

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. 15.

Jesus healed a centurion's servant—raised a widow's son to life—testified of John the Baptist—lamented over the impenitent—encouraged the contrite—dined with a Pharisee, and vindicated the woman, who stood as a mourning penitent at his feet.

AMONGST the various incidents which meet us in the life of Jesus, none will be found of a trifling or uninteresting nature. Every thing in this history is extraordinary, and replete with instruction. Each step that we advance will furnish us with fresh proofs of his divine character and mission, and at the same time with renewed instances of his condescending and compassionate regard to our miserable and guilty race. May every view of him constrain us to cry out with admiration and gratitude, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he hath visited and redeemed his people, and hath raised up an horn of salvation for us *!"

After the solemn address which Jesus delivered to his disciples in the audience of the people, he retired to Capernaum, his most usual residence †. Wherever he went, opportunities of exerting his benevolence were offered, and these he readily embraced. In this city, a man of good reputation, who, it should seem, attended the worship of the true God, a centurion, or a captain in the Roman army, having heard of Jesus, of his character, and the miracles he had wrought, applied to him to come and heal a fa-

* Luke i. 68, 69.

† Matt. viii. 5—13. Luke vii. 1—10.

yourite servant at the point of death. The Gentile soldier discovered a remarkable degree of humility and faith. Thinking himself unworthy to solicit the kind notice of so exalted a Personage, he prevailed on some of the principal Jews in the place to present and second his petition. Jesus, who was ever inclined to succour the afflicted, immediately consented to comply with their request. But the centurion, ashamed to give him the trouble, and conceiving it to be an unsuitable thing that he, a sinner and a Gentile, should receive such a Visitant in his house, believing also that Jesus was able to perform the cure at a distance, sent another deputation of his friends, and then at last went forth himself to meet him, entreating him to proceed no further, but only by his powerful word to command the health of the servant to be restored. "Even I," said he, "who am subject to the authority of another, yet, as I have soldiers under my control, no sooner issue out my orders than they are executed." More was implied than expressed; and the inference intended could be no other than this, "How much rather will every injunction of thine be instantly obeyed, since all creatures are subservient to thy will! No remoteness of place can be any obstacle to prevent the desired cure, if Thou shalt so ordain."

This was a signal instance of faith, in a stranger to the commonwealth of Israel. It was such, that our Lord declared his admiration, being superior to what he had yet found among the Jews themselves. And hence he took occasion to warn them, who boasted of their descent from Abraham, that many from the most distant parts of the earth, even of Gentile extraction, should obtain a distinguished rank in the kingdom of glory, whilst those, who presumed upon their exclusive right to it, should be condemned to a state of everlasting torment and despair. This conveys a suitable admonition to us. We observe that there is no situation or condition of life, however unfavourable, in which the grace of
God

God may not produce eminent instances of real religion. And it should excite our thankfulness to meet with any one, under great disadvantages of education and in the midst of many snares, like this officer in the Roman army, humbled with a deep conviction of extreme unworthiness, and entertaining high and honourable thoughts of Jesus. He did not stoop too low when he said, "Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof;" for the most exalted monarch in the world might properly adopt the same confession. And shall not we remember and acknowledge that we deserve no tokens of the Saviour's kind regard, and that, if He deign to visit us, it must be ascribed to his own wonderful condescension and mercy? But do we possess the faith of the centurion? Or, do we not, rather, distrust the power of Christ? We are favoured, not above the Gentiles only, but even more than the ancient Jews; so that we may be called "the children of the kingdom." Yet have we not occasion to fear that many, who are destitute of our privileges, may rise up in judgment to condemn us? And would it not aggravate our misery to see them admitted into heaven, whilst we ourselves are excluded for ever?

The request of the centurion was granted, and his confidence in Jesus proved to be well founded. He was dismissed in peace, and his servant instantly restored to the full vigour of health, merely by the efficacious word of the great Physician. Nor will any be finally disappointed of their hope in Him. We should entertain large expectations, from a persuasion of his ability to save; and, by a strong unshaken faith in him, we shall infallibly secure his blessing to our souls.

After this miracle, it is probable that the fame of Jesus was celebrated still further, and that, in consequence, the number of his followers increased. The multitude, indeed, so pressed upon him, that he had no leisure to take proper refreshment: and so incessant was his attention to them, that his friends interfered.

interfered, blaming him for an excess of zeal, and with much vehemence importuning him to desist from his labours, as injurious to himself, and even denoting a degree of insanity*. Peculiar occasions may justify and demand such ardent exertions as to some may appear needless and extravagant. Nay, the very fervency, which at all times becomes the servant of Christ, will be accounted by the world a sure mark of weakness or derangement of the faculties. But, compared with the vigorous efforts of the Saviour, the most eager and strenuous endeavours of his people will seem to savour of lukewarmness and sloth. Indeed, we are not capable of activity like His.

He might so far yield to the solicitations of his friends, as to receive some nourishment, and then retire for the night; but the next day he returned to his work again†. He took a journey of several miles, to the city Nain, accompanied by many attendants; and there a fresh opportunity offered for the display of his high character. As he approached the place, a most affecting spectacle was presented. He met the solemn procession of a funeral: a distressed mother, who had been before bereaved of her husband, was now following her only son, her chief support and comfort, to the grave. As a man, our Lord felt the tenderest compassion for the afflicted widow, and, without any request from her or from others, interposed, on the mournful occasion, to wipe away her tears. But what consolation could he administer to one who seemed to have lost her all? "Is any thing too hard for the Lord?" He showed himself stronger than death; for instantly, with divine majesty and authority as the Almighty Lord, "who quickeneth whom he will," he spake the word, and the dead revived. He restored to the disconsolate woman her beloved child, in all the vigour of life; and thus "gave unto her, beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness."

* Mark iii. 20, 21.

† Luke vii. 11—17.

What an astonishing exhibition both of mercy and of might! We are at a loss to know which of them we should most admire. No wonder that an event so uncommon, and incontestably miraculous, impressed the minds of all the spectators with a serious awe, and constrained them to acknowledge that an illustrious Prophet had risen up among them, and that God had again visited his people. And shall not we, also, be struck with holy fear and reverence of the Saviour, while we contemplate his actions? Does not the occurrence before us clearly prove his divine mission? Why, then, do not all receive him, as coming from heaven to instruct and redeem his church? Alas! but few are convinced; or general convictions are very superficial. Many will not examine the evidence with serious attention, but, in proud or careless contempt, turn away both their eyes and their ears from the truth. Others, we observe with grief, though obliged by the strength of argument to assent to the Gospel, yet fail of that unfeigned and supreme regard which is due to Jesus. They may feel an impression of terror upon their minds, like the inhabitants of Nain, and confess that "a great Prophet has risen up," while they refuse to submit or listen to the doctrines which he delivers. How strange and fatal an inconsistency is this!

We have seen the tenderness of Jesus towards the poor widow: surely we shall learn, from the example, to look upon the afflicted with kindness and compassion, and stretch out our hands for their relief. But feeble, in comparison, is our pity; for, in many cases, our endeavours to remove or mitigate distress are ineffectual. Jesus alone can administer suitable and adequate assistance. O, fix your attention upon Him, you that are overwhelmed with trouble, whose "tears have been your meat day and night!" He can instantly turn your weeping into joy, and your complaints into loud thanksgivings, by accomplishing deliverance in a way which to you may seem impossible. For what cannot his power effect?

effect? Or what will not his love be disposed to grant, if really expedient for you? Death, indeed, may rob you of those who were the delight of your eyes and the desire of your hearts, and the grave may detain them; yet, under the pressure of this calamity, you are taught to rejoice in Jesus, as "the Resurrection and the Life," who will shortly break up the mansions of the dead, and restore to you every dear friend, who has departed in the faith, clothed with glory and immortality, to rejoice with you in his blissful presence for ever.

