

THE

DISTINGUISHING TRAITS OF CHRISTIAN

CHARACTER

BY

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1. Visible Morality

In what consists those fruits of the Spirit which show plainly to ourselves and others that we are born of God?

This inquiry is of the most practical kind as it brings every man to sit in judgment on his character. "Know yourself" is an injunction which comes to us under the combined sanction, both of reason and revelation, and which, though not without difficulty in its impartial fulfillment, may and must be fulfilled if we would discharge our duty or enjoy the full measure of comfort which the religion of Jesus imparts. It must be conceded that men have no right to mistake their own moral character. There is a wide and essential difference between holy and unholy affections. God has given them all proper and necessary means to assist them in an acquaintance with their own hearts; He has expressly forbidden them to mistake "the nature of their religious affections and to deceive themselves in respect to their spiritual state; and it is impossible they should make the mistake unless they are under the influence of some selfish and sinful motive with which they have no right to comply. The Holy Spirit would not so often have urged the sentiment - "Do not be deceived," "Let no man deceive himself," "You know not what manner of spirit you are of," "Examine yourselves whether you be in the faith; prove your own selves; know you are not your own selves?" - if there were any necessity for self-deception.

There are some things which neither prove nor disprove the existence of grace in the soul; there are others that prove the existence of it, and that may be safely relied on as furnishing conclusive testimony that we have passed from death unto life. It is no less important to examine the inconclusive than the conclusive testimony, and it is to the former that we solicit your attention for several of the earlier essays in this little volume.

There is no certain evidence that a man is the friend of God resulting from his visible morality.

There is much apparent religion in the world which consists in mere visible morality. "Man looks on the outward appearance." When you see a person of unblemished moral character you involuntarily adjudge him worthy of your esteem and confidence. There are such multitudes in this apostate world who are dishonest, idle, faithless, intemperate, unfriendly, and unkind, that when you meet a man who is honest, industrious, faithful to his promises, and punctual in his engagements, and who to these laudable qualities adds a friendly, humane, generous and amiable spirit and urbane demeanor, you are tempted to believe that such a man is a pattern of rectitude, and that there is no higher standard of excellence. It is quite natural that such a man should not only secure the esteem and confidence of his fellow men, but command his own. Though he may confess he is not so good as he ought to be, yet he is very apt to imagine himself much better than he really is. He cherishes a high degree of satisfaction in the contemplation of his own excellencies, if not of exultation, in the comparison of his own with those of the multitude around him. Can it be necessary to say there are thousands who rest their hopes for eternity on this sandy foundation?

Melancholy view! Melancholy proof that the heart is deceitful above all things, as well as desperately wicked! Yet, thousands who on no other foundation than this are persuaded that their mountain stands strong and who, because they see nothing to shake their hopes or alarm their fears, are environed by all the impenetrability of an unyielding self-righteousness and allured by a confidence that is “as the spider’s web.”

We would not be understood as vindicating the claims of immoral men. Nothing is more preposterous than to yield the honors of the Christian character to vice and immorality. Vital religion is in its very nature operative. The spirit of piety lives in the heart and lives in the life. Whatever may be the pretensions of the immoral and vicious, God forbid that they should be invested with the sacred name of Christian. Nor would we, on the other hand, deny to a reproachless morality the merit to which it is legitimately entitled. A man who possesses these excellencies must not be denounced as the veriest monster of human depravity. In its kind and as far as it goes his character is in a high degree praiseworthy. To the eye of one who sees not as God sees, there is much that is comparatively illustrious in the character and conduct of such men. But while we cheerfully make these concessions, we may not substitute a mere visible morality, however exemplary, however vivid and useful, for true holiness. It is easy to conceive all the virtues of an unexceptional moral deportment concentrated in men who are at heart strangers to the spirit of Jesus Christ. A person of the character to which we refer may, for example, be a professed disbeliever in the truths and doctrines of the Gospel. There are not lacking even infidels who rarely disregard the laws of good neighborhood and civil society. David Hume would have blushed at the imputation of moral dishonesty and yet could boldly deny his God and Savior. Seneca and Socrates inculcated by their writings and sustained by their conduct a morality which, though not faultless, did honor to the pagan world, but they were pagans still. There are also men in these Christian lands who from the peculiarity of their condition, from the restraints of education and habit, from high notions of honor from a keen sense of propriety and gentlemanly deportment, or from motives of mere ambition and personal aggrandizement, would seldom be detected in an immoral action; who, at the same time, disclaim every principle of the Holy Scriptures.

The morality of which we speak, with all its excellencies, is subjected to a lamentable defect. It regards only a part of the divine law. A merely moral man may be very scrupulous of duties he owes to his fellow men, while the infinitely important duties he owes to God are kept entirely out of sight. Of loving and serving God, he knows nothing. Whatever he does or whatever he leaves undone, he does nothing for God. He is honest in his dealings with all except God, he robs none but God, he is thankless and faithless to none but God, he feels contemptuously, and speaks reproachfully of none but God. A just perception of the relations he sustains to God constitutes no part of his principles, and the duties which result from those relations constitute no part of his piety. He may not only disbelieve the Scriptures, but may never read them; may not only disregard the divine authority, but every form of divine worship, and live and die as though he had no concern with God and God had no concern with him. The character of the young man in the Gospel presents a painful and affecting view of the deficiencies of external morality (see Mat. 19:16-22). He was not dishonest, nor untrue; he was not impure nor malignant; and not a few of the divine commands he had externally observed. No, he says, “All these have I kept.” Nor was his a

mere sporadic goodness, but steady and uniform. He had performed these services “from his youth up.” Nor was this all. He professed a willingness to become acquainted with his whole duty. “What lack I yet?” And yet when brought to the test, this poor youth saw that, with all his boasted morality, he could not deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Christ.

I said that mere morality regarded only a part of the divine law, but to speak more correctly, it disregards the whole of it. The sum and soul of obedience to the divine law consists in love to God. But the people whom we describe, though they many have some knowledge of God and may confess his worthiness to be loved, love almost everything else more than He. They have no supreme delight and complacency in His excellence; it is no source of congratulation to those who He is what He is, and that He sways the empire of the universe; and if they ever fix their thoughts upon God, their contemplation of His holiness, justice, and sovereignty are rather the sources of suspicion, alarm, and uneasiness, than of tranquility, confidence, and holy pleasure. Men of this description, therefore, are wholly destitute of the radical and essential principle of conformity to the law of God. However they may have the appearance of rectitude, they fail in all the essential parts of holy obedience.

Nor is there in such a character any conformity to the requisitions of the Gospel. Repentance, faith, humility, submission, hope, and joy are acts of a mind that delights in God. There is a wide distinction between moral virtues and Christian graces. Christian graces spring from holy love and have their origin in holy motives. They regard chiefly the glory of God and the interests of His Kingdom and then govern the relationships of men with their fellow men as God has required. Moral virtues spring from supreme selfishness. They have their origin in motives that are never recognized by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They have no regard for the glory of God and the interests of His Kingdom and go just so far as a well-regulated self-interest leads the way and there they stop.

We may also remark that all mere morality is perfectly consistent with a heart of unsubdued and unyielding enmity to God. “He that is not with me,” says our blessed Lord, “is against me,” Who possessed a fairer character or were held in higher estimation in our own view and in the view of the world than the scribes and Pharisees? And who were more bitter or unrelenting enemies to Christ? You may soothe the self-righteousness, flatter the pride, and inflate the expectations of moral men, and their enmity to God will repose in indifference and stupidity. But let them think enough of God to excite any sensibility toward His character; let them become acquainted with the great design which God is carrying on in all the world; let them perceive how totally opposed it is to all the selfish designs of men; let them feel how certainly every other interest is subjugated to the advancement of God’s glory and Kingdom; and they will see that it is impossible for them to act a neutral part, and that if they are not at heart the friends of God, they must be His enemies.

There is then no true holiness in mere morality. Much as there is in such a character that is highly esteemed among men, there is nothing that is right in the sight of God. The principle and motive of such a character is at a great distance from all that God requires and loves. “As a man thinks in his heart, so is he.” The moral quality of actions lies in the disposition of heart with which they are performed. A man may be very moral, but if the disposition of heart with which the acts of morality are performed be not such as God requires and

approves, though he may believe he is going to Heaven, he is in the broad way to hell. Mere morality never aims at the heart and would never touch it if it should. It may lop off the luxuriences of human depravity, but it never strikes at the root. It may not sink into the baseness of degeneracy, but it never soars to the purity of holiness. It is a fascinating picture, but it is cold and spiritless as the canvas on which it is delineated. It is like the twinkling glow worm which borrows all its light from the putrescent and earthy substances of which it is composed, but sustains no relation to the luminary which imparts light and heat to the universe. However fair this exterior, and however accordant with the expectations of the world, it falls far short of what a man must be to become either holy or happy. If men were not accountable, if they were creatures of time merely, and not directing their course to the Judgment Seat of Christ and destined to the retributions of an ulterior existence, there would be some apology for substituting visible morality for heart religion. Tell me, will such a morality be of any avail in the hour that tries the spirits of men? Does not every page of the Word of God flash conviction on the conscience that such a spurious morality is of no account in the sight of God?

2. Speculative Knowledge

Nor is it conclusive evidence of true religion that a man is well instructed in the doctrines of the Gospel. No man is warranted to believe himself a Christian who is profoundly ignorant of the truths revealed in the Sacred Scriptures. There can be no spiritual knowledge where there is no speculative knowledge. God cannot be loved where He is not known; sin cannot be detested where its nature is not discerned; Christ cannot be confided in where His character and sacrifice are not perceived; duty cannot be performed where the mind does not apprehend its nature and obligations. Truth is both the instrument of gracious affections when produced in the soul, and the nourishment of them in all their subsequent growth and enlargement.

But while there is no spiritual knowledge where there is no speculative knowledge, there may be much speculative knowledge where there is no spiritual. Speculative knowledge has its seat in the head: spiritual knowledge has its seat in the heart. It is obvious there is no moral goodness in the simple assent of the understanding to truth. We receive, compound, and compare ideas, whether we wish to or not. When we see the evidence of a religious doctrine to be clear and convincing, we cannot withhold our assent from it while at the same time, we may hate what we believe and love what we reject.

Besides, who does not see that there is nothing in the nature of speculative knowledge to produce gracious affections? The twilight of reason and conscience and the clear sunshine of the Gospel are of themselves alike unadapted to the causation of holiness. Should all the light of the Last Day break in upon the understanding of the natural man, it could not originate one holy emotion. Follow the enemies of God through every possible degree of instruction, and though their heads will be better their hearts will be worse. The author uses this term as a synonym of intellectual perception, or what is commonly referred to as "head knowledge" as opposed to "heart knowledge." The more they see, the more they will hate; the more they understand, the more will they complain and object; the more they are convinced, will they the more murmur and rebel. It is not impossible, therefore, for the understanding to be illuminated where the heart is not sanctified.

But, theory apart, what is the language of experience and observation? Need we but open our eyes to discern the fact that the minds of wicked men are often richly furnished with doctrinal knowledge, and that they are not infrequently very orthodox in their sentiments? Jesus told the unbelieving Jews that they had both seen and hated both Him and His Father (John 15:24). The Apostle tells us of some who, when "they knew God, glorified him not as God" (Rom. 1:21). He also addresses this pointed reproof to the Pharisee, "Behold, you are called a Jew and rest in the law, and make your boast of God, and know his will, and approve the things that are more excellent, being instructed out of the law; and are confident that you yourself are a guide of the blind, a light of those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, which have the form of knowledge and truth in the law" (Rom. 2:17- 20). And yet, of these very men our Lord says, they are "serpents, a generation of vipers," and cannot escape the damnation of hell" (Mat. 23:33).

And what does the holy Apostle say of the vilest reprobates in perdition? "You believe there is one God: you do well: the devils also believe and tremble" (James 2:19). That foul spirit was himself once an angel of light. There is no more studious observer of the character, designs, and truth of God than that malicious fiend. There is no greater proficient in theological truth than the father of lies. There is no lack of orthodoxy, even in hell. And why should it not be so? Bad men, as well as good, are endued with perception, reason, and conscience; and are as capable of applying these faculties in reflecting upon moral objects as upon natural objects. There is indeed something in the doctrines of the Gospel which the wicked do not perceive; and this is their beauty and loveliness. But this is a perception of the heart and not of the understanding; and of this the wicked are destitute. "The natural man receives not the things of the Spirit of God for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them because they are spiritually discerned" (I Cor. 2:14). But, because he does not love the truth, it is no evidence that he does not understand it. How many people have you seen who were thoroughly versed in the sacred volume, who comprehended the symmetry and connection of the entire system of revealed truth, and who themselves were distinguished champions of the faith, but who, lamentable to confess, were strangers to the religion of the heart? Something beside the illumination of the natural understanding, therefore, is indispensable to the possession of Christian character. Alas! how many have gone loaded with knowledge down to hell!

3. Form of Religion

Nor can the mere form of religion be relied on as conclusive testimony that man is born of God. The religion of the Bible possesses a body and a soul; it has an appearance and a reality; it is endued with a form and a power. The body, the appearance, the form, is a very different thing from the soul, the reality, and the power. Now a moment's reflection will convince any man that, while the power of religion cannot exist without the form, it is very possible for the form to exist without the power. The Scriptures speak expressly of those who having a form of godliness, deny the power thereof (II Tim. 3:5). They present very many painful instances of this character and criminate and condemn them. The foolish virgins put on the form of religion. They took their lamps and thus made a profession of religion before the world. They had oil in their lamps also, though the event proved that it was not such as would burn a great while. They went with the wise virgins; their profession was not an idle profession; they frequented the worship of God and the ordinances of the temple, and performed many of the duties which befitted their standing in the visible church. And when the cry was heard, "Behold, the Bridegroom comes!" they arose, trimmed their lamps, and went forth to meet Him. But, bitter result! Their lamps had gone out, the door of the Kingdom was shut! (Matt. 25:1-12).

There was a period when the great body of the Israelites possessed only the form of religion. God says of them, "They seek me daily; they delight to know your ways, as a nation that did righteousness, and forsook not the ordinances of their God; they ask of me the ordinances of justice; they take delight in approaching to God" (Isa. 58:2). They were also much engaged in the more extraordinary duties of devotion "Wherefore have we fasted," say they, "and you see not?" (Isa. 58:3). And yet, God reproveth and condemns all this as the merest hypocrisy.

Our Savior said of the Pharisees that they outwardly appeared righteous unto men, but within were full of hypocrisy and iniquity. Would to God, my brethren, this evil were confined to other days! No doubt there are those who are rigid in their observance of all the external duties of piety; who read the Scriptures, pray in secret, in private, and public; who profess to be on the Lord's side; who give up their children to God in baptism; who come to the sacramental table and engage habitually in the public commemorations of the death and sacrifice of the Lord Jesus; who, notwithstanding this, are at heart as ignorant of true religion as the prayerless and profane.

