness of a soul that apprehends God himself as his portion, and all the glory of heaven as his inheritance?——]

But it is the peculiarity and exclusiveness of this portion which we are chiefly called to notice—

[To the faithful man these blessings are accorded; but to him also are they limited: for they are peculiar to him; “and a stranger intermeddleth not with his joy,” Let the man who is unfaithful to his convictions or to his engagements say what he knows of these blessings? If he speak the truth before God, he has no experience of them whatever in his own soul. Indeed, it is impossible that he should have any sense of them as already imparted to him; since, if God be true, no one of them belongs to him; “he has no part or lot in any one of them:” they belong to the faithful man, and to him alone——]

SEE, then,

1. What is the proper scope and tendency of the Gospel—

[It is doubtless intended to effect a change, yea, an exceeding great change, both in the characters and states of men. But what does it effect in their character? Does it make them hypocrites? No; but faithful both to God and man. And what does it effect in their states? Does it deprive them of comforts, and make them melancholy? No; but it makes them to abound with blessings, both in time and in eternity. O that you could be prevailed upon to view the Gospel in its true light, and to embrace it with your whole hearts!]

2. What bitter self-condemnation awaits the impenitent and unbelieving soul—

[You have now the blessings of time and sense. But what are they, in comparison of those that await the faithful man? Even here your portion is far inferior to his: but what will they be in the eternal world? Truly, you will all find, ere long, that to gain the whole world with the loss of your own souls was a sad exchange. May God make you wise in time, that you may not have to deplore your folly to all eternity!]

DCCCXIX

SELF-CONFIDENCE REPROVED

Prov. 28:26. He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool.

THE Holy Scriptures speak plainly, and without reserve: they know nothing of that squeamish delicacy that keeps men from designating things by their appropriate names: they declare sin to be sin, and folly to be folly, without considering what the pride of man will say to the fidelity that is expressed. Now this gives an exceeding great advantage to ministers: for though it does not sanction rudeness, or indelicacy, or inattention to the feelings of mankind, it does authorize a “great plainness of speech” in all who deliver the messages of God to a sinful and self-deceiving world. Indeed, by universal consent, a greater freedom of speech is admitted, even by the most fastidious in our public addresses, than would be palatable in private converse: nor will any be offended with us, if we declare authoritatively, and without any palliating modifications, what God has said, and what we know to be true, and what therefore we must affirm, that “he who trusteth in his own heart is a fool.”

In confirmation of this plain and solemn truth, I will shew,

I. What is the conduct here reprobated—

Man, when he fell from God, renounced not only his allegiance to him as his Maker, but his affiance in him as his God. Since that time, man affects to be a god unto himself, and places his reliance rather on his own inherent powers than on the Majesty of heaven. He relies on,

1. His own wisdom and understanding—

[This is true, especially in reference to all that concerns the soul. Every one conceives that he knows what religion is, and how he is to obtain favour at the hands of God. The most careless of men stand, in this respect, on a footing with the most thoughtful and sedate: every one is alike confident that his opinions are just; and he holds them last, with a degree of assurance which the most studious habits would scarcely warrant.

Some, however, will admit the Scriptures to be the only true standard of religious sentiment: but then they suppose themselves to be perfectly equal to the task of extracting from them the mind of God. They feel no need of divine teaching: they are unconscious of the blindness of their minds, and of the bias that is upon their hearts on the side of error. Hence they will take some few particular passages which favour the prejudices they have imbibed; and on them they will build, as securely as if it was impossible for them to err.]

2. His own purposes and resolutions—

[Every one has, at some time or other, thought with himself, that it was desirable for him to be prepared for death and judgment: and most persons have formed some faint purposes at least, if not a fixed resolution, that they will amend their lives, and prepare for their great account. In some imminent danger, or under some distressing occurrence, the purpose may have been formed with a view to a speedy change: but, in general, the convenient season is looked for at somewhat of a distant period. But the power to turn to God is doubted by none. The sufficiency of man to execute his own purposes and resolutions is never questioned. Every one supposes that he shall be able to effect whatever his judgment shall direct, and his necessities require. As for any need of divine assistance for these things, men have no idea of it. Their own strength is equal to the performance of all that they judge necessary for their salvation; and therefore they may safely defer the great work of their souls to any period which it may suit them to assign.]

That I may dissuade you from such vain confidence, I proceed to state,

II. The folly of it—

Even in relation to earthly things an overweening confidence in our own judgment and strength is a mark of folly: but in reference to the concerns of the soul it is folly in the extreme. For,

1. It robs us of the benefit we might receive from trusting in God—

[This is particularly intimated in the words immediately connected with my text: "He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool; but whoso walketh wisely shall be delivered." Now here the "walking wisely" is put for trusting in God, rather than in ourselves: and the person who so conducts himself, "shall be delivered" from those evils into which the self-confident must fall. Indeed the very honour of God is concerned to leave us, that we may reap the bitter fruits of our own folly. If we succeeded in effecting our own deliverance, we should "burn incense to our own net," and ascribe all the glory to ourselves. But God has warned us, that, if we provoke him thus to jealousy, we shall lose the benefits which, by trusting in him, we might have obtained; and bring on ourselves the very evils which, by trusting in him, we might have escaped:—"Thus saith the Lord: Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from the Lord: (where you will see, that to trust in ourselves is a departure of heart from God:) for he shall be like the heath in the desert; and shall not see when good cometh; but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness, in a salt land, and not inhabited. But blessed is the man that trusteth in the Lord, and whose hope the Lord is: for he shall be as a tree planted by the waters, and that spreadeth out her roots by the river; and shall not see when heat cometh; but her leaf shall be green, and shall not be careful in the year of drought, neither shall cease from yielding fruita."]

2. It ensures, beyond all doubt, our ultimate disappointment—

[If ever any man was authorized to trust in himself, methinks Peter and the other Apostles were, in relation to their desertion of their Lord, in his lowest extremity. In the fulness of his own sufficiency, Peter said, "Though I should die with thee, I will not deny thee. And so likewise said they all." Yet, behold, no sooner was their Master apprehended, than "they all forsook him and fled." And Peter, the most self-confident of them all, denied him with oaths and curses. And thus will it be with all of us: however firm our resolutions be, they will prove only as tow before the fire, if they be made in our own strength. We need, indeed, only look back and see what has become of the resolutions we have already made. 'We would turn from this or that sin: we would mortify this or that propensity: we would give up ourselves to God in newness of life.' Alas! alas! how have these purposes vanished, as smoke before the whirlwind! And though we may think to profit by experience, and to become more steadfast in consequence of our former disappointments, we shall only live to prove with still greater evidence the folly of our own ways, and the truth of that inspired declaration, that "the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?"]

