

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. 7.

Jesus preacheth at Nazareth—miraculously escaped—dwelt at Capernaum—wrought various miracles—rose early—took a circuit round Galilee—called four disciples, after a miraculous draught of fishes.

SUCH an inhabitant as Jesus the world never saw either before or since. Every view of him, during his abode on earth, not only furnishes instruction, but excites amazement. Each part of his life is a proof of his own assertion, and a striking comment on what he said, “My meat is to do the will of Him that sent me, and to finish his work*.” While we observe his activity, may we feel the force of his example, as an incentive to diligence! And as we perceive with what strength of evidence his high character and divine mission were displayed, may our faith and hope in him abound more and more!

Wherever he travelled, he appeared as no common person: both the doctrines he delivered, and the miracles he wrought, proved incontestably that he was more than an ordinary Prophet, and no less than the Saviour of the world, “over all, God blessed for ever.”

“He returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee†:” being anointed to his office by the Holy Ghost, he was, by the same unction, directed, assisted, and comforted in its execution. “The power of the Spirit” so accompanied his ministrations, as to carry a forcible conviction to the minds of others. “There went a fame of him through all the region round about; and he taught in their synagogues,

* John iv. 34.

† Luke iv. 14, &c.

being

being glorified of all." We shall not wonder that he engaged the general attention of the neighbourhood, if we take a view of his conduct, and the circumstances which occurred, during his first circuit round Galilee.

"He came to Nazareth," which had been the place of his education, and principal residence till he entered on his public ministry. He had declined going thither for some time after his visit at Jerusalem, and turned aside to the other parts of Galilee, on account of the prejudices which his townsmen entertained. He himself testified that "a prophet hath no honour in his own country:" those who have known him in his childhood, or lived with him on terms of intimacy, in a lower situation, are seldom disposed to pay him reverence or attention, as a teacher of religion. We might have imagined, indeed, that Jesus would have been an exception to this general observation, and that those who were witnesses of his astonishing wisdom and holiness, even at an early age, would have been prepared to listen and submit to his instructions. The fact, however, was otherwise, as our Lord had foretold; for he was sufficiently aware of the enmity of the Nazarenes against him. But, though he knew what his reception would be, he determined to bear his testimony amongst them, and give them an opportunity of manifesting their real dispositions. Nor are the ministers of his Gospel to be deterred from declaring the truth, though they have to combat with prejudice and aversion. Necessity is laid upon them, and they must deliver their message, whether men will hear, or whether they will forbear.

Upon his arrival at Nazareth, "he went, as his custom was, into the synagogue on the sabbath-day." At Jerusalem alone, where the temple stood, sacrifices were offered, and the Mosaic rites observed. But in almost every town and village synagogues were erected, like our parish-churches, for public worship, for prayer and praise, for reading and expounding the

the Scriptures. To them our Lord resorted, whenever he had opportunity; so that he may be proposed as a pattern of a diligent attendance on religious institutions. But do all his professed followers copy after him? Is it their custom, their habitual practice, to frequent the house of God? Is there any excuse to be urged for their neglect of it, which will bear examination? If Jesus thought it right to be a constant worshipper in Jewish assemblies, who shall despise or turn away from Christian ordinances? Who shall say that he has no need of prayer and the word of God, since Jesus himself paid such regard to them?

One particular person presided over each of these places, called "the Ruler," who directed the service, and had a power of appointing any man, seriously disposed and properly qualified, to officiate in it. Accordingly, upon the appearance of Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth, he was desired to read; and what was probably a lesson for the day furnished him with a suitable text for his first sermon among them. The attention of the congregation was fixed upon him, while they heard him repeat those remarkable words, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor: he hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord*." The passage confessedly described the office of their expected Messiah; and, while they were anxious to know what application he would make of it, he solemnly declared that it was fulfilled in himself.

The completion of the prophecy affords strong consolation to us. We are here taught to regard Jesus as the Anointed of God, sent from above, and as bringing with him the gracious offers of pardon for the guilty, peace for the miserable, and salvation for those "who are ready to perish." In this representation the sinful, depraved, and helpless condition

* Isa. lxi. 1—3.

of man, is clearly implied; and the blessings of redemption are freely proposed to the acceptance of all who feel and lament the melancholy truth. If we pride ourselves on any fancied goodness or ability of our own, we grossly mistake our case, and overlook the grand peculiarities of the Gospel; nor can we receive those important benefits which Jesus came to bestow. He gives wisdom to the ignorant, righteousness to the guilty, sanctification to the unholy, and redemption to the miserable captive. But he confers no favour on the proud and self-sufficient, who, not being sensible of their own necessities, will not submit or apply to him.

We ask, then, Are you "the poor," of whom the Prophet speaks; poor, in a spiritual sense, as perceiving yourselves destitute of every thing really excellent? The Gospel proclaims glad tidings in your ears: Jesus brings a message of mercy to you, and bids you take "the unsearchable riches" of his grace.

Or, are you distressed in mind, not on account of worldly losses, but from a conviction of your guilt and danger? Is your anguish extreme, so that, under the dread of God's displeasure, you cry out, "Thy rebuke hath broken my heart?" Jesus is commissioned to administer suitable and adequate relief. He will "bind up your wounds, pouring in oil and wine," and will continue his kind attentions to you till the cure be perfected. It is his peculiar office "to heal the broken-hearted."

Do you fear that the sentence of condemnation is gone forth against you, and that you are detained as "prisoners" in the hands of divine justice? Such, indeed, is your natural state; nor is there any escape possible but by the gracious interposition of Jesus. He grants "deliverance to the captives," cancels the sentence, and proclaims a full forgiveness. Or, do you bewail your spiritual bondage, under the oppression of those enemies to whom you have long been subject, and who are too strong for you? On this account, also, we would direct you to look unto
Jesus,

Jesus, who alone can rescue you from this miserable servitude. He calls upon you to assert your freedom; for "he says to the prisoners, Go forth; to them that are in darkness, Show yourselves *."

You are distressed, perhaps, by your extreme ignorance in divine things, and lament that all appears darkness and confusion to your minds. It may be that you had conceived highly of your own discernment, but now are free to confess that you are spiritually "blind." It is a happy change. While you said "We see," you would have spurned at the proposal of any one to open your eyes. Now you cannot but welcome the Saviour, who "recovers the sight;" and exhorts you to "anoint your eyes with eye-salve, that you may see †."

Yet, after various struggles and painful conflicts, your distress may probably increase, if no sensible deliverance be wrought for you; and every attempt to gain your liberty may make your chains the more galling and insupportable. You are, therefore, fitly described as being "bruised" with your fetters. But, though you are heavily oppressed, and unable to extricate yourselves, your case is not desperate. Jesus appears with a powerful arm, which shall be exerted in your behalf. He not only gives you permission to go forth, but he himself will "break your bands in sunder," release you from the tyranny of the world, the flesh, and the devil, and "make you free indeed ‡."

Should the desponding fear arise, "We have sinned so long and so presumptuously, that mercy cannot now be extended to us; the time of grace is expired:" this great Prophet of our God will quiet your apprehension, while he "preaches the acceptable year of the Lord." In his name we can assure you, that, if you return to your offended God, you shall all find a favourable reception. He waits to pardon and to bless you. This is the happy season prefigured by the ancient jubilee: the proclamation of

* Isa. xlix. 9.

† Rev. iii. 18.

‡ John viii. 36.

the Gospel, like the joyful sound of the trumpet among the Israelites, declares that your debt is cancelled, the appointed hour of your enlargement is come, and your inheritance shall be restored. "Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation *."

Such is the purport of that important prophecy which our Lord applied to himself, and on which he insisted in his preaching to the Nazarenes. And what was the effect produced? They were struck with wonder: the dignity and grace of the Speaker made a strong impression upon their minds. But admiration was all: they did not seriously consider his words, or believe his declarations. Their prejudices immediately appeared; and they began to cavil at the meanness of his birth and extraction. He knew what was in their hearts, and addressed them, probably with a particular reference to their very thoughts concerning him. He gave them to understand that he was aware of their objections to his family and education, and that he expected they would demand from him the same miraculous operations which he had wrought at Capernaum. But he warned them not to reject the evidence offered to themselves, while he maintained that God, as a sovereign Arbiter, is not accountable to any one; and that he has a right to dispense his favours as he pleases. Accordingly, many perish, who are placed in the most advantageous circumstances; and mercy is extended to others at a distance, whom we should not have thought of. Thus he observed to them that a poor Gentile widow was relieved by Elijah, while many widows in Israel were left to suffer all the severities of famine:—a stranger and an enemy to Israel was cured of his leprosy by Elisha, though the same dreadful disease continued to prey upon many others in the very country and under the immediate notice of the Prophet. He intimated, then, that the grace of the Gospel might be sent to some

* 2 Cor. vi. 2.

remote kingdom, even among the Heathens, and that they themselves might never experience the blessing, but be destroyed through their unbelief.

This was more than they could bear: "they were filled with wrath;" and the violence of their conduct soon discovered the enmity of their hearts. Without regard to the day, the place, or the service, they rose up in the utmost confusion; and, with murderous rage having thrust him out of their city, they were on the very point of casting him down from a high precipice. But his hour was not yet come; no schemes could prevail to take away his life till he was pleased to resign it: and therefore by a miracle he passed through the midst of them, and escaped unhurt.

Ah! foolish people and unwise, who so rashly rejected the Saviour! We might be constrained to weep over their sad case: but it will become us rather to be anxiously concerned for ourselves. What reception does Jesus meet with amongst us? His Gospel excites the admiration of many, who know no more of it than the Nazarenes. They soon begin to cavil, and urge a variety of objections. It is in vain to answer: nay, perhaps the most temperate reply may increase their violence: nor would it be surprising if the ministers of Christ, like their Lord and Master, should be driven away with contempt and abhorrence. Ah! what availed it to live at Nazareth, to be near to Jesus, to observe his holy conduct, and to hear his gracious words? Or what avails it now to be placed within the notice of the most excellent persons, and under the most lively ordinances of religion? Even in such circumstances, you may feel a vehement hatred of the truth. But beware: whilst you endeavour to get rid of that which gives you pain, you are rejecting your best mercies, and destroying your immortal souls.

After his escape at Nazareth, our Lord took up his abode for some time at Capernaum, a city not far distant; but the inhabitants, it should seem, were of
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a different temper and disposition. Here he appears to have been particularly active in preaching on the sabbath-days; and from this place, probably his chief residence, he went through the whole neighbourhood, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the Gospel of the kingdom.

We admire the undaunted courage and unwearied assiduity of our Redeemer, in labouring to promote the salvation of men. Though his life had been attempted in one town, he desisted not from his work, but vigorously pursued it in another. The same line of conduct he prescribed to his Apostles; "When they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another *." Thus, also, should his ministers in every age be zealous, diligent, and persevering, in their exertions for the benefit of souls. Instead of being discouraged by opposition, they should renew their endeavours: and though prevented from doing it among certain persons, whose welfare they anxiously desire, in different situations they may be more successful.

What reception, then, did our Lord meet with at Capernaum? There were the most favourable and promising appearances: "They were astonished at his doctrine; for his word was with power." It is probable that much and important good was effected; for we are told that upon this occasion was fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, "The people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to them, which sat in the region and shadow of death, light is sprung up †." Happy, happy people, who gladly received what others contemptuously rejected; who knew the time of their visitation, and upon whom "the Sun of righteousness" shone with such abundant splendour! Let us bless God that our land also, which was once "the region and shadow of death," hath seen a great light, and that now we enjoy the meridian lustre of a Gospel day. Let us not be satisfied, however, to live in a Christian country, but be solicitous to experience the saving efficacy of divine truth,

* Matt. x. 23.

† iv. 16. Isa. ix. 1, 2.

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which is preached and professed among us. For this purpose let us seriously attend to the doctrine of Christ. Though we have not his personal ministry, he still speaks to us by his faithful servants: and we are not afraid to assert, that, in numerous instances, how weak and unworthy soever the instrument may be, "his word is with power." O for the sacred influence of the Spirit, to apply it with energy to our hearts!

If we accompany our Lord, we shall perceive him displaying his high character by the various miracles which he performed in that neighbourhood. He denied to the men of Nazareth, on account of their violent prejudices, those clear and strong evidences which he afforded to the inhabitants of Capernaum. This, indeed, is agreeable to his usual procedure. To humble and sincere inquirers he is pleased to give advantages and opportunities for attaining divine knowledge, which he justly and wisely withholds from others. Let us be faithful according to the light we have; and he will establish us more and more in the belief and love of the truth.

While Jesus was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum, a poor unhappy creature, under the influence of an evil spirit, miserably tormented, cried out aloud in the assembly, "Let us alone; what have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth? Art thou come to destroy us? I know thee who thou art, the Holy One of God." This was a striking confession, perhaps unwillingly made by the devil through an impression of terror, or else intended to bring the character of Christ into suspicion, as if he were really confederate with wicked demons, and so to lay a foundation for that objection, "He casteth out devils through the prince of the devils*."

To show that he wanted not a testimony of such a kind, he rejected it with abhorrence, commanding the evil spirit to be silent, and to come out of the man. Immediately, at his word, the wretched sufferer,

* Matt. ix. 34.

after being violently convulsed, was perfectly restored. No wonder that a general amazement took place, when Jesus appeared so decidedly superior to the powers of darkness, and that the fame of so singular a character was spread abroad through all the country.

The case of those who were possessed has been the subject of much inquiry, and no little controversy. Many would explain away the influence of Satan, and even deny his very being, and therefore they represent this possession as nothing more than a common disease. But the descriptions given in the New Testament seem utterly inconsistent with such an interpretation; as the evil spirits were spoken to, and returned answers, distinct from the persons themselves, and several circumstances attending them can never be accounted for by any natural disorder whatever. Surely there will be no inconsistency in allowing, according to the literal sense of the Scriptures, that the devils were then permitted to exercise an extraordinary power over the human body in many instances. Though we read or hear not of such cases in other periods of history, they might be suffered at that time, in order that the character of Christ, as our great Deliverer, and his complete victory and triumph over the prince of darkness, might be more clearly exhibited.

We perceive the malice of Satan, who is disposed to make use of every method to harass and torment us; and we are thankful that his rage is restrained. But, though he practise not such acts of violence as formerly upon the animal frame, does he therefore exert no influence which is to be dreaded? Alas! he has yet so strong an ascendancy over the minds of men, that many "are taken captive by him at his will*." With a destructive efficacy, "he now worketh in the children of disobedience†." But we behold with love and admiration the divine Redeemer entering the lists against him, and obtaining a complete

* 2 Tim. ii. 26.

† Eph. ii. 2.

conquest. He can "bind the strong man," and let the oppressed go free. "For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil *:" and, during the abode of Jesus upon earth, full scope was given for determining the conflict. We may, therefore, safely commit ourselves to the care of our exalted Leader, who delivers his people "from the power of darkness," and promises "The prince of this world shall be cast out †." But let us not be satisfied with confessing "Thou art the Holy One of God." This did the unclean spirit; and this may we also do, while confederate with Satan. Our system of faith, possibly, may be orthodox, and our hearts, at the same time, filled with impure desires, and enslaved to vile affections. The Gospel needs no such advocates; nor will Jesus accept our praises, or own us for his friends, whatever testimony we may bear for him in such a state.

Common diseases, likewise, were instantly removed by a touch or a word. The mother of Peter's wife being dangerously sick, the case was represented to him; nor was the application vain. With tender compassion he relieved the distress of the family, commanding the fever to depart, which threatened her life; and the cure was so perfect, that she was immediately able to wait upon the company. We regard him still as the great restorer of health; and his agency should be acknowledged in the efficacy of what are called natural means. Physicians and medicines should not be despised or neglected; but our dependence must be placed upon and our supplications directed to Him, in every time of trouble.

No case was too hard, nor was any humble petition for his help ever rejected. "When the sun was setting, all they that had any sick with divers diseases brought them unto him: and he laid his hands on every one of them, and healed them." This was done on the close of the same day in which he

* 1 John iii. 8.

† John xii. 31.

had been preaching at Capernaum, when the sabbath, according to their computation, was ended; for they professed such a high regard for that sacred season, that they thought it unlawful to carry, or even to heal, their sick till the evening. Then also, in various other instances, he triumphed over the malice and power of Satan. He cast out many devils, who all proclaimed him to be the Messiah: but he rejected their testimony, as before, that he might not seem to be acting in concert with them.

After the sabbath had been thus spent, probably with much bodily fatigue, he rose very early the next morning, "a great while before day *." Retirement, contemplation, and prayer, were the refreshment and the solace which he sought. Blessed Jesus! how does thy example reprove our sloth and sensual indulgence! We allow the necessity of secret devotion; but how many excuses do we urge for our neglect! Our time is supposed to be so much wanted for other engagements, that we can find little or no leisure for this. But our Lord has taught us to deny ourselves the gratification of sleep, and rise early, that we may secure an opportunity of waiting upon God, and thus draw down from him renewed supplies of grace from day to day. Those, who are engaged in public life, have especial need of this caution: for a constant hurry of employment, even in religious concerns, may distract and enervate the mind, unless its strength be repaired by frequent retirement.

But, though privacy should be ever so delightful to us, we must be content to have it interrupted. When the work of God calls us away, we must go with cheerfulness and vigour. "The people sought him, and came unto him, and stayed him, that he should not depart from them." It might have been agreeable to himself to have fixed his abode amongst persons so much attached to him. But he resisted their solicitations; and, with eager desire to promote the end of his ministry, he said, "I must preach the

* Mark i. 35.

kingdom of God to other cities also ; for therefore am I sent." Accompanied, then, by certain disciples, he took a circuit throughout Galilee, publishing the glad tidings of salvation, and confirming his doctrine by miraculous operations. In the course of that journey astonishing cures were performed, and such a general admiration excited, that immense multitudes from various and distant places resorted to him*. This was a pleasing sight; but we know, that, with respect to many, they saw, and heard, and wondered, without any real benefit to themselves. It is so now. Great numbers are drawn together by the faithful preaching of the Gospel; and there are those who seem deeply affected by the things which are spoken: yet, notwithstanding their professed approbation and zeal, we have no reason to conclude that they feel the saving efficacy of the truth.