Nor is it difficult to account for this from considerations which fall far short of the operation of grace on the heart. Multitudes are formalists from the force of education. They have been brought up in the regular performance of the external services of piety, and are as much attached to them as the worshipers of dumb idols are to their deities of wood and stone.

Multitudes are formalists from the force of example. They have no wish to be singular in anything and consent to float along with the current though the tide issues from the waters

of the sanctuary. Multitudes are formalists from the force of public opinion. A due regard to the institutions of piety is too creditable a thing to secure the esteem and confidence of a virtuous society without it.

Multitudes are formalists from the influence of erroneous teachers. There have been from the beginning and still are false teachers who lie in wait to deceive; and there is reason to believe that they are too frequently successful in their soul-destroying purpose. Those who are deceived themselves take the most pains to deceive others and are more likely to succeed in spreading their pernicious and false sentiments. And there is no point of instruction on which the world is more willing to place implicit confidence in its teachers, and more willing to be deceived, than when it is taught that the form of religion supersedes the necessity of the power. In the Church of England, in the Church of Scotland, in the Church of Holland, and in very many of the churches of the United States, the sentiment is taught that it is the duty of all men to put on the form of religion though they may be entirely destitute of every holy exercise of heart. Multitudes put on the form of godliness from the force of natural conscience. When the mind is awake to the perception of its obligations, there can be no semblance of compromise with the conscience short of external godliness.

Multitudes put on the form of godliness from the force of fear. They cannot bear to abandon their hopes and yet they know they must abandon them if once they are made to feel there is no religion in their external services. And there are not lacking those who substitute the shadow of the substance from the love of error. It is a common and just maxim that men easily believe that to be right which they wish to be right. That true religion consists in mere external forms is a very agreeable sentiment to a wicked heart, and it is not strange that multitudes should mistake error for truth, and the way of death for the way of life.

There are very many who, from some of these causes or all of them combined, carry the form of godliness to every possible extent and are nothing more than sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. It is an easy thing to make clean the outside of the cup and the platter - but to what purpose is it done? God cannot be mocked. To what purpose is the multitude of such sacrifices? No, God cannot be mocked! Bring no more vain oblations. Your corrupt heart corrupts all the fair forms of your devotion, and you are still in the gall of bitterness and the bonds of iniquity. Beware of an assurance that you are saved that will at last bite like a serpent, and sting like an adder.

4. Eminent Gifts

It is by no means conclusive evidence that men are born of God because they are endued with eminent gifts. Some people are very retired in their habits and very diffident in their powers, and especially in the public expression of religion, who at the same time, possess at heart the true grace of the Gospel; while others of a less embarrassed and more obtrusive turn of mind possess peculiar facilities both of thought and expression, and seldom engage in the public acts of devotion without profit to those around them. These at the same time may be deceivers or deceived. Gifts are one thing and true grace is another. The gift of prayer is one thing and the grace of prayer is another. The gift of spiritual conversation is one thing, and the grace of spiritual conversation is another.

Balaam and Saul were among the prophets, but they were both the enemies of all righteousness. Judas was a public preacher and yet he was an accursed traitor. Many at the last day shall say, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in your name, and in your name cast out devils," to whom the king shall answer, "I know you not, depart from me you that work iniquity" (Mat. 7:22-23). The eminent gifts and distinguished usefulness of many professing Christians are no doubt imparted to them for the benefit of the church of God, while they themselves are reserved to be cast away. A man may converse on the subject of religion as though his lips were touched with a coal from off the altar, and yet be at heart ignorant of those things in which he is the instructor of others. Oh, it is a lamentable thought, but it is nevertheless true that "a man may preach like an apostle, pray like an angel, and yet have the heart of a fiend."

5. Conviction for Sin

It is no certain evidence that a person has been born of God because he has been the subject of deep convictions for sin. Some degree of conviction for sin is absolutely necessary to the existence of religion in the soul. If I were to describe the lowest degree of conviction that is consistent with the possessions of gracious affections, I should be willing to affirm that no man can be a child of God who has not seen his heart to be so sinful as to need regenerating grace, his sins so great as to deserve everlasting condemnation, and his helplessness so complete as to need an Almighty Savior. And yet many a man has this view of himself who is not a true penitent. It is difficult for people who hear the Gospel always to remain unaffected and thoughtless, and their solemn impressions often continue for considerable time. They are frequently made to see their own sinfulness and to feel that they are under the dominion of a carnal mind that is enmity against God (Rom. 8:7). The law of God in all the reasonableness of its precept and equity of its sanctions, in all its extent and spirituality, comes home to their consciences, and brings with it the knowledge of sin and the impression of guilt. They see that in them there dwells no good thing, that it is in vain that they search for the least holiness in anything they have done, and that all they have ever thought, felt, or performed, is in direct opposition to the law of God. Sometimes it is the burden of some particular sin which lies heavy on their consciences, and sometimes it is a life of sin which fills them with distress and trembling. Not infrequently they are awfully miserable. They feel wretched and forlorn, exiled from the favor of God, bound over to the execution of the final sentence, abandoned to despair, and already beginning to sink into the eternal pit. To aggravate their misery, people in this state of mind very frequently also have lively impressions of their ill desert. They deeply feel that they deserve to suffer the weight of God's holy and everlasting indignation. They are stripped of all their excuses, and know that it would be just if the penalty of the law should fall upon them to the uttermost.

Impressions like these also frequently lead men to make very humble confession of their sins. Nor is this all. They frequently lead them to forsake external sins and commence the work of actual reformation. They are for a time afraid of sinning and are restrained and deterred from it by the severity of their apprehensions.

Now there is not necessarily any religion in all this. A man may be sensible that he is a sinner and a great sinner and never become a penitent. The consciousness of sin is a very different thing from repentance for sin. I have seen living men and dying men, deeply impressed with a view of their sinfulness, who at the same time had no heart to turn to God as self-abased and humbled penitents. No doubt the reprobate at the bar of judgment, as well as the damned in hell, possess a keen conviction of their personal sinfulness. We are informed that when the Lord comes with ten thousand of his saints to execute judgment upon all that he will convince all that are ungodly among them, of all their ungodly deeds, which they have ungodly committed (Jude 14-15). So that the mere conviction of ungodliness cannot be evidence of godliness.

Equally certain is it that no apprehension of the coming wrath constitutes vital piety. There can be no holiness in being afraid of hell. Felix trembled under the preaching of Paul, and yet remained wedded to his idols. The devils also tremble and remain devils still. So a man may be sensible of his ill desert, and yet continue in his sins. The man without the wedding garment was speechless. At the last day, the whole world will feel guilty before God and through interminable ages the victims of the final curse will be made to acknowledge that their condemnation is righteous.

Nor is there necessarily any religion in confessing our sins. It is right to confess them when that confession proceeds from a right heart. But there is many a confession that is extorted by fear. Saul confessed, "Behold, I have played the fool and have erred exceedingly" (I Sam. 26:21). Seamen in a storm and landsmen in distress will confess the sins of their whole life and promise amendment, but as soon as the storm is over and health and mercy return, they forget their vows and become tenfold more the children of hell than before.

Nor is it less obvious that men may partially forsake their sins, and yet hold fast the love of sinning. They may abandon their open sins and yet practice their secret sins; they may abandon disreputable sins and yet cleave to those that are reputable; they may abandon sins that are hurtful and yet practice those that are apparently harmless; they may abandon one course of sinning, for the sake of entering upon another; and they may abandon all outward sins, and yet retain all their inward sinfulness. And the very love of sinning in the mind of a convinced sinner may be restrained and suppressed and yet never altered nor changed to holiness.

No degree of conviction for sin, therefore, is conclusive evidence of having been born of God. If you impartially examine the character of a convinced sinner, you will find no evidence of genuine holiness – no evidence of one Christian grace – nothing more than multitudes have felt who have gone to the pit in their blood. If a man never has been convinced of sin, he may be confident that he has never been turned from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God. Still it does not of course follow because he has been convinced that he has experienced this saving change. Impressions of sin and danger do not slay the enmity of the heart. Purposes of amendment do not slay the enmity of the heart. The conscience may be convinced while the heart is not renewed. It is infinitely dangerous, therefore, to rest in conviction of sin as a substitute for sound conversion.

6. Strong Assurance

No man may certainly conclude that he is born of God merely because he indulges strong confidence that he is a Christian. If to be strongly persuaded that we are Christians would make us Christians, there would be no such thing as being deceived by false hopes and delusive presumption. A man may be persuaded that he is a child of God because he discerns in himself the Spirit of Jesus Christ; and in such a persuasion, he has reason to place confidence. But there is a persuasion of our acceptance with God that does not differ from the hope of the hypocrite and the self-deceived. Some men are confident that they are saved because they think they do not deserve to be damned; they believe God is too merciful to damn them. Others presume themselves to be saved because they have never done any harm. Others hope to be saved because they have done a great deal of good. Others have assurance because they believe they possess the spirit of true Godliness. And others hope to be saved for no other reason than they believe they will be saved.

Now most of these are, and all of them may be, mere delusion. There is no man saved except by grace in Jesus Christ, and therefore, there is no man who does not deserve to be damned. By the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified in the sight of God. Neither is God too merciful to damn men who deserve to be damned, for while He saves thousands who deserve to perish, He demands, "How can you escape who neglect so great salvation?" (Heb. 2:3). As to those who feel that they have never done any harm or have done a great deal of good, the Scriptures declare that they are vile enough to make it necessary for the Son of God to die for their salvation, and for the Spirit of God to effectuate an entire change in their character without which it is impossible for them to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven (John 3:3,5). Men too may believe they possess the true spirit of Godliness and yet not possess it. They may suppose that Godliness consists in something which falls far short of true Godliness, and even if they suppose it to consist in that which the Scriptures represent it to consist, they may not possess it. There is a love, a repentance, a faith, a hope, a joy, a self-denial, which are of mere human origin and spurious. The religious affections of many men are founded in supreme selfishness. They are willing to love and serve God just so far as they believe He is willing to love and serve them, and no farther, and this is "making him to serve with their sins" (Isa. 43:24). The religion of such men consists in being very anxious about their own welfare, but very little concerned for the honor and glory of God. It is easy to say, "Pardon is mine; grace is mine; Christ and all His blessings are mine; God has freely loved me; Christ has graciously died for me; and the Holy Spirit will assuredly sanctify me in the belief of these precious truths." It is no Herculean task for an ardent mind and an unsanctified, enthusiastic heart, to make these discoveries. This is a kind of confidence which the subtle deceiver is interested to cherish. And the joys and sorrows, the zeal and devotion, which spring from this delusion, constitute a sort of religion which the blindness and deceit, the self-flattery and pride of the carnal heart very easily substitute for true Godliness. And what if a man firmly believes he will be saved? What if he imagines he has the assistance of the Spirit of God in "working out this faith in himself"? The faith of the Gospel does not consist in believing that one shall be saved. There is a difference between faith in Jesus Christ and believing that we shall be saved; between being actually a partaker

in His salvation, and the persuasion of our minds that we are partakers. Men may have strong persuasions of their spiritual safety, who spoil themselves with their own deceivings, and might well say, "Is there not a lie in my right hand?" A man may have strong hopes who has no religion. What is the assurance of the hypocrite though he has gained when God takes away his soul?

7. The Time of Your Supposed Conversion

It is no certain evidence that a man is born of God because he can specify the particular time when he believes he was converted. I have no doubt that there are those who can tell the period of time when they passed from death unto life. And this may be deemed a happy circumstance in their religious experience. When the love of God is so sensibly shed abroad in the soul, and the light of His countenance so sensibly descends upon the heart and the glory of God so sensibly fills the mind, that the time of its influence can be distinctly discerned, it may well be the source of grateful rejoicing. But this is by no means the experience, even of the great body of God's people. So far as I have been able to form any estimate of this subject by far the greater part of real Christians are the subjects of a true work of Grace before they themselves are aware of any change having taken place. The Holy Spirit does not always shine upon the work He has wrought in the heart immediately upon changing it; and the reflex act of the mind that discerns the change not infrequently is reserved for a period considerably subsequent to the change itself. It is no proof that a man is not a Christian that he cannot tell when he was converted; nor is it any proof that he is a Christian that he can tell the time of his supposed conversion, because it is a very possible thing that the conversion, the date of which he is so ready to specify, may be delusive and spurious. The time and manner of conversion can never decide either the genuineness or spuriousness of the work. The most that the great body of Christians can say as to these is, "I cannot tell how the work was accomplished. All I know is that a sensible change has taken place in the course of my affections, and that whereas I was once blind, now I see." Let none suppose that by this I mean to say that a change of heart is attended with no visible effect. There are effects which cannot be concealed and which lie open to the inspection of every eye. All I wish to say is that it is not a certain and infallible effect that the subjects of it should be ascertained of the exact time when it took place. "It is as true of religious affections as of any other, that 'the tree is known by its fruits'."

Examine yourself, therefore, and see whether you be in the faith. There is a hope that is as an anchor to the soul, and there is a hope that perishes when God takes the soul away. I would not wound you but I am jealous for you even with an anxious jealousy. You have been converted to the profession of religion, but have you been converted to the grace of religion? Who runs so as to obtain? Who fights not uncertainly and as one that beats the air? Who is, not almost, but altogether a Christian? See to it that you build not your hope upon the sand. You may rest satisfied with the mere name to live, but if it be so, the time will come when you will be confounded with disappointment and sink into despair. Alas! that there should be any who think themselves vessels of mercy when they are only the vessel of wrath fitted to destruction. Oh, I charge you before God and His holy angels, to be faithful in this concern. I shall endeavor to present you with a few considerations hereafter that may enable you to decide with greater accuracy whether you are building on the Rock than do those negative evidences which have been presented in the preceding pages, and which may perhaps distress you. But I would rather see your hopes die now than your souls hereafter. I would rather see the mask rent asunder now than torn off by the hand of

discriminating righteousness hereafter. I would rather see you weep now than weep and wail forever.

8. Love to God

In the preceding essays I have referred to several things which neither prove nor disprove the existence of true religion in the soul. A man may be unexceptionable in his moral deportment; he may be well instructed in all the doctrines of the Gospel; he may put on the form of religion; he may be endued with eminent gifts; he may have been the subject of deep convictions; he may himself be persuaded that he is a converted man, and be able to specify the particular time when he supposes he was converted, and still it is possible this very man may be in the gall of bitterness, and bonds of iniquity. We do not affirm that this is any evidence against his conversion, but only affirm that it is not conclusive evidence that he is converted. The view we have taken, therefore, is only a negative view and decides nothing. We are still left in darkness and embarrassment as to the great question. Upon the details of the positive and satisfactory evidences of the new birth it is now our purpose to enter.