The report of our Lord's miracles, which was disseminated far and wide, was carried by the disciples of John to their honoured master, then in prison*. For their conviction, we suppose, rather than his own, the Baptist took that opportunity of sending them with an express message to Jesus, inquiring whether he were the very Messiah or not. In reply to their question, He condescended to give them the most satisfactory evidence, which might disperse every doubt, and probably induce them to attach themselves to Him, after John's decease. They beheld the wonderful exertions of his power and mercy; for in their presence, while they stood before him, he healed all manner of infirmities, cast out devils, and restored sight to the blind. He referred them, therefore, to his works, for a decisive proof of his character, and directed them to carry a faithful relation to John of what they had seen and heard, that they might all perceive the ancient prophecies, concerning the Saviour of the world, to be fulfilled in him. At the same time he added, that it would be happy for them if they should not be staggered in their minds, or influenced by the prevailing prejudices and objections against him. It is of importance to ourselves, also, to be assured that Jesus is no deceiver, that he exhibited the strongest testimonies of his divine mission, and, therefore, that our faith rests on a sure foundation. Yet many

* Matt. xi. 2, &c. Luke. vii. 18—35.

reject him: and it is allowed that there are such things relating to him, his doctrines, and adherents, as may give offence to superficial and captious observers, and such as proud and sensual minds can never relish. In this view, blessed indeed are they who have themselves escaped or surmounted these difficulties, and who are not led away by the exceptions of others.

Our Lord took occasion, from the visit of John's disciples, to address the multitude concerning the Baptist, who had once been extremely popular among them. He spake of him in the most honourable terms, as being steadfast both in his preaching and practice, not easily shaken like a reed with the wind, not seeking the pomps of the world or sensual gratifications, but as a man of singular austerity and self-denial. He declared him to be superior, in some respects, to all the ancient prophets, especially as being the harbinger of Messiah, and preparing the way for his reception. He remarked the peculiar ardour to which some had been excited by his ministry, who seemed as if they would gain an admission into the heavenly kingdom by a holy violence; and yet he lamented the awful condition of those who rejected both the Baptist, and the Saviour whom he came to introduce. He was led, therefore, to complain of the perverseness of that generation, who had discovered the most absurd prejudices against them, and who condemned the one and the other, though for different and opposite reasons; so that there appeared no prospect of obtaining any acceptance with them. They had refused their attention to John, on account of his austerities, as if he were a melancholy distracted man, under the possession of an evil spirit: and now they calumniated Jesus for the freedom of his intercourse with men of all characters, as if he were himself addicted to intemperance, and a patron of the dissolute and abandoned. Yet the Saviour rejoiced, that, amidst these various misrepresentations, there were those
who

who perceived and approved the wisdom of their conduct.

The application to ourselves is obvious. Many, in our own day, betray a frowardness and malignity of temper similar to that of the ancient Pharisees. They are ever ready to take exceptions to the people and the ways of God, and that too on contrary grounds. The ministers of Christ, endued with different talents and dispositions, address them sometimes with one mode of exhortation, and sometimes with another; being solicitous to recommend the Gospel to their favourable regard by every method they can devise. But every method proves equally unsuccessful; for now they are thought too rigid and morose, and again they are condemned for allowing too great a latitude of conduct. It were, therefore, vain for them, with the utmost prudence and circumspection, to expect to gain general esteem, or avoid reproach. Happy they, who are earnestly concerned to save their own souls, and are pressing, with a holy violence, into the kingdom of heaven! They perceive the propriety and necessity of many things in religion, with which others are disgusted; and, instead of being carried away with the torrent of general prejudice, they determine to adhere to the truth and service of God, however vilified in the most opprobrious terms.

On the occasion just mentioned, Jesus was induced to speak more largely, and with peculiar ardour of affection, while he lamented over the impenitent cities of Galilee, in which he had performed most of his mighty works. The meek and compassionate Saviour denounced one wo upon another against Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, and predicted the final and aggravated ruin which was coming upon them for their obduracy and contempt of the Gospel. Many, it should seem, of respectable character and abilities, remained in unbelief. This very circumstance has been thought an objection to the Christian faith. But surely, in this view, it appears

appears that it was not a mere human system, or indebted to worldly policy for its support. The ways of God are in the deep: but we perceive it to be His purpose to abase the pride and stain the glory of man; and when we observe that his salvation is hid from many of high attainments in literature, whilst it is revealed to some of inferior parts and mean rank in life, we are constrained to be silent in the dust, or rather, with the Saviour, to adore the sovereignty of the awful dispensation.

At the same time, however, to encourage those humble penitents, who, under a conviction of their guilt, might be ready to fear that the condemnation he had denounced would fall upon them, he represented his own supreme authority and divine perfections, commensurate to those of the Father, and then declared his peculiar tenderness and grace to such as might be bowed down with a sense of their sin and misery. He published the most kind and general invitation to all who felt a burdened conscience and sought deliverance, adding express and absolute assurances of pardon, peace, and salvation, on their unfeigned application and cordial submission to them.

We ask, then, What conceptions do you form of Jesus? what regard do you show him? Do objections arise in your minds, and prevent your cordial belief of the Gospel? But, after such proofs as have been adduced, who shall complain of the want of evidence? Have you no apprehensions of the tremendous consequences of rejecting him? Shall Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, be condemned with accumulated woes for their infidelity, and you escape unpunished? Or, do you consider yourselves as utterly excluded from his notice, and incapable of receiving mercy, on account of your extreme depravity and long continuance in sin? He speaks expressly to your case, and gives you direction and encouragement suited to your distress. O, keep not at a distance from Him, while he says, "Come unto

unto me!" He will not disdain you, nor withhold his blessings from you. "He is meek, and lowly in heart," and therefore will condescend to your request, mean and worthless as you are. Only be willing, as teachable scholars, to take your instructions from him, and, as obedient servants, to fulfil his injunctions: you, will not complain of the rigour of his demands, but experience them to be easy and delightful, and "find rest unto your souls."

Is it inquired, What was the consequence of our Lord's solemn addresses? Some might be deeply and properly affected, and others so much impressed as to be induced to show him an outward respect, without any cordial attachment. One person of this latter description, whose name was Simon, a Pharisee, invited him to dine at his house; and Jesus, who was an example of civility and kindness, and who sought opportunities of doing good in all places and among all characters, readily complied*. During his visit there, a singular circumstance occurred, which showed the ignorance and pride of the Pharisee, and the amazing grace and compassion of the Saviour. A woman in the town, who had been a notorious sinner, and, as it is supposed, infamous for her lewdness, heard where he was; and, probably emboldened by his assurances of mercy and peace to the mourning penitent, desired to give some testimony of her strong regard for him, and for that purpose prepared certain costly perfumes, with which she might anoint him. She was admitted into his presence, while he was at dinner; and standing behind him, as he lay reclined upon the couch, she betrayed marks of extreme distress. The cause of it, evidently, was unfeigned contrition for her sins. She wept; and her tears were so abundant, that the drops flowed down upon and bedewed the Saviour's feet. Perceiving where they fell, she stooped, and wiped them off with her dishevelled hair. Nor was this all: she could not refrain, even before the

* Luke vii. 36—50.

company,

company, from expressions of ardent gratitude and love: she kissed his feet, and poured her rich ointment upon them, unmindful of its proper use, or not presuming to apply it to his head.