3. It will keep us from discovering our error, till it is past a remedy—

[Tell persons what God says of their ways, and they will not believe it. Every one thinks himself safe; and holds fast his persuasion, in spite of all the admonitions that can be given him. The Rich Man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day, would have deemed any one very uncharitable who should have warned him of his approaching end. He would have found an abundance to allege in his own defence; and would not have believed that so inoffensive a life as his could ever issue in such misery as was denounced against him. His five brethren, who succeeded to his wealth, and followed him in what they esteemed so becoming their situation in life, were equally secure in their own minds, and equally averse to think themselves obnoxious to God's displeasure: nay, so averse were they to admit such an idea, that, if their deceased brother's wish had been granted, and one had been sent from the dead to warn them of their danger, they would not have believed his report. Hence, like him who had gone before them, they held fast their delusions, till, one after another, they all came into the same place of torment. Each, at the instant of his own departure, saw the danger of those who were left behind: for, as they would not believe Moses and the Prophets, their ruin was inevitable, and their misery sure. Precisely such is our state and conduct. We will trust in our own hearts, and deny the necessity for trusting only in the Lord; and the probability is, that we shall never be undeceived, till we come to experience what now we will not believe. And are not they who pursue such a course justly denominated fools? If a man would not be persuaded that the leaping down from a lofty precipice would hurt him, and should desperately put it to the trial, and break all his bones, would any one be at a loss to assign an appropriate name to him? Yet would he be wise, in comparison of one who, in defiance of all the warnings of Holy Writ, will trust in himself rather than in God.]

SEE, then, from hence,

1. How desirable is self-knowledge—

[Respecting gross offences, men cannot be ignorant of their condition before God: but respecting the state and habit of their minds, especially in relation to the object of their trust and confidence, they are almost as ignorant as new-born babes. People will not inquire; they will not examine; they will not even suspect that they may be wrong. In truth, they will not believe that their self-confidence is so criminal as the Scriptures represent it, or that any danger can await them on account of it. But, my dear Brethren, I beg you to remember, that the declaration in my text is the word of the living God, and shall surely be found true in the end. I charge you, therefore, to examine carefully into this matter. See whether you have just views of the deceitfulness of the heart. See whether you feel so fearful of its delusions, that you determine never to take its report of any thing without comparing it with the sacred records, and imploring direction from God that you may not err. And be assured, that, till you are brought to renounce all dependence on yourselves, and to depend only on the Lord, you are not, you cannot be, in a state of acceptance with God: for, if he pronounces you fools, he will surely deal with you according to your proper character.]

2. How necessary is the knowledge of Christ—

[Till we come to know what provision God has made for us in the Son of his love, we shall of necessity continue guilty of the folly which is here reprobated. But when once we are assured that there is another in whom we may trust, and who possesses in himself all the fulness of the Godhead, we are encouraged to look beyond ourselves, and to place our confidence in him. Now the Lord Jesus Christ is that person, who is sent of God for that very end, and “is of God made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption.” Here, then, we have all that our necessities can require. By this, all temptation to creature-confidence is cut off: for who would lean upon a reed, that has Omnipotence for his support? or who would build upon the sand, that can have for his foundation “the Rock of ages?” Seek, then, I pray you, the knowledge of this Saviour; and beg of God to shew you what an inexhaustible fulness is treasured up for you in him; and how impossible it is that you should ever fail, if only you trust in him. Once begin in truth to “live by faith in the Son of God,” and you “shall not be ashamed or confounded world without end.”]

DCCCXX

DANGER OF OBSTINACY IN SIN

Prov. 29:1. He that being often reprov'd, hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.

AWFUL, most awful, is this declaration; yet is it most salutary, and worthy of the deepest attention. Many indeed imagine that it is suited only to the dispensation of the Law: but it is no less suited to us under the Gospel. The Gospel does not consist of promises only, but of threatenings also: and St. Paul himself tells us, that “the day of the Lord will so come as a thief in the night; and that when men are saying, Peace and safety, then will sudden destruction come upon them as travail upon a woman with child, and they shall not escapea.”

But in discoursing on such a subject, we would exercise all imaginable tenderness: and we entreat all who are here present to lift up their hearts to God, and to implore the effectual assistance of his good Spirit, that they may be enabled to “tremble at his word,” and to “receive it with meekness, as an engrafted word, which is able to save their souls.”

There are two things here to which we would draw your attention;

I. The character described—

God, with much patience and long-suffering, reproveth the sinners of mankind—

[In a variety of ways he administers reproof. At all times he speaks, silently indeed, but powerfully, to men in his word. Every sin is there depicted in its proper colours, and marked as an object of his righteous indignation. There especially we hear him denouncing his judgments against impenitence and unbelief: “Except ye repent, ye shall all perish.” “He that believeth not, shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.” There too do we find him requiring of us, that we become “new creatures in Christ Jesus;” and declaring, that “except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” In short, every thing that is necessary for us either to know or do, is there revealed——and in every part of it God himself is addressing us day and night——

He reproveth us also by his Providence. Every one of his dispensations towards us has a voice, to which we should give heed, and from which we may gain the most valuable instruction. Does he summon to his tribunal a neighbour, a friend, a relative? He says to the survivors, “Prepare to meet your God.” Does he make a severer inroad on your domestic circle, by cutting off the olive branches that were round about your table, or by “taking away the desire of your eyes with a stroke?” He bids you to seek all your happiness in him alone. By every change of whatever kind, he tells you that “this is not your rest.” Nor does he speak less by mercies than by judgments. Every gift is sent to draw you to him as the Donor; and every instance of “his goodness and long-suffering and forbearance is intended to lead you to repentance.”

Further, he reproveth us also by his Spirit. Who amongst us has not often heard his still small voice, saying to us, “Repent?” Who has not felt many checks of conscience, when he was tempted to commit iniquity? These have been no other than the motions of God’s Holy Spirit within us, testifying against sin, and inviting us to serve our Godb.]

But against his reproofs how often have we “hardened our necks!”

[Many will not endure reproof at all: and, if the word which is ministered to them by the servants of God disquiet their minds, and especially if it strike at their besetting sin, they will vent their indignation against the faithful Messenger who thus disturbs their slumbers. The reproof given to Amaziah was so reasonable, that one would imagine it could not possibly give offence: yet behold, what resentment it kindled in the infatuated monarch! “Art thou made of the king’s counsel? Forbear. Why shouldst thou be smitten?”——Nothing could be more just than the reproof which Jeremiah was ordered to administer to the Jewish people: yet the only effect it produced was, to excite their wrath, and to make them threaten him with instant death: “When Jeremiah had made an end of speaking all that the Lord had commanded him to speak unto all the people, then the priests, and the prophets, and all the people, took him, saying, Thou shalt surely die”——Herod went further still, and actually put the greatest of all the Prophets to death, for no other fault than that of telling him that he should not persevere in his adulterous commerce with his brother Philip’s wifée. Thus it is at this day. Men indeed cannot proceed to such extremities against their reprovers now as they did in former times:

but the world's enmity is the same against all who "testify of it that the works thereof are evil;" and it is owing to the protection of the laws, rather than to any diminution of men's hatred against the truth, that contempt only, and not death, is the portion of God's faithful servants.

But it is not only in a way of outward opposition that men manifest their obduracy. Many who externally approve of the faithful ministry of the word, are in reality as averse to it in their hearts. They hear the word perhaps even with pleasure, as Ezekiel's hearers did; but they will not do it. Say whether this be not the case with many amongst you: you have had the whole counsel of God declared unto you; but have you complied with it? Are you truly brought to the foot of cross, in deep humiliation, in earnest prayer, and in a simple reliance on the blood of Jesus as your only hope?——Have you also taken his yoke upon you, so that you are daily and hourly fulfilling his will, and regarding his service as perfect freedom? Are you dying daily to the world, and living altogether as pilgrims and sojourners here, having your conversation in heaven, and looking forward to the second advent of your Lord as the consummation and completion of your bliss? If you be not thus brought to live unto your God, you have not yet complied with his reproofs: and if you are speaking peace to yourselves in such a state, then are you hardening your necks against him. In words indeed you call him Lord, Lord: but whilst you do not the things which he says, you are still among the number of those to whom he will say, "Depart from me; I never knew you, ye workers of iniquity"——]

Having then seen the character that is described in our text, let us consider,

II. The judgment denounced against him—

What but destruction can await such a character, even "destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power?" Yes, this is the judgment denounced against him; and his destruction, whenever it shall arrive, shall be,

1. Sudden—

[Not unfrequently does God mark by some signal judgment those who have obstinately withstood his warnings and invitations. The Ante-diluvian infidels, who would not be reclaimed by the ministry of Noah, were swept away, as soon as ever their day of grace was ended; as were Pharaoh also, and all his host, when they proudly set themselves in array against the Majesty of heaven. Ananias and Sapphira were also made examples of God's indignation against wilful and deliberate sin.