Among the most convincing of these is love to God. Love to God involves a conviction of His excellence, an inner contentment towards the revelation of His nature and gratitude for His favors. The man who possesses this sublime affection has reason to believe that his character differs from what it was by nature. The carnal mind is enmity against God (Rom. 8:7). Though unrenewed men may possess some true knowledge, both of the natural and moral perfections of the Deity, and though they cannot contemplate His greatness and goodness without discerning His excellence, still they take no delight in His excellence, they feel no benevolence toward His interests, no true gratitude for His favors.

But this deep root disaffection toward God is superseded in the renewed mind by holy love. As the first and great commandment is, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your understanding" (Luke 10:27), so the love of God is the first and highest affection of the renovated heart. It belongs to true love always to have correct perceptions of its object. The new born soul does not clothe the Divine Being with such attributes and such only as suit a depraved taste, and then fall down and worship Him, but he loves the true character of God as it is revealed in the Scriptures; for to love a false character of God, you perceive, would be to hate His true character. The cause of love to God is the agency of the Holy Spirit; the foundation and motive of love to God is His intrinsic excellence. When Moses exclaimed, "Who is like unto you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like unto you, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders!" (Exod. 15:11), he discovered an excellence and glory in the divine nature which filled his mind with esteem and inward delight. Love to God does not differ in its nature from love to any other object. If you love your friend, unless your love be base and mercenary, it is because you see something in the character of your friend that is amiable and lovely. "In the exercise of true love to any object there is pleasure taken in the object itself." Thus, the excellence of God is the foundation of all sincere love to Him. True love to God essentially consists in being

pleased that He is just such a Being as He is. Is His wisdom unerring? His power irresistible? His purity unblemished? His goodness universal and disinterested? His justice inflexible? His grace infinite? Are His designs all eternal and immutable? These are excellencies which fill the new born soul with pleasure and admiration. On such a Being the mind can rest as its chief happiness; and the favor of such a Being it can prefer to every other enjoyment.

There is a vast difference between such an affection and that selfish and unhallowed friendship to God which terminates on our own happiness as its supreme motive and end. If a man, in his supposed love to God, has no ultimate regard except to his own happiness; if he delights in God, not for what He is, but for what He is to him; in such a sentiment there is no moral virtue. There is indeed great love of self, but no true love to God. But where the enmity of the carnal mind is slain, the soul is reconciled to the Divine character as it is. God Himself, in the fullness of His manifested glory, becomes the object of devout and delighted contemplation. In his more favored hours the views of a good man are in a great measure diverted from himself; as his thoughts glance toward the varied excellence of the Deity he scarcely stops to inquire whether the Being whose character fills his mind and in comparison of whose dignity and beauty all things are atoms and vanity, will extend His mercy to him. It is enough for him that He supremely regards His own glory. So long as God is brought into view, he feels that it were impossible for him to be miserable. His soul cleaves to God, and in the warmth and fervor of devout affection, he can often say, "Whom have I in heaven but you, and there is none on the earth that I desire beside you. As the deer pants after the water brooks, so pants my soul after you, O God!" (Psalm.73:25; 42: 1).

Nor is it less obvious that with this sentiment of delight in the Divine excellence, there is combined a benevolent regard toward Him and the interests of His Kingdom. It is the ardent desire, the highest wish to every sanctified mind that in all His works and all His designs, by all His creatures in all places of His dominion, God should be glorified. Benevolence toward God is a constituent part of love to Him. The Infinite Being who is capable of enjoying an infinitely brighter degree of happiness than all other beings beside, necessarily shares largely in the benevolent affections of every devout mind.

Nor does the view we have given exclude the idea of gratitude to God. While the first exercise of love to God is and must be antecedent to the persuasion that God loves us, no man who loves God for the excellence of His character can refrain from loving Him for His communicated goodness. That the God of Heaven should uphold, bless, sanctify, pardon, and save a wretch like him – angels have no such cause for gratitude as this!

Such is the nature of this sublime affection. And it is important to remark that wherever it exists in the soul, it bears predominant sway. It is supreme love. "He that loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me" (Mat. 10:37). God neither requires nor will accept a divided heart. He is a jealous God, and no rival may participate in the affection due to Him. I do not say that love to God is never intermitted by a baser affection, for the best of men have their seasons of declension and sin as well as of advancement and spiritual vigor. Still when the love of God actually exists in the soul every other love is a subordinate affection.

Here then have we one very obvious characteristic of true religion. Do my readers know by experience what it is to love the infinitely great and ever blessed God? You must be conscious of your love to God before you have Scriptural evidence of His love to you. You have just as much right to call in question God's love to you as you have a right to call in question your love to Him. Is then your heart right with God? Do you love God for what you imagine Him to be or for what He is? Are you pleased with His character and do you love every part of it? Do you love His holiness as well as His grace, and His justice as well as His mercy? Do you love Him merely on account of His love to you or do you love Him because He is in Himself lovely? Do you love Him merely because you hope He will save you, or do you think you should love Him if you supposed He would damn you? Is your love to God supreme? Whom do you love more than God? In whose character do you behold more beauty? Whose blessedness is the object of warmer desires, or more vigorous exertion? To whom are you more grateful? It can be no difficult matter for you to reply to these inquiries. There may be danger but surely there can be no necessity of being deceived in a case so plain. Supreme love to God is decisive evidence of the renewed heart. When the soul is ushered from the darkness of sin into God's marvelous light, it beholds God in an infinitely different light from what it ever beheld Him before. God is everywhere. There is a non-expressible beauty, a mild glory in almost every object because it is the work of His hand and reflects the excellence of His nature. Think how excellent a Being God is, and how exalted would be the happiness to enjoy Him to perfection and to be swallowed up in Him forever. To see and to love that which is infinitely lovely, to behold and to adore that which is supremely adorable, is the character and the blessedness of the heavenly world. The early dawn of this spiritual light, the first glow of this pure affection, is the glimmering of that sacred fire which will bum with a purer and a brighter flame throughout interminable ages. Do you then love God? If so, the question as to your own spiritual condition is at rest. If you are a friend to God, God will be an everlasting friend to you. Nothing shall separate you from His love. Neither angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate you from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus the Lord (Rom. 8:38-39).

9. Repentance for Sin

A mere glance at the ruin and recovery of man is enough to convince us that of the religion of fallen beings repentance forms an essential part. It is alike significant of the character and indispensable to the happiness of a converted sinner to be penitent.

In the order of gracious exercises, repentance follows love to God. An affectionate view of God prepares the mind to take a just view of sin. As it is impossible to repent of having sinned against a God that we hate, so it is impossible not to repent of having sinned against a God that we love. When the heart has been renewed, when the soul, enlightened by the Divine Spirit, sees the beauty and the loveliness of the Divine character, it cannot seriously reflect upon a life of sin without unfeigned grief.

True repentance is “to abhor sin as committed against God; to abhor ourselves for sin, and to reform.” Repentance, like every other grace, is the gift of God and the reasonable and indispensable duty of men; and there are considerations which the mind of man perceives, and which the Spirit of God makes use of in the production and exercise of this grace which give it a peculiar character. The leading thought which influences the soul in all godly sorrow is the intrinsic vileness of sin. It is not enough to feel and acknowledge that we are sinners; the mind must be imbued with a deep and settled conviction of the great evil of sin as committed against God, and as a wanton and wicked violation of His most holy law. The very definition of sin is that it is a “transgression of the law” (I John 3:4). In this you discover its true nature, and appropriate malignity. It is a violation of all law; a willful disregard of all authority; and a consequent hostility to all the holiness and happiness which a conformity to law would necessarily secure.

We cannot now speak of the pernicious consequences of sin, and tell how a view of these opens the sources of godly sorrow in the soul. The main thought that affects the mind of the penitent is that he has sinned against God! Sin is contrary to every attribute of the divine nature, and is the abominable thing which God’s soul hates. And the penitent sinner feels that he is the perpetrator of this foul deed! He has been sinning against the great God; he has been rising up in rebellion against His legitimate authority; he has done what he could to pour contempt upon His infinite majesty and excellence, to trample upon His goodness and forbearance, to despise His grace, and diminish and destroy His influence in the world. He has not only done this, but he has done it with a calm and deliberate purpose, and in defiance to the strongest inducements to an opposite course of conduct. He sees also that he has sinned always; that he has been cherishing a totally depraved heart, which has never intermitted its iniquity, and never ceased from its unprovoked and ungrateful disobedience.

Now when a mind that has been renewed by the Spirit of God makes these internal discoveries it is not surprising that it should be filled with utter abhorrence of all iniquity. To such a mind sin appears in its native odiousness: it is vile, it is utterly detestable, it is exceedingly sinful. He abhors it as committed against God. The thought which most deeply affects him is “Against you, you only have I sinned” (Psalm. 51:4). Nor is it enough that he

abhors his sins; he abhors himself for sin. He is sensible that he is a vile transgressor; that he has no excuse for his iniquity, and is altogether criminal; that the evil of his transgression is chargeable upon himself alone, that he deserves to be blamed rather than pitied, and that he might well bear the blame as well as endure the curse of his iniquities to all eternity. There are seasons when his views of sin are comparatively languid; and there are also seasons when they are deep and thorough – when they pierce and rend the heart and fill it with the bitterness of ingenuous sorrow. O, he feels that his transgressions are multiplied, and that his iniquities testify against him! His laughter is heavy and he goes bowed down to the earth. He is abased before God. He loathes himself in his own sight for his iniquities and abominations. It breaks his spirit to look back and survey the multitude of his transgressions. If you could follow him to his closet, I doubt not you would often hear him cry with the bemoaning servant of God, “Oh, my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to you, my God; for mine iniquities are increased over my head, and my trespass is grown up into the heavens” (Ezra 9:6).

An essential part of true repentance also consists in actual reformation. It exhibits itself in real life. The penitent feels the force of considerations which restrain from sin. He is afraid of sin and dreads its aggravated guilt. How shall I commit this great wickedness against God! Though a sinner still he cannot remain a sinner in the sense in which he was a sinner once. He manifests a desire to honor the God he has so long dishonored; to undo what he has done against the interest of His Kingdom, and repair the injury he has caused to the souls of men. There is no genuine repentance where there is no forsaking of sin. Still to go on in sin, to practice iniquity with greediness, with constancy, and with perseverance, is incompatible with the nature of that sorrow which is unto salvation.

Such is true repentance. This is that “godly sorrow” of which the Scriptures speak “that works repentance to salvation, not to be repented of ” (II Cor. 7:10). But before you apply these thoughts in the examination of your own character, allow me to advise you that there is a false and spurious repentance, a “sorrow of the world that works death” (II Cor. 7:10). Saul and Esau, Ahithophel and Judas were penitents, but their repentance needed to be repented of. The damned in hell are weeping and mourning and must weep and mourn without end; but they are not the subjects of godly sorrow. A child will weep under the rod and often grieve and afflict his heart because he expects to be punished, while he is at a great way off from ingenuous sorrow for his fault. Is there not reason to fear there is no small degree of repentance which arises from the fear of punishment, without hating sin?

It is one thing to mourn for sin because it exposes us to hell, and another to mourn for it because it is an infinite evil. It is one thing to mourn for it because it is injurious to ourselves, another to mourn for it because it is offensive to God. It is one thing to be terrified, another to be humbled. A man may tremble at the apprehension of Divine wrath, while he has no sense of the intrinsic vileness of sin and no true contrition of soul on account of it.

There is also the sorrow which arises merely from the hope of forgiveness. Such is the mercenary repentance of the hypocrite and the self-deceived. Many it is to be feared have eagerly cherished the expectation of eternal life and here begun and ended their religion. Many it is to be feared have eagerly cherished the hope of mercy and here begun their

repentance who have mourned at the last. In all this there is nothing that is truly virtuous, no godly sorrow arising from a sense of the intrinsic turpitude of sin.

With this illustration of the nature of true repentance, we think you may decide the point as to your own good estate. Those who are true penitents are born of God. Suffer me to inquire, do you know anything of genuine godly sorrow for sin? Retire into your own bosom and ask yourself questions like these: Do I possess any settled conviction of the evil of sin? Does sin appear to me as the evil and bitter thing? Does conviction of the evil of it increase? There are moments when heaven and hell lie out of sight – how does sin appear then? Do you hate it merely because it is ruinous to your soul, or because it is offensive to God! Do you hate it because it is sin? Is your repentance deep and sincere? Is sin your greatest grief? Which grieves you most, your sins or your misfortunes? What sacrifices are you willing to make to be delivered from your sins? Do your sins appear many and aggravated? Do you discover sin in a thousand forms and new expressions which you never discovered before? Do you mourn over the sins of the heart? Do you abase yourself for your innate depravity as one that was shaped in iniquity and conceived in sin? Do you mourn over your vain thoughts and carnal affections, over a life of sin, ingratitude, and profligacy; over your unprofitableness and unfaithfulness? Does it grieve you that you are worldly, proud, and selfish, that you have lifted up your soul unto vanity and panted after the dust of the earth?

Does it grieve you to the heart to call to mind that you have sinned against God? When your eyes behold the King, the Lord of Hosts, are you constrained to exclaim, “Woe is me!” When you look on Him Whom you have pierced, are you constrained to cry out, “I am undone!”

The degree of godly sorrow is by no means to be overlooked in your self-examination. When God touches, He breaks the heart. Where He pours out the spirit of grace, there are not a few transient sighs that agitate the breast – there are heart-rending pangs of sorrow. Is the reader experimentally acquainted with such godly sorrow? Can no solitary hour, no sequestered spot bear testimony to the bitterness of your grief? Does anything grieve you more than that you have ten thousand times pierced the heart of redeeming love? Do you abhor sin and turn from it? Are you conscious of being afraid of sin, as well as of an increasing tenderness of conscience whenever you are tempted to go astray? If so, then you have testimony that the work of grace is begun within you – testimony as infallible as the sincerity of your repentance - “Whoever covers his sins shall not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them shall find mercy” (Prov. 28:13).

Chapter 10: Faith in Christ

There are errors on the subject of faith in Christ which it is nowhere more important to observe and avoid than when we consider it as a test of Christian character. There are those who affirm that the faith of the Gospel is nothing more than a general assent to the doctrines of revelation, unaccompanied by love for them or a dependence on Christ for salvation. It is not necessary to remark critically upon this description of faith, for every man who reads the Bible must perceive that faith in Christ is there described as a holy act. But if it is nothing more than the assent of the understanding to the doctrines of the Gospel, then it is possessed by some of the vilest men on earth as well as by the fallen spirits in hell (James 2:19).