These signs of her fervent affection our Lord did not disdain, but received them favourably. The Pharisee, however, who looked on her with contempt, took offence. Lifted up with a proud conceit of his own goodness, he considered the very touch of the woman as carrying defilement, and concluded that a Prophet of God must not only know the baseness of her character, but instantly turn away from her with disgust. This disposition is not uncommon. Those, who have high thoughts of themselves, set up a kind of claim to the divine regard, and cannot bear that such as have been notorious offenders should be admitted to a share in that regard, or that any encouragement should be given to them, even when transformed and established "in newness of life." But how large is the grace, how great the condescension, of Jesus! He did not scorn the poor weeping penitent, though she had been most abandoned, and long enslaved in the service of Satan; but he received, he comforted, he defended her, at the hazard of his own reputation.

He replied, in a very apposite parable, to the secret objections of the Pharisees (for they had not been openly avowed), showing, that of two debtors, both of whom are insolvent, and both freely released from their obligations by their generous creditor, he to whom the largest forgiveness is extended will feel the warmest gratitude. He then referred immediately to the case of Simon and the woman, reproving him for the neglect of those tokens of respect which are usually paid to welcome visitants, and commending her for the expressions of her regard, however extravagant they might seem. The Pharisee thought his own offences few and trivial, and, therefore, could not entertain any high value for the Saviour; but she, who was overwhelmed with a deep sense of her

her aggravated guilt, and yet cheered with the hope of a full and gratuitous pardon, was solicitous to declare, in every way she could, the ardour of her affection towards Him, who had obtained the mercy for her. "Wherefore," said Jesus, "her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much." Her strong attachment to Christ did not procure her remission, but, rather, it was its fruit and evidence. It would invert the order of things, and of God's dispensations to his people, to suppose that this attachment preceded her acceptance; but it afforded a striking proof of it, and manifestly arose from a conviction of her vast obligations. Not, therefore, as if she were then first received to favour, but to establish her the more in thankfulness, hope, and joy, he solemnly pronounced her absolution: "Thy sins are forgiven." That very circumstance occasioned fresh offence among those who were present; for they had no just conceptions of the person and authority of Jesus. But, in order to declare his divine character most peremptorily, and to assert his high prerogative, however they might cavil, he repeated the assurance of her pardon and salvation, through faith in his name, and dismissed her in peace.

A serious attention to this little narrative may suggest the following inquiries, which will furnish an useful improvement of the subject.

Are not we debtors to God, according to the description of the parable? Have we not failed of that obedience which He has a right to demand? Is not our debt large, immense beyond calculation? Let us beware of the ignorance and presumption of the Pharisee. Though others may seem to owe far more, will this procure our discharge? Or are there any, among the most atrocious offenders, whom we may disdain? Does it not, rather, become us to confess that our own transgressions are innumerable, and, considering how we have violated the strongest obligations to God, that none can need forgiveness more?

Are not we, likewise, insolvent? Or, in what manner shall we contrive to answer all the claims which the Lord God has upon us? What payment can we tender? Is it such as will be sufficient to satisfy his just demands? It is said, perhaps, "We shall repent, and do better." But shall we ever perform more than would have been due from us if we had not sinned? And, if we only prevent an increase of the debt in future, can this have any effect in diminishing what is already contracted, or wipe off any part of the old account against us? What, then, shall we resolve on? Let us not waste the time in forming vain and fruitless schemes of our own, but frankly acknowledge our inability, and go with deepest humiliation to that Jesus, who "receiveth sinners." Let each of us cry to Him, "O Lord, undertake for me:" He will appear as our Surety, and present us with a full and free discharge. If, like this penitent woman, we mourn and weep at his feet, he will observe our tears, commiserate our distress, and hasten to comfort us with the assurance that "our sins, which are many, are forgiven."

If, then, he pronounce us to be acquitted, what should hinder but that we depart in peace? This is his own gracious proposal, and ought not to be refused. Yet do not many reject the consolation, and indulge an excess of sorrow? Doubtless there is continual cause to abhor ourselves, and lament our folly; but to grieve as if there were no hope is to despise the mercy provided. Jesus, the compassionate Redeemer, stands ready to wipe away our tears, and bids us "Be of good cheer." Let us only, without reserve, submit to him, and depend upon him; and then we may "go on our way rejoicing."

Finally, what affections do we feel towards Jesus? Surely the warmest expressions of thankfulness and zeal are highly suitable and becoming in those who have obtained such free and extensive forgiveness. Where Jesus is disregarded, we can assign the real cause; the malignity of sin is not understood, the greatness

greatness of the debt incurred is not at all apprehended, and it is supposed that there is but little, if any, need of remission. Do we, therefore, show any certain signs of sincere and ardent love to our heavenly Benefactor? Do we seek his presence, and delight to be in the house where Jesus is? Do we mourn before him; and are we willing to be at expense for his sake? We cannot, indeed, make any adequate compensation; but do not we wish to testify the sense which we feel of our immense obligations to him?—"O Lord, come, and shed abroad thy love in our hearts by the Holy Ghost, that we may hereby be constrained to dedicate ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and lively sacrifice unto Thee, who hast loved us, and given thyself for us!" Amen.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. 16.

Jesus took another circuit—healed a demoniac—vindicated that miracle against the objections of the Pharisees—admonished and reprov'd them—and encouraged his faithful adherents.

THE grand Luminary, which visited the earth in the person of Jesus Christ, diffused its unequalled splendour through a large extent. Happy indeed would have been the men of that generation, if they had been sensible of their inestimable privilege, in having such an Inhabitant, such a Teacher, amongst them. He brought with him “good tidings of great joy to all people,” and he laboured to disseminate the knowledge of them far and wide. He took one circuit after another, in the land of Judea, publishing salvation wherever he went, and among all ranks and characters. Not seeking the friendship of the great, or any sensual enjoyments, but ever intent upon his work, he removed from city to city, with considerable pain and fatigue to himself, for the benefit of others, that he might give them an opportunity of being instructed in the Gospel of his grace*.

Where are they who copy after this illustrious Pattern? Though we are not called to travel in the same manner, we ought to possess the same spirit, and be willing to sacrifice our ease to usefulness. “Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.” So shall “this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus †.”

* Luke viii. 1—3.

† Phil. ii. 4, 5.

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A similar benevolence may be displayed even by persons of moderate abilities and private situations. According to our talents and occasions, we should lay ourselves out for the glory of God and the best interests of our fellow-creatures. Hereby we shall evince our acquaintance and union with him, whose name we bear, while "we are changed into the same image, from glory to glory, by the Spirit of the Lord."