But though death should come upon us gradually, as it respects the body, it may, as far as it respects our preparation for it, be altogether instantaneous. The effect of wilful sin is, to harden the heart, and to render us more and more indisposed for repentance. It also grieves the Holy Spirit of God, and provokes him to withdraw those gracious influences which he has hitherto vouchsafed. When delaying our repentance, we are apt to fancy that we shall in a time of sickness have such a favourable opportunity for spiritual exercises, as will abundantly make up for all the time that we have lost: but when sickness comes, we find that we cannot realize all our fond expectations: the state of our bodies perhaps unfits us for exertion: and the indisposition of our mind for holy things in become more deeply rooted, so that we cannot relent, or humble ourselves before God. The word of God, when we look into it, is only as a sealed book. The instructions we receive, produce no effect. Even during their full enjoyment of bodily health many are given over to final impenitence, so that the ministry of the word serves only to harden them, and the Gospel itself becomes to them only "a savour of death"—God gives them over to judicial blindness, and leaves them to harden themselves in order to their more aggravated condemnation. Thus he dealt with the sons of Eli; and thus he has declared he will deal with us, if we wilfully reject his tender solicitations——Thus may death come in its most gradual and protracted form, and yet, as far as respects our souls, be as sudden, as if it visited us like a thief in the night.]

2. Irremediable—

[If once God say to his Holy Spirit, "Strive no longer with that man: he is joined to idols: let him alone;" the man is in fact left to irremediable destruction. He will live only to "fill up the measure of his iniquities," and to "treasure up wrath against the day of wrath." But at all events, the very instant that death arrests us, our day of grace is terminated: there is no repentance in the grave; no possibility of passing the gulf that is fixed between heaven and hell: the worm that gnaweth the conscience will never die; the fire that torments the body will never be quenched: the wrath to come will ever be the wrath to come.

What a fearful thought is it, that of those to whom the word of salvation is now preached, many will "come at last into that place of torment," and many, who, like the Foolish Virgins, once had the lamp of outward profession, and associated with the wise virgins, will, instead of being admitted to the marriage supper of their Lord, be "cast into outer darkness, where is weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth!" The Lord grant that none of you may ever experience this doom! yet it is certain, that if you harden your necks against either the precepts of the Law or the promises of the Gospel, this will be your state for ever.

To put you more effectually on your guard, let me]

ADDRESS—

1. Those who are indisposed to submit to God's reproofs—

[The word delivered to you, so far as it accords with God's revealed will, is God's, and not ours. We are his ambassadors; and it is He who speaks to you by our mouth. Indeed, whoever he be that gives you the counsels of true wisdom, he is God's representative to you. Think then, ye who have rejected the counsels of your friends, and the admonitions of your ministers, what will be your reflections in the last day: when you call to mind the instructions once given by your parents, the advice offered by some pious friend

or relative, the warnings delivered by God's servants in the public assembly, how distressing will it be to see that they were only the means of aggravating your eternal condemnation! Oh! let me prevail with you, ere it be too late. Consider, I pray you, "Who ever hardened himself against God, and prospered?" To-day then, while it is called to-day, harden not your hearts, lest you provoke God to swear in his wrath, that you shall never enter into his rest.]

2. Those who are inclined to obey his will—

[Truly this disposition is of the Lord: "it is he that has given you either to will or do." Bless him, then, that the destruction which has come suddenly and irremediably on so many millions of mankind, was not permitted to come on you in your unawakened state. And now let your hearts be right with him: let every word of his sink down into your ears, and be obeyed without reserve. Seek an entire conformity to his mind and will. "Forget all that is behind, and reach forward constantly to that which is before." Seek to "grow up in all things into Christ, your living Head." Make more and more use of that remedy which is in your hands. Apply the precious blood of Christ more and more to your souls, to purge you from your sins; and seek more abundant supplies of the Spirit of grace, to transform you into the Divine image: so shall you be happy now in the prospect of your inheritance, and be progressively rendered meet for your full possession of it.]

DCCCXXI

THE IMPORTANCE OF GOSPEL MINISTRATIONS

Prov. 29:18. Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the Law, happy is he.

THROUGHOUT the whole Scriptures, we have one unvaried testimony respecting man. We see, in every part,

I. The deplorable state of those who know not the Gospel—

Revelations to the prophets were often made in visions: and hence the subject-matter of the revelation was called their "vision." Now, where no revelation is, or where, though given, it is not attended to, "the people perish"—

[This is the unhappy state of the heathen world, who are constantly represented as dead in trespasses and sins, and as under the dominion of Satan—Still more is this the state of God's ancient people, whilst they reject the Messiah—But far worse is the state of those who hear, without obeying, the Gospel—]

II. The blessedness of those who hear and obey it—

Our Lord pronounces them supremely blessed. And there is somewhat very emphatical in the declaration of it contained in our text—

[Those who truly believe in Christ, and live altogether by faith on him, "are happy." They are so, as restored to God's favour—as enjoying his presence—as inheriting his glory—]

OBSERVE from hence—

1. The importance of missionary exertions—

2. The importance of improving our present privileges—

[On the due improvement of them depends both our present and eternal happiness—]

DCCCXXII

THE FEAR OF MAN

Prov. 29:25. The fear of man bringeth a snare; but whoso putteth his trust in the Lord shall be safe.

OUR blessed Lord, at the very first introduction of his religion into the world, told his followers, that he was not come to send peace on earth, but a sword, and to set at variance with each other the nearest and dearest relatives. We are not however to suppose that this was the proper end of his religion: it was not the end, but the effect: and it is, and must be, the effect, as long as there shall be a carnal and unregenerate man upon earth. What, then, must be done by the followers of Christ? Must they draw back, because their carnal friends forbid them to proceed? or must they put their light under a bushel, lest it should offend the eyes of those who behold it? No: they must dismiss from their minds all fear of men, and be faithful to their God at all events: for "the fear of man bringeth a snare;" which they can only avoid by giving themselves up faithfully to their God.

From the words before us, we learn,

I. Our great danger—

The fear of man is far more general than we are at all aware of—

[Ungodly men, who, in relation to all other things, set at defiance the whole world, are yet, almost as much as others, in bondage, in reference to religion. They can set at nought all religion, without any fear at all: but, to shew respect for it, and especially a desire to become acquainted with it, they dare not. They see that there are persons whose ministry would prove instructive; but they fear to avail themselves of such a ministry, lest a suspicion should attach to them as leaning towards a religious life, and as inclined to sentiments which are generally decried. And, as for cultivating an acquaintance with one of strict piety, however much they may wish, they dare not do it, lest they incur ridicule from their ungodly companions.]