It has been observed that our Lord was attended by certain disciples, and an account is given us, at the commencement of this journey, of the manner in which four of them, viz. Peter and Andrew, James and John, were called to this attendance†. The two former, at least, had been attached to his service before, though not such constant followers as to forsake their common employments. But now, as he travelled much, their presence and assistance upon all occasions became more necessary; and it was designed, that, by accompanying him throughout his ministry, they themselves should be gradually prepared for the work. They were all of one occupation, and that of mean estimation in the world; for they were fishermen. Jesus sought not his Apostles out of the palaces of kings, or the schools of philosophers: but, while he chose the poor and the unlearned, it more evidently appeared that "the excellency of the power" in their preaching "was of God, and not of men."

When he addressed himself to them, he found them diligently engaged in their business: and we

* Matt. iv. 22—25.

† Mark i. 16—20. Luke v. 1—11.

also

also are taught to expect his favourable notice; though our time and attention be much taken up with the lowest offices of life. The people in Galilee with great eagerness pressed after him to hear his instructions, not merely in the synagogues, but wherever he went. On one occasion, therefore, we perceive him delivering his doctrines by the sea-shore, and out of Peter's vessel.

When this was done, that he might encourage Peter and his three companions the more cheerfully to follow him, by affording them a sort of typical representation of the wonderful effects which should be produced by their ministry, he desired them to launch into the deep, and let down their nets. Peter replied, that they had laboured all night in vain, but that, animated by his direction, they would make another attempt. He, that gave the word, commanded success, and proved that he was Lord of the whole creation; through his influence, an immense multitude of fishes were brought to the net and taken up, so as to fill them all with amazement. The presence of the God of nature was acknowledged; and Peter in particular, overwhelmed with confusion and terror, under a sense of his unworthiness and unfitness to stand before such an exalted Personage, cried out, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." The Saviour, however, instantly dispersed his fears, and then explained the miracle, as exhibiting an event of far greater consequence, the success of his preaching, since from that time he should "catch men."

Now they could not hesitate to devote themselves wholly to his service: for what had they to dread? With readiness, therefore, they forsook their worldly occupations and connexions, no longer anxious about their nets, their ships, or their friends; and, at his invitation, became his constant followers. Nor did their Lord disappoint the hopes which he gave them. When three thousand souls were converted by their ministry on the day of Pentecost, they appeared indeed

deed to "catch men," and a far more stupendous miracle was wrought than this draught of fishes.

Shall not we, also, confess and adore the divine power of Jesus? But let us not say, "Depart from me, O Lord;" but rather, "Come, Lord, to my help, for I am a sinful man: Come and subdue, as well as pardon, mine iniquity, that I perish not, as I deserve!" But are we willing to follow Christ? And do we resolve to forsake all, though not exactly as the Apostles did, yet fully and deliberately to give up and to suffer whatever he may require? If not, we cannot be his disciples. O, may that same energy which so disposed their minds, be exerted upon us! Especially, may the ministers of Christ, in our day, obey his call! May they be furnished for their office by an abundant measure of faith, love, and zeal; and so taught to cast the net of the Gospel, that they also may catch men, and bring them to the knowledge and the service of their divine Master! Amen.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. 8.

*The first part of our Lord's sermon on the mount,
containing the eight beatitudes.*

IF we consider what manner of person Jesus was, how uncommon the works he performed, and the instructions he delivered, we shall not be surprised that immense multitudes flocked to him from every quarter. We shall rather wonder that they were not more deeply affected by what they saw and heard, and that so few in comparison became sincere converts and disciples. During his abode in Galilee, when he perceived himself surrounded by a numerous assembly, with generous compassion for their souls he seized the opportunity to preach a sermon of peculiar extent and importance, in which he declared, more publicly and expressly than he had done before, the purposes of his coming, and explained more clearly the spiritual nature of his kingdom*. "He went up into a mountain," probably that his voice might reach to a greater distance; and, according to the custom of the Jewish teachers, he was seated whilst he gave his instruction. His disciples were his near attendants, and to them in a more immediate manner he directed some parts of his discourse, whilst many things concerned the multitudes at large. With peculiar solemnity "he opened his mouth, and taught them" with such wisdom and majesty as astonished them all.

This sermon of our Lord upon the mount is a rich and invaluable treasure, containing instructions of the highest moment. We do not say that it is an explicit and entire declaration of the Gospel method of salva-

* Matt. v. 1, &c.

tion; for the season was not then come for the wondrous plan to be so fully disclosed as it afterwards was. During the continuance of Jesus upon earth, before he had finished the mystery of redemption by the sacrifice of himself, he thought it not proper to insist, very minutely or very publicly, on the nature and reasons of his death, or on the spiritual benefits to be received through faith in his blood. On these subjects, indeed, he was not wholly silent, but he left them to be further opened to the Apostles themselves by the teaching of the Holy Spirit, that they might communicate them to the world, after the grand event had taken place. We are, therefore, to look for a more perfect summary and clearer account of evangelical doctrines in the apostolical writings than in the history of our Lord's life. Some have asserted that nothing more need be preached to the people than what the sermon on the mount contains; yet perhaps these very persons would not be willing that every part of this discourse should be closely pressed upon their consciences. Let us pay all possible deference and respect to every word of Jesus, and endeavour to enter into the full meaning and importance of this solemn address: but let us not presume to say, what some have absurdly and impiously maintained, that this alone is sufficient, as if every other portion of the Scriptures might be safely expunged or disregarded.

It seems to have been the design of Jesus, on the occasion before us, to prepare his hearers for a more cordial reception of the Gospel, and to lead them gradually to the knowledge of himself. With that view he endeavoured to correct the false notions they had imbibed concerning his kingdom, and to impress upon their minds a deeper sense of spiritual and eternal things. He spoke, therefore, in such a manner as to display the dignity of his own character, and to show the new necessity of their submission to him. He pronounced benedictions, as being invested with supreme authority; he interpreted the divine law,
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not as a common expounder, but as the sovereign Lawgiver, with "I SAY UNTO YOU," and represented the grand decisions of the universal judgment as depending upon himself, everlasting life or everlasting misery being awarded to the sons of men according to his irreversible sentence.

May we listen with reverence and profound attention to this glorious Prophet; and, while we meditate on his word, may we learn his will, and bow with unfeigned subjection to his command!

In the first part of his sermon, he appears, like the great High-Priest, blessing his people. He speaks, not as from Mount Sinai with thunderings and lightnings, but with invitations and promises of mercy. He had been already preaching "The kingdom of heaven is at hand;" and of this his followers entertained very gross conceptions, expecting that he would erect a temporal dominion, with outward pomp and splendour, and exalt them to places of power and dignity. But now he strikes at the root of their errors, showing them that his kingdom is of a spiritual nature: and, after giving a description, contrary to their preconceived ideas, of the tempers and blessedness of its true members, he represents it as indispensably necessary that they should be distinguished by a peculiar holiness.

Here are eight different parts of the Christian character delineated; to each of which a promise is annexed, and on each a blessing pronounced. These are not to be separated, as if the Christian might possess no more than one of them: for they are united in the man of God, and the combination of the whole constitutes his excellency. There is also a beautiful connexion between them, and one may be considered as leading to another.

1. "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Though the Lord pays no regard to us for our outward condition, since "he accepteth no man's person," yet those, who are "rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom," are generally

nerally found among "the poor of this world *;" and it must be allowed that their situation exposes them to the fewest temptations. But "the haughtiness of men" of every rank, whether poor or rich, "shall be bowed down †:" for those only can receive the salvation of the Gospel, who are sensible of their spiritual indigence. They feel and confess that they are destitute of every thing truly valuable before God; and, having no possessions to boast of, they are willing to come as needy supplicants, that they may be relieved out of the inexhaustible fulness of Jesus. A knowledge of themselves has taught them that they have neither wisdom, righteousness, nor strength; and, under such a conviction, they may conclude against themselves as unfit objects for the notice of a holy God. But Jesus speaks to their case, and declares, not only that they may hope for, but that they have already obtained, mercy. They "are blessed." The world may pity and despise them; but thus saith the Lord, who dwelleth in the heavens, "To these men will I look ‡:" nay, he hath begun to manifest his favour to them. "Theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Of such only does the church of Christ below consist and from such is the church above replenished. None others do sincerely submit to Jesus, and partake of his grace; and these alone shall reign with him for ever: he hath reserved for them "a crown of glory," and a "kingdom that cannot be moved."

2. "Blessed are they that mourn." Unfeigned and deep distress cannot but follow from real poverty of spirit. Those, therefore, who know themselves, will be "mourners in Zion." How many causes of sorrow do they discover! Their tears flow down for the sake of others, when they behold the sin and misery which are in the world. But, being in the first place concerned for themselves, they weep before God with sincere contrition, not so much for the present inconveniences or future dangers to which

* James ii. 5.

† Isa. ii. 11.

‡ lxvi. 2.

their iniquities may expose them, as for the heinousness of their conduct against that great and gracious Being, who has the strongest claims to their gratitude, love, and service. They may be derided for their dejection of mind, as if they were lost to all happiness: but it is otherwise; "They that sow in tears shall reap in joy*." It is a peculiar mercy to be brought into this very state; for now it appears that the Lord hath a tender regard to them. He "hath begun a good work in them," the effect of which, though painful for the present, will be "quietness and assurance for ever†." The lips of truth declare "they shall be comforted." Perhaps they fear "they shall lie down in sorrow;" but, under the influence of the Holy Ghost "the Comforter," they shall receive strong consolation. Through a discovery of the power and grace of Jesus, they shall be "filled with all joy and peace in believing;" and soon shall every tear be wiped from their eyes, when they shall be admitted to a complete and uninterrupted happiness in heaven.

3. "Blessed are the meek." Wherever there is a proper apprehension of the nature of sin, a total renovation takes place in the affections of the mind; "the lofty looks of man are humbled," and the fierceness of his temper is restrained. Such is the origin of true spiritual meekness, which will produce an humble deportment towards God and man. Those who are partakers of this grace will bow down with submission to the sovereign will of God, without murmuring or cavilling at his appointments or commands; and, sensible of their own ignorance, will implore and obey his guidance. With respect to their fellow-creatures, they will not be forward or assuming, but "take the lowest room;" not peevish or self-willed, but kind and gentle; not easily provoked, or implacable under injuries, but they will return good for evil, blessing for cursing. The world in general are so opposite, that these persons may,

* Psal. cxxvi. 5.

† Isa. xxxii. 17.

probably,

probably, be scorned as men of mean and little minds, destitute of all proper firmness and dignity. But the grace of God is upon them; and he, who hath implanted this disposition in them, will testify his approbation. They are happy; and none others have any true satisfaction; for all those affections contrary to meekness, such as pride, anger, cruelty, and revenge, imbitter the spirit, and invariably produce misery. But "the meek shall inherit the earth, and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace *." They taste the sweetness of life, and have the most exalted pleasures which earth can afford; for inward tranquillity gives the highest relish to every enjoyment in this world: and these only shall "inherit the land" of bliss and glory, of which the land of Canaan was a type, "and dwell therein for ever †."

4. "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness." With what eagerness do men in general pursue present objects! But they who are under a divine influence have fixed their supreme and most ardent affections upon things spiritual and eternal; and these they covet with a vehemence which resembles our natural longings for meat and drink, when we suffer the extremities of hunger and thirst. In preference to every other object, they desire to possess "the righteousness of God;" that righteousness which will answer the demands of his law, and that also by which alone they can serve him with acceptance upon earth, and be fitted for the complete and everlasting fruition of him in heaven. From a conviction of their guilt and depravity, they perceive their inability to justify themselves; and then, with the utmost importunity, inquire, "How shall man be just with God?" They feel likewise a want of conformity, in their hearts and lives, to the will of God; yet cannot be satisfied without it. While they contend with the corrupt affections of the soul, they pant after its total renovation, and pray

* Psal. xxxvii. 11.

† xxxvii. 29.

most fervently to be "holy in all manner of conversation."

Happy indeed is the man in whom desires like these are excited! They are not the wishes of sensualists or worldlings, but of them only whom God hath blessed; and he will give them more grace. They shall not be disappointed, but abundantly gratified by a ready communication of those benefits which they so ardently covet: "they shall be filled." The Lord "satisfieth the longing soul, and filleth the hungry soul with goodness *." They shall be completely justified through the righteousness of their Redeemer, and shall stand with confidence before God: being sanctified by the Spirit, they shall persevere in righteousness and true holiness. They are, therefore, encouraged to indulge the most delightful expectations: "Let the heart of them rejoice that seek the Lord †."

5. "Blessed are the merciful." Such as have been now described will not confine their attention to themselves; but, having "tasted that the Lord is gracious," will feel compassion for their fellow-creatures, and show mercy according to their abilities and opportunities. There will be various occasions for the exercise of this temper, owing to the ignorance, sin, and misery, which have overspread the world. They will, therefore, consult the happiness and welfare of all around them; and, under the strong influence of Christian benevolence, will endeavour to please and profit them. Accordingly, they will give "the soft answer," which "turneth away wrath;" and "in their tongues will be the law of kindness," because the law of love governs their hearts. This will also be evinced by their actions as well as professions. They will cheerfully relieve the necessitous, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the sick. Nor will their compassionate regard be confined to the body; but, with generous concern for the souls of men, they will desire to warn the careless

* Psal. cvii. 9. † cv. 3.

and instruct the ignorant, if so be they may bring them into the way of righteousness and peace.

These alone possess real tenderness and liberality of mind; and it must be generally allowed that such persons are the most happy in themselves, an ornament to religion, and a blessing to society where they live. But they are of a heavenly extraction, born from above. The merciful temper here described is so contrary to the natural selfishness and cruelty of the human heart, as to form a strong evidence of divine grace. These, then, are they who are truly "blessed:" and "they shall obtain mercy." This is the character of all whom God hath reconciled to himself; by such marks they are to be known and distinguished: and it is an unwarrantable presumption to imagine ourselves in the favour of Heaven, without this influence of the Spirit, disposing us to show favour to our fellow-creatures upon earth.

6. "Blessed are the pure in heart." The Lord is a God of purity, who "desires truth in the inward parts," and is not to be imposed on by any external display or pretences of piety. But, ah! "how abominable and filthy is man *!" He has "yielded his members servants to uncleanness," his "mind and conscience is defiled," his "heart desperately wicked †." We must, therefore, not merely be reformed as to gross immoralities, but "renewed in the spirit of our mind ‡." The subjects of Christ's kingdom are "born again," their principles are changed, their tempers sanctified. They renounce all iniquity, not in appearance or profession only, but with a cordial desire and determination never more to return to it. They cheerfully "yield themselves unto God," and he is pleased to make their hearts his own habitation through the Spirit. These, then, are "the blessed of the Lord;" for, however they must deny themselves many sensual gratifications, the Lord God hath bestowed upon them

* Job xv. 16.

† Rom. vi. 19. Tit. i. 15. Jer. xvii. 9.

‡ Eph. iv. 23.

nobler enjoyments. They are separated from the world ; but he hath consecrated and united them to himself : and it ought to suffice that “ they shall see God.” Even here he will manifest his grace and glory, and “ lift up the light of his countenance upon them.” And can any earthly delights be compared with their happiness, when they are favoured with his visits, and the discoveries of his love ? Yet this is only an earnest of their future felicity. Soon shall the vail, which now in a great measure hides from them the brightness of his face, be entirely removed ; and, when admitted to that beatific vision, they shall be transformed into his righteous image. “ We shall be like him ; for we shall see him as he is :”—“ and so shall we ever be with the Lord *.”

7. “ Blessed are the peace-makers.” In such a world as this, various contentions may be expected, which will prove and evidence our characters and dispositions. Amidst warm and angry debates, the men of grace will be distinguished by their labouring for peace. They “ study to be quiet,” and to promote harmony in their families and neighbourhood, willing rather to sacrifice their own interest than bitterly to strive for it. Having much forgiven them, they refuse not to forgive a brother, though offending “ seventy times seven ;” but eagerly embrace him, and renew their assurances of kindness. It grieves them to observe discord among others ; and, as far as their influence will extend, they endeavour to repair the breach, and effect a reconciliation. This is indeed a happy temper, and we need not fear to pronounce the possessors of it “ blessed,” not only as enjoying a sweet tranquillity of mind, but as having in themselves an evidence of the divine favour. For, by their resemblance of him, who is the God of peace and love, they prove their relation to him, and shall be taken notice of under the honourable distinction of his children. They are “ born of God,” who has put his Spirit upon them ; and, as children, they are

* 1 John iii. 2. 1 Thess. iv. 17.

heirs; heirs of the kingdom, where all will be united in bonds of strictest union for ever and ever.

One would think that a character so excellent must meet with universal esteem and respect among men. No: it is quite otherwise. As "the friendship of the world is enmity with God *," all, who bear his image, must look for contempt and hatred from those who are in a state of opposition to him. But we add, according to our Lord's declaration,

8. "Blessed are they who are persecuted for righteousness sake." The saints of God are a constant reproof to the wicked, who, from that very circumstance, are often extremely mortified, and frequently enraged. Hence it generally happens that the more eminently holy, zealous, and useful, any persons are, the more malignity and violence they meet with. But, while they suffer for their attachment to the Saviour, in the cause of truth and righteousness, let them take up their cross with faith and patience, and not lament their case as severe and calamitous. He, who has separated them to himself from the midst of an evil world, as his own peculiar people, will support and comfort them; and, whatever temporal losses they may sustain in his service, he will bestow an abundant recompense. They may, possibly, be excluded from earthly possessions, but they shall inherit the kingdom of everlasting glory.

The character last mentioned so exactly described our Lord's disciples, who stood by him, and whom it was necessary to encourage in the prospect of their approaching sufferings, that he made a particular application of it to them. While he pronounced his benediction, he taught them to expect scorn, opposition, and infamy, for their adherence to him, even though they were ever so circumspect in their conduct. But he called upon them to maintain a holy confidence and joy, and to exult in the lively hope of the glorious reward, remembering that all the patri-

* James iv. 4.

archs and prophets of old had trodden the same path, and endured the same cross.