Many, who resorted to him, soon withdrew from his company, having no relish for his conversation. But he had some stated attendants, throughout his various movements, who were almost inseparably attached to him. "The twelve were with him." These he selected as his chosen witnesses, that they might be instructed in the mysteries of his kingdom, confirmed in their regard, and fitted for their apostolic function. Certain pious women, also, who had been healed of their infirmities, and converted by his grace, occasionally, at least, waited on him, and "ministered unto him of their substance." What condescension, to receive such assistance! He became very poor indeed. Though "the earth is his, and the fulness thereof," so mean and destitute was his condition here, that he subsisted upon the charity of others. Shall we admire their liberality, in contributing to his support? Or rather shall we not envy them the honour of being permitted to do so? "It is more blessed to give than to receive*." And may not this blessedness be ours? Though we cannot minister unto Jesus, in his person, we may in his representatives, in his distressed members; for, what is bestowed upon them he will consider as bestowed upon himself. And, if we "shut up our bowels of compassion from them, how dwelleth the love of God in us †?"

Thus attended, then, Jesus took another circuit, in which we shall meet with some remarkable occurrences. In the course of his progress, a poor unhappy man, under the possession of the devil, so

* Acts xx. 35.

† 1 John iii. 17.

grievously

grievously afflicted as to be deprived both of his sight and speech, was brought to him, and obtained immediate relief *. According to his custom, he paid a gracious regard to the application, by expelling the evil spirit, and restoring the demoniac to the perfect exercise of his faculties. And what effect did the miracle produce? The common people were struck with astonishment, and ready to draw the conclusion that Jesus must be the promised Messiah. But were not these persons ignorant, and liable to be imposed on? That they were unlettered, it is allowed; yet that circumstance was no disadvantage to them in the present case; they were as capable of judging of plain facts as the acutest philosophers. The Scribes and Pharisees, conceited of their wisdom, like most pretenders to science, possessed more pride, and therefore more prejudice, than the multitude: and thus, whatever evidence the Saviour exhibited, they constantly urged one objection or another, and would not be convinced. How malignant and impious a disposition did they discover in the instance before us! They suspected, if they did not avow their sentiments, that Jesus performed the miracle by the assistance of Satan, and really acted in confederacy with the prince of darkness, to promote his interest in the world. How infamous and absurd the inference! Was there any ground, in his life, his doctrines, or his works, to accuse him as an agent or accomplice of the devil? No: very far otherwise indeed. But it is not uncommon for men who hate the Gospel to give a credit and importance to such insinuations against it, as appear, upon the very face of them, ridiculous and false.

This circumstance, however, rendered the character of Jesus the more illustrious; for it produced fresh proofs of his meekness and wisdom. His followers, also, should remember, that, while they preserve a proper temper under malicious calumnies and reproaches, they afford such an evidence of their sin-

* Mat. xii. 22—32. Mark iii. 22—30. Luke xi. 14—23.

cerity, and the excellency of their principles, as must eventually turn to the confusion of their enemies. Our Lord spoke in his own vindication; but his defence went rather to convince, or at least to silence, his adversaries, than to justify himself. "It is a very small thing, that we should be judged of man's judgment;" and therefore, if we be ever so much traduced (and it is not possible that we can be more so than the Saviour), let us not be solicitous, on our own account merely, to obviate the charges which envy or malevolence may bring against us. Yet there may be reasons which render it expedient to reply.

Jesus showed that he was privy to their thoughts, for he spoke to their secret surmises, while he proved their objections to be most foolish and profane. He argued that Satan would never oppose his own interest, or dispossess himself; for such a conduct would infallibly weaken, and even destroy, his kingdom amongst men: and on the same ground we maintain that the Gospel, which contains a system of religion, manifestly subversive of the devil's influence in the world, must be from Heaven. He alleged, that as they believed some of their own disciples to cast out demons by the Spirit of God, they ought not to ascribe his miracles to any other cause. On their own principles he convicted them of the most partial and unjust judgment, in not allowing those dispossessions, which he had effected, to proceed from the Holy Ghost, as well as those which were accompanied by the exorcisms of their own adherents. He then contended, that, granting a divine agency in what he had performed, they must also admit that he was come to set up the kingdom of God among them; and, therefore, instead of foolishly and maliciously cavilling at him, they ought with profound humility to solicit a place in that kingdom. The fact was, that Satan, who had long maintained an undisturbed dominion, was now in various instances deprived of his influence. His authority was so far destroyed; many of those, whom he had held in cruel bondage, being
rescued

rescued out of his hands by the superior and irresistible power of Jesus. The inference then was clear and decisive, that he, who "destroyed the works of the devil," could not be his confederate.

Our Lord proceeded to warn them that it was impossible for them to observe a neutrality in the contest which he had instituted against the prince of darkness, and that all were required to declare themselves either on one side or the other. The same warfare is still carried on, and it holds good to this present day, "He that is not with him is against him; and he that gathereth not with him scattereth abroad." He commands us, in the most explicit manner, to espouse his cause with cordiality, and support it with vigour. On which side then do we stand? Here are two Leaders, of opposite interests, never to be reconciled: and it is indispensably requisite that every man show himself, decidedly and actively, for the one and against the other. Have we entered into the service of Jesus? Are we "with him;" sincerely, without dissimulation; uniformly, without wavering; and universally, without reserve? This he demands. Yet how many are satisfied, merely because they do not set themselves in an avowed resistance against Christ and his measures! You, who do not oppose the Gospel or its professors, may boast of your candour and liberality; and, as you are not open enemies, may presume upon being accounted his friends. But you are most unhappily deluded. Your indifference about his cause he considers as a marked contempt of him; and therefore he thanks you not for abstaining from hostilities; but, while you refuse to exert yourselves for him, he looks upon you as being in the interest of his grand opponent.

Jesus, perceiving in these proud and malevolent cavillers a confirmed hatred of him, warned them still further of their danger in daring to ascribe to Satan's agency what had been effected only by the divine Spirit. He declared, that, while the Gospel offers a full and free forgiveness of "all manner of sin and blasphemy,"

blasphemy," one offence is excepted, and that "the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men."

This is a most tremendous assertion indeed! It should excite a holy fear and circumspection in us all. We ought to beware that we do not even approach to the sin; much less should we imitate the profane effrontery of those who deny or ridicule the operations of the Holy Ghost. It is far better to keep at a distance, than to understand exactly its particular nature and precise limits. But it may be proper to inquire of what kind the offence is, of which such awful things are spoken. Many painful apprehensions are entertained by persons of a tender conscience, as if they had certainly committed it, and therefore, by the divine decree, were absolutely and for ever excluded from mercy. But so far, perhaps, we may confidently affirm, that those, who are most oppressed with the dread, are least in danger of having contracted the enormous guilt.

From a comparison of the different passages in the sacred Scriptures, where the sin is mentioned*, it appears to be an entire rejection of the Gospel. And, since there is no other remedy for our fallen state, who shall dare to complain, whatever be their punishment, after their own deliberate refusal of salvation? Yet this is not all: it is an avowed and continued opposition to the grace of Christ. The Pharisees, to whom our Lord spoke, persecuted and calumniated him, as acting under the direction of Satan. Shall we say, then, that decided enmity against him is, of itself, unpardonable? Many, who have made long and furious resistance to him, have found mercy. St. Paul himself had once been "a blasphemer and a persecutor;" and it is probable that some, who had "crucified the Lord of glory," were redeemed to God by the very blood which they shed. But they sinned ignorantly. The offence here specified is committed against strong evidence and conviction of the

* Heb. vi. 4—6. x. 26—29. 1 John v. 16.

truth.