Persons who begin to feel any concern about their souls are immediately beset with this evil principle. They are conscious that the change which is taking place in them will, of necessity, offend their former companions; and therefore they desire to conceal their feelings, and to avoid the rupture which they foresee. Hence they make many compliances contrary to the convictions of their own conscience; and expose themselves to many temptations, which their better judgment would have taught them to avoid. So common is this bondage, that scarcely one, at the earlier period of his conversion, is free from it. Whatever be men's rank in life, they are still in subjection to their fellows: yea, the higher their station, the greater, for the most part, is their cowardice.

Nor are established believers free from this thralldom. They do indeed disregard the world; but they are as much enslaved by the maxims and habits of their associates in the church, as ever they were by the world around them. They dare not think for themselves, or act for themselves, according to the convictions of their own minds. They take not their faith and practice from the Scriptures of Truth, but from a standard which obtains among them, and from which they are afraid to deviate. Who would think that Peter himself, bold and intrepid as he was by nature, and still more fortified by grace, should yet yield so far to the prejudice of his Judaizing brethren, as even to endanger the utter subversion of the Gospel, which he had been the honoured instrument of first opening both to the Jewish and Gentile world? Yet so he did, through fear of their displeasure. Who, then, has not cause to acknowledge himself in danger of erring, through the operation of this evil principle?]

To all who yield to its influence, it brings a fatal snare—

[Thousands it keeps from coming within the reach of spiritual instruction. The fear of that expostulation, "He hath a devil and is mad; why hear ye him?" is quite sufficient to intimidate the generality of men, whom curiosity at least might otherwise bring within the sphere of spiritual instruction. And in those of whom better things might have been hoped, it has wrought, in unnumbered instances, to the production of the most tremendous evils, moral, spiritual, eternal. Behold in Peter a dissimulation, which led even Barnabas astray. They, through mercy, were recovered: but many it has led to utter apostasy, and involved in everlasting ruin. In the days of our blessed Lord many were "afraid to confess him, because they loved the praise of men more than the honour that cometh of God;" and many who had followed him "went back, and walked no more with him:" and so in every age, even to the present hour, have many been turned aside by the dread of persecution, and have "made shipwreck of their faith." And what the issue of this is to their souls, we are told: for "the fearful and unbelieving," no less than "murderers and whoremongers, have their portion in the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone, which is the second death." In truth, our adorable Saviour warned his hearers respecting this, from the very beginning; declaring to them at all times, that they who should be ashamed of him, and should deny him, would assuredly find him ashamed of them, and would be ultimately denied by him in the presence of his Father and of the whole assembled universe.]

Seeing, then, that we are all exposed to this danger, it will be expedient that I point out to you,

II. Its proper and only effectual antidote—

There is nothing but a regard to God himself that can ever overcome the fear of man: on which account our blessed Lord says, "Fear not man, who can only kill the body, and after that hath no more that he can do; but fear him who can destroy both body and soul in hell." The same truth is suggested in my text, only in somewhat of a more gentle form: "Whoso putteth his trust in the Lord, shall be safe."

Would we then be delivered from the foregoing snare, let us put our trust in God,

1. For happiness—

[A man who is dependent on the world for his happiness, must of necessity be in bondage to its maxims, its habits, its votaries. But one whose heart is fixed upon God, and who looks up to God as his portion, feels himself at liberty. It is to him a small matter whether the world frown or smile. All that he is anxious about, is, to retain the favour of God, and to have the light of his countenance lifted up upon him. His interest, his reputation, his life may be endangered; but he smiles at the vain attempts of his enemies. They may shut him up from all access of earthly friends; but they cannot deprive him of communion with God: on the contrary, his communications from God are, for the most part, enlarged, in proportion as man's efforts to distress him are increased. And "when God giveth quietness, who then can make trouble?"]

2. For support—

[A man, when menaced by earthly enemies, is driven to the Lord for succour: and, O! what strength does he find communicated to him in the hour of need! Assured of strength according to his day, the believer disregards the utmost efforts of his persecutors. The

furnace may be heated seven times more than usual, or the lions have their appetites whetted for their prey; but his mind is in peace, because he “knows in whom he has believed, and that God is able to keep that which has been committed to him.” Whether he shall be delivered by God from his trials, or be supported under them, he knows not: but he is assured, that whatever be done by his enemies, shall “work together for his good;” and that, in the issue, he shall “prove more than conqueror, through Him who loved him.”]

3. For recompence—

[To heaven the believer looks, as his final rest: and in the prospect of that, all the transitory events of time become of no account in his estimation. The crown of victory and of glory is ever in his view; and he knows the condition on which alone it will be bestowed: we must “be faithful unto death, if ever we would obtain a crown of life.” Hence he finds no difficulty in renouncing all that the world can give, and in enduring all that the most bitter persecutors can inflict; because, like Moses, he “looks unto the recompence of the reward;” and, like the “women who refused to accept deliverance from their tortures, he expects a better resurrection.” Whatever tribulations he may pass through in his way to glory, he feels no doubt but that the glory which awaits him will amply make amends for all.]

For an IMPROVEMENT of this subject, I will add,

1. A word of caution—

[The foregoing sentiments, if not received with a becoming spirit, are liable to abuse. Indeed we have often seen, in young and inexperienced persons especially, conceit and self-will assuming the garb of religion; and exerting themselves, without controul, in opposition to all sound advice, and in defiance of all legitimate authority. Let me, therefore, be well understood in this matter. Though we are to be on our guard against the fear of man, we are not to set at nought the counsels of the wise, nor the injunctions of those who are over us in the Lord. In matters of indifference, it is well to consult the judgment and the wishes of those who are in authority over us. It is only when the counsels and commands of men go counter to the commands of God, that we are authorized to set them at nought; and even then we must conduct ourselves with meekness and modesty, and must not give way to a rude, unmannered, refractory spirit. This is of exceeding great importance. We cannot too strictly watch against the indulgence of any unhallowed temper under the pretext of religion: and if at any time we are constrained to oppose the wishes of our friends, we must order ourselves with such kindness and love, as may leave them in no doubt but that our perseverance is the fruit of real piety, and not the offspring of obstinate conceit.]

2. A word of encouragement—

[However careful we be, we must expect to incur the displeasure of those who wish to retain us in bondage to the world. But if, as we have reason to expect, our greatest foes be those of our own household, let us consider how much better it is to have the frowns of men and the approbation of God, than the smiles of men and the displeasure of God. If all the men in the universe were to applaud us, it would be a poor recompence for the loss of a good conscience, whose testimony in our behalf would repay us for the loss of the whole world. In fact, if we inquire into the state of those who uphold each other in iniquity, we shall find that no one of them has peace in his own soul: for, how should they have peace who seek their happiness in the world rather than in God? Compare, then, your state with theirs; and you will have reason to bless God, even though the whole world be against you. For them nothing remains but “a certain fearful looking-for of judgment and fiery indignation:” for you is prepared an eternal weight of glory, which will be augmented in proportion to the trials which you sustained for God, and the services you rendered to him. Be of good cheer, then: for your trials do, in fact, “turn unto you for a testimony;” and “if you suffer with Christ,” you are assured, by the voice of Inspiration, that “you shall also be glorified together.”]

DCCCXXIII

A SAINT'S VIEWS OF HIMSELF

Prov. 30:1, 2. The words of Agur the son of Jakeh, even the prophecy: the man spake unto Ithiel, even unto Ithiel and Ucal, Surely I am more brutish than any man, and have not the understanding of a man.