There are also those who teach that the faith of the Gospel consists in a strong persuasion of our personal piety. If a man believes that he is one of God's elect people, that Christ loved him from eternity, that He died for him in particular, and that he is a regenerated, pardoned sinner, this persuasion is by many supposed to constitute him a believer in the Scriptural acceptance of the term. Hence, the stronger a man's persuasion of his own interest in Christ and the blessings of his salvation, the stronger his faith! And hence the sentiment has obtained that unbelief consists in not believing or doubting that we are Christians, and all those fears which disturb the peace of good men, and all those apprehensions lest they be deceived in their hopes and fail of everlasting life are stigmatized as unbelief. Now, that these cannot be either the faith or unbelief of the Gospel is abundantly evident from a number of considerations on which we cannot enlarge and will merely suggest.

Nothing can be the object of saving faith except what is revealed in the Scriptures. Now it is nowhere revealed in the Scriptures that any one of us in particular is pardoned and justified and individually a partaker of Christ's redemption. And if anyone imagines that this revelation has been made to him in particular, he deceives himself and the truth is not in him. Besides, the Scriptures always represent faith as terminating on something without us, namely, on Christ and the truths concerning Him. But if it consist in a persuasion of our being in a state of salvation, it must terminate principally on something within us, namely, the work of grace in our hearts; and how inferior is such an object of faith to the all-sufficiency and glory of the great Redeemer!

It is not easy to give a definition of faith that comprehends all its properties. In its most general character, it is reliance upon the testimony of God's Word. It is receiving the truth in the love of it. The Apostle Paul uses the phrase "received not the love of the truth" as synonymous with the phrase "believed not the truth." Faith, however, when viewed as an evangelical grace, possesses altogether a peculiar character. It is not simply reliance upon the divine testimony, but particularly upon the truth of God revealed in the Scriptures concerning Jesus Christ. So the Scriptures themselves represent it. "These things are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing, you might have life in his Name" (John 20:31). "If you shall confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and

believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you shall be saved” (Rom. 10:9).

I cannot better describe this grace than by adverting to the state of mind which precedes and exercises it. When, by the operations of the Holy Spirit, a man is made sensible that he has sinned against the Holy God, he deeply feels that he is fallen, guilty, condemned, and undone. He sees that he lies at the mere mercy of that God whom he has offended, who is under no obligation to pity him, and may most righteously destroy him forever. Under the righteous sentence of a holy law, he does not see how God can be just and yet extend pardoning mercy to a wretch like him until he become acquainted with that soul receiving truth that he so loved the world as to give His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him might not perish, but have everlasting life (John 3:16). In this wonderful expedient, he discovers a remedy which vindicates the authority of the divine law in the dispensations of pardoning mercy, and relieves his soul from the oppressive apprehension that there is no forgiveness with God. Through this Redeemer he ascertains that he is invited and commanded to return to God with the hope and assurance of mercy; and is confirmed in the belief that whoever comes to Jesus Christ, he will in no wise cast out (John 6:37). And he is emboldened to go. The good deeds, the religious performances, which once used to encourage him, afford him no encouragement now; but renouncing them all, he returns to God with an implicit, active, and exclusive reliance on Jesus Christ and His Redemption as God’s appointed way of saving sinners. He approves of this method of salvation, he delights in it, he chooses it as his only refuge. He no longer rejects the mystery of the cross nor stumbles at the cornerstone which is laid in Zion, but glories in the cross of Christ and is happy to commit his all for immortality on this sure foundation, and thus does he “receive” and rest on Christ alone for salvation as He is offered in the Gospel. And this is faith in Christ.

This heavenly grace is one of the fruits of the Spirit and evidences of regeneration. “He that believes shall be saved” (John 3:36). “No man can say that Jesus is Lord, but by the Holy Spirit” (I Cor. 12:3). “Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God” (I John 5:1). Do you possess this heaven-inspired grace? What do you know of Jesus Christ as the Savior of sinners? What glory have you ever discovered in that great moral wonder, “God manifest in the flesh” as the Prophet, the Priest, the King in Zion? Have you from the heart received the record that God has given of His Son? Have you discovered anything in Christ that qualifies Him to be your Savior and that can encourage guilty, miserable men to trust to His grace? Is He precious to you as to those who believe? Is it your happiness to commit your cause to better hands than to your own, to relinquish all your self-righteous confidences, and cast yourself into the arms of Jesus? What things were gain to you, do you count loss for Christ? Is everything you are and have done and can perform, in your own view, nothing that you may win Christ and be found in Him, not having your own righteousness which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith? (Phil. 3:8-9). In a word, with a just view of the character and a supreme attachment to the Person of Christ, can you yield yourself into His hands as a full and complete Savior? Can you look to Him to be sanctified by His Spirit, to be governed by His laws, to be protected by His power, to be saved by His death, to be disposed of at His pleasure, and to be the means of promoting His glory? If you can, all is well. In the comprehensive promise of that

covenant to which faith makes you a party, lie concealed the life and immortality of the Gospel. Life and death, earth and heaven, things present and things to come, joys high, immeasurable, immortal 'what shall I say? All are yours and you are Christ's and Christ is God's (I Cor. 3:22-23).

Chapter 11: Evangelical Humility

Evangelical humility consists in a just view of our own character, and in a disposition to abase ourselves as low as the vileness of our character requires us to lie. The pride of the human heart casts a veil over the character of men and aims to conceal their worthlessness as creatures and their ill dessert as sinners; while the humility of the Gospel throws aside the veil, and discovers that native worthlessness which ought to sink the creature in the dust and that moral deformity which ought to fill the sinner with self-abasement. The natural spirit of men is an independent, haughty, and proud spirit; and nothing is more certain than that this spirit is in a measure subdued in every regenerated mind.

It is no unwelcome sentiment to a good man that he is absolutely dependent on God. There are seasons when he feels that he is a "worm and no man." Not more readily does a little child hang upon the care and kindness of its parent, nor the abject poor depend on the daily bounty of their fellow men, than the humble child of God, the daily pensioner upon the divine bounty, conscious of his dependence, waits only upon God as the Source and Sustainer of his every expectation.

Nor is he less sensible of his unworthiness than of his dependence. At best, he feels as an unprofitable servant. The habitual emotions of his soul are those of the returning prodigal when he said, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no more worthy to be called your son!" (Luke 15:21).

The people of God also cherish quite as deep impressions of their ill dessert as of their unworthiness. Most deeply do they feel that "it is of the Lord's mercies they are not consumed" (Lam. 3:22). They do not complain of God though He should sink them as low as they deserve to lie; but from the heart they approve the justice that condemns, while they are allowed to admire and adore the grace that rescues from the condemnation.

Nor are sentiments like these the mere dictates of the understanding, but in-woven with their habitual experience and conduct, and manifested both toward God and man. How is the humble and contrite sinner when in the more immediate presence of God, borne down under the impression of his inexcusable deficiencies! How does a view of his moral corruption keep him near to the earth! How is he ashamed and abased that he is no more holy! How does he desire to be divested of all his pride, to empty himself and feel less than nothing and vanity. His more happy moments are those in which he is enabled to lie abased before God, and in which he has increasing desires to be kept humble to the end of his days. This humble temper also naturally expresses itself in his relationships with his fellow man. It is indeed no part of his character to make whining pretenses to humility; but if he truly desires more to be humble than to appear humble, this unobtrusive and modest spirit will evince itself in his walk and conversation. "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me" says our Lord Jesus, "for I am meek and lowly in heart" (Mat. 11:29). A man of an ungovernable and ungoverned spirit surely bears little resemblance to the character of Christ. It is not denied that some good men have vastly more native haughtiness, vastly more of the

overbearing spirit of the carnal man with which to struggle, than others, but notwithstanding this, real Christians are humble; and their humility will necessarily express itself in the modesty and meekness of their habitual deportment. "Let nothing," says the Apostle, "be done through strife or vain glory, but in lowliness of mind, let each esteem others better than themselves" (Phil. 2:3). The Spirit of Christianity is congenial with its precepts though it is not in the present life perfectly conformed to them. There is such a thing as in honor preferring one another. There is such a spirit and however those who indulge in the hope of their good estate may be disposed to shrink from the test, such is the spirit of all Christians.

Divine "charity" says the Apostle, "boasts not itself, is not puffed up, does not behave itself unseemly" (I Cor. 13:4). It is only when, as the elect of God, good men put on affections of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, long suffering, that they exhibit the power and sweetness of genuine religion (Col. 3:12). It is only when seated in the lowest place and clothed with humility that they exhibit the amiableness of their gracious character. Well may we call humility a heaven-born grace. She is indeed the daughter of the skies, the "meek-eyed child of Jesus" and dwells only with Him, who like herself is born from above.

Does the reader possess this humble spirit? Does he know anything of this child like, Christ-like disposition and conduct? Has he ever been truly abased before God? Has he ever sunk down to that abyss of self-abasement to which his guilt might sink him? Has he degraded himself as low as his sin has degraded him? Has he ever taken the place which belongs to him as a sinner against God? What would he think of God if He should abase him as low as guilt and the curse require him to lie? And as it respects your contacts with your fellow men and the world, do you evince anything like this meekness and lowliness of demeanor? You recollect the reproof our Lord gave His disciples when He took a little child and set it in the midst of them, and said, "Except you be converted and become as little children, you can in no wise enter into the Kingdom of God" (Mat. 18:3). Have you been assimilated to this sweet spirit? Tell me, reader, do you love the praise of men more than the praise of God? If so, can you be a Christian? "How can you believe, who receive honor one of another, and seek not the honor that comes from God only?" (John 5:44). "See you a man wise in his own conceit? There is more hope of a fool than of him" (Prov. 26:12).

Chapter 12: Self-Denial

Another evidence of Christian character is the spirit and practice of self-denial. Self-denial consists in the voluntary renunciation of everything which is inconsistent with the glory of God and the highest good of our fellow men. It does not imply the voluntary renunciation of good, nor the voluntary toleration of evil as being desirable in themselves considered; though it does imply both as being desirable all things considered. There is no absurdity in the proposition that a thing may be very unpleasant in its own nature, but taking all things into view, may be very desirable. Neither does self-denial imply the renunciation of all regard to one's self, for desire of happiness and aversion to misery are inseparable from human nature. The natural principle of self-love does not constitute the sin of selfishness, for there is no moral turpitude in being influenced by the anticipation of good or the apprehension of evil, provided I am not influenced by these considerations supremely. Nor is there sin in regarding my own interest provided I do not put a higher estimate upon it than it demands.

Self-denial is diametrically opposite to supreme selfishness. Selfishness is making a man's self his own center, the beginning and end of all that he does. It is difficult with the Bible in our hands or upon the principles of sound philosophy not to acknowledge the distinction between affections which are supremely selfish and truly unselfish to be both plain and important. There is no need of the aid of metaphysical discussion to establish the proposition that no man ought to regard his own happiness more than everything else and that the man who does so possesses none of the spirit of the Gospel.

The affections of men must be placed on some one object which is paramount to every other. Two objects of supreme delight there cannot be. Two paramount principles of action there cannot be. There is no intermediate object between God and self that can draw forth the highest and strongest affections of the soul. As there is "no such thing as a creature's going out of himself, without rising as high as the glory of God" so there is no such thing as a creature's going out of God without descending as low as himself. Other objects may be loved, but if they are not loved merely as the means of self-gratification they are not loved supremely. Affections that do not terminate on God, terminate on self. Men who do not seek the things that are Jesus Christ's seek their own. Inordinate self-love is the ruling passion of their hearts and the governing principle of their lives. They love themselves, not as they ought to love themselves, but supremely. They set up their own private good as the highest object of desire and pursuit. Their affections operate in a very narrow circle. They have no ultimate regard but to themselves. They have but one interest and that is their own. A supreme regard to their own happiness is the mainspring of all that they do for God, of all that they do for themselves, and all that they do for their fellow men.

It is needless to say that with this spirit, Christian self-denial has no communion. This heavenly grace is the result of a supreme attachment to a higher interest than our own. It terminates on nothing short of the highest good, and in pursuing this, terminates on an object large enough to gratify the strongest desires of the most benevolent mind. He who is

not a stranger to the spirit of self-denial has learned to make his own interest bend to the interest of God's Kingdom, and that from supreme regard to the interest of God's Kingdom, not from supreme regard to himself. Once he denied Christ for himself, now he denies himself for Christ. Once he lived to himself, now he lives to God. No duty is so hard that he is not willing and resolved to perform it; no sin so sweet that he is not willing and resolved to forsake it. Nothing is too dear to give to Christ, nothing too great to be cheerfully sacrificed for the promotion of His glory. He knows he is but a point in the universe of God, "an atom in the sum of being," a single member of Christ's mystical body, and is willing that God should lift him up or cast him down at His pleasure. His own advancement is as a feather when put in the balance against the honor of Christ and the good of His Kingdom.

Such is the spirit of self-denial. It is the result of a calm, deliberate, invincible attachment to the highest good, flowing forth in the voluntary renunciation of everything that is inconsistent with the glory of God and the good of our fellow men.

That this is the Scriptural idea of self-denial would be easy to illustrate by a multitude of examples. This is the elevated spirit that prompted the father of the faithful to offer up the son of promise, that bore the three worthies of Babylon to the burning fiery furnace, and that led the apostles and martyrs to glory in tribulation. It has borne the test of ridicule and reproach, stood undaunted before the scourge and the prison, triumphed amid the light of the fagot, and smiled at the point of the sword. This is the spirit which shone with such signal luster in the sufferings and death of our blessed Lord. It was eminently the characteristic of this Divine Personage that in all He did and suffered He pleased not Himself. He sought not His own glory, but the glory of the Father who sent Him. "Though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, that we through his poverty might become rich" (II Cor. 8:9).

He often anticipated the day of His death and in itself considered, earnestly desired to be delivered from that fatal hour. He knew the malice of His enemies and expected to feel the weight of it in His last sufferings. He foresaw all the circumstances that would add poignancy and agony. But does He shrink from the dreadful undertaking? You see Him steadfastly setting His face to go to Jerusalem, you hear Him telling His disciples that He must go, He must suffer, He must be killed, but do you hear Him complain? Go to Gethsemane and there behold the Son of God under the most clear and awful view of His approaching crucifixion and learn what it is to deny yourself for the sake of advancing the Father's glory. Listen to the language of a heart already broken with grief, "I am poured out like water, all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my affections. This body sweats as it were great drops of blood. The hidings of my Father's face are enough to bury me in eternal darkness. The guilt of this falling world will sink my feeble frame to the grave. O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass away from me! Now is my soul troubled. The hour is come and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour? But for this cause came I to this hour. Father, GLORIFY YOUR NAME!" This was carrying self-denial to its highest pitch.