truth. One miracle upon another had been wrought in the sight of those very people who still persisted in reviling our Lord; and probably they acted in repugnance to the full persuasion of their own minds. Yet it is supposed by some that Jesus referred, not to the case of those presumptuous opposers, but of such as should witness the extraordinary effusion of the Holy Ghost upon the Apostles, and should then ascribe his operations to the influence of Satan, rejecting the Gospel as a base and impious fraud. Certain it is that the persons liable to this condemnation are those who have received the clearest information, the most decisive testimony, and deepest impressions of religion upon their hearts; and yet, in defiance of all, put away from them the salvation of God, with a blasphemous contempt. Such is the description given of the unpardonable apostate. It should still be remarked, that "backsliding," though attended with circumstances of peculiar aggravation, may obtain forgiveness with God; and that then only we may fear it is the black offence to which remission is denied, when it involves in it a malicious and confirmed opposition to the truth. For it should carefully be noted that it is never followed by contrition or godly sorrow, but always accompanied with an unrelenting obduracy of mind. The apostate, whose case is desperate, cannot be "renewed unto repentance." Those, therefore, who feel a tenderness of conscience and a real compunction of heart for the guilt they have contracted, and who seek deliverance by the blood of Jesus, afford the strongest evidence that the sin here spoken of is not chargeable to their account, however they may be oppressed by the painful apprehension. After all, any other wilful transgression against God, if persevered in, will be fatal and damnable to the soul; and yet, in every instance, forgiveness is in this life promised and granted to the humble and believing penitent.

But why, it may be asked, was this severe admonition addressed to the Pharisees? Had they cast off all

all regard to religion? No: but their professions were hypocritical, as their words and actions clearly proved. Jesus, therefore, exhorted them to a consistency of conduct, either in one way or another, by giving up themselves to God sincerely and without reserve, or else by throwing off their pretences to piety, and appearing openly and avowedly wicked, that so the fruit might accord with the nature of the tree*. They had uttered blasphemous expressions, from which he proceeded to convict them of their guilt and danger. He affirmed that they had spoken agreeably to their inward dispositions, and that the source of all foolish and profane conversation lies in a depraved and unconverted heart. Lest this should be made light of, as if words alone, being no more than a mere breath of air, were of little consequence, he warned them that God would soon call them to judgment, not only for their daring and impious assertions, but for all their vain and idle talk, and that their common discourse would be adduced as an evidence of the state of their minds, either to their acquittal or condemnation.

And do these things concern none but the ancient Pharisees? Shall not we also be tried for the words of our lips; and our eternal doom be assigned according to the attestation which they shall deliver? Yet who considers the tendency of his conversation, or endeavours so to order it that he may not be ashamed to "give account thereof in the day of judgment?" If "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh," how shall we stand the test; or what will our prevailing tempers and passions appear to have been? Do not the mouths of many among us utter blasphemy; and others delight in expressions of lewdness, slander, and reviling? Where are those who conform to the apostolic rule? "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good, to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers †." Is the discourse

* Matt. xii. 33, &c. Mark iii. 31, &c. Luke xii. 24—36. † Eph. iv. 29.

of the most eminent believers as spiritual and heavenly as might be expected from their high character? O let us pray, "Set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips; and let my words be acceptable in thy sight*."

Did the solemn warning, then, convince or silence the Pharisees? No: they perceived that he claimed a dignity which they were unwilling to acknowledge; and therefore they complained of the want of evidence, and demanded some further sign, desiring, perhaps, a visible display of his divine glory, or an appearance from heaven, which should carry absolute demonstration with it. How preposterous was this! Shall proud and obdurate sinners prescribe to God by what particular kind or degree of testimony he shall confirm his own revelations to them? Jesus, therefore, declared that no other sort of attestation should be granted till his own resurrection, which, he foretold, would happen on the third day from his death, agreeably to its typical resemblance in Jonah's miraculous deliverance. He reproved them for their obstinate impenitence and unbelief; he threatened them with the most aggravated punishment. The Ninevites had repented at the preaching of Jonah, but they had despised a greater Prophet. He referred them, also, to the queen of Sheba, who had travelled from a remote country, with much pains and expense, that she might profit by the wisdom of Solomon, while they had shown the utmost contempt and hatred of him, who was far superior to Solomon; and he warned them that her example would condemn their perverseness.

Are we satisfied with the proofs brought in favour of the Gospel? Nothing, indeed, but a proud or sensual disposition, will lead us to deny their sufficiency. Many in our own day, like the unbelievers of old, call for additional and stronger evidence, and presumptuously refuse to examine that which is already proposed to them. But the Lord God is not

* Paal. xix. 14. cxli. 3.

at their command; nor will he model his dispensations according to their wishes. O beware, lest, in righteous judgment for your arrogance, he leave you to yourselves! "Light is come into the world;" and if your eyes have not discerned its excellency, the reason is, you have "loved darkness rather than light;" and your final condemnation will be much more aggravated when you are compared with others who have made good improvement of inferior advantages.

Better things might have been expected from many of our Lord's captious hearers, who had once discovered a hopeful disposition. The kingdom of Satan seemed to be shaken amongst them; but they fell back again to their former condition of a willing subjection to his government, and gave him a more entire ascendancy over their minds; and therefore Jesus foretold that their "last state would be worse than the first." On this occasion he delivered the parable of the relapsing demoniac. The evil spirit may depart for a time, as if he had quitted his hold of the poor enslaved sinner, and yet may return to his possession. The door being open, the heart prepared to comply with his suggestions, and no contrary principle forbidding his admission, he will enter with greater strength, and lead the captive soul with increasing obduracy from one degree of wickedness to another.

This describes a common case. Many are deeply affected by the faithful and lively preaching of the Gospel; and a temporary reformation takes place. Their attention may be roused, their passions moved, and especially their fears alarmed by the striking addresses of some plain practical preacher; and then they cannot continue in the same vain and sinful habits as before. Like Herod, who "heard John the Baptist gladly, and did many things," they may express a warm approbation of the minister; and amend their conduct, at least in certain enormities; so that it may seem as if the evil spirit was expelled.

But

But they rest in a mere external change, and fail of a real conversion of the heart; and therefore Satan, who has withdrawn his influence for a time, obtains a free admission again. The habitation is made ready for his reception; and he returns with seven-fold force. How terrible the consequence! A relapse is often more to be dreaded than the first attack of a disorder. "Evil men and seducers wax worse and worse*:" "the latter end is worse with them than the beginning†." Let us, therefore, implore the God of all grace, so to drive out the prince of darkness, that He himself may take full and everlasting possession of our souls, and nothing be. "able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

In this awful manner Jesus continued to preach the word with unshaken fortitude and unwearied patience, exposing himself to the malevolence of his enemies by his pointed reproofs, and exhausting his bodily strength by incessant labours. While he was thus employed, a certain woman, impressed by his exhortations, exclaimed, as if in envious admiration of the happiness of her who was favoured with such a Son: but he replied, that a far greater privilege is conferred on those who believe and obey the Gospel. His pious mother, together with some near relations, stood at a distance, and, probably, through anxiety for his welfare, wished to call him away. It seems they were prevented from approaching by the surrounding multitudes. It was, therefore, intimated to him, that they were waiting to speak with him. But he, still intent upon his important work, and to encourage the attendance of his faithful followers, declared that those who truly received and practised his word were much dearer to him than the nearest among his earthly connexions, merely as such, could possibly be. He meant not to slight his mother or any of his kindred, but to show that we should be superior to all carnal and worldly regards, by looking beyond the ties of consanguinity; and, in order to

* 2 Tim. iii. 13.

† 2 Pet. ii. 20.

animate his disciples to diligence and perseverance in his service, he took that opportunity of expressing his warmest affection for them.