THE sayings of the wise and good have in all ages been regarded with veneration, and been treasured up in the minds of men as a kind of sacred deposit, for the enriching and instructing of future generations. We have here a very remarkable saying of Agur the son of Jakeh; to which I would now call your attention. It does indeed, we must confess, appear, at first sight, a rash expression, savouring rather of intemperance than of sound discretion. But as it was delivered to “Ithiel and Ucal,” who were probably his disciples; and as it was introduced with the word, “Surely,” which marks it as the result of his deliberate judgment; and, above all, it being called “a prophecy,” which determines it to have been inspired of God; we should calmly inquire into it, and examine its import. That such an expression may be uttered by persons widely differing from each other in their moral and religious habits, I readily admit: and therefore, in order to prevent any misapprehension, I shall consider the text,

I. As the language of passion—

Sin, however fondly cherished in the heart of fallen man, is no other than folly and madness. So it is described by Solomon, in the Book of Ecclesiastes: "I applied mine heart to know and to search, and to seek out wisdom and the reason of things; and to know the wickedness of folly, even of foolishness and madness." And again: "The heart of the sons of men is full of evil; madness is in their heart while they live; and after that they go to the deadb." When a person, who has been led captive by it, comes to discern somewhat of its true character, he is apt to feel indignation against himself, and to reproach himself in strong terms for the folly he has committed. We may well conceive of him as saying, in the language of our text, "Surely I am more brutish than any man, and have not the understanding of a man." But this indignation against himself may be the mere language of passion, and not of genuine humiliation: and it may be distinguished from that which is the fruit of piety,

1. In its object—

[An ungodly man may feel strongly, whilst he has no real humility: he may hate his actions and himself on account of them. But it is not sin that he hates, so much as the consequences of his sin. Nor does he hate all its consequences: he hates it not as defiling to his soul, as offensive to his God, as injurious to his eternal interests; but as destructive of his peace, as degrading him in the eyes of his fellow-men, and as ruinous to his present welfare. A gamester, who has staked his all upon the cast of a die, and has thereby reduced himself and his family from affluence to want, curses his folly with the most indignant feelings; and so hates himself for it, that he can scarcely endure his very existence. But, if his money were restored, he would do the same again: or, if taught wisdom by experience, he would not refrain from his former habits on account of any regard for God or his own soul, but only on account of the injury that was likely to accrue from them in a temporal view. The same may be said respecting the votaries of dissipation. When their fortune is wasted by extravagance, and their constitution ruined by excess, they may be strongly impressed with the folly and madness of their past ways; whilst, if they could be restored to their former affluence and vigour, they would run the very same career again. Under all the painful consequences of his licentious habits, the libertine can scarcely avoid those reflections which Solomon represents as arising in his mind: "Thou wilt mourn at the last, when thy flesh and thy body are consumed, and say, How have I hated instruction, and my heart despised reproof; and have not obeyed the voice of my teachers, nor inclined mine ear to them that instructed me! I was almost in all evil in the midst of the congregation and assemblyc." Nor can we doubt, but that in hell those reflections will be both universal and exceeding bitter: for the "wailing and gnashing of teeth" which will be there experienced, will arise, in no small degree, from the consideration of the opportunities once enjoyed, but now irrecoverably and for ever lostd.]

2. In its operation—

[The indignation of an ungodly man is sudden and transient; and is always accompanied with a crimination of those who have been in any measure accessory to the evils that have come upon him. But, in a man of piety, they are the fruit of deep reflection, dwelling habitually in the mind, and always attended with self-reproach. We may see in the Prodigal Son a just exhibition of that which arises from genuine repentance. He does not, under the pressure of his distress, cry out with vehement exclamations, designating his conduct by every term that an embittered spirit can suggest; but he adopts a resolution to return to his father's house, and there, in measured and contrite language, confesses, "I have sinned against heaven and before thee; and am no more worthy to be called thy son." Generally speaking, the more violent the expressions are, the less genuine is the contrition from which they flow. The exercise of deep and just feeling is rather in a way of temperate meiosis, than of vehement and fluent exaggeration. The two kinds of indignation may be easily distinguished by their attendant feelings: the one is the fruit of wounded pride, and the root of every thing that is unhallowed, whether in word or deed; the other is the offspring of deep contrition; and either the parent or the child of genuine conversion to God.]

Having discriminated, we hope, sufficiently between the expressions of our text as used by persons of opposite characters, and shewn how to distinguish them when uttered as the language of passion, we proceed to notice them,

II. As the language of piety—

We know assuredly that indignation is a fruit of godly sorrow: for St. Paul says to the Corinthians, "Behold this self-same thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge!" And we have seen it operate precisely as in the text, when, according to common apprehension, there would appear to be but little occasion for it. David, seeing the prosperity of the wicked, and not duly adverting to their end, had envied them: and in the review of his conduct he exclaims, "So foolish was I, and ignorant; I was even as a beast before thee." Nor are such views uncommon to the saints: or rather, I should say, there is no true saint who does not on some occasions apply them to himself.

If it be asked, 'How can such expressions fall from the lips of a real saint?' I answer, they necessarily spring,

1. From a view of the law under which we live—

[Whilst ignorant of the spirituality and extent of God's Law, we take credit to ourselves for our external conformity to its precepts; and are ready to imagine, that, "touching the righteousness of the Law we are blamelessg." But when we come to see how "broad the commandment ish," that it reaches to the inmost thoughts of the soul, prohibiting even so much as an inordinate desire, and requiring us to "love and serve our God with all our heart, and mind, and soul, and strength," we are struck dumb; our towering

“imagination is cast down;” and, like the Apostle Paul, we feel the sentence of death gone forth against us, and attaching to us no less for our best deeds, than for the most sinful action of our lives.” Then we become observant of our defects: and, O! how loathsome are we then in our own eyes, in the view of that very obedience of which we once thought so highly! It is no wonder, if, with this augmented new of his own deformity, the saint speak of himself in very humiliating and degrading terms. A person coming into a room at night with a lighted taper, would see but little: if he returned at the dawn of day, he would have a clearer view of all the objects that before were scarcely visible: but, if he entered when the sun was shining forth in its strength, he would discern the smallest specks of dirt, and even the very motes in the air. But would he then conclude that all the dust and dirt which he now beheld had been cast in since his first entrance? No: he would know to what he must ascribe the change in his views, even to the increased light by which he was enabled to take the survey. And so a clearer view of God’s holy Law will give us a deeper insight into our own deformity, and turn the glories of self-esteem into the mournings of humiliation and contrition.]

2. From a view of that God against whom we have sinned—

[The least knowledge of God is sufficient to abase us before him: but the more we behold his glorious perfections, the more shall we stand amazed at the coldness of our love to him, and our want of zeal in his service. Job, previous to his troubles, was considered as “a perfect man” even by God himself. But when God had revealed himself more fully to his soul, how base did this holy man appear in his own eyes! “Behold, I am vile!” says he. “I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear; but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” This will be the effect of all God’s manifestations of himself, whether in a way of providence or of grace. It is impossible to behold his goodness, his patience, his forbearance, and not stand amazed at our own insensibility. “The ox and the ass” do not appear so brutish as we; nor “the stork or crane or swallow” so unobservant of the things which we are most concerned to notice: and our only wonder is, that it should be possible for God to endure with such long-suffering our great and multiplied iniquities.]