So pure was the selfless love of the Savior that the sweetest feelings of His heart would have remained forever ungratified without the privilege of expiring on the cross.

This too is the spirit which is no less strongly enforced by precept than example. How often are believers exhorted not to seek their own, not to live unto themselves, and whether they live to live unto the Lord, or whether they die to die unto the Lord? That charity which the apostle represents as the distinguishing characteristic of believers is self-denying, it seeks not her own (I Cor. 13:5). "If any man," says the Divine Savior, "will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me." "Whoever will save his life shall lose it, and whoever shall lose his life for my sake shall find it" (Mat. 16:24-25).

One would think it difficult after such an explication to be long in doubt as to the nature of one of the most decisive evidences of real religion. We can hardly turn to a page in the Bible without being convinced that the grand distinction between true religion and false is that the one is self-denying, the other is supremely selfish. "For whether we be beside ourselves," says the apostle to the Corinthians, "it is to God; or whether we be sober, it is for your cause. For the love of Christ constrains us, because we thus judge that if one died for all, then were all dead; and that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them and rose again" (II Cor. 5:13-15). Those who are in the flesh live unto themselves; those who are in the Spirit live unto Christ. There are but two moral characters that are essentially different and this is the radical difference between them.

Here then you have another criterion of Christian character. It is not supposed that in the present state we shall find self-denial unalloyed with selfishness. Still in the affections and conduct of every child of God the spirit of self-denial is the prominent feature. He who possesses most of this spirit possesses most of the spirit of his Divine Master. In the same proportion which the glory of God and the welfare of His Kingdom take the place of personal advancement does vital religion predominate in the soul.

The question has often been put "How far must a man deny himself for the good of others and the glory of God?" The thoughts already suggested appear to give us a satisfactory reply to this inquiry. But, if they do not, I answer, just as far as the good of others and the glory of God require him to deny himself. So long as this is the criterion it is impossible that self-denial can be carried too far, either in this world or the world to come. But must it be carried so far as to make a man willing to be damned for the glory of God? I cannot express better my whole soul on this point than by quoting an anecdote which the great Witherspoon introduces as expressive of his own views on this interesting subject. "A man in a high position who had been a great profligate afterward became a great penitent. He composed a little piece of poetry after his conversion, the leading sentiment of which in his own language was to the following purpose:

" 'Great God, Your judgments are full of righteousness; You take pleasure in the exercise of mercy, but I have sinned to such a height that justice demands my destruction, and mercy itself seems to solicit my perdition. Disdain my tears, strike the blow, and execute Your judgment. I am willing to submit, and adore even in perishing the equity of Your procedure – but on what place 'will the stroke fall that is not covered with the blood of Christ?' "

The monastery and the cloister are not the only evidences that there is much of the show of self-denial where there is none of its spirit. Men may deny themselves in a thousand instances from no other motive than that they expect to be the gainers by it. You cannot know whether your self-denial is genuine or whether it is spurious without knowing whether it is founded upon a supreme attachment to the glory of God. To deny yourself from a supreme regard to a higher interest than your own is to possess the spirit of the Gospel. Is this then the principle which regulates your conduct both toward God and toward man? Which do you pursue most, your interest or your duty? Which do you think of most, your interest or your duty? Can you renounce your ease, your profit, your honor when they come in competition with your duty? Can you renounce everything which is inconsistent with the glory of God and the highest good of your fellow men? Are these the natural breathings of your heart – “Your Kingdom come! Your will be done!”? Is the highest interest of this Kingdom identified with the object of your highest wish, and with your most vigorous exertion? Is the cause of Christ your concern? The dishonor of Christ your affliction? The cross of Christ your glory? If so, you are not strangers to the spirit of self denial. You are not without conclusive evidence that you are born from above. The more you forget yourselves in a supreme regard for God’s glory, the more will you advance your own interest both in this world and that which is to come. But the more you seek a selfish, private, separate interest in opposition to the glory of God, the more are you seeking an interest which God has determined to destroy.

Chapter 13: Devotion to Divine Honor and Glory of God

Intimately connected with the spirit of self-denial is supreme devotion to the honor and glory of God. From the formation of the first angel of light down to the period when the heavens shall pass away as a scroll, the Creator of the ends of the earth had His eye steadfastly fixed on the same grand object. As all things are of Him, so all will be to Him (Rom. 11:36). He who made all things for Himself cannot fail to pursue the end for which He made them, and to obtain it at last. When the proceedings of the last day shall have been closed, when the assembled worlds shall have entered upon the unvarying retributions of eternity, when the heavens and the earth shall have passed away and a new heaven and a new earth, the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, shall have come down from God out of heaven, He that sits upon the throne shall say "It is done; I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end!" In the winding up of the scene, it will appear that God Himself is the first and the last, not merely the efficient, but the final cause of all things. The vast plan which has for its object nothing less than the brightest manifestation of the Divine Glory has an unalienable right to the most unreserved devotedness of every intelligent being. To the advancement of this plan, God therefore requires every intelligent being to be voluntarily subservient.

All the strength and ardor of affection which we are capable of exercising must be concentrated here. Every faculty, every thought, every volition, every design, must be devoted to this great cause. The injunction is explicit: "Whether therefore you eat, or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the Glory of God" (I Cor. 10:31). Now the heart of depraved man is obstinately averse to such a course of feelings and conduct. Instead of being supremely attached to God and the good of His Kingdom, men are by nature lovers of their own selves. And here lies the controversy between man and his Maker. God requires men to regard His glory as the great end of their existence, but they disregard His requisitions and prefer their own will and ends to His. This is the disposition of every natural heart; hence the mortification of this spirit, and the supreme devotion of the heart and life to the service and glory of God, is evidence of a radical change of moral character.

It was the character of Jesus Christ that 'He went about doing good.' God is served and glorified by a life which is actively engaged in seeking the good of others. Where the heart is seriously and intensely interested in the service of God, it cannot be satisfied without accomplishing something for the cause of God in the earth. Our Lord alludes to this evidence of discipleship when He says, "Herein is my Father glorified that you bear much fruit, so shall you be my disciples" (John 15:8). The true Christian possesses such impressions of his absolute dependence and has such view of God's entire right to him that he feels that all he is and all that he has belong to God. And hence his heart in the first place is devoted to the service of God. He has a sacred relish for the duties and designs which he knows every creature of God ought to accomplish. The service of God is no irksome employment, but one in which he feels heartily and cheerfully engaged. There is nothing to which his affections are so strongly attached and in which he takes so much delight as in doing good. He loves the work of pleasing and glorifying his Redeemer, and of doing good to

his fellow men. "My food," says the Lord Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me, and to finish his work" (John 4:34). And the disciple, though far from coming up to the high standard of his Master's example is in this respect like his Lord. There is a pleasure, a satisfaction of soul he enjoys in the service of God which no other employment can impart. No matter what position he may occupy in the world, he may be a minister of the Gospel, an officer in the church, or a private Christian; he may be a magistrate or a subject, he may be rich or poor, he may be a legislator, a lawyer, or a physician, he may be a farmer, a merchant, a mechanic, or common laborer; he may be a seaman or a landsman, a master or a servant; and if he is a child of God, his heart will be bound up in the work of doing good and in pleasing and serving God. With his heart, he will also give his thoughts to this interesting concern. This is the ultimate end which will absorb his attention. His thoughts are not indeed always immediately on this object because this is impossible. He is like a man who sets out on a journey. The place of his destination is not in his thoughts every foot of ground he passes over, but it is the point to which his thoughts are perpetually recurring, and from which they are with difficulty diverted and toward which all his course maintains an habitual, if not an invariable tendency. The Christian habitually carries the great object of his existence into the whole course of human life. In seasons of relaxation and seasons of business, it rests upon his mind. He thinks, and studies, and contrives, and consults how he may, in the best manner and with the greatest success, accomplish his Master's work. With his thoughts, he will also consecrate his time to the service of God. All his time belongs to God, and though it may be his duty to devote the most of it to secular pursuits, he considers it all as consecrated time. No child of God can be habitually idle, or waste his time in empty relaxation and vain amusements. Show me the man who lives at his ease, and feels that he has time enough for anything and yet devotes it to nothing, and if to anything, to that which is foreign to the business of a creature who is the possessor only of one short life, and that redeemed by the blood of Jesus, and for which he is shortly to give up his last account, and I will show you a man who is a Christian only in name. The professed Christian who attends the dance and assemblies and parties of pleasure, whose precious time is consumed and killed in the perusal of novels, romances, and plays, who is nowhere so happy as at the theater, the horse race, or the card table is a miserable deceiver and more miserably deceived.

But it is not the mere omission of crimes of this aggravated sort which constitutes a Christian improvement of time. The state and growth of grace in his own soul, the spiritual condition of his family, his friends, his neighbors, the church, and the world, together with the ignorance, the immorality, the vice, the want, and suffering of his fellow men, these will redeem his time from idleness from amusements, and often from secular labor. There is one portion of time which every Christian holds dear. The Sabbath is his delight. He anticipates it, he enjoys it, he reflects upon it as the "sweetest day of all the seven." There are no hours of which he is more frugal, none which he turns to better account than the hours of the sacred Sabbath. With his time, the true believer also devotes his property to God. If there be those who have no property to devote, they form an exception to this remark. But while I say this, I would not forget that our Lord once passed a high estimation upon a "poor widow," because she helped the cause of sacred charity by throwing into His treasury "two mites" when it was literally "all her living." Even the poor may give to the Lord and trust in Him who has promised that those who love Him "shall not lack any good thing" (Psalm.

84:11). But what shall be said of men who are blessed with competency, men who are blessed with abundance, and have nothing to spare for Christ; men who can behold a world lying in wickedness and pagan and Christian lands famishing for the bread of life, and withhold the light of the great salvation; men who can see the woes and hear the lamentations of hard-working people in poverty, without a liberal heart and a communicating hand; but that the love of God dwells not in them. Christian liberality is one of the indispensable characteristics of true religion, and whenever it is lacking, there is a mournful measure, if not an entire absence, of the love of God in the soul.

Professed Christians sometimes avoid the rigid application of this truth by persuading themselves that covetousness is their besetting sin. And has it come to this, that the child of God has any sin so besetting that the love of duty does not gradually diminish and eventually subdue its power? What besetting sin ever bore such sway in the bosom of a child of God as to exert an influence habitually paramount to the love of Christ? What would be thought of a professed Christian who should say that the worship of idols is his besetting sin, or the lust of the flesh, or the love of wine, or bitterness to his neighbor, or dishonesty, or theft is his besetting sin? Would this convince you that an idolater, an adulterer, a glutton, a drunkard, a liar, or a thief is a Christian? No more is a man who makes an idol of his gold (Col. 3:5-6). "You cannot serve God and mammon (Mat. 6:24). The love of God and of duty in the mind of a regenerated man obtains and habitually preserves the ascendancy. Where gold and not duty determines the choice and the conduct of men the religion of the Gospel is too hard a master to be submitted to. And shall I not say that with their heart, their thoughts, their time, and property, the disciples of Christ consecrate their influence and prayers to God? Yes, the cause of God is with them the grand pursuit. If you would warm and animate their minds, if you would awaken their resolution, fortitude, and zeal, if you would excite their souls to fervent importunity in prayer, it must be by presenting to their thoughts some concern that has a discernible connection with the honor and glory of God. Whatever may be the life of others, theirs is devoted to Him, who loved them and gave Himself for them. Whatever may be the design of others, their purpose is to glorify God in their bodies and spirits, which are His. Whatever may be the enjoyment of others, they account not that to be living at all which is not devoted to the great purpose for which life was bestowed.

As to the motive of such a life, it has been incidentally sufficiently developed. The deceiver thought that a man might be devoted to the service of God from motives of self-interest, and yet give no evidence of piety. "Does Job serve God for nothing?" (Job 1:9). "There is," says Dr. Witherspoon, "certainly in every renewed heart a sense of duty independent of personal and selfish interest. Were this not the case, even supposing a desire of reward or fear of punishment should dispose to obedience, it would plainly be only a change of life, and not a change of heart. It is beyond all question indeed, that our true interest is inseparable from our duty, so that self-seeking is self-loosing; but still a sense of duty must have the precedence, otherwise it changes its nature and is no duty at all."

We entreat you then, in inquiring into the evidence of your salvation to ask yourselves whether you are supremely devoted to God? Is it the first and highest desire of your soul to honor God? Is it incited by the hope of reward, or the love of God and duty? Is the glory of

God the end of your conduct? And do you pursue it, not from regard to yourself, but from regard to God. Do you find your highest happiness in your duty?

14. The Spirit of Prayer

Another evidence of regeneration is the spirit of prayer. When we say that the spirit of prayer is conclusive evidence of Christian character, we feel under obligation to point out wherein that spirit consists. We are not to forget that there is such a thing as drawing near unto God with the mouth and honoring Him with the lips, while the heart is far from Him (Mk. 7:6). The hearts of men may be as stupid and unfeeling, as proud and as self-righteous; they may be in the exercise of as sensible opposition to the character of the Most High, to the law and the Gospel, while offering up the most solemn expressions of homage, as they are when God is not in all their thoughts. But it is not so with the righteous. His prayers go not forth out of feigned lips (Psalm. 17:1). With the spiritual worshiper, the heart feels what the lips express.

The spirit of prayer is humble. It flows from a broken and contrite heart. The publican could not so much as lift up his eyes to heaven, but smote upon his breast saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner' (Luke 18:13). Every sentiment of his heart constrains him to make the affecting confession, "O my God, I am ashamed, and blush to lift up my face to you, for my iniquities are increased over my head, and my trespass is grown up into the heavens" (Ezra 9:6).

The spirit of prayer is also believing. Though the child of God has an impressive sense of personal unworthiness and ill-desert, yet he knows that he has a great High Priest who has passed into the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, who is touched with the feeling of his infirmities, and he may therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that he may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Heb. 4:14-16).

But the spirit of prayer is also submissive. The suppliant prefers the will of God to his own. He pours forth his heart with the affectionate submission of a servant. He is prepared to be accepted, or to be rejected in his petitions. He approaches the mercy-seat with the desire that God would exercise His wisdom and grace in granting or denying his requests.

This is the spirit of prayer – sincere, humble, believing, submissive. Other prayer than this the Bible does not require, and God will not accept. This is the spirit of genuine devotion, a spirit which, you cannot be conscious of possessing without the consciousness of your reconciliation to God. "Because you are sons, God has sent forth the spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying Abba, Father" (Gal. 4:6). It may not be amiss, while we are upon this subject, to spend a few minutes looking at the question, "What evidence does the long-continued practice of the external duty of prayer afford of the existence of vital religion in the heart?" We do not mean by this statement necessarily to exclude the spirit from the form of prayer. If we did, the question would be at an end. What evidence does the long-continued practice of the external form afford of the existence of the internal spirit?