Are any persons ready to congratulate the blessed Virgin, who had the distinguished honour of bringing forth the Saviour of mankind? The way is here pointed out, in which you may obtain a superior dignity. Only yield an unfeigned respect to the Gospel, give up your whole hearts to God, and walk in cheerful obedience to his commands, and you shall be happier, and dearer to Jesus, than any natural relation to him could make you. If you profess a peculiar attachment, and number yourselves among his followers, we ask, whether you are willing to walk in holiness as he requires. Or, are you satisfied with paying him an unmeaning compliment, as if it could please him to cry "Lord, Lord," while you regard not his precepts? Observe, that he pronounces his benediction upon those who not only HEAR, but DO, his word, and perform the "will of his Father." Are you such? Or, are you not conscious that some or other of your tempers and practices expressly contradict his injunctions? You must search out, and put away from you "the accursed thing," which he hateth; or else it were presumption to expect his favourable notice.

You, who have devoted yourselves to him "without partiality and without hypocrisy," may take fresh courage, since you are assured from his own mouth how dear you are to him. You are in his account as "a brother, a sister, and a mother." Do you know what those tender names imply? Yet you cannot conceive the strength of his affection for you. How ample is the recompense he bestows for all you can do or suffer in his cause! O, let a sense of his unmerited and extensive love excite you to more vigorous and cheerful exertions, that you may express your gratitude, and promote his glory!

But let "the sinners in Zion be afraid, and fearfulness surprise the hypocrites." The eye of Jesus discerns your insincerity under every specious disguise

guise which you may assume. And in what light do you appear before him? Does he regard you as "a brother, a sister, and a mother?" No: he detests the baseness of your character; and he will avenge the insults you put upon him. O, cast off the mask of an unsound profession; confess your iniquity; sue to him for pardon, while he waits to be gracious; and implore the influence of his Spirit, "to the end he may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness!"

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. 17.

Jesus repaired to the sea-shore, and instructed the multitude by the parables of the sower—the tares—the growth of corn—the grain of mustard-seed—the leaven in meal—the treasure hid in a field—the pearl of great price—and the net gathering different kinds of fishes.

THE life, at least the public life, of Jesus, was very short; but, being employed in almost constant exertions for the glory of God and the benefit of men, it was crowded with important events. If we possessed a larger measure of his activity and zeal, much might be done in the contracted period of our existence upon earth; for our usefulness depends not on length of days, but on their diligent improvement.

The friends of Jesus were, perhaps, apprehensive that he would impair his strength by incessant labours; and therefore they endeavoured to draw him away from the multitude, that he might have some intermission. Probably, he yielded to their importunity, and retired; but “the same day” he appeared again in public, concerned for the people, who came from all parts to hear his heavenly doctrines. It cannot be wrong to pay a prudent regard to our health; for religion requires not any efforts, to which our bodily frame is unequal. But, from an attention to ourselves, let us not plead for indolence, or neglect those opportunities of doing good, which are, evidently, within our power. May it please God to “shed abroad his love in our hearts by the Holy Ghost,” that his work may ever be our delight! Then shall we lament that our usefulness is so confined, and that

our best exertions bear no proportion to the extent of our desires.

No sooner did Jesus quit the house to which he had withdrawn, than immense numbers surrounded him, as before *. Being situated near the sea, for the better convenience of delivering his instructions, he entered into a ship, from which he addressed the people, who stood upon the shore in a serious and respectful manner to hear him. He spake to them by parables, that is, by certain likenesses or representations, taken from the ordinary occurrences of life, in which, while a common history seems to be related, some spiritual information is meant to be conveyed. This method of teaching was frequent among the ancients; and it is happily calculated to strike the mind, and leave a lasting impression upon the memory. He proposed, to the consideration of the audience then assembled before him, various similitudes of this kind, all of them tending to show the nature of his kingdom upon earth, the character of its true members, its gradual augmentation, and invaluable blessings.

The parable of the sower stands first in order. Here an attentive and diligent husbandman is exhibited in the cultivation of an extensive field. Desirous of procuring a large increase, he took care that good seed should be sown upon every part of it; but, as it consisted of different sorts of soil, the effect was very different. In one place, where the ground was hard as a beaten path, the seed could not enter, and, as it lay exposed, was either destroyed by the feet of passengers, or devoured by the birds. Another place afforded a promising appearance for a short time: the ground was rocky, being covered only with a thin coat of earth; and this for a while gave nourishment to the grain which was cast upon it; but, having no depth, it could not defend the root from the scorching sun; and therefore the whole of the produce soon withered away. A third

* Matt. xiii. 1—23. Mark iv. 1—25. Luke viii. 4—18.

situation proved unfavourable to the good seed; for the thorns, which grew there, checked the efforts of the rising corn, and effectually prevented it from coming to maturity. Was, therefore, all the labour vain? No: there was one portion of the field which answered the expectations of the owner: it brought forth a plentiful increase, though in various degrees, which gradually ripened till the time of harvest, and was then gathered into the barn.

At the conclusion of this little narration, Jesus required his audience to fix their attention upon it, as involving truths of the greatest importance. He proclaimed aloud, "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear;" which intimated that some would understand and regard the instruction, whilst it would be totally lost upon others.

But wherefore did he use such a studied obscurity in his preaching? His very disciples seemed unable to account for it, and therefore afterwards put the question in private, "Why speakest thou unto them in parables?" and besought him to explain his design. This gave him occasion to vindicate that peculiar manner of teaching. A parable will readily be comprehended by those who are seriously disposed, and desirous of useful information; but to others it may appear to have no meaning, or none of any consequence. This, he observed, was intended in just judgement against those who had despised his plainest declarations. He replied to his disciples to the following effect: "The mysteries of the kingdom, which remain a secret to them, are in rich mercy revealed unto you, my beloved friends. And this method is agreeable to the righteous proceedings of God, who in general dispenses his favours to men according to their temper and improvement. Those, therefore, who have refused to be convinced on the strongest evidence, and have contemptuously rejected all the offers of my grace, shall be given up to a judicial blindness and obduracy; so that, how long soever they may be spared under means and ordinances"

ordinances, they never will be brought to a true and spiritual understanding of the Gospel. How great, then, is your blessedness, who have obtained a divine illumination, whereby you perceive the doctrines which I deliver, and feel their powerful influence upon your minds! You are distinguished above the most eminent saints of old, who saw but through a glass darkly, and looked forwards with ardent desires to the advantages and privileges which you now enjoy."

Such was the purport of our Lord's interesting address to his disciples; and a solemn warning it conveys to us. We must render an account to God for the religious opportunities with which we are favoured. He hath sent to us the Gospel of his Son, and He will shortly inquire what reception we have given it. Are there not many among us who will not even examine it with seriousness, but, like the Pharisees, disdainfully put away the truth from them? No wonder, then, that to you, who are of this character, the doctrines of Jesus appear obscure or inconsistent. O, be afraid, lest, while you shut your eyes and stop your ears, God determine in his wrath that they never shall be opened! The day of grace may be expired with respect to some, even while they are suffered to remain upon earth. O, listen to those, who beseech you "that ye receive not the grace of God in vain!"—"Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation *!"

This very caution is inculcated in the parable before us. That we may enter more fully into the subject, let us advert to our Lord's explanation. Jesus is "the Sower," who by himself and his ministers scatters abroad the good seed of his word. But, alas! the most excellent instruction does not always produce the desired effects: through various causes men are prevented from receiving that real advantage which it is calculated to promote. These causes exist in the men themselves.