Let the disciples of Jesus in every age be reminded that they also should look for similar treatment from the world, and that it will become them to be equally bold and vigorous in the service of their Lord and Master; since to them likewise "are given exceeding great and precious promises." And let all who profess a regard to the Saviour attend to the succeeding admonitions of his sermon, in which he has enjoined upon them the most exemplary and distinguished holiness. For our divine Teacher added, "Ye are the salt of the earth," designed to prevent a general corruption, and to diffuse the sacred influence of truth and righteousness. In this view, how widely may your usefulness extend! But, if you forget your character, and so far lose your spirituality and zeal as to become like salt which is deprived of all its virtue, you will incur a peculiar measure of contempt and abhorrence. You are exalted to an eminent situation, which calls for constant circumspection and unremitting diligence: as elevated objects attract a nice invidious attention, so your whole temper and deportment will be narrowly observed. Nor should you think it enough barely to escape censure; you are raised up, and furnished with talents for the benefit of others, whose best interest, therefore, you should study to promote. Conceal not your gifts, but labour to improve them for general good. Like the grand luminary of heaven, you are intended, in your sphere of action, to give light to them who are in darkness. Be careful, then, so to live, that all men may see what they ought to be, and, perceiving the nature and excellence of true religion throughout your spirit and conduct, may be led to admire and praise the grace of God in you, and persuaded to tread in your steps, to the glory of your God and Father.

To this purpose, and so practical in their tendency, were the exhortations of Jesus. Now, if it be allowed that

that the essence of Christianity is the same which it was originally, those only are to be accounted real Christians in our day, who answer to the descriptions here given. We ask, then, if you desire to partake of the blessings, do you sincerely comply with the injunctions, of the Gospel? Let us advert to those we have now considered. Are you "poor in spirit;" emptied of your self-sufficiency, and willing to be indebted to the grace of Jesus for your whole salvation? Are you sensible of your guilt, and do you "mourn" for sin with a godly sorrow? You may, possibly, shed many tears; but are they tears of genuine repentance? Do you understand what it is to be "meek and lowly in heart?" Is the haughtiness of your carnal mind subdued, so that you can "esteem others better than yourselves?" On what are your affections chiefly fixed? Is this the object, that you may attain "the righteousness of God;" and, being accepted of him, that you may serve him in true holiness? But do you feel any ardour of desire after it, and labour for it as for your necessary food? Have you any "bowels and mercies?" And, with an abhorrence of your natural selfishness, do you "open your hand wide," as opportunities are given you, for the relief and comfort of the distressed? Again, are your consciences purged? Do you dread the thought of resting in "a form of godliness;" and do you possess real purity, the inward sanctification of the Spirit? "As much as lieth in you," do you "live peaceably with all men;" avoiding quarrels, and endeavouring to reconcile contending parties? And of what sort is your reputation in the world? Is your religion offensive to any? Or are you willing to incur reproach for Christ's sake, anxious rather to promote the honour of God by your exemplary conduct, than to secure public favour to yourselves?

If you are destitute of these evidences of grace, we dare not pronounce you "blessed." No: we must faithfully warn you, that you deceive not yourselves. Amongst men you may, possibly, be accounted

counted happy ; but the God of heaven declares you accursed. Be solicitous, therefore, to be rescued out of your present wretched situation ; and cry, with importunity, " O Lord, remember us with the favour that thou bearest unto thy people : O visit us with thy salvation ; that we may see the good of thy chosen, that we may rejoice in the gladness of thy nation, that we may glory with thine inheritance * !" Amen.

* Psal. cvi. 4, 5.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. 9.

The second part of our Lord's sermon on the mount, in which he expounded certain precepts of the moral law.

THE multitudes who flocked around the Saviour were, probably, very eager to know what new doctrine he would preach; or averse to receive him, from an apprehension that he undervalued, and meant to subvert, the goodly system which the Old Testament established, and of which they boasted. To give them, therefore, the necessary information concerning himself, and to remove their prejudices, he solemnly asserted that he came not to destroy the law or the prophets, but to fulfil *.

Since the Lord God changed not, one revelation cannot be repugnant to another. Yet there may be in one age a more full and express declaration of the divine will than in the preceding; and the former communications might be intended to prepare the way for a clearer manifestation of the same truths. Thus, in fact, the increase of sacred light has resembled the gradual approach of day. The great plan of redemption was intimated to Adam upon his fall, and in succeeding generations fresh and brighter discoveries of it were afforded to the church, under the Mosaic dispensation, and by various prophets, till the appearing of Jesus Christ, to whom, as to one common object, they all referred. He came not, therefore, to overturn the fabric already built, but to establish and complete it; not to contradict any

* Matt. v. 17, &c.

foregoing revelation, but to unfold the grand scheme, and perfect the whole. Agreeably to this account of the matter,

1. He answered the types of the ceremonial law. They were only the shadow, but he was the substance. In themselves they would have been weak, trifling, and absurd; but, as prefiguring the Saviour, and deriving an efficacy from him, they were important, and worthy of all respect, during their intended continuance. They had their full accomplishment in Jesus; and, therefore, he set them aside, not as if they had been of no use, but because he was in himself every thing which they were designed to represent.

2. He explained and enforced the moral law. This is the everlasting rule of righteousness, the grand obligations of which depend not on any peculiar circumstances of situation, but exist the same in all ages and places; for God must ever require his rational creatures to love him with all their hearts, and one another as themselves. This law Jesus "magnified and made honourable;" for by his own obedience and expiatory sufferings he showed the extent and equity of its demands, by his spiritual exposition he vindicated it from false interpretations, and by his holy precepts he enjoined its observance upon all his people. From this view of the subject it appears, that believers, though released from its penal sanctions, are still indispensably bound to regulate their tempers and conduct agreeably to its directions.

3. He hath also completed the design of all former dispensations, and supplied their defects. The days of the Son of man, therefore, are called "the last days," because no succeeding revelation is to be expected. Patriarchs and prophets looked forwards to his incarnation, and paved the way for him; and now, since he has come, and accomplished every thing predicted, nothing more is wanted, either to discover the will of God, or to make reconciliation for us. What thanks, and love, and service, do we

owe for our distinguished privileges under the Gospel! And what returns are due to Him, who hath perfected for ever the great work of our salvation!

Our Lord proceeded in his sermon to maintain the authority and full extent of the law, declaring that God will not recede from his righteous demands, and consequently that either obedience must be paid, or punishment inflicted. Wilfully, therefore, to transgress the least of these precepts, and encourage others to do the same, as if they might be dispensed with, would render us unfit for a place in his kingdom; and, to be distinguished in that society, we must yield an universal submission to them, though they may seem ever so trifling, and enforce the same conduct upon others.

While Jesus inculcated the necessity of holiness, it is probable that the people fixed their attention on the Scribes and Pharisees, whom they held in high veneration for their professions of sanctity. It would, therefore, astonish them to hear this new Teacher requiring his disciples to go much further than those whom they considered as the most eminent patterns of religion, and asserting that otherwise they could have no place in heaven. But it was proper to expose these vain pretenders, to detect their errors and hypocrisy, and to warn their deluded followers no longer to be led by them, who were of all men most opposite to the temper of Christianity. They boasted much of their attachment to the divine law, while, in reality, they could not bear the strict and spiritual sense in which it ought to be understood, and, by their subtle interpretations, explained away much of its meaning. Jesus, however, has instructed us, contrary to their glosses, that it enjoins perfect holiness, in the dispositions of the mind, as well as the practice of the life. Their righteousness was merely external; for all their works were done "to be seen of men;" but we are taught to seek for inward purity, and not to be satisfied with regularity of manners, or a show of piety. They were influenced, even in their religious duties,

duties, by base principles, "for a pretence making long prayers," and boasting of their own works, as if the happiness of heaven were no more than a just recompense of their deserts. But we are warned of the sin and danger of trusting to ourselves, whatever our attainments may be, and of the necessity of a better obedience than our own, to procure our justification before God.

From a general declaration, our Lord descended to a particular exposition of the spiritual nature of the law, in certain precepts, which had been shamefully perverted; guarding the people against their erroneous teachers, and requiring their attention and submission to himself.

1. He insisted on the extensive meaning of the sixth commandment. This was understood as if it had forbidden nothing more than the actual and open commission of wilful murder. But Jesus, the great Lawgiver, instructs us that it condemns whatever may lead to such violence, and, therefore, that all causeless anger or desire of revenge, and all opprobrious language arising from this vehemence of passion, will justly expose us to the divine vengeance. Accordingly, it were vain to worship God, or expect any advantage from his ordinances, so long as the heart remains under the influence of malignant dispositions. We must lay aside our animosities, and consent to make restitution for injuries committed, when we would "compass God's altar;" for the most costly sacrifices and professions of the warmest devotion will not compensate the want of brotherly love. Common prudence, also, as well as religion, requires that contentions be dropped, and a reconciliation effected, as soon as may be. If you are threatened with a suit by one whom you have offended, how much better is it by a speedy accommodation to repair the breach, than obstinately to persist in the contest till matters are brought to an extremity, and rigorous justice must have its course! If it be thus in human affairs, how much more is it your interest and duty, without a moment's delay,

to

to seek peace with the Lord God Almighty, whom you have provoked; lest, being summoned to his bar, you be cast in the trial, and sentenced to the infernal prison, from which there can be no release!

Such was the substance of our Lord's address: and shall we not allow the suitableness of it to ourselves? Or shall we boast, like the Pharisees, that, because we have not shed the blood of a fellow-creature, the sixth commandment has no charge against us? Are we free from all violence of temper? Or have our tongues never betrayed the vindictive desires of our hearts? Are we now at peace? Or have we, at least, anxiously sought for it? And, when we lift up our hands in prayer, is it "without wrath?" We may thank God that so many powerful restraints are laid upon the sinful affections of men, or else every part of the world would present us with scenes of horrible confusion. But, though our fury may be repressed, so as not to break forth to the disturbance of society, God may behold much iniquity within us; for it is possible, that, where a calmness and benevolence of spirit are pretended, much rancour may remain in the heart; and, in God's account, "who-soever hateth his brother is a murderer*."

2. He opened the spiritual and extensive nature of the seventh commandment. Here also, as in the preceding instance, the prohibition had been confined to merely external acts; and he only was deemed an adulterer who had been guilty of the grossest uncleanness. But Jesus teaches us that inward impurity brings us under the divine condemnation; that a lustful desire and a wanton eye are forbidden, in the full sense of the law, no less than the absolute violation of the marriage-bed. And will any person say, I have never felt any such irregular motions in my heart: my eye hath never wandered in a lascivious manner? Let us remember that we are always open to the inspection of that God, who "searcheth the heart, and trieth the reins,"

* 1 John iii. 15.

and that he hath noted down all our secret imaginations, looks, and wishes. Let us not presume to justify ourselves before him.

If we would avoid the sin of lewdness, we are to resist every secret propensity to it, and subdue the corrupt affections of the flesh. This must be done at any pains or expense, as Jesus has instructed us; the inordinate desire is to be abandoned, though it may seem as dear to us as a right eye, or profitable as a right hand; though it may be as severe a trial to part with it as to cut off the most tender and useful member of the body. For, as, in chirurgery, a gangrene must be stopped, or else death ensues; so here the most favourite passion must be given up: there is no room for hesitation; it must be done, or else everlasting destruction in the torments of hell will be the consequence.

Our Lord was naturally led from the exposition of the seventh commandment to condemn the prevailing practice of divorcing their wives, as fancy, disgust, or resentment, might dictate. Separations, indeed, had been allowed by the Mosaic law, under certain restrictions; but the permission had been abused to the worst purposes; and we are now taught that nothing but unfaithfulness in the wife can absolve the husband from the obligations of the marriage bond. Alas! it is too evident, from the state of things among ourselves, that, with respect to this important subject, the authority of Christ is but little regarded, and that the chastity and continence which he inculcated are most shamefully violated.

3. He expounded also the third commandment. The heinousness of perjury, which is a solemn appeal to God in attestation of a lie, was generally acknowledged among the Jews. But they showed a manifest contempt of the majesty of God by the frequency of their oaths in common conversation; and it should seem that they so interpreted the law as to justify the practice of swearing, if they abstained only from the express mention of God, or did not call upon

him to confirm a falsehood. How ingenious is the depraved nature of man in perverting the truth, and inventing arguments for the vindication of his own evil conduct! For, agreeably to our Lord's representation, we may ask, What do you, when you swear by any creature? Your appeal in effect is, and must ultimately be, to the great Creator himself, though it contain not any direct invocation of his name. It is therefore enjoined that you "swear not at all."

We are not forbidden to make use of oaths in a solemn manner, and for important purposes, in support of the truth; for these were commanded in the Old Testament, and unexceptionable examples are recorded in the New. But Jesus prescribes a rule only for our common conversation. Inasmuch as it is an insult to Jehovah to introduce him as a witness or an arbiter of our trifling controversies in familiar discourse, we are required to avoid all strong and vehement asseverations, and only simply to affirm or deny, without having recourse to any other expedient to establish our credit. For not merely the gross expressions of profaneness, but all those customary forms of speaking, by which men endeavour to strengthen and support their declarations, arise from evil habits and wrong tempers, or perhaps from Satan himself, who in various ways solicits us to sin.

Let us not, then, be satisfied barely to abstain from the palpable violations of the commandment by perjury or impious execrations, but regulate our conversation with "simplicity and godly sincerity." How little is this attended to! Is not the name of God frequently introduced, in a light and trifling manner, as an embellishment of discourse, or an expression of surprise? Do we not adopt certain fashionable phrases, which have the nature of oaths, or lead to them? Alas! the practice is general; and thus God is provoked among us every day. For, to pass by the multitude of perjured persons and blasphemers,

phemers, we observe that the sacred appellations and titles of God and his Christ are treated with the utmost levity or contempt, being constantly used as words of course, or the mere expletives of language, by many who boast of their morality, and possess the fairest reputation in the world.

4. He guarded against a misunderstanding of the Mosaic law of retaliation. A precept had been given for the direction of magistrates in the punishment of injuries; for they were authorized to take "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." This had been interpreted as if private persons might avenge themselves for any assault, and requite the offenders in kind. But Jesus teaches us that it belongs not to individuals to vindicate their own wrongs, and that appeals to the law should not be made for losses of small consequence. He forbids us to "resist evil," and enjoins a meek and patient submission to the violence and injustice of others. This he has inculcated in certain proverbial expressions, which admit not of a literal interpretation. It is not difficult, however, to collect from them that a malicious vindictive mind is totally opposite to true religion; that, rather than furiously withstand or retaliate one injury, we ought to expose ourselves to a second; that it were better quietly to sustain any trifling damage, such as a blow on the face or the loss of a garment, than rigorously insist upon a compensation; and that our benevolence should be so extensive, that no suitable opportunity of doing good should be neglected.

It is easier to find the meaning, as to the substance at least, than to make the application. Who among us are willing to be directed by this divine Teacher? The temper of real Christians and that of worldly men are quite contrary to each other; and to fulfil the law of Christ would subject us to the reproach of cowardice and meanness of spirit. Be it so: let us cheerfully bear the imputation. That sense of honour, which is so much contended for, is a principle most odious

to God, as it implies a vindictive disposition, or, what must lead to it, a determination not to pass by the most trifling offence. We need not, then, reflect upon the Scribes and Pharisees, as retaliation is practised and justified among ourselves. Whoever insults the man of honour must answer it at the peril of his life. Nay, do we not all, under provocations, feel a desire of revenge? And have we not been betrayed into such a conduct as our Lord has here condemned? He, however, has given us an example of forbearance, as well as the precept. May we study to attain "the mind which was in Christ Jesus!"

5. He inculcated the law of universal love. It was allowed to be a divine command, that we should love our neighbours; but, as if neighbours included only those who are nearly related or intimately connected, the command was so expounded, that it was judged right, perhaps expedient, to treat those with contempt and rancour who were of a different country or religion. How unwarrantable and impious an interpretation! Jesus therefore restored and vindicated the sense of God's ancient law. He has taught us, that no one, however malevolently disposed, is a proper object of our abhorrence, and no injurious usage a sufficient reason for withholding the kindest offices of Christian benevolence. He has instructed us, that, as the children of God possess peculiar privileges, they must surpass all others in a spirit of forgiveness and disinterested goodness, and prove their relation to their heavenly Father by their resemblance of him.

What shall we say to these things? Have we so learned Christ as to love our enemies? It were easy to profess this enlarged philanthropy, while we enjoy the general countenance and favour of the world. But can we stand "the fiery trial," and, under the most injurious persecutions, return good for evil? Are we not easily offended, and hardly reconciled; "implacable, unmerciful?" And is this the temper of mind which becomes the heirs of heaven? "What

do we more than others?" Or wherein do we differ from them who know not God? What similitude do we bear to him whom we call our Father? "God is love;" and, if we feel not the power of that principle, we are not renewed after his likeness, nor can we dwell with him.

But shall we not own that the divine law, in the extensive sense which is here given, is most excellent? Can we object to it as an unnecessary strictness; or suppose that a holy God can require less? Is not every injunction perfectly reasonable, and well calculated to promote universal happiness? or, would it be better, if we were allowed to harbour in our hearts the least degree of anger, lust, or revenge?

Yet such a view must abase our pride; for who shall dare to boast "We have done our duty?" Have we not satisfied ourselves with a partial and merely external obedience, without attempting to regulate the inward desires of the mind? "The commandment is exceeding broad*." And each particular precept, in the spiritual meaning, proves that we are all in a state of guilt and condemnation. Let the conviction have its full influence, and we shall then welcome the Saviour, who "is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth†."

Believers, however, as before observed, though "justified from all things," are by no means released from their obligations to holiness. Does Jesus speak as if the law were designed to be abrogated, or to be no longer binding upon his people? Is it not, on the contrary, strongly enforced for the direction of our conduct? Here, then, we should study "what manner of persons we ought to be," how far superior to others "in all holy conversation and godliness." Our impartial and constant regard to duty will be the safest evidence of our faith; and without it our expectations of the divine favour are no better than the hope of the hypocrite, which shall perish.