Men may pray much and yet not be Christians. They may pray in public and in their families and still not be Christians. This they may do to gratify their pride, to be seen of men, to

maintain the character of Christians in the view of the world, to silence the clamors of conscience, or to support a hypocritical hope. But whether men persevere in the habitual practice of secret prayer without good evidence of Christian character is a question which, I dare not answer in the negative. Neither would I venture to answer it unhesitatingly in the affirmative. This much the Bible will surely warrant us to say that men who are not Christians will be exceedingly apt to neglect and in the end, wholly to abandon the practice of secret prayer.

Job demands concerning the hypocrite, "Will he delight himself in the Almighty? Will he always call upon God?" (Job 27:10). Wherever you find the habitual performance of secret prayer for a long course of years, there is some reason to believe you find the breathings of the new-born soul. There you may hope there are hungerings and thirstings after righteousness. There you will discover a heart that is not in pursuit of assurance merely, but grace, not safety only, but holiness. There you will usually, if not always, discover one not muttering over a few unmeaning sentences as devoid of life as a loathsome carcass is of the life-giving spirit, but one whom the Spirit of God has taught to pray because he is weak and needs strength; because he is tempted and needs support; because he is in want and needs supply; because he is a sinner and needs mercy.

If these remarks are just, it is not impertinent to ask my readers whether they practice the duty of secret prayer. We do not ask whether you pray in secret now and then, whether you perform this duty on the Lord's Day, or some occasional seasons of unusual alarm or solemnity. Is this your habitual practice? Has it been your habitual practice since you hoped you were brought out of darkness into God's marvelous light? No matter how punctual you are in other duties, no matter what evidence you have of your conversion from any other quarter, if you have not this, you may set all other down for nothing. The lack of this is decisive evidence against you, even if the possession of it is not decisive evidence in your favor. Prayer has been often styled as the "Christian's breath." It is eminently so. A prayerless Christian! No, it cannot be! It is a mark of the highest delusion, of the grossest stupidity, to cherish the hope of having made your peace with God and at the same time to live in the neglect of secret prayer. Who that has the least pretension to religion can presume to live without seeking the favor, without deprecating the wrath, and without realizing the presence of Him in whom he lives, and moves, and has his being? To live without prayer is emphatically to live without God in the world. (See Jonathan Edwards' sermon on this subject "Hypocrites Deficient in the Duty of Secret Prayer.")

But I would give one caution to a certain class of my readers. There are not lacking those who live in constant doubt and trembling because they do not enjoy the constant presence of God and the uniform fervency of affection in their seasons of prayer. Real Christians have periods of coldness, which chill the spirit of devotion. Such is the power of indwelling sin that God's own children are sometimes carried far down the current. To the shame and guilt of God's people, we are constrained to make this affecting acknowledgment. Still, real Christians cannot live in the neglect of prayer; no, more, those who do not possess the spirit and live in the habitual performance of the duty are in the gall of bitterness, and the bonds of iniquity. The moment a man begins to live in the neglect of prayer, that moment he should take the alarm.

May it then be said of you as it was of Saul of Tarsus, "Behold, he prays?" (Acts 9:11). If so, then you like him may be a chosen vessel. Maintain a constant and uniform intimacy with the throne of grace, and for the sake of our great High Priest, God will put His fear into your hearts, and you shall not depart from Him (Jer. 32:40). "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you" (James 4:8). Keep near to the fountainhead, and with joy shall you draw water out of the wells of salvation (Isa. 12:3).

15. Brotherly Love

Another evidence is love to the brethren.

The Gospel breathes the spirit of love. Love is the fulfilling of its precepts, the evidence of its power, the pledge of its joys, and the ripe fruit of the Spirit. "A new commandment," says our Lord to His disciples, "give I unto you, that you love one another" (John 13:34). "And this is his commandment, that we should believe on his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another" (1 John 3:23). This is emphatically a new commandment. It has a new object, not specified in the original law of love and obviously a different affection than that which is required in the moral law. Brotherly love is an affection which is limited to particular characters. There can be no doubt but the children of God are kindly affectioned toward all men because Christian benevolence runs parallel with rational being. Genuine love to our neighbor is extended to all, according to their character and circumstances. It blesses those who curse us, and does good to those who hate us. This, however, is not the distinguishing nature of brotherly love. Brotherly love differs materially from the love of a general feeling of good will. It is the love of good men, and for their goodness only, and extends only to the followers of Christ. It is an affection which is directed toward the excellence of religion, and consists in a delight in holiness. Everyone that is of the truth, everyone that is born of God, of whatever condition, or nation under heaven, is to be loved with this affection. There is something in the character of every child of God that reflects the image of his heavenly Father, and it is this that attracts the eye and wins the heart.

There is something which is amiable and lovely, and it is this loveliness that gives a spring to the affections and draws forth the hearts of God's people toward God Himself. The children of God are partakers of the Divine nature. From bearing the image of the earthly, they now bear the image of the heavenly. God has imparted to them a portion of His own loveliness; He has formed them new creatures; of His free and distinguishing grace, He has made them more excellent than their neighbors and hence they are lovely. They are the excellent of the earth. God loves them, Christ loves them, the Holy Spirit loves them, angels love them, and they love each other. It is around those who the virtues cluster; from those who the graces of heaven are reflected, though shaded, and very often darkened by debasing and reproachful sins.

Love to the brethren is also an affection which rests upon the union which believers sustain with Christ. The Lord Jesus, together with all true believers, forms one mystical body. Christ is the Head and they are the members. The same bond which unites believers to Christ binds them to each other. The love which is exercised toward the Head extends to the members. The union necessarily involves a union of affection. Those who love Christ love those who are like Him and those who are beloved by Him. Here all distinctions vanish. Name and nation, rank and party, are lost in the common character of believers, the common name of Christian. Jew and Gentile, bond and free, rich and poor, are one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28). They have one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God, and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in them all (Eph. 4:5- 6). Actuated by the same

principles, cherishing the same hopes, animated by the same prospects, laboring under the same discouragements, having the same enemies to encounter, and the same temptations to resist, the same hell to shun, and the same heaven to enjoy, it is not strange that they should love one another sincerely and often with a pure heart fervently. There is a unity of design, a common interest in the objects of their pursuit which lays the foundation for mutual friendship and which cannot fail to excite the "harmony of souls." The glory of God is the grand object which commands their highest affections and which necessarily makes the interest of the whole the interest of each part, and the interest of each part the interest of the whole. There are no conflicting interests and there need be no jarring passions. In a common cause which in point of importance takes the place of every other and all others, the affections of the sanctified heart are one.

The Lord Jesus has given peculiar emphasis to the duty of brotherly love, by constituting it the easy and decisive standards of true godliness. It is by this standard that His disciples are to judge of themselves. "We know," says an apostle, "that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren" (I John 3:14). This is the criterion also by which He would have the world judge of the sincerity of their religion and the truth and divinity of His Gospel. "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one to another" (John 13:35). In that memorable prayer just before His death, He also prays for His disciples "that they all may be one, as you Father are in me and I in you, that they also may be one in us, that the world may believe that you has sent me" (John 17:21). With this standard before him, may not every man ascertain whether he is a child of God?

The love of good men is not one of the native affections of the carnal mind. This cold, degenerate soil bears no such heavenly fruit. The affection which Christians exercise toward each other as Christians is the offspring of brighter worlds. It is a principle of celestial birth. Love is of God, and everyone that loves is born of God and knows God (I John 4:7).

It cannot be difficult to distinguish this Christian grace from a mere natural affection or mercenary or sectarian attachment. A parent may love his child, and a child his parent; a husband may love his wife and a wife her husband; and there may exist much and reciprocal affection between one man and another; while the personal religion of the party beloved constitutes none of the reasons of this affection. People may have been educated to esteem and respect pious men while this respectful sentiment falls far below the love of men as Christians and for their Christianity. Men may love Christians merely because they imagine that Christians love them. This, like every other affection that is purely selfish, is unworthy of the Christian name. They may love particular Christians because they are of their denomination and imbibe their sentiments. This too is nothing better than that friendship of the world which is enmity with God. The obvious inquiry is: Do you love the people of God because they are the people of God? Because you discover in them the amiableness of that religion which is altogether lovely? Do you love them, not merely because they love you or have bestowed favors upon you; not because they are of your party, but because they bear the image of your heavenly Father? Do you love them for their love of God, their self-denial, their heavenliness, their usefulness in the world, their reproachless example, their faithfulness and love of duty? Do you love them when they reprove you, and when their example condemns you? And do you love them in proportion to the measure of these

excellencies which they possess? Do you feel an interest in them and for them? Can you bear and forbear with them? Can you forget their infirmities, or do you rejoice to magnify them? Can you cast the mantle of charity over their sins and pray for them, and watch over them, and pity, and love them still? And can you feel thus and act thus toward the poorest and most despised of the flock and that because he is a Christian? If so, here is your encouragement "He that loves is born of God" (I John 4:7).

16. Separation from the World

A convincing evidence of true piety is the spirit of separation from the world.

Saints are expectants of glory. They are born from above and have no home beneath their native skies. Here they are strangers and pilgrims and plainly declare that they seek a better country (Heb. 11:13-14). It is their avowed profession that their happiness and hopes are neither in nor from the present world. Their treasure is in heaven. They are not of this world even as Christ was not of this world (John 17:14).

The spirit of the world is incompatible with the spirit of the Gospel. It is the spirit of pride and not of humility; of self-indulgence rather than of self-denial. Riches, honors, and pleasure form the grand object of pursuit with the men of the world. Their great inquiry is "Who will show us any good?" Indifferent to everything but that which is calculated to gratify a carnal mind, they lift up their souls unto vanity and pant after the dust of the earth. Their thoughts and their affections are chained down to the things of time and sense. And in these they seem to be irrecoverably immersed. They seldom think but they think of the world; they seldom converse but they converse of the world. The world is the cause of their perplexity and the source of their enjoyment. The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life close every avenue of the soul to the exclusion of every holy desire. I had almost said, every serious reflection.

This spirit the Christian has mortified. "Now we," says St. Paul, "have not received the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God" (I Cor. 2:12). The disciple of Jesus, as he has nobler affections than the worldling, has a higher object and more elevated joys. While the wise man glories in his wisdom, the mighty man glories in his might, and the rich man glories in his riches, it is the Christian's privilege to glory in nothing save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ by whom the world is crucified unto him, and he unto the world (Gal. 6:14). The character and cause of the blessed Redeemer lie so near to his heart that in comparison with these everything else vanishes to nothing. He views the world by the eye of faith and in a light that reflects its intrinsic importance – the light of eternity. There the world shrinks to a point and the fashion of it passes away.

As the spirit of the world is not the spirit of God's people, so the men of the world are not their companions. "We know that we are of God," says the apostle, "and the whole world lies in wickedness" (I John 5:19). Between the people of God and the men of the world there is an essential difference of character. The views, the desires, and the designs of the children of God are diametrically opposite to the views, the desires, and the designs of the men of the world. The one loves what the other hates; the one pursues what the other shuns. Saints are passing on the narrow way which leads to life; sinners the broad way which leads to death (Mat. 7:13-14). If there were no other ground for the expectation, therefore, than the common principles of human nature, we might look for dissension rather than unity between the disciples of Christ and the men of the world. "How can two walk together, except they be agreed?" (Amos 3:3). What fellowship has light with

darkness? Or what communion has Christ with Belial? (II Cor. 6:14-15). The same principles which prompt the men of the world not to select the people of God for their familiar companions also induce the people of God to choose other companions than the men of the world. There is an irreconcilable spirit between them. The friendship of the world is enmity with God (James 4:4). Many as may be mutual tokens of respect, civility, and kindness (and many there should be) between Christians and the men of the world, they are notwithstanding two distinct classes of men. Much as Christians esteem the men of the world as good members of civil society, much as they regard their happiness, and endeavor to advance it, much as they have compassion on their depravity, and deplore their prospects, much as they are conversant with them in the ordinary calls of duty, still they are not their chosen companions. They cannot court their friendship because they are afraid of it. "Evil communications corrupt good manners" (I Cor. 16:33). "He that walks with wise men shall be wise, but a companion of fools shall be destroyed" (Prov. 13:20).

Those who have mortified the spirit and who stand at a distance from the men of the world are also in some good degree above its corrupting influence. The claim, which from their numbers and strength, the world is apt to consider itself as warranted to make upon the opinions and practices of God's people, is habitually resisted. Though good men may be often seduced by the smiles and awed by the frowns of the world, it is no part of their general character to conform either to its pleasure or displeasure. They act from higher motives and maintain a more consistent character than to give way to indulgences merely for the sake of pleasing the world or to avoid duty merely through the fear of offending it. While they regard the fear of God more than the fear of man, they will not dishonor God to please the world. And while they regard the favor of God more than the favor of man, they will not purchase the favor of man at the expense of the favor of God. A habitual regard to the will and the favor of God is an effectual security against the smiles of the world. The great object of the Christian is duty; his predominant desire to obey God. When he can please the world consistently with these, he will do so; otherwise, it is enough for him that God commands, and enough for them that he cannot disobey. While they dread to offend God, they cannot tamely bow to the favor or frowns of men. Whether it be right to hearken unto men rather than unto God, judge you? (Acts 4:19).

There would be no difficulty in pointing out the path of duty upon this subject, but there is some in saying how far man may swerve from this path and yet be Christians. One thing is plain Christians cannot be worldlings. They cannot be lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God (II Tim. 3:4). He who fixes his highest affections on wealth, honor, sensual pleasures, gay amusements, and the various pursuits of the present scene, cannot fix them supremely on God.

Nor is the character of the vast multitude who attempt to make a compromise between God and the world better than that of the mere worldling. The mere fact that they are forever balancing between a life of devotion and a life of pleasure, that they design now to yield the empire to God and then to the world, decides the question against them.

We may not deny that the children of God are sometimes guilty of awful defection from the standard of Christian character in their communion with the world. But after all, their

prevailing feelings and conduct are not those of conformity to the world, but of habitual non-conformity. The principles of the new man are at war with the principles of the world. True believers have put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and have put on the new man which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness (Eph. 4:22-24). "This I say then," says the apostle, "Walk in the spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lusts of the flesh" (Gal. 5:16). We cannot walk after the flesh while we walk after the spirit. While the love of God is the reigning affection of the heart, it will turn away from the allurements of the world.

This subject presents a number of solemn questions to everyone who is anxious to ascertain whether his heart is right in the sight of God. It is a great point with all of us to know whether we are spiritually minded or worldly minded. Whether we are conformed to this world or transformed by the renewing of our minds. Whether the objects of faith or of sense, things present or to come, have the predominating influence over our hearts.