* 2 Cor. vi. 1, 2.

Some are hard and impenetrable as the ground on which they tread; fitly compared, therefore, to "the way-side." They give no serious attention to the momentous truths which they hear, nor take any pains to understand them. Upon these, then, no good impression is made: the word preached to them is soon forgotten and lost; they do not even resist the attempts of Satan, who is hovering around, like a bird of prey, and who, to frustrate the design of the Gospel, will artfully contrive to divert their minds from it, by proposing subjects more pleasing to their carnal nature.

But others are affected with the declarations of the Gospel. So far the seed is admitted, as their passions are moved by the things which are spoken to them. They listen with avidity, form the best resolutions, and discover an ardent zeal for religion. But, alas! like the rocky ground, they have no depth; and therefore their convictions are hasty and superficial, not being able to penetrate their hearts. Their professions may be warm, and excite notice and admiration; but the trying season is at hand, in which all their fine appearances will wither away. Troubles, like the scorching sun, will prove that their principles have not taken firm root within, as these have not influence enough to support them.

A third sort may also promise fair, and preserve a show of piety for a length of time. The blade springs up, and endures the various changes of the weather. Yet it does not thrive; for thorns surround and choke it. Ah! how many constantly attend upon the ministry of the Gospel, in whom no saving effect is produced! The cares, riches, and pleasures of life, so engross their minds, that no proper heed can be given to the truth which is heard; and, of consequence, it is lost upon them; for, with a heart so much attached to secular concerns, they cannot possess any spiritual life or vigour. They may maintain their place in the visible church; but, when we look
for

for the fruits of righteousness, we are disappointed, and their religion is vain.

The labour, however, of the husbandman, is not in every instance unprofitable. There are those who resemble the good ground, who are prepared by divine grace for a due reception of the heavenly word. Their supreme regard is fixed upon it; they perceive its important meaning, and cherish it in their hearts, till its grand design is answered. "They walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God*." A difference, indeed, in their excellence and usefulness, is observable; but all bring forth fruit to maturity, and some in an eminent degree. Their sincerity is proved by their perseverance in holiness. They endure every trial; they stand both the winter's cold and the summer's heat, and "go on unto perfection."

Can we avoid making the application? If we are favoured with the preaching of "the everlasting Gospel," and constantly attend upon it, let us inquire, What is the effect produced? Do we seriously meditate on what we hear? Is any deep and lasting impression fixed upon our minds? Are any spiritual principles implanted, and habits formed? Is our religion such as will carry us through temptations and persecutions? Is it such as renders us superior to the solicitations of the flesh, and the allurements of the world? Do none of these things take up that time and thought which should be devoted to the care of the soul? And are we not, consequently, in a lean and barren state, notwithstanding the faithful administration of the sacred ordinances around us? If those only receive real advantage from the Gospel, who are so affected by it as to bring forth the substantial fruits of holiness, do we come under that description? Or what is the profit which has accrued from our profession?

* Col. i. 10.

The Saviour subjoined a most solemn caution, reminding his disciples that divine light was communicated to them for the benefit of others, and that they should make a good improvement of the instructions delivered, by recommending the same important truths to the world around them. And ought not we, also, to consider for what intent our religious privileges are bestowed upon us? Do we shine, in our respective places, as "lights of the world," desirous to impart knowledge to them who are in darkness? It should be remembered, that, if our distinguished favours are not turned to some useful account, we may not only be soon deprived of them, but shall be severely condemned for the neglect.

On the same occasion, it should seem, our Lord delivered the parable of the tares*. Here again a common story is related, for the purpose of communicating spiritual information. A field was sown with good seed, which, from its favourable growth, promised a plentiful increase. But, through the malicious interference of one who was an enemy to the owner of the land, and through the negligence of the servants, to whom it was committed, tares were scattered among the wheat. The injury was not discovered till the fruit of the corn appeared; and then it was proposed to root up the noxious weeds, which obstructed the ripening of the crop. The master, however, rejected that scheme, as being attended with some danger, and allowed the tares to remain, commanding only that in the time of harvest they should be carefully separated, and consumed by fire, while the good grain should be collected and secured in the storehouse.

What instruction, then, does this narrative convey? The disciples did not at first perceive it, and therefore afterwards, when Jesus retired, they requested him to explain it. In condescension to their inquiries, he gave a clear and minute interpretation; from which we learn that the parable exhibits the

* Matt. xiii. 24-30, 36-41.

present state of his kingdom, or the visible church, as it consists of a mixed company, hypocritical pretenders as well as real believers. These may not always be distinguishable from each other, and for wise purposes may be suffered to continue in the same religious community. The latter only are "the children of the kingdom," entitled to its blessings; and they possess their high privileges merely by the grace of Jesus; for He it is who sows the good seed in his field. The former are "the children of the wicked one," being induced by his influence to put on the semblance of piety; whilst they still bear his likeness, cheerfully comply with his temptations, and do his work. In the rashness of our zeal, we might sometimes wish a greater separation to be made than the present system of things will admit; we might wish that the saints of God were no longer "vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked." But we must wait for that event till the end of the world, the great harvest; and then, how accurate will be the distinction of characters, how wide the difference between them! The reapers, who are the angels of God, cannot err in the awful division which they shall make, or appoint any individual to an improper place. Every tare shall be burned with fire: every grain of wheat shall be safely lodged in the heavenly garner. How tremendous the destruction of the ungodly in that "furnace of fire, where shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth!" How excellent the glory into which the righteous shall enter, where they "shall shine forth as the sun, in the kingdom of their Father!"

May God excite in us "great searchings of heart!" What is our present character? What our future prospect? We are fixed in the outward church of Christ; but we are not therefore secure of an admission into his blissful presence above. Possibly we may wear the garb of sanctity; and others may not suspect any insincerity in us. But unless we are renewed in righteousness, and "have our fruit unto holiness,"

holiness," our hope is presumptuous, and our "expectations shall perish." Nor let the impenitent flatter themselves that they shall escape detection in the midst of so immense a multitude. Sinners, be assured that the eye of God perfectly discerns you now, and that his hand will find you out hereafter. Whatever fair appearances you may assume, or whatever plausible excuses you may frame, His righteous judgment shall be executed: "These shall go away into everlasting punishment; but the righteous into life eternal *."

Our Lord also delivered, probably to the same audience, various other similitudes, all of them instructive and important †.

He referred them to the gradual increase of corn, by the inexplicable principle of vegetation, as a representation of the progress of his spiritual kingdom. The seed is cast into the ground, and, without any further care of the husbandman, it rises insensibly, and advances by degrees to a state of maturity, when, being fully ripe, it is cut down, and gathered into the barn.

The interpretation is obvious. The work of God, both in the church as a community, and in the heart of each individual believer, is carried on imperceptibly, like the growth of corn, in a way which depends not on human management, and which we cannot explain. The seed may appear to perish in the earth, or the blade to spring up in a very slow manner, while the mysterious process goes forward without interruption. Let us not despond, though we see not the most favourable appearances at once; nor let us be impatient, though we perceive not, after a length of time, the perfection of grace either in ourselves or others. Let us pray that the Gospel may spread its influence from one kingdom to another, and that we ourselves may "go from strength to strength." We wait for the harvest: may we all be ripening for it; that, when the great Reaper

* Matt. xxv. 46. † Matt. xiii. 31—35, 44—53. Mark iv. 26—34.