* Psal. cxix. 96.

† Rom. x. 4.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. 10.

The third part of our Lord's sermon on the mount, in which he cautioned his disciples against vain glory and the love of the world.

THE necessity of religion is generally acknowledged, whilst the nature of it is but little understood. Many comply with the forms and put on the semblance of piety, and fancy themselves devout because they are so accounted, at the very time that they are under the influence of the basest dispositions. Such were the Pharisees of old, who, with all their boasted goodness, betrayed a hatred of the doctrine and genius of Christianity. It became expedient, therefore, for our Lord to expose their real character, to guard his hearers against their erroneous notions, and show how essentially different his disciples must be. This he did throughout his sermon on the mount.

In that part of his discourse to which we now proceed he gave the most solemn cautions to his followers to beware especially of the two dangerous principles, vain glory and the love of the world, by which the Pharisees were actuated *; for, notwithstanding their high pretences to devotion, and the admiration in which they were held, their religion proceeded from pride, and consisted with an inordinate attachment to present things. Our righteousness must be of another sort, or else we cannot be the subjects of Christ's kingdom, however frequent or

* Matt. vi. 3, &c.

assiduous we may be in the external observances of divine worship. Let us pray that He, who alone knows our secret desires and purposes, would discover to us and eradicate every motive and affection of our hearts incompatible with true Christianity, that we may not be found destitute of that "holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord."

I. We are cautioned against vain glory, or that ostentatious display of our own goodness, which is meant to catch the notice, and procure the admiration, of men. An arrogant spirit, which is always contemptible, is never more preposterous than when it assumes the mask of piety. It were the height of absurdity and profaneness to practise those very duties which should proceed from the deepest humility, and cannot be acceptable without it, merely to gratify a conceited and ambitious temper: and yet it is a common case. The most painful and mortifying injunctions are submitted to, in order to gain a character. Persons professing godliness have peculiar need to guard against this principle; for they are not so much in danger from sensual as from spiritual wickedness. They are often overtaken and deceived, even in their best services, by the secret workings of pride, which, while it conceals itself from the nicest observation, influences and corrupts the whole conduct. Our Lord, therefore, mentions several instances of religious acts, which we may be tempted to perform entirely or chiefly with a view to the esteem of our fellow-creatures; and on this account he calls upon us to "take heed."

1. Almsgiving.—The duty is not in this place commanded; but it is supposed that every disciple of Jesus will practise it: and it is universally allowed among Christians that we are under indispensable obligations to relieve the distressed, according to our abilities. But our attention is here directed to the proper principle of obedience. Alms are to be given from a supreme regard to God, not to men. Hypocrites, we find, can distribute large sums, for the purposes

purposes of charity. But usually they are ostentatious; and, as they seek the praise of the world, they fail not to publish their own liberality, and contrive that it may be of such a sort, or exerted at such times and places, as will engage general notice and esteem. The motive being wrong throughout, the most extensive munificence, on this plan, cannot be an acceptable service. Surrounding spectators and witnesses, who look only on the outward appearance, may express their admiration; but the Lord God, who is forgotten and despised, since the sacrifice is not offered to Him, will bestow no recompense. Yet even these persons "have their reward." Many are ready to compliment them for their generosity, and court their favour; but this, which is all they will receive, is a poor benefit indeed, fleeting as a breath of air!

How different is the disciple of Jesus! His aim is to approve himself to God; and, to be consistent, he should be as glad to embrace a private as a public opportunity of doing good. Secret liberality is, also, particularly pleasing to God, since it springs from a pure regard to Him, and solicits not human applause; and He, who beholds our inward purpose, will make an open acknowledgment of it, before the whole universe, in the great day.

But do we not stand reprov'd either for avarice or pride? Are we "ready to distribute, willing to communicate?" Are we seeking out those objects of charity who are concealed from the view of the world? Or are we not rather forward to proclaim our own bounty; or, at least, most disposed to lend our assistance where we shall probably obtain notice and admiration? But, if we have such respect to the opinions of men, we are acting from the vain-glorious principle which is here condemned.

2. Prayer.—This also will be allowed to be an important duty, and one which enters into the life and essence of religion; those who habitually neglect it, so far from being eminent Christians, are no
Christians

Christians at all. Yet the bare external performance of this service does not necessarily imply any real piety. Forms and ceremonies may be punctually observed, and warmly contended for, without a sincere regard to God. Hypocrites may be exact in their attendance upon divine worship, and value themselves because they "make many prayers." They "draw nigh unto God with their mouth, and honour him with their lips, but their heart is far from him;" and therefore "in vain they do worship him*." They would gladly be thought religious; and accordingly they comply with such institutions and rites of devotion as are most likely to call them forth into public view, and procure them applause. Thus they may obtain the character of saints; and this is their grand object. But it is all that they shall have. From such persons "incense is an abomination unto God," and their boasted services will increase their condemnation. This was the very case of the Pharisees, whom our Lord described. They were so scrupulously observant of their stated times of prayer, they would not omit or delay the duty on account of any company or engagement. Nay, it should seem they contrived to be in places of much resort at those very seasons, that the eyes of the multitude might be fixed upon them, and this their sanctity be remarked and celebrated.

In opposition to this practice, Jesus enjoins the religion of the closet; not forbidding public, but commanding private, worship; or rather showing in what manner the latter should be performed. It were absurd and impious to seek the notice of men, when our concern is with God alone. If possible, we should retire from noise and observation, that we may avoid interruption, and maintain a holy converse with the God of heaven, abstracted from the cares and business of the world. This communion between God and the soul must, from the nature of it, be concealed from our fellow-creatures, and may not

* Matt. xv. 8, 9.

gain us respect in this life. But the eye of the Lord God is upon his people, at those times especially when they withdraw from human society to hold fellowship with him; and He will proclaim and prove to the assembled universe, for his own glory as well as their recompense, with what frequency and fervour they kept up their intercourse with Him.

Does not our Lord's injunction detect the hypocrisy of many? There are those among ourselves, who, like the ancient Pharisees, with a confident and clamorous profession of religion, express a decided preference for those services which bring them into notice, and take pains to catch the esteem and applause of the public. They may not stand to repeat their prayers in the open streets, as those of old; but do they not evince something of the same disposition when they are forward to call the attention of others to the ardour of their devotions? May we not fear, that, among the multitudes who constantly tread the courts of the Lord, many totally neglect the duties of the closet? In such a case, no sacrifice is offered to God; but all their works are done to be "seen of men."

From the foregoing caution, Jesus proceeded to give further instructions for the framing and presenting of our solemn addresses to God. He has directed us to speak with serious deliberation, and to avoid that foolish prolixity of expressions which the Heathens practised. All repetitions in imploring the divine blessing are not condemned; for our Lord himself, three times together, in pouring out his soul before God, "said the same words *;" and it seems the natural effect of a pious fervour and importunity, to urge the same request again and again. But we are required to abstain from those repetitions only which are unmeaning, and not to suppose that a multiplicity of words will constitute a good prayer or procure us a favourable acceptance. It is neither necessary nor expedient to protract our devotions to

* Matt. xxvi. 44.

a tedious length, as if we could thereby give any information to God, or produce any change in his mind. We cannot, indeed, be too earnest, nor ought we to be weary of the service. But we should remember that we come to a God who knows all our wants and desires better than we can represent them, and who is more ready to bestow than we to ask his blessing.

We behold also an instance of the amazing condescension of Jesus, in delivering to his disciples a form of prayer adapted to their use. He takes them, as it were, by the hand, leads them to the throne of grace, instructs them what requests they should make, and even puts words into their mouths. The form here prescribed might be designed as a general model, by which we may frame our petitions : but it seems also intended to be introduced among our other devotions, and offered to God exactly as it is. Perhaps it was drawn up with a particular reference to the situation of his followers at that time ; but with the utmost propriety it is still continued as a suitable address for Christians in all possible circumstances, since it is a clear and compendious representation of their common desires and necessities, and every expression in it such as they may adopt for their own.

We cannot here give it that full consideration which its importance demands ; and therefore a few general observations must suffice.

The introduction or invocation teaches us to approach to God with confidence and love, as to a Father concerned for our welfare, and yet to maintain the deepest reverence and humility before Him, who is in heaven, and who there reigns in glorious majesty. When our minds are thus impressed with suitable conceptions of the God whom we worship, we may proceed to the petitions, which are six in number, the three first relating to the honour of God, the three latter to the necessities of man. We pray, therefore, that the name of God may be hallowed,

lowed, that the excellency and perfections of his nature may be known throughout the world, and that every where He may be regarded with all that veneration which is justly due unto him. For this purpose we desire that his kingdom of grace may be universally established; and that the Gospel, which is designed and calculated to promote it, may be spread abroad with increasing energy and success. But, since this dispensation of mercy requires unfeigned obedience to God, we beg, that, as all in heaven do, so all on earth may, bow with entire subjection to him; and that as the angels incessantly, completely, and cheerfully execute his will, so we, in this lower creation, may be enabled by his Spirit to do the same.

We are dependent, guilty, depraved, and helpless; and our petitions should be framed with a reference to this our state and character. We therefore represent the wants of our bodies, and beseech Him, who is the God of providence, and "fillet all things living with plenteousness," to supply us with whatever may be needful for our temporal support. We ask for bread, as an article of absolute necessity, not of luxury; yet that only from one day to another, and not for years to come. As we have forfeited all claims to the divine favour by sin, it is always proper to confess our demerit, and deprecate the wrath we have deserved: we are debtors to God, and liable to justice; therefore we pray that he would cancel the black account, and no more urge his demands upon us. Here we lay hold on his promises in the new covenant, and have recourse to him, as he is revealed through the Mediator, a God "forgiving iniquity, and transgression, and sin." But, since it is probable, in the present state of human affairs, that we may sustain much injurious treatment from others, we solemnly declare before God our readiness to extend full forgiveness to them, and only implore his mercy as we ourselves pardon our offending brethren. Being exposed to continual assaults,

assaults, which may endanger our souls unless God preserve us, we request that "He, who keepeth Israel," would so guide and dispose of us in his providence, that we may not be brought into circumstances of severe trial, or the formidable conflict of temptation. In order to this, we supplicate the divine aid, that we may be delivered from the attacks of the wicked one, who is our grand adversary, and from every thing which is to be dreaded as a real evil in this life or another.

In the conclusion of the prayer, which is a doxology, or an ascription of praise to God, we acknowledge this to be the worship which he deserves, and has a right to demand. He is the universal Sovereign, the almighty Potentate, the God of all perfection, the unchangeable Jehovah, from everlasting to everlasting. And, while we thus adore and magnify the Lord for his greatness and his excellency, each of these considerations will furnish a plea by which we may enforce our requests. We confirm the whole, and again express our ardent wishes for a favourable acceptance, when we add, in the close, "AMEN," or, So let it be.

In the form which Jesus here taught his disciples, the declaration annexed to the petition for pardon of sin is of so much consequence, and, as it might appear to them, so new and singular, that he subjoined a particular reason for it, observing, that God will receive no sacrifice except from the man who is of a placable and forgiving temper. And is this the temper with which we lift up our hands to the throne of grace? Do we possess those principles and affections which the words imply or call for? How often have we repeated the prayer without any holy spiritual desires, when we have neither felt nor understood the force of the language! And is this the worship which we dare to offer to the heart-searching God? As he is not to be imposed on, or satisfied, like our fellow-creatures, with an unmeaning compliment, we may justly fear, lest our pretended

pretended devotions should provoke his indignation against us.

The same caution which Jesus gave respecting the two forementioned duties is extended also to another instance:—

3. Fasting.—However the folly, pride, and superstition of some persons may have brought the practice into disrepute and contempt, it is clearly incumbent on those who profess the Christian name. The disciples of Jesus cannot, with any propriety, decline that service, for the right performance of which their Master has left them particular directions. We confess it has been abused; but let it not therefore be totally laid aside. Some, possibly, “in will-worship, and” a pretended “humility,” have “neglected the body * :” yet still it should be our care to “keep under our body, and bring it into subjection †,” on better principles.

Here, then, as in the other cases, we must beware of vain glory, which is ever ready to infuse its corrupt influence into our best actions. How preposterous is it to make a parade with that which is intended to denote humiliation! We must, therefore, avoid all ostentatious display, which is so common with hypocrites; and, while with sincerity of heart and unfeigned contrition we practise self-denial and mortification, we shall not pass unobserved, nor fast in vain. Men may disregard or despise us; but God will graciously accept us in the Son of his love, and publicly reward what is really done unto him, though we shall not presume upon any merit in ourselves, as if we had a claim to his favour on the ground of justice. But to what purpose do we speak of abstinence? For where are those who “crucify the flesh with its affections and lusts?” Who among us are willing to renounce any beloved gratification? Do not most persons plead for, and pursue with an insatiable avidity, every sensual pleasure and delight?

* Col. ii. 23.

† 1 Cor. ix. 27.

In these several instances, almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, the religion of Jesus instructs us to fix our supreme regard upon God, as the Judge to whom alone we are accountable, and to be perfectly unconcerned about human opinions and decisions. It commands us to look forward to a future day, when all hypocrisy will be exposed and detested, and the excellency of the true believer confessed and admired. How many mistakes will then be rectified! "For that, which is highly esteemed amongst men," will appear to be "abomination in the sight of God *." On the contrary, Jehovah will declare his approbation of those who faithfully discharged the duties of righteousness in secret, though their names were cast out as evil: and, to the astonishment of those who despised and hated them, he will proclaim, with high commendations, how much they have done for him, and appoint them a glorious retribution for the most private exertions of their charity, piety, and abstinence.

II. We are required to beware of the love of the present world. There is no sin against which the Saviour has delivered more or stronger cautions than an inordinate attachment to the concerns of this life, and perhaps there is none more dangerous to the soul. It frequently lies concealed under the garb of a religious profession; for men are apt to flatter themselves, and cry "Peace, peace," if they practise no gross iniquity, approve of right doctrines, and give a regular attendance to the means of grace. Yet all this may be, while the heart remains totally alienated from God, and "goeth after covetousness." He, who is solicitous only to promote his secular interest, and consequently immersed in worldly cares, cannot possess any proper regard to God, or his own everlasting welfare. Though decent in his conduct, orthodox in his notions, constant and exact in all external forms and observances, he is just as far from heaven as the drunkard and adulterer; perhaps

* Luke xvi. 15.

more so, as being less likely to apprehend his own danger.

There might be a peculiar suitableness in our Lord's address to his disciples on this subject, not only as warning them of the selfish and avaricious disposition of the Pharisees, but as giving them the expectation of suffering the loss of all things for his sake. However, it is as necessary for us at this time, as it was for them, to possess that spiritual abstraction of mind which is here inculcated. We must turn our attention from the vain things of the present life to the more important concerns of that which is to come.

We are forbidden to seek our happiness in the world, and the reasons are plain and forcible. Whatever we may gain on earth will be short and uncertain, but the possessions of heaven are durable, and far removed from every contingency. Let us beware, then, what choice we make, and what object we propose to ourselves; for our affections and pursuits will be determined by the nature of that treasure which we desire to attain. But, in order to decide aright on that which is most valuable, a clear discernment is absolutely needful. How shall the body be directed in its movements, if the eye be so vitiated, that it cannot properly distinguish one thing from another? Or how shall the mind lead us to a just conclusion, whilst it is under the influence of wrong maxims and inclinations? There is a mental darkness which perverts the judgement, and produces the most fatal consequences.

Is it supposed that some happy expedient may be found, by which religion may be made consistent with a devotedness to present gain? No, it is impossible: the love of God and the love of the world cannot prevail in the same heart. They are like two adverse masters, whose commands and expectations contradict and oppose each other: so that we cannot be sincerely attached to their different interests. We should, therefore, determine without delay whom we will serve, and instantly renounce one of them.

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Do any plead, "I am not enslaved to the world; I look not for real happiness in it, nor seek great things to myself, but am anxious only to secure a comfortable subsistence?" It may be proper to remark, that our Lord's injunctions require us to lay aside all distressing cares about the enjoyments, or even the common supports, of life. His directions on this head equally concern the poor and the rich. For, as in each situation the heart may be drawn away from God to present objects, both are forbidden to indulge any excessive solicitude about their secular affairs.

We may apply the reasons which Jesus has alleged. God has given you life, and he is able to maintain it. You may surely rely upon him for the continuance of that vital principle, which he has graciously bestowed upon you; since he can as easily preserve as create. Behold the tender care which he exerciseth over inferior animals! He constantly provides sustenance for the fowls, which are of far less value than you. But, with all your anxiety, how little can you effect for yourselves? You cannot lengthen out your existence one moment. Or, should you be distressed about procuring a suitable covering for your body, we refer you to the flowers of the field. The Lord God has clothed them with a gayer attire than the most splendid monarchs can exhibit; and shall you be unwilling to intrust yourselves with him?

Besides, this worldly solicitude, which may be expected to prevail in them who know not God, is unsuitable and dishonourable to your character, who profess to be his children. If God be your Father, he cannot be inattentive to your wants. Is there not, also, a more glorious object proposed to you, which demands your warmest affections and most diligent pursuit? You cannot be too earnest in preparing for your eternal state: and if that be your first and grand concern, as it ought, every earthly

earthly care will appear comparatively small. But to secure an admission into heaven is the best expedient for promoting your temporal interest, since God has engaged by his covenant to bestow all needful support in this life upon the heirs of his kingdom. You ought, indeed, to be assiduous in your application to business; for to expect your sustenance from God, whilst you neglect the appointed means of obtaining it, would be extreme presumption. But, with all your most strenuous exertions, it will become you to live in cheerful dependence on the providence of God from day to day, and not to look forward, with anxious dread, to any future events. Each returning period of time brings its difficulties: and therefore, instead of anticipating the trials of the morrow, you should diligently improve the present season, in which you may find enough both to do and to suffer.