3. From a view of the obligations we lie under—

[Our Lord has said, that our love to God will bear proportion to the sense we have of the extent of his mercy towards us in forgiveness. But, when we reflect on the means he has used, in order to open a way for the exercise of his mercy towards us, what shall we not account his due? When we consider that he has “not spared even his own Son, but delivered HIM up for us all,” what bounds will there be to our gratitude; or rather, what bounds will there be to our humiliation for the want of gratitude? It will be impossible for us then ever to satisfy our own desires: if we had a thousand lives, we would devote them all to him, and at his call be ready to sacrifice them all for him. The services which we once thought sufficient will then appear little better than a solemn mockery; so entirely will our souls be absorbed in wonder at the thought of an incarnate God, a crucified Redeemer.]

4. From a view of the interests we have at stake—

[If only the life or death of our bodies were at stake, we should feel deeply interested in the event: but, when heaven and all its glory, or hell and all its misery, are the alternatives before us, one would suppose that every temporal consideration should be swallowed up, and vanish as the light of a star before the meridian sun. But the saint is not always so indifferent to the things of time and sense as he would wish to be. There are times, when every thing below the sun is in his eyes lighter than vanity itself: but there are, also, times when he finds his heart yet cleaving to the dust, and when his progress heavenward is slow and imperceptible. On such occasions he is amazed at himself: he can scarcely conceive it possible that, with such prospects before him, he should be so stupid and brutish as he feels himself to be. Truly, at these seasons the language of our text will be often in his heart, and in his mouth too, especially if he find an Ithiel, or an Ucal, that is capable of understanding it.]

After viewing this subject, we shall be at no loss to UNDERSTAND,

1. Whence it is that saints are often dejected in their minds—

[None are at all times alike joyful. St. Paul says, that “they who have the first-fruits of the Spirit,” no less than others, sometimes “groan within themselves, being burdened.” And so it ought to be. In the review of their past lives they should be humbled, even as Paul was, when he designated himself as “a blasphemer, and injurious, and a persecutor, and the very chief of sinners.” And under a sense of their remaining infirmities, it becomes them to lie low before God. Behold St. Paul, when he had preached the Gospel above twenty years, yet felt so much corruption within him, that he cried out, “O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me?” The image which he here uses is that which has often been realized. He refers to a punishment sometimes inflicted on criminals, by chaining them to a dead corpse, and constraining them to bear it about with them, till they died through the offensiveness of its noxious odours. Such was his in-dwelling corruption to him, even at that advanced period of his life: and such it should be felt by every saint on earth. In truth, there should not enter so much as a ray of comfort into the soul, but from a view of the Sun of Righteousness. It is He alone that can, or ought, to “arise upon us with healing in his wings.” And therefore the Apostle, after the lamentation just mentioned, adds, “I thank God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Let not this, then, prove a stumbling-block to any: nor let it be supposed, that, because a pious person uses, in reference to himself, terms which a worldly person would not deign to use, he must of necessity have committed any greater sin than others. His humiliation, as we have seen, arises out of the views which he has obtained of holy things: and the nearer his intercourse with heaven is, the more ready will he be to exclaim with the

Prophet, "Woe is me, I am undone! I am a man of unclean lips, dwelling in the midst of a people of unclean lips;" that is, a leper, in the midst of a leprous and ungodly world.]

2. How far they are from piety who are filled with self-complacent thoughts—

[Persons who have been exemplary in their conduct, and punctual in their religious observances, are, for the most part, filled with a conceit of their own goodness, and confident of their acceptance with God on account of it. But little do they know how odious they are in the sight of God, whilst they are righteous in their own eyes. It is the Publican, and not the Pharisee, that will be justified before God: and "the sick, not the whole," that will experience "the Physician's" aid. Christianity is not a remedial law, lowered to the standard of our weakness; but a remedy, by which the soul that is sick unto death may be effectually healed. Christ is a Saviour; but he is so to those only who feel themselves lost, and renounce every other hope but him. Bear this, then, in remembrance. Bear in remembrance, that there are no terms too humiliating to express the real state of your souls before God. You have lived as without God in the world, unconscious of his eye upon you; and his address to you is, "Understand ye brutish among the people; and ye fools, when will ye be wiser?" This may be offensive to our proud hearts; but it is such an address as we merit, and such a one as it becomes an holy God to deliver. The particular ground of Agur's self-abasement was, that "he had not learned wisdom, or attained the knowledge of the Holy One." And have not many amongst you the same ground for self-abasement? Yes, "There are many amongst you who have not the knowledge of God. I speak this to your shame." Many amongst you have never yet walked in the ways of true wisdom. Humble yourselves, therefore, for your more than brutish stupidity: and now, as the Psalmist says, "Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in hima."]

DCCCXXIV

AGUR'S WISH

Prov. 30:7–9. Two things have I required of thee; deny me them not before I die: Remove far from me vanity and lies; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me: lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the Lord? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain.

IT is the privilege of man to make known his requests to God in prayer, and to solicit from him whatever may conduce to his real good. Even temporal things may be asked, provided it be in subserviency to our spiritual interests, and with entire submission to the Divine will. Who Agur was, we cannot certainly determine; but he was evidently an inspired persona; and his prayer in reference to his condition in this world is an excellent pattern for our imitation. He entreated the Lord with very great earnestness; yet he considered his condition in this world as altogether subordinate to his eternal welfare; and therefore in what he asked for his body, he consulted only the good of his soul.

We propose to consider,

I. His request—

Some interpret the former of his petitions as expressing a wish to be kept from error and delusion in spiritual matters; but we apprehend that the things which he requested were,

1. A removal from the temptations of an exalted state—

[He justly characterizes the pomp and splendour of the world as "vanity and lies;" "vanity," because they are empty and unsatisfying; and "lies," because they promise happiness to their possessors, but invariably disappoint them. In this light they are frequently represented in Scripture; and they who have been most competent to judge respecting them, have been most forward to declare them mere vanity and vexation of spiritc.

Agur doubtless beheld them in this view, and therefore rather deprecated them as evils, than desired them as objects of his ambition.]

2. A mediocrity of state and condition—

[He did not, through a dread of wealth, desire to be reduced to poverty: he wished rather to stand at an equal distance from each extreme; and to enjoy that only which God should judge "convenient for him." It is not easy for us to say precisely what a competency is; because it must vary according to men's education and habits; that being poverty to one, which would be riches to another: yet the line drawn by Agur, seems to mark the limits most agreeably to the mind of God, because it exactly corresponds with the views of patriarchsd, of prophetse, of Apostlesf, and particularly with the prayer which our blessed Lord himself has taught all his followers to useg.]

In urging his request, Agur manifested great zeal and earnestness: his whole soul appeared to be engaged in it: we are therefore interested in inquiring into,

II. The reasons with which he enforced it—

He was not actuated by any carnal motives, though he was praying about carnal things. It was not the incumbrances of wealth, or the hardships of poverty that he dreaded; he considered only the aspect of the different states upon his spiritual advancement; and deprecated them equally on account of the temptations incident to both.