What shall we say of those who exhibit to themselves and to others all the traits of character which belong to worldly men? What of those who pursue worldly things with all that ardor, all that intemperate zeal which enters into the pursuits of worldly men? Is there not reason to fear that they are supremely attached to earth and are as yet aliens from the commonwealth of Israel?

What shall we say of those who love the circles of fashion more than the associations for prayer? And who court the friendship of the rich, the gay, and the honorable, more than that of the humble disciple of Jesus? What of those who "send forth their little ones like a flock, and their children dance; who take the timbrel and harp, and rejoice at the sound of the organ?" (Job 21:11-12). Was Job uncharitable when he ranked people of this character with those who say unto God, "Depart from us, for we desire not the knowledge of your ways"?

What shall we say of those who are forever varying from the path of duty lest it should be unpopular, who never lisp a syllable or lift a finger for the honor of God lest they displease the world? What, but that they love the praise of men more than the praise of God (John 5:44).

Conformity to the world is to be expected from the professed worldling: it is the character of the worldling. But is it to be expected from the professed disciple of Jesus? Is it the result of habitual determinations of a heavenly mind? Is it the character of one who looks on things that are unseen and eternal, of a stranger and sojourner, of one who sets his affections on things above and not on things on the earth? How many like the young man in the Gospel, exhibit a decent and regular outward profession, who are wholly devoted to the world! Here their affections center. From this polluted fountains all their joys flow. They had been Christians but for the world. But the world is the fatal snare. They have plunged down the precipice, and drifted almost beyond the hope of recovery.

If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him (I John 2:15). To be carnally minded is death (Rom. 8:6). Show me the men who imbibe the spirit of the world, who

choose the company of the world, who imitate the example of the world, conform to the maxims of the world, are swallowed up in the gaiety, fashions, and amusements of the world – behold, these are the ungodly who are brought into desolation as in a moment! I have seen the wicked in great power, spreading himself like a green bay tree. Yet he passed away, and lo he was not; yes, I sought him, but he could not be found (Psalm. 37:35).

17. Growth in Grace

How beautiful is the light of the morning! Behold it hovering over the distant edge of the horizon and shedding its cheerful beams upon the hills. It is a morning without clouds. But how soon is the prospect overcast! The atmosphere is obscured by vapors and the sun is darkened by a cloud. Again the mists are fled; the clouds have passed over, and the sun is still advancing in his course. Thus he rises; now, behind the cloud, now in all the greatness of his strength, shining brighter unto the perfect day.

Such is the path of the just. In the present world, good men are very imperfect. The best of men have reason to complain bitterly of the body of sin and death, and the best of men too have the most ardent desires that the body of sin and death may be crucified with Christ. The highest point of Christian experience is to press forward. It is a distinguishing trait in the character of every good man that he grows in grace.

There are various similitudes used by the inspired writers that are significantly expressive of the advancement of Christians in knowledge and in piety. The young convert is likened unto one that is newly born. There is a point of time in which he begins to live. At first he is a babe; then a child, until he finally attains unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13). The Kingdom of Heaven is also compared to seed which is cast into the ground. First comes up the tender blade, then the thriving stalk, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear, ripening for the harvest, and preparing for the garner of the husbandman (Mark 4:28-29). It is also compared to a well of water, springing up into everlasting life (John 4:14). No imagery in nature can more fully illustrate the growth of grace in the heart. "The righteous," says Job, "shall hold on his way, and he that has clean hands shall wax stronger and stronger" (Job 17:9). This is the prominent feature in the character of the good man - "he shall hold on his way." "The youth," says the evangelical prophet, "shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall; but those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles, they shall run and not be weary, and they shall walk and not faint" (Isa. 40:30-31). With inimitable beauty is the good man described by the Psalmist: "And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither, and whatever he does shall prosper" (Psalm. 1:3). Grace in the heart as certainly improves and advances as a tree thrives in a kindly and well-watered soil. "It flourishes in immortal youth, and blooms forever in unfading beauty."

The certainty of the believer's progress, however, rests on a surer foundation than either the degree or the nature of his religion. "We are not sufficient," says the apostle, "to think anything as of ourselves, but our sufficiency is of God" (II Cor. 3:5). Covenanted grace is the support of the believer through every step of his pilgrimage. There is nothing in the nature of holiness that is incapable of corruption. Adam fell, angels fell, and such is the awful depravity of the human heart that left to himself, the holiest saint on earth would draw back unto perdition. Still, he shall progress in holiness throughout the interminable ages. It is the

economy of divine grace that where God has begun a good work He will carry it on until the subject is ripened for glory (Phil. 1:6).

The hypocrite, when once he imagines himself to be a Christian, views his work as done. He is satisfied. He is rich and increased in goods. But it is otherwise with the true Christian. Conversion is but the first step. His work is all before him. His graces are increasingly constant and increasingly vigorous. The more he loves God, the more he desires to love Him. The more he knows of His character, does he contemplate the manifestations of His glory with rising delight. "As the deer pants after the water brooks, so does his soul pant after God" (Psalm. 42:1). Having once tasted that the Lord is gracious is not enough to satisfy him. He will ever remain unsatisfied until he reaches the fountain head and drinks to the full of "the river of life which flows from the throne of God and the Lamb" (Rev. 22:1). The more he sees of the evil of sin, the more he desires to see. The more he hates it, the more he desires to hate it. The more he sees of himself the more he abhors himself, and the more does he desire to abhor himself. The more he is emptied of himself, the more does he desire to be emptied of himself; the more he desires to become poor in spirit, to feel that he is cut off from every hope, and to rest on Christ alone. The more he is engaged in duty, the more delight he finds in performing it. The more severe his conflict with the enemy, the harder he urges it and the more vigorous his resolution to maintain it to the last.

There are some things in which the increase of grace is more visible, both to the world and the subject than others. Particularly have the people of God less and less confidence in themselves. They cherish an increasing sense of their dependence. They have been so often disappointed in their false confidences that they have in some good measure become weaned from them. They know by bitter experience the folly of trusting to themselves and daily taste the sweetness of that heavenly precept "In all your ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct your paths" (Prov. 3:6).

They are more and more patient in sufferings. The more they are accustomed to the yoke, the less do they repine under the weight of it. They are also more and more charitable in their opinions of others. Young Christians are too often very uncharitable and censorious. They are more apt to take notice of the infirmities of their brethren than their graces and the infirmities of others than their own. But the more they know of themselves the more reason do they see to exercise charity toward others. They fear to judge lest they themselves should also be judged (Mat. 7:1). They walk "with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love" (Eph. 4:2).

They have also the more full government of their passions. They are "slow to wrath" (James 1:19).

They are more and more punctual in the performance of the relative duties. Young Christians are apt to neglect them. They allow the duties they owe immediately to God to swallow up those that belong to their neighbors. But as they advance in the divine life, they become more uniform in the exercise of grace, and more punctual in the discharge of all duty. They do not love God less, but they love their fellow men more. As they grow more

fervent and more constant in their devotional exercises, so they become more circumspect and unexceptionable in their relationships with the world.

Perhaps there is no one point in which growth in grace is more visible than in that harmony and consistency of character which are too often lacking in young Christians, but which shine with so much beauty in those who are advanced in the Christian course.

In everything that belongs to the excellence of real religion, the true believer is in a state of progression. He seeks and strives, he wrestles and fights, he is ever aiming at the prize. View him in the early part of the divine life, follow him through the various stages of his progress, and you will find that notwithstanding all his doubts and declensions, he makes a gradual advance. He does not feel, he does not act "as though he had already attained, either were already perfect, but he follows after, if he may apprehend that for which also he is apprehended of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:12).

"This one thing I do," says Paul, "forgetting the things which are behind, and reaching forth to those things that are before, I press toward the mark of the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:13-14). Where is the Christian that does not make the spirit of the apostle his own? Tell me, you who have just begun the heavenly race; tell me, you who are verging toward the goal; was there ever a Christian that felt satisfied with present attainments? Is not the unvarying voice, both of early and long-tried piety responsive to the language of Paul? Yes, it is both the highest point of Christian experience and the clearest evidence of Christian character to press forward. It is his grand inquiry how to be and how to live more like a child of God.

Mark the way of the upright. As you trace his steps through this dreary pilgrimage sometimes he wanders from the path; sometimes he halts and tires. His progress is far from being uniformly rapid and often far from being perceptible either by himself or others. Sometimes his motion is retrograde. There are seasons when, instead of advancing, he is the subject of great defection. Still it is true that on the whole he advances. If you compare his present state and character with what they were a considerable length of time past, you will find that he has made gradual progress. I know there are seasons – dark and gloomy seasons, seasons of guilt and declension – when the real Christian will make this comparison at the expense of his assurance. Seasons of guilt and declension ought to be seasons of darkness. I know too there are seasons when he is liable to discouragement, because he does not always experience that light and joy which crowned the day of his conversion. There is a glow of affection, a flush of joy which is felt by the young convert as he is just ushered into the world of grace which perhaps may not be felt at any future period of his life. You cannot draw from this the inference that he has made no advance. All this may be true while there is a power of feeling and a strength of affection in the saint who has passed through the wilderness and knows the trials of the way to which the young convert is a stranger. As he ascends the mount, his eye is fixed, his step is more vigorous, and his path brighter and brighter. He remembers his devious steps and how he traced them back with tears. But the trials of the way are forgotten. He is rising to that brightness of purity which "sheds the luster of eternity" on his character and aiming at the crown of righteousness which fades not away.

Here then is another test of the genuineness of your religion. I am aware that it is a severe one. But it is one which bears the seal of truth, and we must not shrink from it. Professing Christians are apt to place too much confidence on their past experience and think little of the present, to think much on what they imagine to have been their conversion, their first work, and then give up the business of self-examination, and allow themselves to droop and decline. But the question is what is your present character? "Grace is the evidence of grace." I know it is true that he who is once a Christian is always a Christian, but it is also true that he who is not now a Christian never was a Christian. "Examine yourselves, therefore, whether you be in the faith" (II Cor. 13:5). The best evidence in the world that you are is that you grow in grace.

No man living in spiritual sloth and making no new advances ought to flatter himself that he is a partaker of the blessings of the great salvation. The man who is satisfied because he thinks he is safe, who feels that he has religion enough because he thinks he has enough to save him from hell is as ignorant of the power as he is a stranger to the consolation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

18. Practical Obedience

After all that has been said the great evidence of vital piety is practical obedience. The character of men is to be decided by their conduct. I maintain this to be the great scriptural test of true religion. And it is a rule of judging which is always infallible. The conduct of men is governed by their hearts. "Out of the heart are the issues of life" (Prov. 4:23). A good heart will produce good conduct and a corrupt heart will produce corrupt conduct. The rule is infallible. By this I do not mean that it is always infallibly applied. A rule may be ever so perfect and yet by inability, unskillfulness, or error be misapplied and lead to a wrong decision. Still, this does not impair the infallibility of the rule. Nothing is regarded by men as more certain than that a good tree will bear good fruit and that a corrupt tree will bear corrupt fruit (Mat. 12:33). And it is equally certain that a good heart will produce good practice and that a corrupt heart will produce corrupt practice. Those dispositions of the heart which are right are so because from their nature they lead to right conduct; and those dispositions of heart which are wrong are so because from their nature they lead to wrong conduct. We have therefore absolute certainty, if the conduct be good, the heart is good; and on the other hand, if the conduct be bad, we have the same certainty that the heart is bad.

Men adopt no other standard of character in the common concerns of life and they know no other. A man who is fettered by no external restrictions and who is left free to act will act according to his desires and affections. If we see a man supremely and habitually engaged in the pursuit of wealth, or honor, or pleasure, we are never at a loss to know where his heart is. And the principle holds with respect to everything. As the practice is so is the heart. If therefore we know the practice to be good the conclusion is infallible that the heart is good, and if we know the practice to be bad, the conclusion is as incontrovertible that the heart is bad. This is a test also which is peculiarly easy in its application. Were the inward sentiments or emotions of the soul the only test of character, we should have been peculiarly liable to self-deception. But there is by no means the same liability to deception when we judge of the nature of our feelings by our conduct. When a man says he desires and delights above all things to serve God, let him try the reality of his desire by asking whether he actually serves Him. How sure the test! How comparatively easy to form a decision! What plainer principle than this, "The tree is known by its fruit" (Mat. 12:33).

The Scriptures assign peculiar importance to this test of religious character. God knows the blindness of the human heart and the strange exposure to self-deception in men. He has therefore provided that the reality of those dispositions which we profess to cherish toward Him shall be clearly shown by corresponding conduct. Do you inquire, "Who are the friends of Christ?" He Himself replies, "You are my friends, if you do whatever I command you" (John 15:14). Do you ask, "Who are those that love the Redeemer?" He Himself replies, "He that loves me, keeps my commandments" (John 14:23). Do you ask, "How shall we know that we possess a saving knowledge of the Redeemer?" You are informed that "Hereby do we know that we know him if we keep his commandments" (I John 2:3). Would you know the evidence of hostility to Christ? He says, "He that loves me not, keeps not my sayings"

(John 14:24). Would you know who are those who are deceived and deceivers? The Scriptures say, "He that says he knows him and keeps not his commandments is a liar and the truth is not in him" (I John 2:4). Would you become acquainted with the grand line of demarcation between saints and sinners? The Bible tells you, "In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: he that does not righteousness is not of God" (I John 3:10). Would you know what will be regarded as the grand rule of trial at the last day? The Scriptures inform you that "without respect of people the Father will judge every man according to his works" (I Pet. 1:17).

When the beloved disciple, in the visions of Patmos, saw the sea give up the dead which were in it, and death and hell give up the dead which were in them; they were judged every man according to his work (Rev. 20:13). So that the test of character to which we allude has received from the great Searcher of hearts the decided preeminence. The blindness, prejudice, and carelessness of men can scarcely mistake the result of a trial by this criterion. Men say what they please about religion; they may be ever so orthodox in their creed; and ardent in their affections, and sanguine in their hopes; but if they yield not themselves unto God as those that are alive from the dead; if they bring not forth the fruits of holy obedience, their faith is vain, they are yet in their sins. By their fruits you shall know them (Mat. 7:20). Grapes never did grow on thorns, nor figs on thistles.

In forming our estimate of the nature of holy obedience, the Scriptures must be our only guide. A man may be very good according to the world's standard who is very bad according to the standard of the Bible. When we inquire into the nature of that obedience which constitutes the great evidence of Christian character, it is important to turn our attention to two or three particulars.