Such is the temper of mind which Jesus has inculcated in his sermon on the mount: and so superior to the world must all his disciples be. Yet this is an excellency which can be attained only by the knowledge of him. For "this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith *."

But how few appear to possess that divine principle! We perceive and lament the prevalence of a pharisaical spirit among ourselves. Are not most persons hurried away by an immoderate attachment to their gain? And do not some, even of those who profess godliness, betray a sordid, unbelieving, distracted state of mind? We need not advert to the multitude of open and profligate offenders; perhaps more are destroyed through the fatal influence of covetousness, which may consist with a fair character among men, than by any other sin whatever. Let us beware, and examine where is our peculiar danger. Let us watch and pray, lest our hearts be engrossed by those secular cares, which may, to a

* 1 John v. 4.

certain degree, be expedient and necessary; and, remembering how very poor is the richest treasure which can be attained in this life, let us "covet earnestly the best gifts," and desire above all things to possess "the unsearchable riches of Christ." Amen.

11. 2000

THEY WHO ARE OF THE WORLD, AND WHO ARE OF THE FLESH, AND WHO ARE OF THE DEVIL, THEY ARE NOT OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

It is a very common mistake to suppose that the Kingdom of God is a place, or a state of mind, or a condition of the soul, which can be attained by the efforts of the human will. It is not so. The Kingdom of God is a reality, and it is a reality which is not of this world, nor of this age, nor of this generation. It is a reality which is not of the flesh, nor of the blood, nor of the will of man, but it is of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. It is a reality which is not of the world, nor of the flesh, nor of the blood, nor of the will of man, but it is of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

It is a reality which is not of the world, nor of the flesh, nor of the blood, nor of the will of man, but it is of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. It is a reality which is not of the world, nor of the flesh, nor of the blood, nor of the will of man, but it is of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

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JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. 11.

The conclusion of our Lord's sermon on the mount, in which he gave various practical directions and exhortations.

WE have already perceived much of the excellence and importance of the sermon which Jesus delivered on the mount; and the conclusion, to which we now proceed, will appear equally interesting. We shall meet with further proofs of the holiness of that religion which he taught, while we consider the various directions here given for the conduct of his disciples*.

To guard them against the censorious disposition of the Pharisees, who were ever prone to condemn others in the most rigorous manner, he commanded them to abstain from all rash and severe judgment. "Judge not" is, indeed, an extensive precept. We cannot help forming an opinion of those actions and characters which force themselves upon our observation; nor are we forbidden, surely, to blame what is evidently wrong; nay, our duty requires us, as we love our brother, to point out his faults, and warn him of his danger. But we are enjoined not to conclude against any person precipitately, nor to be influenced in our decisions by pride or malevolence. Yet do we not perceive amongst ourselves much of this very spirit, which prevailed with the Pharisees of old? How few are actuated by that divine principle of love, which "beareth all things, believeth

* Matt. vii. 1, &c.

all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things*!" Do not the various parties, who contend so warmly for their respective sentiments and adherents, both in politics and religion, discover a bitter and malignant disposition? How unwilling are they to believe any thing favourable of each other, or to make any candid allowance for the mistakes or failings of their opponents! How keen in their remarks; how glad to find any thing justly censurable; and how eager to fix names of contempt and reproach, one upon the other! We need not inquire or assign a reason for this besides our own depravity. We need not impute bigotry and malevolence to this or that party, for they are the weeds which spring up in every soil, and are the natural produce of the human heart. "The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy †."

Jesus has suggested some important considerations, which should deter us from forming any rash judgment. Those who are most severe in their reflections upon others need expect no favour from their fellow-creatures. Men will not be disposed to pardon or palliate their misconduct, but will greedily catch at an opportunity of requiting them with the same acrimonious censures which they have liberally dealt out. And what treatment may they look for at the hands of a righteous God? How will they stand before him, when their characters are scrutinized with that rigorous exactness with which they have decided upon others? He has determined that "they shall have judgment without mercy, who have showed no mercy ‡."

It should also be considered that we are but ill qualified to pass sentence on any persons around us. Few of their actions, in comparison, fall under our notice, and, perhaps, of those few we see not the whole. We may not understand their inward principles; or we may conclude too hastily from appearances, which are deceitful, or from mere reports, which are generally vague and uncertain. If, how-

* 1 Cor. xiii. 7.

† James iv. 5.

‡ ii. 13.

ever, there be something in their manners which we must condemn, may not certain extenuations be admitted in their behalf? We know not under what temptations and difficulties they have laboured, and how much they have been excluded from opportunities of information or admonition. At least, a sense of our own ignorance and liableness to err, through prejudice and misconception, should incline us to draw the most candid and charitable conclusions; and the remembrance of our own numerous and aggravated faults should deter us from speaking evil of any man.

Jesus has instructed us, likewise, to look well to our spirit and conduct, when we undertake to reprove. Our office in life, and our Christian duty in a private situation, may frequently render this painful task necessary. But, while we narrowly inspect others, we should pay a strict attention to ourselves. It would be absurd and preposterous to spy out every minute failing in a brother, and at the same time to be wilfully blind to our own enormous offences. Yet this is generally the case with censorious persons, who are, of consequence, incapable of passing fair judgment, and giving a proper admonition. Correction and reformation should begin at home; for those, who allow themselves in bad habits, are like men whose eyes are so obscured that they cannot discern objects aright. And as the sight must be cleared, in order to form any just decision concerning things around us; so must the mind be freed from the love and power of sin, that it may be qualified to determine honestly, and bring a true charge against another. "Cast out the beam out of thine own eye, and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye."

Prudence will require us also to consider the character of those whom we may wish to rebuke or exhort; for there are some such profane and bold contemners of every thing good and serious, that any solemn admonition would not only be lost upon them,
but

but excite in them the most violent resentment; which, besides bringing us into difficulties, might cause the name and the truth of God to be blasphemed. Therefore the Saviour adds, "Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine:" and on the same ground Solomon directs us, "Speak not in the ears of a fool; for he will despise the wisdom of thy words *."

The caution, probably, may be abused, and urged in defence of that cowardly disposition, which is afraid of opposing sin upon any occasion whatever. While, therefore, we plead for prudence and reserve, let us endeavour to regulate our conduct, not by worldly motives, but by a supreme desire to promote the glory of God. It may be difficult, in particular cases, to determine the line of propriety and duty, or still more difficult to pursue it; on which account we shall have need of constant application to the God of all grace for his guidance and assistance. Jesus, therefore, proceeds to inculcate fervour and importunity in prayer. We seek not for an exact connexion in the different parts of this discourse; yet exhortations to call upon God appear at once suitably to follow from the preceding subject.

It has been objected, however, "Though our work be arduous, our petitions to God can avail us nothing. He knows our wants, and, if he chooses, will supply them; if not, our arguments or entreaties can never persuade him." An impious suggestion indeed! Will you not be thankful, if God will dispense mercy to you in any way? He requires you to surround the throne of grace with incessant cries; and, if you decline that service as hard or unreasonable, you will perish for ever for your proud contempt of his offered blessing. He understands that you every day feel fresh occasion for food to eat; and, if he pleased, he could give you bread from heaven. But he has appointed the husbandman to labour, "that he may bring forth food out of the earth;" and, though

* Prov. xxiii. 9

the husbandman's utmost efforts would, of themselves, be ineffectual, yet, if for that reason he should neglect the cultivation of his ground, he might justly starve in the time of harvest.

In making known our requests unto God, we should not be satisfied with cold and faint wishes; for all the vigour which the soul is capable of exerting is required in this business. We are, therefore, commanded to "ask, seek, and knock;" to "ask," as those who feel the most pressing necessities, and cannot take a denial; to "seek," with unremitting diligence, as those who are pursuing an object of the first importance; to "knock," with repeated solicitations for admission, till the door of mercy be opened. Nor need we fear the charge of presumption for this importunity, though our sins have merited the severest displeasure of our God. It is his own injunction, and we must obey. But have we a good prospect of succeeding? No less than an absolute certainty; for an express promise is added, that our requests shall be granted, that the desired effect shall crown our endeavours, and a free entrance into the church and kingdom of God be allowed us. But, you will say, do not many fail? No, not one, who has sincerely complied with the rules prescribed. In no instance whatever has the divine declaration been falsified. We should form larger and more honourable conceptions of the goodness of God; for Jesus has here taught us to consider him as a tender and loving Father, who cannot sport with the miseries of his dear offspring, or mock them when they cry for help. A striking appeal is made to the feelings of every parent, to determine the case. Such a monster is scarcely to be met with as can insult over his children in distress, and, instead of ministering to their necessary support, give them that which would be an injury rather than a benefit. And shall the God of heaven be less kind and compassionate than we, who are depraved and perverse from our very birth?

But what effect should the mercy of God produce
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in us? It should render us not only fervent in prayer to him, but upright and faithful in our dealings, attentive and benevolent, one to another; nor is it possible that we can feel any real devotion towards God, unless we have learned to exercise justice and tenderness to our fellow-creatures. Hence Jesus has inferred the necessity of observing what is usually called the golden rule of equity, that we should treat all men as we could with reason expect them to treat us in similar circumstances. This contains a perfect system of ethics; at least, from this one simple direction, every moral duty may be deduced. It exhibits the substance of all that the law and the prophets have enjoined, concerning our relative obligations. The propriety and excellency of the precept must be generally allowed, since it calls upon every man to judge between his neighbour and himself. If he doubt what line of conduct he should pursue towards another, let him suppose, for a moment, a mutual change of situation, and then ask what usage he could fairly look for from him. He cannot help drawing a right conclusion. Yet how little attention is paid to this rule! Most persons seem to act upon contracted and selfish principles, as if they were the only people whose advantage and comfort ought to be consulted; and few indeed, comparatively, demean themselves in life with a real and disinterested integrity. We lament the disingenuousness we meet with in the world; but let us seriously examine ourselves, and perhaps it will be found that we practise the most awful self-delusion, and sooth our consciences with a false peace.

Religion, however, is a solemn business, which cannot be managed, to any good effect, with a duplicity or indifference of mind. So our Lord proceeds to admonish us. If we would save our souls, we must be in earnest: and since many obstacles may await us, our utmost exertions will be required. At the very onset, much is to be done and suffered; we must "enter in at the strait gate."

Two different ways are proposed to our consideration; and we ought to deliberate very seriously which road we should take. The first which offers seems to possess some advantages. "The gate is wide:" it is readily found; and admission may be obtained without difficulty. There are no disagreeable restraints to deter us, especially as "the way is broad;" for every man may pursue his own course, and there is room enough to wander in an endless variety of paths. We need only follow the desires of our hearts, and we shall not deviate from it. Another very powerful inducement to proceed is, that a numerous company are travelling in this track; and, however various our tastes, we may meet with acquaintance suited to our wishes. "Many there be, which go in thereat;" so that, to be fashionable, we must join their society.

What hinders, then, but that here we fix our choice, since so many reasons invite us? It may be proper to ask another question, Whither doth this path tend? and the answer, surely, will fill us with dismay, "It leadeth to destruction." A few fine flowers may be strewed in the way, to tempt unwary pilgrims; but how terrible will the end be! "Blackness of darkness for ever!" Many affect to disbelieve it; but the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it, and he will execute his own denunciations. Ah! foolish people, and unwise! Sport no longer on the brink of final perdition; but instantly stop, or rather endeavour to make good your retreat without delay.

Another road is proposed, which is attended with some discouraging circumstances; but let us consider of what sort they are, and what influence they should have. "Strait is the gate:" it requires mature thought to discover it, and many strenuous efforts to gain admission. In order to enter, we must consent to certain painful separations, we must part with many things which we might wish to retain, and expect violent opposition from our nearest relatives and associates. If there are such obstacles at the very beginning,

beginning, what will be the remainder of the journey? Throughout the whole, even to the very close, it is what our corrupt nature will dislike. "The way is narrow;" so that we shall be constantly in danger of deviating from it. The restraints, also, which are imposed, the various snares laid for the travellers, and the resistance made to their progress, may discourage and distress them; for most persons are unwilling to combat with difficulties. It may be asked, Who are they that walk this road? And here, perhaps, another objection will be raised, since "few there be that find it." It is not pleasant to be marked out and derided as precise and singular; and on this very account many will turn aside from a path which is so little frequented, and determine to be like their neighbours. Besides, the company upon this road is not only small, but of such a sort as to disgust those who are devoted to worldly pursuits. For "not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called *;" so that they who dare to "tread the narrow way" must be willing to be accounted of a weak understanding, and of a mean contemptible spirit.

But will you not inquire, What will the issue be? And will it not at once fix your resolution, to hear that "it leadeth unto life?" Only enter by the appointed gate, and persevere in the path prescribed, and you will be eternally happy with your God. It will infallibly conduct you to heaven: every one that endureth unto the end shall be put in complete and everlasting possession of that kingdom of bliss and glory. Storms and tempests may for the present beat upon you, briars and thorns may obstruct your progress: but hold on your way, and soon shall your pilgrimage be finished, when you shall partake of that fulness of joy, and those pleasures, which are at God's right hand for evermore. Does there a doubt remain? O, credit the declarations of him who cannot lie; and delay not, for a moment, a business

* 1 Cor. i. 26.

of unspeakable importance! Whatever painful struggles it may cost, as you value the salvation of your souls, strive to gain admission at the only door, to which the Gospel refers you, before it be for ever closed.

The difficulties of the Christian may be increased by the unsoundness of some who make a religious profession, on which account our Lord has warned us to beware of deceivers and hypocrites. False teachers, then, may be expected to arise in the church; nor should we be staggered when we find them. They may assume a specious appearance, and pretend to much meekness and simplicity of manners, as if they belonged to the true fold; for they "come in sheep's clothing." But their designs are base and mischievous: they are enemies to the flock of God, which it is their aim to scatter and destroy, for "inwardly they are ravening wolves." "Beware," says the great Shepherd: be cautious what credit you give to the claims and declarations of those who put on the fair show of piety, and undertake to instruct others.

Is there, then, any sure test by which their sincerity may be tried? The general tenour of their conduct will furnish the most decisive proof. "Ye shall know them by their fruits." The nature of a tree is always determined by its produce. That only which yields something useful in life is allowed to be really good: and that which brings forth nothing but what is noxious or worthless will not long be suffered to stand, however beautiful in appearance; "it is nigh unto cursing, and its end is to be burned *." The subject is applicable to those who receive as well as those who give instruction; and it is therefore incumbent upon all to inquire of themselves, Are there any fruits of righteousness to be found in me? If we have nothing more to exhibit than the leaves and blossoms of a religious profession, we may justly

* Heb. vi. 8.

dread that sentence, "Cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground?"

It were absurd to attempt any imposition upon Jesus by a hypocritical show. He requires a sincere and uniform obedience; nor will he be satisfied by the strongest declarations of high regard, where there is no intention to please him, no strenuous endeavours to do his will. Expressions of esteem are cheap; and are these all that you look for from your friends? If you perceive in them a continual neglect of your wishes, and an opposition to your known interest, you will not credit their words. Nay, you will account them as your enemies, who with their mouths pretend a cordial attachment, the better to carry on some hostile designs against you. Accordingly, Jesus assures us that all those, who shall be found "workers of iniquity," shall be disowned by him in the great day, and sentenced to an everlasting separation from him, however they may be able to plead that they have been zealous advocates for his truth, eminent officers in his church, and possessed of distinguished gifts for the benefit of others. How tremendous is the declaration! Can any more forcible argument be suggested, which may induce us to examine, with true seriousness of mind, What are we? Does our conduct as well as our language evince an unfeigned regard to the Saviour? Or what reception may we expect from him when he shall come to exhibit every character in its true light, and execute an impartial judgment upon all?

So solemn were the admonitions of Jesus to his hearers! The close of the sermon may be considered as a practical application of the whole, and may furnish his ministers with an excellent model for their public addresses to the people. He separated and divided his audience into two classes; and it will, in general, be proper and necessary to distinguish our congregations in the same manner.

There are those who make a suitable improvement of their religious instructions; and they are to be encouraged

encouraged by a representation of their happiness and security. They listen to the word of Christ; and, moreover, they render an unfeigned obedience. Not satisfied with expressing their approbation, they desire that their conduct in every respect should be conformable to it. They are, therefore, anxious to know, chiefly in order that they may perform, the whole will of God. Herein they act a wise part; and they shall reap the benefit. They build upon a sure foundation, which cannot be removed, and provide a place of refuge from the violence of impending storms. For such trials, probably, will soon come upon them, as will prove that they stand on firm ground, and that their house of defence is immovably established. Is the ministry of the Gospel then precious unto us? and are we giving heed to the precepts, as well as to the promises? Our obedience, doubtless, is defective: but does the general practice of our lives evince our sincerity? If so, being accepted of God according to his covenant, we shall be preserved in the hour of temptation, supported and comforted in the pains of dissolution; and in the solemn day of accounts, when the hope of the hypocrite shall perish, we shall maintain a holy confidence and joy before the presence of our Judge.

○ But there are those who constantly attend upon the word of God, and yet regulate not their conduct by it. It is proper to detect their hypocrisy, and, if possible; to discover them to themselves, that they may be awakened out of the dreams of self-deceit, and alarmed by a faithful representation of their danger. They hear the sayings of Christ; and so far it is well: but they do them not. The preaching may please and astonish; but it has no practical influence upon their tempers and conversation, so that they continue as covetous, sensual, and malicious, as ever. How absurdly do they act! By their religious services they seem to be preparing a house of defence; and they flatter themselves with security. But the season is approaching when their folly will
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be exposed. Their building will not stand against those tremendous tempests which may be expected to arise. It has no foundation, for it is not established upon the Rock; and therefore the storms which beat upon it will level it with the ground, and bury them in the ruins.