1. On account of the snares of wealth—

[Riches foster the pride of the human heart, and engender a haughty and independent spirit. This was the effect of opulence on God's people of old; and the same baneful influence is observable in our day. The great consider it almost as an act of condescension to acknowledge God. Scarcely one of them in a thousand will endure to hear his name mentioned in private, or his will propounded as the proper rule of his conduct. The atheistical expressions in the text are indeed the language of his conduct, if not also of his lips. It is on this, as well as other accounts, that our Lord has spoken of riches as rendering our salvation difficult, yea impossible, without some signal interposition of divine grace. And therefore every one who values his soul may well deprecate an exalted state.]

2. On account of the snares of poverty—

[Poverty has its snares no less than wealth: where its pressure is felt, the temptations to dishonesty are exceeding great. Even those who are in ease and affluence are too easily induced to deviate from the paths of strict integrity, especially when there appears but little probability of detection: how much more strongly then may a dishonest principle be supposed to operate, when called forth by necessity and distress! God appointed that a person suspected of theft should clear himself by an oath before a magistrate; but this was a feeble barrier against dishonesty; for he that will cheat, will lie; and, if urged to it, will rather perjure himself to conceal his crime, than expose himself to shame by confessing it. Thus one sin leads to another; and a soul, that is of more value than ten thousand worlds, is bartered for some worthless commodity. Justly then may that state also be deprecated, which exposes us to such tremendous evils.]

This subject may TEACH us,

1. Contentment with our lot—

[Whatever be the means used, it is God alone that fixes our condition in the world: and, if we be Christians indeed, we may be sure that our lot is that which, all things considered, is most for the good of our souls. If any variations in it have taken place, such changes have been sent to teach in that contentment, which St. Paul so richly experienced, and which it is no less our privilege than our duty to learn. If we have that which is best for our souls, then we have that which is really best.]

2. Watchfulness against our besetting sins—

[Every situation of life has its peculiar temptations. Youth or age, health or sickness, riches or poverty have their respective snares. It is our wisdom to stand on our guard against the difficulties to which we are more immediately exposed; and rather to seek for grace that we may approve ourselves to God in the station to which he has called us, than to desire a change of circumstances, which will change indeed, but not remove, our trials.]

3. Solitude for spiritual advancement—

[It was sin, and sin only, that Agur feared: and doubtless sin is the greatest of all evils. Let the same mind then be in us that was in him. Whether we have poverty or riches, or whether we be equally removed from both, let us endeavour to improve in spirituality and holiness. Then will the wisdom of God, in appointing such a variety of states, be made manifest: and the collective virtues of the different classes will then shine with combined lustre, and, like the rays of the sun, display the glory of Him from whom they sprang.]

DCCCXXV

THE SELF-DECEIVER EXPOSED

Prov. 30:12. There is a generation that are pure in their own eyes, and yet is not washed from their filthiness.

MEN of themselves are very backward to form an unfavourable estimate of their own character. Hence arises the necessity of accurate discrimination and undaunted fidelity in ministers, whose office is to "separate the precious from the vile," and to give to every one his portion in due season. The Scriptures draw a broad line of distinction between the righteous and the wicked; and this, not in their actions only, but in their dispositions and habits; by which the different characters may be as clearly discerned as by their outward conduct. The generation of self-deceivers is very numerous: multitudes there are who stand high in their own estimation, whilst in God's eyes they are as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. Amongst these we must number,

I. The decent formalist—

He is "pure in his own eyes"—

[He is punctual in the observance of outward duties, both civil and religious. He will attend constantly at the house of God, and even at the table of the Lord: he will also establish worship in his family: and in respect of his dealings with men, he will be all that is amiable and lovely: he will be honest, sober, just, temperate, benevolent: as far as the letter of the law goes, he may be blameless. In such a state, what wonder is it if he be pure in his own eyes? He understands not the spirituality of the law, and can judge of himself only by the defective standard of heathen morality. By the world he is admired, and held up as a pattern of all excellence: and seeing that he stands high in the esteem of others, he almost of necessity entertains a high opinion of himself.]

But he “is not washed from his filthiness”—

[Much filthiness there is in the heart of every man by nature; and there is a filthiness which every person may properly call his own, as being congenial with his own feelings, and particularly connected with his own character. With the character before us there is a very abundant measure of pride, venting itself in a constant habit of self-confidence and self-complacency. Combined with this are impenitence and unbelief: for how is it possible that he should repent and believe, when he knows not the extent of his guilt and danger? “Being whole, he feels no need of a physician”——He is altogether under the dominion also of worldly-mindedness. When he has performed his religious duties, he goes to worldly company, without feeling any want, or being sensible of any danger. The friendship of the world is what he delights in as his chief good, never once suspecting, that this very disposition proves and constitutes him an enemy of God. Thus, though there is nothing in him that the world disapproves, and nothing that seems to call for self-reproach, he is under the habitual and allowed dominion of evils, which render him abominable in the sight of God. He has somewhat of “the form of godliness, but none at all of its power”——]

Amongst this generation we must also number,

II. The almost Christian—

He goes much farther than the decent formalist—

[He is convinced of the truth and excellence of Christianity, and wishes to be a partaker of its benefits. He will vindicate the faithful servants of God against the accusations brought against them by the ungodly world: and will actually comply with many things which the Gospel requires——

From this partial change in himself he begins to think that he is a Christian indeed. His constrained approbation of the Gospel appears to him to be a cordial acceptance of it: and his slender performances of its duties are in his estimation like an unreserved obedience.]

But, like him, he deceives his own soul—

[He will not renounce all for Christ. When our Lord says, “Go, sell all that thou hast, and give to the poor, and come and follow me,” he departs sorrowful, like the Rich Youth, and chooses the world in preference to Christ. He draws back also from the cross, which he will not bear. He is ashamed of Christ, even at the very time that he shews some regard both for his word and ministers. He will not “come out from the world and be separate;” but still remains conformed to it, to its maxims, its habits, its spirit, and its company. Of the true Christian, our Lord says, “Ye are not of this world, even as I am not of the world:” but of the almost Christian, the very reverse is true: he strives to reconcile the inconsistent services of God and Mammon: and if this cannot be done, he will forego his eternal interests, rather than sacrifice his worldly interests, and subject himself to the scorn and hatred of the ungodly.

Thus, though pure in his own eyes, he is yet in bondage to the fear of man; and gives a decided preference to this world, before the preservation of a good conscience, and the approbation of his God.]

To the same class belongs also,

III. The inconsistent professor—

Who more confident of the goodness of his state, than he who professes to believe in Christ?

[The man who has felt some conviction of sin, and some hope in Christ, and has been hailed by others as a sound convert to the Christian faith, is ready to conclude that all is well: his successive emotions of hope and fear, of joy and sorrow, are to him a sufficient evidence, that his conversion is unquestionable. If he have some ability to talk about the Gospel, and some gift in prayer, he is still further confirmed in his persuasion, that there exists in him no ground for doubt or fear. More especially, if he have views of the Covenant of grace, as “ordered in all things and sure,” and have adopted a crude system of religion that favours a blind confidence, he concludes at once that he is, and must be, a child of God.]

But who more open to self-deception?

[Professors of the Gospel are very apt to forget that rule of judging which our Lord himself has prescribed, “By their fruits ye shall know them.” But this is the only safe criterion whereby to judge of our state before God. Yet, when brought to this test, how low do many religious professors appear! They can talk of the Gospel fluently; but, if their spirit and temper be inquired into, they are found to be under the habitual dominion of some besetting sin, as they were before they ever thought of religion. It is lamentable to think what “filthiness there is both of flesh and spirit,” from which many who profess the Gospel have never yet been “washed:” yet an inspired Apostle declares, that “if a man seem to be religious and bridled not his tongue, he deceiveth himself, and his religion is vain.” What then must be the state of those who yet remain proud and passionate, worldly-minded and covetous, false and dishonest, impure and sensual, yea, and grossly defective in all the duties of their place and station? Truly, of all the people belonging to the generation spoken of in our text, these are in the greatest danger, because their confidence is founded in the idea,

that they have already bathed in the fountain which alone is able to cleanse them from their sin.]