In the first place it has respect to all God's commandments. The great error into which men are apt to fall is that of taking a partial view of the fruits of holiness. Some highly extol those which relate to our duty to man and lay little or no stress upon piety toward God; others lay the whole stress upon acts of piety and devotions and, where these are found, make very large allowances for the absence of everything else; others again direct all their attention to views and feelings, and to a particular process through which a man may have passed in attaining his present confidence and joy, while few take into consideration the fullness of the Christian character or recognize the necessity that it should be complete in all its parts though it is imperfect in degree. Now all this is wrong. And it is so because it is a partial mode of judging and is very apt to lead to an erroneous judgment. The true method is to comprehend all the fruits of righteousness; to bring into account all the duties of religion; to compare our character with all the precepts of the Bible, both those which relate to God, to our neighbor, and to ourselves; and if this entire character belongs to us, then does our conduct demonstrate the genuineness of our piety. "If a man say I love God and hates his brother, he is a liar; for if he loves not his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God, whom he has not seen?" (I John 4:20). If a man makes high professions of his inward religious experience while disregarding the claim of justice, kindness, honesty and truth toward his fellow men, he is deceived and knows as little of the power of godliness in his heart as the fruits of godliness in his life. Neither a regard to one precept of the law or to another affords evidence of piety, but a regard to the whole.

The obedience of which we speak is also habitual. It is not constant for if it were, then would men in the present world be perfect. Universal and constant obedience is the very definition of sinless perfection. But such is not the obedience of any man on earth. I know it is written, "Whoever is born of God, does not commit sin, for his seed remains in him, and he cannot sin, because he is born of God" (I John 3:9). But if we would make the Bible consistent with itself, we must give these passages some latitude of interpretation. The experience of the world and the declarations of eternal truth assure us that "There is not a just man upon the earth, that sins not" (Eccl. 7:20). We must not root out all religion from the earth because we do not find perfection in men. Moses, Samuel, Paul, Peter, were all fervently pious, and yet they sinned. The melancholy fact is that the best of men do sin greatly and are sometimes the subjects of the most awful defection.

It is needless to conceal the truth that the sins of good men are of an aggravated character. It is vain to say that they do not sin knowingly. They are indeed often surprised into the commission of sin; but they often commit sin with calmness and deliberation. They often commit it in defiance of the sober dictates of reason and in defiance to the most powerful conviction of their consciences.

It is vain to say that they do not sin voluntarily. No man was ever constrained to sin. Sin cannot be forced upon men contrary to their own inclination. The children of God often complain that their hearts prompt them to sin, but their hearts never constrain them to act contrary to their choice. Seriously considered, it is impossible to sin without acting voluntarily. The divine law requires nothing but voluntary obedience and forbids nothing but voluntary disobedience. As men cannot sin without acting, nor act without choosing to act, so they must act voluntarily in sinning.

The children of God therefore do sin. They sin knowingly. They sin voluntarily, but they do not sin habitually. It is not the prevailing habit of their lives to disobey the commandments of God, but their purpose to obey always and their practice to obey habitually. In forming our estimate of the fruits of righteousness, therefore, we are not to attribute too much importance to particular instances of conduct. The life of every good man is stained with imperfection and sin, and if we pronounce none good unless we find absolute perfection, all must be condemned. On the contrary, there is scarcely any bad man whose conduct does not sometimes exhibit the semblance of real goodness. We can say no more therefore of good men than that their obedience is habitual and that their conduct, viewed as a whole, exhibits clear and decisive evidences of a sanctified temper. This is most surely true of every Christian.

It may also be added that the conformity to the precepts of God's Word upon which we may safely rely as a test of character is persevering. The disciple of Jesus Christ perseveres in his course to the end of life. He holds on his way. It is the characteristic as well as the blessedness of those who "trust in the Lord that they are as Mount Zion which cannot be removed, but abides forever" (Psalm. 125:1).

The apostle John speaks of a class of professing Christians that were somewhat multiplied even in those early days of the Christian church. He says, "They went out from us, but they

were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us" (I John 2:19). The true disciple endures to the end (Mat. 24:14). Though he foresees that his path is beset with obstructions on every side, still he goes forward. Though dangers may threaten and trials discourage him, leaning upon the Beloved, he goes forward. His most vigorous resolutions terminate upon his duty. He goes forward with a firm and vigorous step. No matter how rough the way, with eye fixed on the Author and Finisher of his faith, he goes forward with unabated ardor, leaving the earth behind him and animated with the prospect of heaven and glory before him. He is aiming at "the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14). No difficulties are so great, no fatigue so severe, as to divert him from his design. Perfection is his object. He cherishes no present intention to disobey at all. From the heart, he desires and intends to yield a compliance, not merely to this or that requisition, but to all the divine requirements without distinction and without exception.

And now I am satisfied to make my appeal to my readers, whether this is not the conduct which flows from genuine piety. To say nothing of the example of Christ who added to universal, habitual, and persevering conformity to holiness, a constant conformity, are not such the fruits of righteousness demonstrated by prophets and apostles and other holy men mentioned in the Bible? Between such obedience and the man of mere morality or the best painted hypocrite the world ever saw, is there not a discernible difference? Such obedience begins with love to God; it advances with hatred of sin; it is encouraged by faith in Jesus Christ; it is cherished by a self-abasing humility; it is nurtured by prayer; it is purified by detachment from the world; it is beautified by all the relative and social virtues; it is consistent in all the moral and exterior duties; it is evidenced by a tender and active benevolence; and it is matured by a life and a death devoted to God. These are the fruits of genuine Christianity. They grow on this parent stalk and on no other. They may be sometimes blasted and withered by the noxious atmosphere of earth; they may find little to nourish them in the impoverished soil of the human heart; they may sometimes appear in very diminished size and richness, but in greater or less perfection; here they are always found; and they never fail to flourish in such quantity and such perfection as to tell on what tree they grow.

Let the reader, then, try his character by the same rule by which the Word of God tries it. He that has the hope of the Gospel purifies himself even as Christ is pure (I John 3:3). Does your love to God prompt you to devout attendance upon all His institutions? Does it animate you with increasing attachment to His Word and His service? Does your love to man lead you to do justice and love mercy, to live in peace with all men? Does it make you the better husband, or the better wife; the better parent, or the better child; the better master, or the better servant; the better magistrate or the better subject; the better friend, or the better citizen?

The religion of Jesus Christ is not a system of empty speculations, designed to have no practical influence. It is not the offspring of wild enthusiasm that exhausts all its force in feeling and leaves none for action. A good man out of the treasure of the heart necessarily brings forth good things (Mat. 12:35). Experience without practice is nothing, and practice without experience is not more. Experimental religion consists in the reality of the Christian

graces, and in their due effect upon the life and conversation. If you are an experienced Christian you feel the power of religion in your heart and exhibit it in your life. With such a test, men surely need not be deceived in their fears or their hopes. Nothing is more infallible than this simple test. And if any go through the world with false hopes, it will be because they measure themselves by a standard of their own, and not by the standard which God has given them, Never, never could the hypocrite, destitute of every good thing and enemy of God as he is, go to the throne of judgment with the hope of eternal life, if he did this. And never could real Christians so often doubt of their good estate, if they did this. If the fruits of righteousness in their lives were not so few, withered, and sickly, they could never doubt whether they are genuine. Because you are not a better Christian, you doubt whether you are a Christian at all. God never designed that saved men should have assurance, peace, and joy in any other proportion than they bring forth the fruits of holiness. If you would enjoy the pleasures of religion, therefore, you must practice its duties. If you will not do this, you will continue in darkness and doubt while you live. On the contrary, if you will awake to a life of Christian activity, you shall have that peace which passes all understanding, that your joy may be full.

19. Conclusion

The preceding pages may perhaps assist you in deciding the question whether you are born of the Spirit and a child of God.

This subject is certainly worthy of every man's serious attention. God has revealed plain and infallible tests of character which all can understand and apply. They are tests by which we must all one day be tried. God will not revoke nor alter them. It is in vain to thrust aside the solemn inquiries which have been made in the progress of these Essays. They will meet you when you come to lie on the bed of death; they will meet you in another world. I entreat you, therefore, examine yourselves as though you were before the throne of the final judgment. The inquiry is of eternal importance. A mistake here is a mistake for eternity. Under a deep sense of your need of the searching influences of the Divine Spirit as you reflect upon what you have read, adopt the language of the Psalmist, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm. 139:23-24).

"He that is not with me," says the Savior, "is against me" (Luke 11:23). There is no principle within the whole compass of morals that admits of more strict demonstration than this, that there can be but two moral characters that are essentially different. There must be necessarily in every intelligent being a conformity to the will of God or the lack of it. It is as impossible that a man should be neither right nor wrong, as it is that a portion of matter at any given period should be neither at rest nor in motion.

It is absurd to suppose that he is neither a saint nor a sinner; neither penitent nor impenitent; neither a believer nor an unbeliever. So long as men possess any moral character they must view themselves and be viewed by others, either for God or against Him. In the great contest which enlists the feelings and the power of three worlds it is impossible that there should be a neutral. One side or the other will claim every intelligent being in heaven, on earth, and in hell. And it is right they should do so. If the line should now be drawn by the invisible hand of the greater Searcher of hearts, on the one side would be the friends of God, on the other His enemies.

Suffer me, then, beloved reader, plainly, solemnly, and affectionately to ask the question, "On which side do you stand?" If you possess nothing more than mere visible morality, nothing more than the naked form of religion, nothing more than a speculative knowledge of the system of revealed truth, nothing more than simple conviction for sin, nothing more than a vain confidence of your own good estate, connected with some apparent zeal for the cause of God, and a few transient and spurious affections, how can you be one of the children of the Everlasting Father? If you are a stranger to love to God, to repentance for sin, to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, to evangelical humility, to genuine self-denial, how can you cherish the hope that you are a Christian? If you know nothing of the spirit of prayer, nothing of the love of the brotherhood, nothing of mortifying the spirit of the world, nothing of growth in grace, of cordial, habitual, persevering obedience to the Divine

commands, how can it be that you have been “brought near by the blood of Christ”? If these things are so, “You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God” (Acts 8:21).

Does this agitate you? The writer of these pages takes no pleasure in exciting needless alarm. But how can he raise the unhallowed cry, “Peace, peace,” when the Eternal God says, “There is no peace!”? How can he raise the unhallowed cry, when every note of such a song would only lull the hypocrite into a more deathlike security, and every sentence prove the blow to sink him deeper into the eternal pit? Poor self-deceived man, who vainly imagines that you are in the way to heaven while you are in the way to hell; rather than amuse you with tame, smooth, pretty things, O that I could raise a voice that would make you tremble even in the grave of trespasses and sin! Be entreated to dismiss your deceptions; to give up your delusive confidence. Cast not the anchor of hope upon a shore so yielding that the final blast will break its hold. However hard the struggle, despair of mercy without being washed in the blood of Jesus. Cherish not a delusion which the king of terrors will tear from your heart!

But do I seem to presume that my readers are hypocrites? Many, I trust, are the dear people of God. Some may be weak in faith, and weak in assurance. Beloved, I would not lisp a syllable to rob you of your confidence. Though weak and trembling, there is everything to encourage and strengthen you. It cannot discourage you to examine closely whether the foundation of your assurance is firm; whether your confidence is built upon the sand or whether it rests on the Rock of Ages. Feeble Christians are called upon to mourn over their weakness. Their lack of strength is their sin. Their graces may be well compared to the “dimly smoking flax” (Isa. 42:3). They emit little that warms and enlightens. Their love is cold; their joys barren and poor. God hides His face, and they are troubled (Psalm. 30:7). Tossed, like Peter, upon the tempestuous sea, they have hardly faith even to cry, Lord, save or I perish! Still they may rejoice. The angel of the everlasting covenant lives. That precious covenant itself recognizes the heart reviving principle, redemption through the blood of Jesus, forgiveness of sins according to the riches of His grace (Eph. 1.7). Well, then believer, may you rejoice even in the midst of trembling. What, though you are bowed down under the weight of guilt; what, though poor in spirit, filled with apprehension and almost hopeless; what, though you are like the bruised reed – frailty itself still more frail, ready to fall by the gentlest breeze! “A bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench” (Isa. 42:3). No, never. It shall not be broken, but supported, cherished, yes, by a hand that is omnipotent, transplanted to the garden of the Lord and flourishing in the courts of our God. The Great Head will never disregard the feeblest members of His own body.

There is a peculiar adaptability in the character of our Lord Jesus Christ to the weaknesses and fears of His people. Early was He designated as One who should bear our griefs and carry our sorrows; commissioned to bind up the broken-hearted, and to comfort all that mourn. The Man Christ Jesus is “touched with the feeling of our infirmities” (Heb. 4:15); “He knows our frame, he remembers that we are dust” (Psalm. 103:14). The Shepherd of Israel will “gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young” (Isa. 40:11). It is He who “gives power to the faint, and to those who have no might, he increases strength” (Isa. 40:29).

O believers! that we all might learn to fasten our affections, to rivet our hopes on the cross of Christ! Here is our comfort. We must think much and make much of Christ. In Him all fullness dwells. He is the Captain of your salvation. He is a Fountain for your uncleanness, and a Light for your way. It is He that is of God made unto His people wisdom and righteousness and sanctification (I Cor. 1:30). No matter how great your guilt, rest on Him, and He will be increasingly precious; precious in life, precious in death, precious forever. While your life is hid with Christ in God, however languid the throb, it shall never expire.

Come then, "lift up the hands that hang down, and comfort the feeble knees" (Heb. 12:12). The heavens and the earth shall sooner crumble into their native nothing, than the feeblest lamb of the Shepherd's fold stumble and finally fall. "Loose yourself, therefore, from the bands of your neck, O captive daughter of Zion!" (Isa. 50:2). If you have seasons of trial, do not be alarmed; if you have moments of despondency and weakness, do not be dismayed. "Fear not, you worm Jacob, for you shall thrash the mountains and beat them small. Your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel. He will strengthen you; yes, he will help you; yes, he will uphold you by the right hand of his righteousness" (Isa. 41:10). Say, is it not enough? "Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift" (II Cor. 9:15).

I close, then, by beseeching the reader to devote himself unreservedly to the Lord. "What! know you not that you are not your own? For you are bought with a price; wherefore, glorify God in your spirit and in your body, which are his" (II Cor. 6:19-20). Render unto God the things that are God's. What higher delight, what greater privilege can you enjoy than to consecrate all that you are and all that you possess to God! Come then, and make a voluntary surrender of everything to Him and choose His service as your highest delight.

Henceforth, let it be your greatest care to honor the Lord who has bought you. As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord so walk you in Him, rooted and built up in Him, and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving (Col. 2:6-7). Yes, blessed Redeemer! Other Lords besides You have had dominion over us, but by You only will we make mention of Your Name. O Eternal, Incarnate God! I am Yours, doubly Yours, wholly Yours, Yours forever. Amen.