And have we not occasion to lament, as Jesus did, that many seem to hear in vain? Many, who neglect not the ordinances, are remiss in the common duties of life. We rejoice to perceive their attention at church, but grieve to observe no amendment at home. We solemnly warn them, then, not to trust to their professions of regard to Christ and his Gospel, nor to flatter themselves, on this ground, that they have provided a place of safety. The tempestuous day is coming, and wo be to all those who have built their house upon the sand! God "will lay judgment to the line, and righteousness to the plummet; and the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters shall overflow the hiding-place*." Horror and anguish inconceivable must ensue, when they, who "were exalted to heaven" in their religious privileges, "shall be thrust down to hell," to suffer the vengeance of eternal fire.

Such was the import of this awful, pointed, and awakening sermon on the mount. "The people were astonished at this doctrine:" and, as to many, this was all the effect produced. Yet what does it avail merely to express an admiration of the speaker, while the truth delivered is rejected with scorn? Soon will it be said, "Behold, ye despisers, and wonder, and perish †." Justly, indeed, might the audience of Jesus be amazed: for so singular an Instructor never appeared. Probably in his manner he was remarkable, uniting a majestic dignity with the sweetest condescension. "For he taught them as one having authority, and not as the Scribes," who meanly sought the favour of the people. He issued out his commands, as possessing in himself the

* Isa. xxyiii. 17.

† Acts xiii. 41.

power of enforcing obedience, as their Lord, their Governor, and their Judge. Nor was the matter of his discourse less surprising, the doctrine being in many respects sublime and mysterious, contrary, at least, to the sentiments usually advanced by their Rabbins.

Let all the hearers of the Gospel make the application to themselves. It is Jesus who yet addresses you by the mouth of his servants, and to him your attention is demanded. What influence, then, have the truths which are preached produced in your minds? You may have been astonished, but have you been truly converted, by them? Remember with whom ye have to do; it is One whom you cannot deceive. Though with demure appearance you tread his courts, if you work iniquity, he will search it out, and finally reject you with contempt and abhorrence. He spake on earth, and much more will he speak from heaven, "with authority," when he shall come with power and great glory, as the Judge of quick and dead. "But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth *?" There are those, who will "have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming †." But there are multitudes, even in his visible church, who shall then be overwhelmed with confusion, whilst he will pronounce the tremendous and irreversible sentence, "I never knew you: depart from me."

"The Lord grant unto us that we may find mercy of the Lord in that day!" Amen.

* Mal. iii. 2.

† 1 John ii. 28.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. 12.

Jesus healed a leper—retired into the wilderness—attended by Pharisees and doctors—cured a paralytic—called Matthew the publican—visited him, when many publicans were present—justified his disciples for their free and social manner of life.

IN every part of our Lord's public ministry, we shall find him attended, through his different movements, by immense multitudes. The doctrines which he preached, and the miracles which he performed, generally brought together a large concourse of people, though but few in comparison seem to have been cordially attached to him. Some were led by curiosity, or a desire to hear and to see any thing new and uncommon; others, oppressed with bodily diseases, applied to him for relief under their various complaints. Shall not we, also, in the present day, be induced to listen to the word which he hath commanded to be published, and come to him for that healing of our infirmities, which he alone can bestow? The Gospel of his grace is as wonderful and important as ever: and Jesus, who is exalted to his throne of glory, is not less powerful or compassionate than he appeared to be during his abode on earth. Let us inquire, then, what are the truths which he hath delivered to his church? what the benefits which his hand confers?

Among the crowds which followed Jesus, after his sermon on the mount, was a poor unhappy man, "full of leprosy*." A malady this, which was pe-

* Matt. viii. 1-4. Mark i. 40-45. Luke v. 12-14.

cularly distressing; for, not to observe that it was most offensive, painful, and dangerous, the Jewish law excluded all persons infected with it from public worship, and from a free intercourse with society, forbidding them to dwell in any town. How wretched their situation! Here was one, who, being deeply impressed with a sense of his own misery, earnestly implored relief. When he saw Jesus, having heard of his character and wonderful works of mercy, he applied to him with much importunity, and with evident signs of real dependence, though, probably, not without a mixture of unbelief. He worshipped him, falling down on his face, and very ardently besought him to show his usual compassion. Fully confident of his power, yet doubtful of his willingness, to heal him, "Lord," said he, "if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean." What a picture of distress was here! An afflicted creature, deprived of the main comforts of life, shut out from friends and relations, loathsome in the sight of others, and burdensome to himself, despairing of obtaining deliverance from men, and now prostrate as an humble suppliant at the feet of Jesus! And did the Saviour ever turn away from such an object, or disregard such an application? No; his heart was ever susceptible of the tenderest pity; and, therefore, no sooner was the desire expressed, than it was granted in its full extent. Instantly, at his word, the malady was removed, and a perfect cure wrought. He upbraided not the leper's distrust, yet took an effectual method to remove it. To demonstrate that his grace is equal to his power, and that he is as ready as he is able to relieve every needy petitioner, he said, "I will; be thou clean." Like the great almighty Sovereign, having all things at his command, "He spake, and it was done."

The circumstance here related represents the Saviour in the most amiable light, and holds forth encouragement to us to make known our requests, whatever our necessities may be. Are we not, in
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a spiritual sense, like this poor afflicted person? Sin is the leprosy of the soul, which renders us unclean in every part, and unfit for the society of God and his saints. Do we perceive and lament the defilement and the danger of this disease? Behold, a Physician is at hand! In every miracle of Jesus we see an emblem of the works of grace which he performs for the deliverance and salvation of his people. You, who are bowed down with your distress, entreat his help. You have heard what he has done for others; you believe, therefore, that he is able to save you; and though your faith may be weak, and the fear may arise in your minds, "perhaps he is not willing," yet come and make the experiment. Lie low at his feet, and lift up your prayer to him, "Lord, make me clean;" and he will not disdain or reject you. You shall prove the healing virtue of his Spirit, and obtain such abundant mercy as to your own apprehensions may appear impossible. He will reply to your petition, "I will; be thou clean."

The leper, being restored, was dismissed with a strict injunction not to divulge the case, till he had properly attested it before the priest, and offered the appointed sacrifices at the temple. The charge of secrecy might be given by our Lord, either that he might avoid all appearance of ostentation, or that he might prevent the malicious objections of the priests, who, probably, would have denied the reality of the cure, if they had previously heard of its Author; and he required a compliance with the Mosaic rites, that he might not be censured for contempt or disregard of the law. But the man who had been healed, perhaps in the transport of his joy and the warmth of his gratitude, published the miracle, which he was commanded to conceal. This excited the general notice of the neighbourhood; and great multitudes resorted to Jesus from all quarters, through the extensive fame which he had acquired.

The admiration of a multitude, however, was not
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what Jesus sought; for he had no vain or ambitious views; and therefore "he withdrew himself from them into the wilderness." And for what purpose? That he might secure some short season of retirement, which he might spend, without interruption, in meditation and prayer. How often are we reminded, from his example, of the necessity of such an occasional abstraction from the world! Be it, then, remembered, that, unless we are seriously attentive to secret devotion, our religion, and our usefulness too, will dwindle away. Those who are much engaged in public life should consider their peculiar danger on this account: for, whilst they are always in a crowd, and distracted with a constant succession and hurry of secular avocations, how can the soul be properly regarded, or its vigour maintained? Nay, even those who are actively employed in the immediate service of God, as the ministers of his word, may expect to suffer some spiritual declension, if they neglect the private duties of the closet. They should not only be earnest and unremitting in their labours for the benefit of others, but endeavour to obtain fresh supplies of wisdom and strength, by renewed communications of grace, for their own use. The difficulty is, to secure a sufficient and suitable time. But we must learn of Jesus to watch our opportunities, and even insist upon them, by retreating from our necessary engagements and our kindest friends, that we may keep up our secret intercourse with God. Such is the pattern set before us: alas! how defective are the most eminent of his followers! In nothing, perhaps, do they fail more, than in the improvement of their leisure for devotional purposes. For is not this holy retirement too much neglected? and neglected because it requires the most lively spiritual affections, and flatters not the vanity of the mind, by exciting the admiration of others?

Jesus, however, was soon called forth again to public view and activity. Though it might have been

been pleasing to himself to have spent a longer season in solitude, he could not be unmindful of the multitudes who flocked after him, and therefore, for their sakes, he returned to his former exertions*. Upon his coming back to Capernaum, immense crowds attended him, to whom he preached the Gospel. Amongst these were some persons of higher station, and more respectable appearance, than his common hearers; "Pharisees, and doctors of the law." It is but seldom that men of rank or consequence pay any serious regard to the word of God; and therefore we may be disposed to wonder that these made part of the congregation. But it is remarked of them, that "they were sitting by," as if they were totally unconcerned with his subject, and, like spies, meant only to observe and censure his conduct. They had travelled from distant parts of the country, even from Jerusalem, and, probably, met by appointment at Capernaum, not so much from curiosity, as from a malicious desire to start objections. We shall, therefore, remark, that they were ready to catch at his words. He was perfectly apprized of their intentions; yet, not discouraged by their presence, he proceeded in his work, and gave such proofs of his high character before them, by many miraculous cures, as were enough to convince or confound them.

The ministers of Christ are often placed in a similar situation, being surrounded by those who are unfriendly, and disposed to find fault. Such hearers may properly be said to be "sitting by;" for they come, not to be instructed, but to pass their judgment on the sermon; and, therefore, they criticise both the preacher and his doctrine with malevolence and severity. The servant of the Lord, however, though his feelings may be wounded, must still persist in the faithful discharge of his office, nor conceal any part of the truth, even while he knows that he shall excite opposition.

* Matt. ix. 1—8. Mark ii. 1—12. Luke v. 17—26.

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When Jesus was thus attended, a poor disabled paralytic was brought before him. The crowd about the house prevented all access; but such was the eagerness of the afflicted man and his friends to obtain relief, that with great pains and difficulty he was taken up to the roof, and let down by cords, where our Lord was preaching.

Perhaps this particular method of application arose from ignorance and unbelief, as it seemed to imply that the Saviour could not work the cure at a distance. He did not, however, upbraid them with their weakness; but, considering their conduct as an evidence of faith, he received them graciously, and encouraged the palsied person by an assurance of the pardon of his sins. A blessing this, which does not appear to have been solicited or desired. But so free and extensive is the mercy of our God, that all, who apply to him with real sincerity of heart, shall find him "able to do exceeding abundantly above all that they ask or think."

The declaration of Jesus, which denoted his sovereign majesty and divine power, disposed his captious hearers to raise a formidable objection against him. They argued within themselves that he was guilty of the grossest impiety in the claim which he set up. Their position was true, that none can forgive sins but God alone; yet their conclusion, that Jesus had spoken blasphemy, was false. They would not believe, though the clearest evidence was given, that he possessed the perfections of Deity, and, therefore, that the forgiveness of sins belonged to him, as his high prerogative. He replied to the charge, even before they had dared to avow it, and thereby discovered his intimate acquaintance with their very thoughts. Who, then, can this be, that calleth men to account for the imagination of their hearts? To prove that he had not been guilty of a vain presumptuous boast, he proposed instantly to restore the poor cripple before them to health and vigour; and therefore, with all the majesty and authority of a divine

a divine Person, and with a view to show his full right to pardon offenders, he thus addressed the man, "I say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy bed, and go thy way into thine house."

The word was effectual; for immediately the paralytic received strength, so that he departed without assistance, ascribing glory to God. This excited a general amazement and consternation among the people. They cried out, "We have seen strange things to-day," as if they knew not what conclusion to draw: but the proper and just inference is, that Jesus possesses divine perfections in himself, and can dispense the remission of sins as he pleases. This must be a fair deduction, as the miracle seems to have been wrought on purpose to confirm it. And, when we hear of these astonishing events, shall we not rejoice "that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins?" If we have no palsy to be cured, it will not be said that we have no iniquities to be pardoned. Then let us consider our need of Jesus, and, instead of cavilling, as the Scribes and doctors did, let us implore his help. While our consciences witness against us that our transgressions are very many, let us go to him with an humble reliance upon his mercy, and say, "Lord, thou only canst remove my load of guilt; extend thy compassion to me; assure me of thy favour; and speak peace to my soul, that I may depart with deepest impressions of gratitude and love, glorifying God."

As Jesus retired from Capernaum towards the sea-shore, he fixed his eye upon a certain publican, named Matthew or Levi, who was busily employed in his occupation as a tax-gatherer, "sitting at the receipt of custom," and immediately called him to be his disciple*. The office of publicans was odious to the Jews, and, as their business exposed them to many temptations, they were generally persons of an infamous character; so that it became proverbial to join "publicans and sinners" together.

* Matt. ix. 9. Mark ii. 13, 14. Luke v. 27, 28.

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But by our Lord's conduct we are taught to despise no man, whatever he may once have been. Jesus can pardon, and can sanctify: he disdains not to accept and save even those who have been most atrocious offenders; nay, he seems purposely to have chosen some of this very stamp, that he might display the greatness of his mercy, and encourage the hopes of all who are willing to submit unto him, however desperate their case may appear. In certain instances, we perceive, he has sought after them, without waiting for their application; and constrained them, by the discovery of his love and the influence of his Spirit, to forsake their beloved pursuits, and to follow him.

Such, we apprehend, was the case of Matthew. He was immersed in all the hurry of an advantageous, though not an honourable, business, and probably had no serious cares or spiritual desires, when Jesus looked upon him, and required him to renounce his secular gains, and become one of his despised attendants. Many, also, among ourselves, who seem to have had no previous preparation of heart, no solemn consideration or convictions of religion, are suddenly awakened in the midst of various schemes of vanity and sin. A thought is darted in upon their minds, as quick and as effectual as the word spoken to Matthew, in consequence of which they immediately covet and seek for that acquaintance with Jesus, which they disdained before. The transition from one course to another is rapid; and the change in every view is truly wonderful. Yet, we see, it is easy for Him, who has access to the conscience, to produce it in an instant. The call given to Matthew, though urged by no motives or persuasions whatever, went with a powerful impression to his heart, and succeeded. He "conferred not with flesh and blood," but obeyed the summons without hesitation, cheerfully relinquishing his lucrative post, and entering on the service of a poor and despised Master. "He arose, and left all, and followed

lowed him." From that time he was numbered among the disciples of Jesus, and afterwards chosen to be an Apostle.

Some persons were prejudiced against our Lord, on account of the meanness, ignorance, and former immoralities of his attendants. The same objection is still made: and many are even exasperated when they hear that those who have been profligate in their manners, or suspected in their characters, discover an ardent zeal for religion, and commence teachers of others. But, while the pride of Pharisees quarrels with the rich and sovereign mercy of God, "who will have mercy on whom he will have mercy," let us admire and praise the love and power of our Redeemer, "who justifieth the ungodly," and constrains the most rebellious, not only to submit, but to plead his cause and promote his glory. Let us inquire for ourselves, Are we the called of God in Christ Jesus? It matters little in what way, or by what particular means, this has been effected: but are we really influenced to follow the Saviour? Matthew, doubtless, was condemned for his conduct, as a weak or visionary enthusiast: nor need we wonder if we come under such censures for our attachment to Jesus. "Let us go forth, bearing his reproach," and be solicitous only to approve ourselves unto God.

Some time after this occurrence, we find the young convert entertaining his beloved Master at his own house. It may not be easy to fix the precise date of the visit; but it may be most suitable to consider it here, while Matthew's character is before us. Perhaps to show his grateful regard to the Saviour, and to recommend him to the notice and esteem of his former acquaintance, at least to give them an opportunity of receiving benefit from his conversation, he provided a large feast, and invited many publicans, and others of a similar stamp, to be present with Jesus*. We admire the condescension of this exalted Guest, who was willing to mix with any com-

* Matt. ix. 10—17. Mark ii. 15—22. Luke v. 29, &c.

pany where there was a prospect of usefulness, and who, upon the occasion now mentioned, conversed in a familiar manner with persons of an ignominious reputation. But his conduct again called forth the enmity of the Scribes and Pharisees, who, with a pretence of superior sanctity, held all others in the utmost contempt, and were angry that favourable notice should be taken of any besides themselves. They seemed to insinuate that Jesus, by a free communication with men of an infamous character, appeared as the patron of iniquity. He replied, that he did not maintain an intercourse with them, as a partaker or encourager of their evil deeds, but from a real desire to save their precious souls, like an attentive physician visiting his patients, to heal and restore them. He observed that his business lay more properly amongst those, who readily acknowledged themselves sinners, than with those who boasted of their own righteousness, and disdained the offer of a Saviour. He intimated, that, while he showed a regard to the most abandoned, his object was "to call them to repentance;" and that herein he performed an act of mercy more acceptable to God than ceremonial observances.

The ministers of Christ are censured in the same manner, whenever they are followed, as is frequently the case, by persons who have been irregular and profligate in their conduct. It is suggested, if not openly asserted, that their doctrine is favourable to the purposes of licentiousness, as if it allowed men to continue in their evil practices. This is said, or hinted, by those "who trust in themselves that they are righteous, and despise others." But we would admonish them that in such a temper of mind they are of all others most opposite to the Gospel, and furthest from the kingdom of heaven. "Many that are first shall be last, and the last shall be first." The servant of Christ, therefore, like his Master, should be willing to pay attention to the most abandoned sinners, in the hope of reclaiming them; and
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he ought to rejoice when they accept the rich grace of that Gospel, which the proud Pharisee so contemptuously rejects.

Probably, at the same time, an objection was urged against Jesus, for the free and social intercourse which his disciples maintained, so very different from the disciples of John and of the Pharisees, who fasted often. He, however, justified their conduct, not by denying the duty of abstinence, but by observing that they would soon be called to it, in a season of peculiar affliction; and that, during his personal residence amongst them, the austerities of fasting and mortification would be unsuitable to their situation, as they were then rejoicing in the presence of the heavenly Bridegroom. He had, also, another reason to offer, which he illustrated by certain similitudes taken from the common concerns of life. Some of those, whom he had attached to himself, had been strangers to that humiliation which would afterwards be necessary for them; and therefore, in a wise and compassionate regard to their weakness, and even to their former prejudices, he would not put them upon severe trials or duties, for which their strength was insufficient; but he designed to lead them on gradually, as they were able to bear it. A different treatment might have had the worst effects, producing a dislike to his service, as rigorous and intolerable.