ADDRESS,

1. Those who, though pure in their own eyes, are not washed—

[Happy would it be if men would relax the confidence which they are ever ready to maintain of the safety of their state before God. Every one conceives, that whatever others may do, he deceives not his own soul: yet behold so great is the number of self-deceivers, that they constitute “a generation!” Beloved, learn to try yourselves by the only true test, your conformity to the will of God, and to the example of Christ——It is in the balance of the sanctuary, and not in your own balance, that you are to weigh yourselves; for in that shall you be weighed at the last day: and if you are found wanting in that, the measure of your deficiency will be the measure of your condemnation——]

2. Those who, though not pure in their own eyes, are really washed from their filthiness—

[Blessed be God! there is a generation of these also. Many who once wallowed in all manner of filthiness, are now washed from it, even as the Corinthian converts were. Yet they are not pure in their own eyes: on the contrary, they are of all people most ready to suspect themselves, and to “lothe themselves” for their remaining imperfections. See how strikingly this is exemplified in the very chapter before us: Agur was a man of unquestionable piety: yet, under a sense of his great unworthiness, he complained, “Surely I am more brutish than any man, and have not the understanding of a man.” This may appear to many to be extravagant: but it is the real feeling of many a child of God: I may add too, it is their frequent complaint before God. Such were the feelings of Job, of Isaiah, and of Paul——If it be asked, Whence arises this, that such holy and heavenly persons should be so far from being pure in their own eyes? the reason is, that they try themselves by a more perfect standard, and from their clearer discoveries of the path of duty are more deeply conscious of their aberrations from it. Their love of holiness also makes them now to abhor themselves more for their want of conformity to the Divine image, than they once did even for the grossest sins. To you then, dearly Beloved, I would address myself in the language of consolation and encouragement. It is well that you see and lament your vileness, provided you make it only an occasion of humiliation, and not of despondency. The more lowly you are in your own eyes, the more exalted you are in God’s, who has said, that “he who humbleth himself shall be exalted.” Let your sense of your remaining imperfections make you plead more earnestly with your God that reviving promise, “From all your filthiness, and from all your idols, I will cleanse you.” And remember, that you are not to wash yourselves first, and then to lay hold on the promises, but to embrace the promises first, and then by means of them to cleanse yourselves from the defilements you lament. This is the order prescribed in the Gospel; and, if you will adhere to it, you shall have increasing evidence that it is the destined path of purity and peace.]

DCCCXXVI

USEFULNESS OF SCHOOLS OF INDUSTRY

Prov. 31:10. Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies.

WHILE we rejoice in the progress of civilization, we cannot but regret the loss of primitive simplicity. In former days, women of the highest rank did not disdain to employ themselves in the most common offices of life. King Lemuel, supposed by some to be Solomon himself, was exhorted by his inspired mother to select for his wife a woman who was not ashamed to occupy herself in domestic duties. The description here given of a queen, is, alas! but ill suited to the refinement of the present age. It is rather calculated for the lower classes of the community. With a more immediate view therefore to their benefit, we shall consider it, and shew,

I. The character of a virtuous woman—

There is no other character so fully drawn in Scripture as this. She is described by,

1. Her industry—

[She rises early: and when occasion requires, goes late to rest. She encourages industry in her dependents, and sets them an example of it herself, willingly, regularly, without regarding fatigue.]

2. Her prudence—

[She sells the produce of her labour, and lays out her money with judgment for the permanent benefit of her family. She provides comfortably for her family in respect of food and clothing. She guards against all waste of her husband’s property. She employs her leisure in improving her mind; and conducts herself with love and kindness towards all.]

3. Her piety—

[She is not satisfied with performing her duties towards man, but endeavours to serve God also. She accounts “the fear of God” to be the one thing needful. She labours above all things to cultivate this divine principle: she makes it the source and motive, the rule

and measure, the scope and end, of all her actions; and, while she serves her God, she delights also to benefit the poor.]
Of such a character it is not easy to estimate,

II. The worth—

Rubies are accounted valuable among earthly treasures: but the worth of such a woman is infinitely above them—she is,

1. An ornament to her sex—

[However highly beauty is prized among men, the endowments before mentioned render their possessor incomparably more lovely. The person possessing them must be admired in any station in life; but her excellence is then most conspicuous and most valuable, when she sustains the relations of a wife and a mother. It is to be lamented that such characters are rarely “found:” but the more scarce they are, the more worthy are they of our esteem.]

2. A blessing to her family—

[Of whatever rank they be, they cannot fail to reap much benefit from her prudent management, and pious example. If they be poor, especially, the good arising to them will be incalculable. They will enjoy a thousand comforts, of which others of their class are destitute. Their decent appearance will procure them respect, and redound to her praise. Her children will love and honour her, and bless God on her account. Her husband will delight in her himself, and make his boast of her to others. They will all esteem her as a rich and continued source of domestic felicity.]

3. A comfort to all around her—

[The rich will be glad to aid her by their wealth and influence. The poor will find in her a friend, to counsel them in difficulty, and relieve them in distress. All who behold her, will be constrained to applaud her conduct, and many will be excited to follow her example.]

We may now hope for a favourable attention, while we set before you,

III. The tendency of this institution to increase their number—

Though piety is as common among the poor as among any class of the community, yet it is very rare indeed that we can find among them a combination of the qualities before insisted on.

[From want of education they know not how to manage their affairs——And from habits of inattention, they are indisposed to learn ——]

But to the rising generation much good will arise from a school of industry—

[The instruction which they gain in common schools, is very confined; but in this they will be taught all that can qualify them for usefulness in this world, or happiness in the next. To read the Bible, and to fear God, will be proposed as the first objects of their attention. To qualify them for service, and to fit them to manage their own families at some future period, is the next concern we wish to promote. To call forth their own exertions, and stimulate a desire to excel, every encouragement will be afforded them. Thus habits of industry, of economy, of subordination to men, and of piety to God, being formed, they will fill up their future stations in life with far greater advantage to themselves, and benefit to society.]

We will now consider SOME OBJECTIONS that may be made—

1. Among the rich—

[Some think it better that the poor should be kept in ignorance. But these are themselves ignorant, unfeeling, and ungodly. Some have a fear that persons may be wanted for agricultural work; but there will always be found many who stand in need of employment.]

2. Among the poor—

[These are unwilling to forego the immediate earnings of their children. But in a little time they will earn much more than they now do. They will sooner find situations where they will live at free cost. They will probably be able at a future period to aid their parents, instead of being a grief, and perhaps a burthen, to them. They will have a far better prospect of heaven, by having their minds instructed, and their conduct regulated, than they would have had, if brought up in ignorance and sin.]

We conclude with recommending the institution to your support—

[If self-interest alone were consulted, the rich should help forward such institutions: for, if extensively promoted, they would soon lower the rates. But if benevolence be allowed to operate, it has unbounded scope for exercise in such institutions as these; since they render the lower orders of people more intelligent, more useful, more prosperous, and more happy.]