This exhibits a pleasing representation of the manner in which he now deals with his people. He proportions their difficulties to their ability. Many things both in doctrine and practice, to which they would violently object upon their first conversion, are by degrees accepted, approved, and admired. When they enter on the Christian course, they are generally favoured with peculiar consolations, and know little of those burdens by which others are oppressed. The Bridegroom is with them; and they rejoice in his presence. Indeed he never deserts them; but, as they advance in wisdom, strength, and courage, he
calls

calls them out to severer exercises; and then frequently the clear manifestations of his love are withdrawn from them, and they are weighed down with heavy afflictions and temptations. Such was the divine conduct towards the children of Israel, when they were led about through the wilderness, and not by the direct road to Canaan, and thus were gradually prepared for those sharp conflicts which they were destined to encounter*. Let us praise God for the methods of his grace, so exactly suited to the various cases of his people, and cheerfully commit ourselves to his care and disposal.

We observe what perverseness and "contradiction of sinners" our Lord endured, and with what meekness he replied to their malicious objections. We learn, therefore, to abstain from all pride and vehemence of spirit, and with patience to bear the folly and malignity of those who oppose themselves. Let us beware, especially, lest we be numbered amongst "the adversaries of the Lord." Are there not those who show the same cavilling temper of mind which the Pharisees did of old? Most awful indeed is your situation. He who suffered his enemies to raise their wicked contentions against himself, when he was upon the earth, may exercise much forbearance towards you; but he will soon reckon with you for your captious insolence in resisting his Gospel, and for your obstinate contempt of his grace. And "can your heart endure, or can your hands be strong, in the days that he shall deal with you?" O submit, nor dare any longer to maintain the vain and presumptuous contest! Refuse not to comply with his demands; and therefore come to him, as you are required, confessing yourselves on a level with publicans, and saying, from the heart, "God be merciful to me, a sinner!"

* Exod. xiii. 17, 18.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. 13.

Jesus celebrating the passover, cured an impotent man at Bethesda—called to account, declared his own dignity—stated the proofs of his divine mission—and subjoined the most solemn admonitions to his opposers.

It is generally supposed that our Lord celebrated four passovers during his public ministry; and that the circumstance, which we are now about to consider, occurred at the second. At the annual celebration of that great festival, he went up to Jerusalem, as the law commanded. He was constant in his attendance upon all instituted means; and his example teaches us not to slight or neglect the ordinances of God, since he, who could not stand in need of them, as we do, put such honour upon them.

When he came to Jerusalem, an opportunity soon offered for the exercise and display of his power and compassion*. A poor disabled man, who had remained in a state of entire impotency for thirty-eight years, lay at the pool of Bethesda, waiting in expectation of a cure from the miraculous motion of the water, which it pleased God to appoint, at certain seasons, for the healing of the most inveterate diseases. Jesus looked with pity on this afflicted person, and, without receiving so much as a petition for relief (the cripple, probably, not knowing the Saviour's character), instantly by a word restored his strength: he commanded him, also, to give full and public proof of his recovery, by taking up his bed and walking.

* John v. 1, &c

The supernatural effect was manifest; and we might have thought the conclusion from it so obvious, that all must acknowledge it. But the superstitious Pharisees immediately objected, because the work had been performed, and the man had carried away his couch, on the sabbath-day. Hypocrites, we find, are generally attentive to outward observances, while they are content to be destitute of real religion in their hearts. The person who was cured rightly argued, that he, who had so wonderfully removed his disease, could not be supposed to require him to do what was sinful. They, however, probably suspecting that Jesus was the Author of the miracle, were desirous to bring him forward to public view, that they might accuse him. But, in the mean time, he had judged it proper, either through modesty or prudence, to retire from their observation before he was known. Afterwards the man met with Jesus in the temple, and received a solemn charge to take warning from his late visitation, and amend his conduct: having thus learned to whom he owed his deliverance, he reported it to the Pharisees. This he might do from a strong impression of gratitude, and an absurd expectation that all would pay the most profound deference and respect to his gracious Benefactor. They ought, doubtless, to have sought after him, given him the homage and submission so justly due to a Messenger from heaven, and considered their nation highly honoured by his presence. But, on the contrary, they persecuted him with malicious rage, as if he were unworthy to live, for an imaginary and not a real violation of the sabbath.

The circumstance here related may repress our wonder, when we hear the basest misrepresentations of excellent characters and the most benevolent conduct. Those who are followers of Jesus must expect to pass through evil report as he did, and should not be staggered in their minds though they hazard the loss of every thing, even when they exert themselves most earnestly for the honour of God and the
benefit

benefit of their fellow-creatures. "Though war should rise against them," let them "not be weary in well-doing."

For this compassionate act Jesus was called to account, probably in a public manner, and, as it should seem, before the sanhedrim, the great council of the nation. There he stood arraigned as a criminal; and yet, when put upon his defence, he spake as the sovereign Lord of all, possessing full authority to condemn and destroy his accusers. With an inexpressible dignity he declared, "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work;" as if he had said, "My Father is continually carrying on his works of providence, and ceaseth not on sabbath-days from exercising his almighty power for the support of the creation; and since I, likewise, maintain the same dominion, and act in the same absolute manner, I am not to be restrained and limited in my operations by those rules which must direct the conduct of creatures." If this be, as it evidently appears, the fair import of his words, we wonder not that the Jews, who were determined to deny his divinity, considered him as a blasphemer, in making himself "equal with God." This charge, therefore, they immediately urged; and he replied without fear or reserve. He took occasion from it to enter upon a full vindication of himself, asserting the high dignity of his character, and the offices he sustained, and warning them of their danger in opposing him. The whole of his speech is inconceivably sublime, especially if it be understood to be addressed to the rulers of the people, collected in their grand assembly, and sitting in judgment upon him.

Had they mistaken his words, or drawn a false and mischievous conclusion from them (as they certainly did, if he be not very God), he would instantly have corrected the error, and explained his meaning more explicitly. But, so far from contradicting, he allowed and confirmed their inference. For he proceeded to declare, that "what things soever the Father doeth, these

these also doeth the Son likewise," not only performing the same operations, but conducting them in the same manner, with an equal display of supreme and sovereign authority. And is it not, then, a fair deduction, that the Father and the Son, who are confessedly united in their plans of action, are one in nature, and possess the very same perfections? He referred them to some stronger testimonies of his omnipotence than had already been given by the cure of the lame man; and observed, that in two particular instances his dignity, as the Son of God, would be manifested, to their astonishment. The one was, his restoring of life to the dead, according to his own pleasure; for, even now, he quickens whom he will, and at the last day the general resurrection will be accomplished by him. The other was, the administration of the final and universal judgment, which is committed to him; for he it is who will assign to the whole human race their different states for ever, according to their respective characters. Are these such works as a creature can perform? Or do they not evidently require the exertion of divine perfections? Jesus, therefore, added, that in these acts it is the Father's grand determination to assert and vindicate the proper dignity of his Son; that, notwithstanding the insolent attacks made upon him, he commands all men to honour the Son, even as they honour the Father; and that whatever regard is withheld from the former, is, in effect, denied to the latter. Of what sort, then, is their religion, who are attempting the degradation of the Saviour? With all their pretences of veneration for the God of heaven, they are here expressly declared to be his enemies.

Accordingly, the Lord Jesus, in the most solemn manner, demanded the attention of his judges, representing himself as the grand source of all spiritual blessings, and requiring them to submit to and depend upon him, as the Author and Giver of everlasting life. To fix a deeper impression on their minds, he set before them the awful proceedings of the last day,

day, when they should hear his voice, awakening them from their graves; and stand at his bar, to receive their final sentence from his mouth.

It is objected to the doctrine, which asserts his Deity, that he said on this very occasion, "I can of mine own self do nothing;" which is thought to imply an original subjection and inferiority. But we apprehend that no such conclusion can be fairly drawn from his expressions. True it is that "the Son can do nothing of himself;" that is, he can have no distinct plan of his own, nor act separately from, or in opposition to, the Father; such is their union and perfect agreement together.

But does not Jesus describe himself as subordinate and dependent? Doubtless there is a sense in which he is so. He speaks of a commission which he had received, and of an authority with which he was intrusted, from the Father. But this may properly be referred to his mediatorial office, and does not prove any difference or inequality, previous to his own voluntary engagement. In the function which he has assumed, he submits to be a servant, and acts by express directions. "Because he is the Son of man," having taken our nature, and appeared in the likeness of sinful flesh, he is, in this respect and for this very reason, inferior to the Father, and is sent and appointed by him. Yet the character he sustains, and the acts he performs as Mediator, clearly manifest his divinity, since they far exceed the powers of every created being in earth or heaven.

Are we, then, in danger of rendering too much honour to Jesus, or of exalting him higher than he deserves? Who does not tremble at the suggestion? But have we indeed obtained suitable conceptions of his dignity? and are we habitually giving him the glory which is his due? Let us fear, lest we come under the condemnation of those "who honour not the Son." If we are disaffected, and unwilling to pay him profound and supreme adoration, we are fundamentally and dangerously wrong. It is indis-

pensably required, that, as we believe in God the Father, we should also believe in his Son Jesus Christ.

He proceeded to state certain decisive proofs, in support of the claims which he made. Our reason is appealed to, in confirmation of our faith: and evidence, in abundance, may be adduced, to convince us that our holy religion is no foolish fancy, or base imposition. The Gospel does not evade, but challenges and demands, a fair inquiry. Accordingly, Jesus did not rest the matter upon his own mere assertions, which might appear suspicious, but showed, by a variety of arguments, that he was the very Person whom he declared himself to be.

He appealed to the testimony of John the Baptist, who had seen the Spirit of God descending in an open manner upon him, and heard a voice from heaven affirming his high character. To him they had once appeared to pay attention, and had sent a deputation to consult him; and yet they would not abide by his decision.

He referred them to his own miracles, in attestation of his divine mission. He had performed such wonderful works as no human power ever could effect: these, therefore, sufficiently evinced that he could not be a deceiver, but was, indeed, what he had uniformly maintained, the Saviour that should come into the world.

He alleged that his Father himself had borne witness of him: He had done it, not only by the communication of extraordinary gifts, but by an express declaration that Jesus was his beloved Son. Such an evidence as this had not been vouchsafed on any other occasion. Yet to what purpose was it then given? Alas! it rendered many the more inexcusable for their unbelief, as they hardened their hearts against conviction.

He directed them, likewise, to the testimony of the holy Scriptures. These were the writings of the Old Testament, which they all acknowledged, and professed to receive with the highest regard.

To

To these divine oracles he made a solemn appeal, in vindication of his own claims, and exposed the inconsistency of pretending reverence for the sacred records, and at the same time rejecting the Saviour, whom they all concurred in pointing out. The inspired authors are witnesses of Christ, either by types, promises, or prophecies; and since Jesus has exactly fulfilled those ancient descriptions, they illustrate and confirm his declarations. How strange is it, then, that any, who have the Bible in their hands, should remain in ignorance of him! How absurd and sinful is the general inattention of men to the important contents of that book, which they allow to be a revelation from heaven!

Thus Jesus endeavoured to convince the Jews of his character and mission, and of the justice of those claims which he advanced. And are not we also interested in the subject? Do we, then, receive Christ Jesus the Lord, as he is set forth before us? Do we unfeignedly bow to his authority, and confess him to be "the Lord from heaven," "God over all?" Much has been said and written about the want of evidence; the same outcry was raised among the unbelieving Jews, "What sign showest thou?" This question was urged again and again, even where proofs in abundance were produced. And nothing is more common than for those, who are determined not to be persuaded, to allege that no decisive arguments are brought, to gain them over to the side of Christianity. It is preposterous that men should make this complaint, and affect to be ready to give every testimony its due consideration, when we know that they refuse to examine with serious attention; nay, that they contemptuously shut their eyes and stop their ears against every thing which opposes their favourite scheme. We doubt not that the grand cause of infidelity is insincerity, and an extreme inveterate depravity of heart. And such reasons as these do not form an excuse for free-thinkers, but rather furnish the grounds of their condemnation.

Observe, then, from what source your objections to the Christian doctrines arise; and fear lest you should not conduct your religious inquiries with diligence and honesty, with meekness and solemnity. That your minds may be more deeply impressed with the importance of the subject, weigh carefully the conclusion of our Lord's address, in which he subjoins the most pointed admonitions.

In our application to men who are utterly careless and indifferent, we must not content ourselves with cold reasoning, but endeavour to alarm their consciences, or else the strongest arguments will fail of their effect. Thus Jesus, upon the occasion before us, attempted to rouse his hearers, and to work upon their hearts, by a plain and faithful representation of the nature, malignity, and danger, of their sin. As it is probable that some persons of a similar character and disposition may cast their eyes upon these pages, we would earnestly entreat their serious regard to the considerations here suggested.

He warned and reproved his opposers, because they acted in contempt of his unparalleled kindness, and most gracious offers of salvation, when their own final perdition must be the consequence. He declared that he courted not their favour through ambitious views, and that their destruction would be entirely owing to their obstinate refusal of submission to him. His knowledge of their very thoughts and motives enabled him to detect their hypocrisy; and therefore he observed that their treatment of him fully proved, notwithstanding their professions of regard to God, that their hearts were not under the influence of divine love. That principle would have led them to receive him, who addressed them in his Father's name, and sought nothing but his Father's glory. So likewise will all our pretences either to devotion or morality be found vain and insincere, if we neglect the great Saviour of the world.

He condemned them for their anxiety to procure respect and empty titles of honour from their fellow-creatures,

creatures, while they felt no real concern about the favour and approbation of God; declaring, that, in such a state of mind, they could not exercise any proper reliance upon him, as the Redeemer. How solemn is the thought! The faith of Jesus cannot consist with ambition, or a foolish fondness for human applause. Those, therefore, whose grand desire and aim is to be admired and advanced among men, are at once excluded from the number of his true disciples. He requires us to take up our cross, and to follow him through contempt and tribulation. Such as are unwilling to do this understand not his worth or their own necessities; and, of consequence, they cannot believe in his name.

He warned them, finally, that Moses, the great founder of their own religion, to whom they professed an unreserved submission, appeared as their accuser before God; and that, as they would be fully convicted on the charge of rejecting that prophet, there would be no need to bring any further testimony against them. They were condemned on their own principles. Moses had written much concerning the Redeemer, and represented his office, work, and character, by various rites and ceremonies: a real regard, therefore, to those ancient records, would have produced a cordial reception of Jesus, in whom the types and prophecies were fulfilled. Yet such was their astonishing ignorance and perverseness, that, with the Bible in their hands, they denied and persecuted the very Person of whom they were continually reading.

The address is applicable to others besides Jews; to many among ourselves, who pretend to pay the highest deference both to the Old and the New Testament, as the revelation of God. May we not ask, Do not these Scriptures contain the heaviest charge against you, while you oppose the authority of Christ, and despise his grace? And should you not, to be consistent, either totally reject the book of inspiration,

or

or else change your own principles and practice? The sin of unbelief is generally thought of little consequence; for it is presumed that men will not be finally condemned for mere opinions. But, from the representation here given, does it not appear that it includes the most complicated guilt? It is not barely an error of the judgment, but betrays an extreme depravity of heart. It is not a single offence; for it is always accompanied with other base principles, and infallibly leads to every species of ill conduct.

Unhappy they, on whom this sin is chargeable! who treat the Saviour, and his offers of mercy, with contempt! O, consider how wretched is the state of your minds, while you discover the utmost disdain for infinite excellence, and repay the tenderest love with hatred! Your wickedness is of a heinous nature, and highly aggravated. You despise "the Lord of glory," the Son of God, "who thought it no robbery to be equal with God." You pay no regard to the united testimonies of earth and heaven in his favour. You scorn the kindest and richest offers ever made to man. You are unwilling to bow to him, whom even angels worship, or to be indebted to him for the life of your souls, when, alas! without him you must inevitably perish. You set light by his unparalleled condescensions and labours of love, and, in defiance of all admonitions and threatenings, are rushing on, with steady course, to certain and everlasting damnation.

It is proper, by these repeated warnings, to call your attention to your own perilous condition. But how little effect is produced by such solemn reproofs! Probably, after our Lord's address, his accusers and judges were silenced, and restrained by an awful impression upon their minds from proceeding to any act of violence against him. So possibly may you, who are his avowed opposers, for a season at least, be convinced and alarmed by these faithful representations

presentations of your guilt and danger, You may seem to relinquish your objections, and yet persevere in unbelief, and be destroyed for ever. Most tremendous thought! May it please God, not only to awaken your fears, but to subdue the enmity of your hearts! Then you will not cease to pray, "O Lord, fulfil in us all the good pleasure of thy goodness, and the work of faith with power!"

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. 14.

Jesus replied to the objections of the Pharisees against his disciples for plucking the ears of corn, and vindicated himself for healing the withered hand on the sabbath-day—performed various cures—spent a whole night in prayer—chose twelve apostles—and repeated certain passages of his sermon on the mount.

THE history of Jesus exhibits the highest excellence of character, labouring under the most malignant misrepresentations, contempt, and opposition. His life was one continued series of actions denoting fervent zeal for God, and pure benevolence to man. We might have thought that such exalted goodness could not meet with enemies, or would soon disarm their malice. But it was otherwise; and the fact incontestably proves the extreme depravity of human nature. While this depravity remains, a conduct like that of Jesus will always excite disgust. Let it, however, be our only care to tread in the steps of our Lord and Saviour, regardless of all temporal inconveniences which may follow. A wicked world may hate and defame the truly religious; but He, whom they serve, will soon plead their cause, and even now "Wisdom is justified of her children *."

Various objections were urged against Jesus; for he was surrounded by perverse and malevolent persons, who watched him with close attention, and sought occasions to accuse and reproach him. Very frequently, therefore, he had to stand upon the defensive, and reply to the petulant cavils of his ad-

* Matt. xi. 19.

versaries. A common subject of complaint was, that he did not pay a proper regard to the sabbath; because he ceased not from acts of kindness and mercy on that day. The proud and superstitious Pharisees, who placed all their religion in external observances, endeavoured to represent him as a profane despiser of divine institutions; yet the case was, that he neglected no ordinance of God, but did not conform to their fanciful and traditional explanations of the law.

His disciples accompanied him on his return from Jerusalem, soon after the passover, and, as they walked through the fields, finding the calls of hunger, they began to pluck the ears of the corn, which grew about their path*. The dictates of necessity, however, were no apology to the insidious attention and watchful malice of their enemies. It happened to be the sabbath; and immediately the objection was ready, "Behold, they do that which is not lawful to do upon the sabbath-day." The thing itself was expressly allowed†; but the particular time, and perhaps some concomitant circumstances of the action, gave the offence. It might be that the very rubbing of the ears of corn was represented as a kind of labour unsuitable to that sacred season.

Our Lord, who will maintain the cause of his people against their accusers, replied to the charge, and vindicated the conduct of his disciples by the example of David. That holy man, in a case of pressing necessity, took the shew-bread out of the house of God on the sabbath, for the support of himself and his attendants; an action, which in any other situation would have been highly sinful. To save life is more pleasing to God than the observance of any merely positive institutions; for, as Jesus argued, our gracious God has declared that "he will have mercy and not sacrifice‡;" that is, when they interfere with each other, the former must have the

* Matt. xii. 1—8. Mark ii. 23—28. Luke vi. 1—5.

† Deut. xxiii. 25.

‡ Hos. vi. 6.

preference, and the latter be dispensed with. From this part of the defence, we are led to remark and admire the faithful and zealous attachment of his followers, who cheerfully exposed themselves to hunger, that they might wait upon him, and enjoy the benefit of his divine instructions. We are not aware how many and extreme difficulties they endured; and, probably, we should not have known their distress on this occasion, had it not been requisite to offer an excuse for them. But where do we now perceive such a regard to Jesus as disposes men to suffer in his service? In general, many withdraw upon the first appearance of hardships, and "walk no more with him." Like birds of passage, they abide not the winter, but depart when storms approach.

Our Lord alleged, likewise, that, as the priests were allowed to perform certain laborious offices on the sabbath, in their attendance upon God, so his disciples might be permitted to do that which was necessary to enable them to wait upon Him. To make this reason good, he asserted his own sovereign authority, declaring that "the Son of man is Lord even of the sabbath-day." The important truth demands our serious consideration. The appointment itself, of one day in seven to be dedicated to holy purposes, is derived from the Lord Christ. He instituted it at the creation, when he rested from all his works; He renewed it at the delivery of the law from Mount Sinai; and He, who ordained, has a right to suspend, to modify, or alter it, as he pleases. It was, therefore, a sufficient vindication of his followers, in the circumstances now mentioned, that they acted in his service, and by his permission.

It becomes us, also, to regard "the Son of man" as "the Lord of the sabbath." In this view, we should observe that sacred season out of obedience to his command, and seek the enjoyment of his presence and favour, as its grand object. We believe it to have been agreeable to his will, if not by his express

press directions, that a change should be introduced, and that the first, instead of the last, day of the week should be kept holy to Him. This is now distinguished by a new and more honourable name, "the Lord's day:" He claims it as his own, in a peculiar manner, and has laid us under fresh and greater obligations to sanctify it, by rising from the dead, and blessing his church with the miraculous effusions of his Spirit, on that very day. In this alteration it is not implied that the sabbath itself is abrogated, or that any thing is taken away essential to the original institution, which prescribes such a portion of our time to be set apart for God. But rather, according to this representation, if Jesus be "the Lord of the sabbath," the appointment is confirmed, and its continuance among Christians ordained by him.

Soon after the incident last mentioned, we find him combating the same or similar objections. "On another sabbath," probably in some city of Galilee, he attended the public worship of God at the synagogue, as his custom was; and there also he took the opportunity of teaching the people*. Here again we are instructed to be thankful that we have a house of prayer, to which we can resort, and that divine ordinances are administered among ourselves, much more valuable than those which Jesus frequented. But how are we followers of Him, if our place be generally vacant, if by our absence we show that we care not for the sacred service?

In the midst of the congregation sat a poor man, whose right hand was withered, and, therefore, utterly disabled for labour. From the known benevolence of Jesus, and his former miraculous cures, the Pharisees expected that he would heal the cripple, and narrowly observed him for that very purpose, that they might charge him with a direct profanation of the sabbath. He was aware of the perverse reasonings and malicious intentions of their hearts,

* Matt. xii. 9—21. Mark iii. 1—12. Luke vi. 6—11.

which

which they had not expressed; yet he was not discouraged. He therefore called forth the man, whom he had beheld with compassionate regard; and then they asked with some subtlety, that they might ensnare him by the question, whether it would not be a violation of the holy rest to perform any cures on that day. He replied, however, that all exertions of real mercy were perfectly allowable, and that they must be strangely inconsistent to extend relief, as they commonly did on their sabbaths, even to their sheep in danger or distress, and yet obstinately refuse it to one of their own species. This was not all; He knew that they entertained a secret design of murdering him, while they objected to his works of kindness. Accordingly, by a solemn appeal to their consciences, he detected their hypocrisy, and confounded their malevolent purposes. He called upon them to say, whether it was more suitable to the object of that sacred season "to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it:" and instantly they were convicted and silenced. He felt a holy indignation and grief, on account of the obduracy of their hearts: and, looking round about upon them all, that he might command their attention, he spake the word with an inexpressible majesty, and the cure was performed.

Did they not, then, relinquish their opposition to him, when they saw such an incontestable proof of his divine power? Did they not all acknowledge, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God?" Ah! the desperate wickedness of man! We can scarcely conceive greater depravity than that which is here exhibited: they departed in a rage, and immediately consulted together how they might destroy him. Being apprized of his danger, he retired to the sea of Galilee: and there, not discouraged by the designs of his enemies, he continued to prosecute his important work. Immense multitudes from various and distant parts of Judea followed him; and many amongst them, oppressed with divers diseases, experienced

experienced the virtue of his healing hand. But, to avoid all appearance of ostentation, and that he might not still further incense his opposers, he took particular pains to prevent the accounts from being dispersed abroad. Thus, by his kind attention to the weak and distressed, and his gentle unassuming deportment, he fulfilled the prophetic description of his character given by Isaiah *, and proved himself to be the very Saviour that should come.

We may learn prudence and modesty from our great Exemplar; and he will instruct us, also, to persevere in well-doing, whoever may set themselves to resist, or form malevolent intentions against us. But let us fear the awful state and condemnation of his adversaries. How vain and detestable are their schemes! Their best-concerted plans will be baffled, and themselves covered with their own confusion. Yet, we apprehend, disaffection to Christ prevails among ourselves, as certainly as it did with the Pharisees of old: and it is requisite for us all to inquire, if we are not, in one respect or another, actuated by a similar spirit. What, then, will the issue be? What can you expect in prosecuting a contest against Him, who has all power in his hands? O "kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little †!"

It should seem, that, even in our own times, some unfair and mischievous conclusions have been drawn from our Lord's conduct upon the sabbath, and his vindication of himself. Many think themselves authorized to pursue their worldly projects of business and pleasure. But is there any thing in what he has said or done to countenance such a practice? Do we perceive in him any contempt of the sacred day? Or can we infer more from his example than this, that works of piety, charity, and necessity, may be attended to? We ask, then, Are these the only calls which you regard on the season set apart for holy rest? Have you not taken pains to explain

* Isa. xlii. 1-4.

† Psal. ii. 12.

away all obligations to a strict and serious observance of the sabbath; as if, at least, the Gospel had so far released you from them, that every man is now at liberty to prosecute his own plans, as he is led by interest or convenience, by fashion or inclination? You may inveigh against superstition; but are you not, in this way, pleading for profaneness? We are aware that infidels are desirous to throw down that strong barrier of religion, the sanctification of every seventh day; this being effected, there is nothing to prevent the floods of impiety and wickedness from overflowing and desolating the world. Should we not, then, on our part, make a bold stand against every such attack, and maintain the important duty of devoting to the Lord, without abatement, that portion of our time which he requires? And can we help lamenting that so many, who profess to be followers of Jesus, habitually neglect and shamefully violate the duty? We see them deserting the house and ministry of God, ready to join in every scheme of idleness, vanity, and dissipation, or else so engrossed with secular cares, that their thoughts and affections cannot be raised to any higher objects; and yet they wish to be complimented as good Christians. How strange and grievous an inconsistency is this!

The same ardent zeal for the glory of God and the salvation of men continued to actuate the Saviour through each part of his life. Intending to appoint certain persons, out of his constant attendants, to the Apostleship, he previously retired for secret prayer to a mountain, where probably an oratory was erected *, that he might engage the divine blessing upon the institution; and so fervent was his devotion, that he remained all night in the same spiritual exercise †. A whole night spent in importunate supplications to God! Ah! at how great a distance do we stand from this eminent example!

* Prid. Connect. vol. iv. p. 557.

† Mark iii. 13—19. Luke vi. 12—49.

Would not a single hour, so employed, seem a weariness to us? Yet surely we must allow the propriety and necessity of consecrating some portions of our time to the same pious purpose. Especially, when our minds are fixed upon any important scheme or undertaking, a more than common length of holy retirement, and an unusual earnestness in prayer, will be requisite, that we may proceed with right principles, and prevail with our God to assist and prosper us. And can there be a business of greater moment than the ordination of persons for the sacred ministry?

After such a preparation, very early in the morning Jesus called together his disciples, or stated followers, who by their previous acquaintance with him had been in some measure trained up for the service; and out of them he chose "whom he would:" as Lord of his own kingdom, he appointed twelve, who were to act like chief officers, or principal ministers, under him. These he named APOSTLES, that is, messengers, intending, after further instructions, to send them forth with full powers and credentials to declare his will and publish his Gospel throughout the world. He might, probably, fix upon this exact number, from its answering to the number of the tribes of Israel, that, as the Jewish church was derived from the twelve sons of Jacob, so the Christian might be founded and established by means of twelve persons, as the heads and fathers of it. We rejoice and give thanks for the benefit of their labours, which extends even to us; for through them the salvation of God has been made known to distant lands and successive generations; and the truth of their doctrine is confirmed with a strength of evidence, which no assaults of our adversaries can shake.

The office of the Apostleship was extraordinary, and therefore not designed to be perpetual; but there is a general and constant necessity for the common functions of the ministry, which, accordingly,
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will be continued to the end of time. Let prayer be made without ceasing unto Christ, who himself directs all the affairs of his spiritual government, that he would raise up and ordain faithful pastors and teachers, and support and prosper them for the conversion of sinners, and the edifying of his saints. If He give the word, great will be the company of preachers; and those who go forth at his call, and by his appointment, may be expected to labour to good effect. It seems especially requisite for them to be previously acquainted with Jesus, and furnished with their instructions from him, that they may be able to say, as he did, "We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen." Yet even such persons, who are properly invested with the sacred character, stand in need of the constant intercessions of the church, that, by the divine blessing, they may "both save themselves, and those that hear them."

When the Apostles had received their commission, Jesus came down with them into the plain; and he was immediately surrounded, as usual, with vast multitudes imploring relief. At his command their various diseases were expelled, and the causes of their distress removed. So freely and extensively did he manifest his power and compassion, that none solicited his help in vain; "for there went virtue out of him, and healed them all." We wonder not that those, who are oppressed with affliction, supplicate deliverance. In general, men feel an acute sense of their bodily wants, and importunately beseech others to assist them. But sin hath induced a dreadful stupor upon our souls; in consequence of which few perceive or lament their spiritual necessities, or consent to apply for that remedy, which Jesus alone can bestow. O, flock around him, you who are bowed down with a conviction of your guilt and depravity, and who know from your own painful experience that you "are wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked!" Come, and
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he will supply all your need. Let your faith bring you to him; and the influence of his grace shall work effectually in you, to cure your spiritual maladies (for virtue still goes out of him), and you shall be able to bear witness of his mighty energy, even as the multitudes who were now around him.

Nor were the doctrines of Jesus less salutary than his miracles. When he descended from the mountain with the Apostles whom he had lately chosen, and a numerous assembly of other persons resorted to him, he took the opportunity of delivering the most important instructions and exhortations both to his particular attendants and to the people at large. His address upon this occasion contains a repetition of certain remarkable passages of the sermon which he had preached some months before, probably in a distant place, and to a different audience. As that sermon has been already considered, it may be sufficient briefly to suggest the principal topics on which our Lord insisted at this time; not as if they were of small moment, but because they have so lately engaged our serious meditation.

With a view to encourage his true disciples, and perhaps those more especially whom he had just appointed to the sacred function, "he lifted up his eyes on them," as if rejoicing over them, and expressing for them his peculiar affection. He then described their character, their exalted privileges and happiness, notwithstanding all they might suffer, and, with the language of authority as well as love, pronounced them blessed. This is perfectly applicable to his sincere followers in every age. They are "poor," it may be, in worldly things, as they certainly are "in spirit;" but they are the favoured subjects of Christ's kingdom; and heaven, with all its bliss and glory, shall be their inheritance. They may suffer the extremity of want, so as to be destitute of food, for the sake of the Gospel, after the blessings of which they "hunger," more than for their necessary support; but they shall be supplied with

with every thing truly good, and satisfied with all spiritual enjoyments. They may endure much distress upon earth, oppressed with penitential sorrow, no less than with the calamities of life; but the time of their deliverance and exultation is at hand. They may be treated with hatred and contempt, and separated from the society of their nearest friends; but on this very account they ought to rejoice and triumph, because the Lord God hath conferred an honour upon them, and will distinguish them with marks of peculiar regard, at the resurrection of the just.

But, turning to others of an opposite character, he described their awful case, and denounced the most tremendous woes against them. Let those in the present day, who are destitute of true religion, bear their doom declared, and fear for themselves. They perceive not their need of any spiritual blessings, nor feel any ardent desires to obtain the grace revealed in the Gospel. Whatever temporal advantages, therefore, or sensual pleasures, they may now enjoy, they are wretched, since they "have neither part nor lot in this matter." Possibly they may abound in wealth, and be able to command every gratification which a carnal heart may covet; they may live in splendour, gaiety, and dissipation; they may be admired and applauded amongst men: but the day of their calamity is coming; for their expiring breath will conclude all their comfort and their glory; nor can any thing await them beyond the grave, except tribulation and anguish, shame, and everlasting contempt.

After such alarming declarations, Jesus proceeded to deliver various precepts, which prove the peculiar holiness of his religion, and are of general use to all his professed disciples, for the regulation of their tempers and conduct.

He enjoined the exercise of forgiveness and love towards the most violent and malignant persecutors; together with the practice of universal and disinterested

interested benevolence. But to return kindness for injuries, blessings for curses, how opposite is it to the pride, envy, anger, and resentment, of our fallen nature! To do good, without the prospect of present recompense or advantage, and without exception of persons, how contrary to the selfish contracted notions of men! Yet only by such enlarged beneficence can we prove ourselves to be partakers of the grace of Christ, and the children of the Highest, who extends his benefits to all.

He gave cautions about judging and reproving others. There are cases, in which it may be proper and necessary to undertake that unpleasant office: but we should be sure that the occasion demands it, and that we do it not rashly or severely, or from an arrogant, censorious, or malicious disposition. Upon this head our Lord intimated the danger of following "blind guides;" and, as we are generally much influenced by our teachers, we should beware lest we attach ourselves to those who do not feel or understand the mild and liberal spirit of Christianity. Yet, while we look to others, we should not forget ourselves, but rather begin the work of reformation there; for, except we perceive, condemn, and correct our own faults, we are incompetent to decide upon the characters and conduct of others.

He enforced the necessity of proving a professed regard to him by a holy life. As the fruit determines the nature of a tree, so the habitual tendency of our actions, words, and tempers, will best discover the state of our hearts towards him. By such marks, then, we must examine whether we are truly united to Christ, and renewed by his grace. To what purpose shall we make a show of high respect for him, while we live in an uniform course of disobedience? How striking his reproof, "Why call ye me Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?" Such compliments he considers as the grossest insult; yet how generally has that insult been put upon him! Not a few in every age have pretended
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the most ardent affection, and have been forward to give him every proper title expression of honour, who have not submitted to his authority. Let us beware of this fatal delusion.

He represented the difference between the sincere believer and the unsound professor of the Gospel. They differ most widely from each other, both in their present practice, and in their final condition. The sincere believer comes to Christ, receives with an humble mind the doctrines of grace, and, by an exemplary life, proves that the word which he has heard has produced its right influence upon him. His trust is built on an immovable basis: "the Rock of ages" is the sure foundation on which he rests. Trials and temptations, like heavy storms, may beat upon him; but nothing shall be able to overthrow his hope, or disappoint his expectation. The hypocrite may listen to, and perhaps zealously contend for, the pure system of the Gospel; but he advances no further. He depends on his accurate notions and distinctions, or his compliance with the forms and ceremonies of religion, while he feels not its inward energy. He will, therefore, be left defenceless and unsupported in the day of his calamity: "the overflowing shower" of divine indignation shall suddenly cast him down, and sweep him away into everlasting destruction.

Such were the solemn admonitions of the Saviour. They have been offered to our notice before; but surely we may bear the repetition of them again and again. They are at all times interesting, seasonable, and necessary. May they lead us to a strict and impartial examination of our own hearts! What, then, is our character? what our expectation beyond the grave? If we call ourselves the disciples of Jesus, what is the regard we pay him? Do we give him any thing more than a bare compliment? Or are our affections and general habits regulated by an unfeigned obedience to his will? What benefit do we derive from hearing the Gospel? Or what fruits of righteousness

righteousness do we produce? These important inquiries naturally arise from the subject before us; and they claim our most serious consideration. Let us examine the foundation on which our edifice rests, since we are building for eternity. How terrible will be the confusion of the ungodly, when "the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters shall overflow their hiding-place *!" But may we, "being rooted and grounded in the love of Christ," stand fast in the faith against every assault on earth, and then appear at the last awful day with confidence and exceeding joy, through the merits and mediation of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ! Amen.

* Isa. xxviii. 17.