“putteth in the sickle” (as he will at the hour of death, with respect to every separate person), we may be received into his celestial garner!

The same instruction is conveyed in the parable of the grain of mustard-seed. This, though one of the least of seeds, it is observed, produced in eastern countries a tree so large, that the birds might build their nests in its branches. The astonishing increase exhibits the mighty power of God in his providence; and equally illustrious is the display of his grace in causing his Gospel to spread and flourish, from the smallest and most contemptible appearances, till it shall fill the earth, and afford a refuge in the church for men of all ranks and characters, and for all the nations of the world. The progress in our day may seem inconsiderable; but we look forwards, with cheerful hopes, to those glorious times, when the branches of this tree shall be so enlarged as to reach the most distant lands: for “the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ *.” The case is similar with respect to the establishment of divine grace in the heart of every Christian. This holy principle may seem, in its beginning, to possess little influence, and promise no great improvement. But the plant is under the peculiar care of Heaven, and, being watered from above, it shall thrive and prosper. It shall gradually extend its shoots, till it occupy every part of the soul, in which it has been fixed.

Our Lord confirmed and illustrated this truth by the parable of the leaven, which he described as put into a large quantity of meal. This, being inconsiderable in its bulk, may lie concealed for a time, as if it had no effect; but its operation, though secret, is powerful; and, as its fermentation spreads by degrees, it will diffuse itself through the whole mass. Just so the Gospel, which was of little account in the world at first, is in a progressive state, and, we trust, will increase more and more, till it reduce all nations

* Rev. xi, 15.

to "the obedience of faith." "A little one shall become a thousand, and a small one a strong nation. The Lord will hasten it in his time *." Nor is the case at all different, wherever the sacred influence of God's Spirit is put into the heart. For a season it may not excite notice; much weakness may seem to attend its first efforts, so that the change produced may not show itself in every part, or in any remarkable manner. But the operation, which is accompanied with a mighty energy, will be effectual in the end. It will be felt in every faculty and member, and gain a complete ascendancy over the whole man. Such is the usual advancement of religion in the soul.

Is this what we are acquainted with, in our own particular state? We would encourage any favourable appearances, any feeble attempts to serve God "in spirit and in truth." "For who hath despised the day of small things †?" Yet we are taught to expect a gradual progress; and therefore we inquire, Are we growing in grace? Do we increase in spiritual light and vigour, and become more and more confirmed in holy principles and habits? Doubtless we should feel an ardent desire that the Gospel may extend its influence from house to house, and from town to town, in every nation, till it reach the remotest corners of the earth. But let us not forget OURSELVES, nor cease to lift up our prayer, that, professing the truth of God, we may feel more of the efficacy of our own principles, and be gradually transformed into the divine likeness, "from glory to glory." May the sanctifying energy of our religion diffuse itself throughout all our faculties, and bring our affections, words, and actions, into subjection under the government of Christ!

Thus Jesus continued to describe the nature of his kingdom by figurative illustrations. This method of teaching, indeed, has something of obscurity in it; and that obscurity was intended: for many of his

* Isa. lx. 22.

† Zech. iv. 10.

audience could not bear a more clear and avowed declaration, so that he might have hazarded his life by speaking more explicitly. Besides, in this very way of delivering his instructions by parables, he accommodated himself to an ancient Scripture, which is therefore said to be fulfilled in him.

Other similitudes were added, which were calculated to give direction and encouragement to his disciples. The Gospel may fitly be compared to an immense treasure; it is an inexhaustible mine of spiritual riches. This may be represented as "hid in a field:" the valuable substance, not being exposed on the surface, may escape the notice of careless observers, and cannot be explored without much pains. Men of carnal dispositions are not aware how many and precious blessings are comprised in that salvation which they neglect and despise. But those who perceive its transcendent worth will "rejoice as one that findeth great spoil*," and gladly relinquish every other possession, if necessary, that they may secure it for their own. Who, then, among us, are desirous to purchase this field, which contains such inexpressible wealth? Alas! do you not betray your ignorance of "the kingdom of heaven," who estimate the Gospel at a low rate? It would not pass with you for a trifle, as it now does, if you were acquainted with its hidden treasure. You would not scruple to part with any thing for Christ's sake, if you properly understood the value of his grace. You pour contempt upon him if you do not prefer him to the best enjoyments of the world, or if you hesitate to sacrifice them all when they stand in competition with him.

This also we learn from the parable of the pearl of great price. A merchant, in search of rich commodities, having discovered a pearl of peculiar excellency, abandoned every other pursuit, and relinquished all his gains, that he might purchase that one jewel. Such is the man who obtains a true

* Psal. cxix. 162.

knowledge of the Saviour, and becomes a member of his kingdom. It may be, he has long been in quest of happiness, and each favourite object appeared to him, for a time, as a beautiful gem: but he found continual disappointment till he heard of Jesus, and beheld something of his glory, when every thing else lost its former charms, and seemed trifling and worthless in comparison. Then he began to desire, most ardently, the grace of Jesus, and fixed all his attention upon that one point, being willing to sustain any loss, and renounce every advantage, for the acquisition of that high prize. Have you, then, any proper conceptions of the value of Christ, who shrink from his service, because it requires so many painful sacrifices? Do you apprehend that you shall pay too dear for his benefits? No, Sirs; this is the pearl of so great price, that there can be nothing in the whole world equivalent to it. Give up interest, pleasures, reputation, friends and relatives, father, mother, brothers, sisters, wife, and children; yet, if Jesus be yours, we will congratulate you on your immense gain. Whatever you lose, you receive "unsearchable and durable riches" in Him; and therefore you may adopt the Apostle's exultation, "As having nothing, and yet possessing all things*."

But let no man deceive himself. It will not suffice to "name the name of Christ," where there is not cordial attachment to him. And are there not many professors of the Gospel, who, by their formality, worldliness, or sensuality, disgrace the cause? These weaken the hands and distress the hearts of faithful ministers. Yet let us not be staggered, since our Lord has taught us to expect it by the following similitude.

He subjoined another parable, taken from the practice of fishermen. They cast their net into the sea, which collects various kinds of fishes; nor can any separation of them be made till they are brought

* 2 Cor. vi. 10.

to the shore: but then the useful are preserved, and the worthless rejected. So mixed is the present state of the church, and such will be the final division of its members. Those, who preach the Gospel, go forth, as it were, upon the wide ocean of the world, to throw the net, desirous of enclosing in it all they can. Many may accordingly be taken, who may not be approved upon an exact scrutiny. And such a scrutiny will be instituted at the end of the world. Who can abide the strict examination? The angels will part the different characters asunder, however close their connexion may now be. They, who possess only the form of godliness, shall then be for ever excluded from the society of the saints, among whom they were numbered here; and their portion shall be assigned them in "the furnace of fire," where they shall for ever "wail" their sin and folly, and "gnash their teeth" through the extremity of rage, anguish, and despair.

So solemn and alarming were the addresses of Jesus. And if his servants in the Gospel endeavour to speak as he did, they must remind their hearers of the important distinction which subsists between them, and thus, by faithful admonitions, "take forth the precious from the vile*." Their work is difficult, and often painful. How necessary is it for them to be well acquainted with the religion which they teach! Let them attend, then, to the question which Jesus proposed to his disciples: "Have ye understood all these things?" Let them consider, too, what improvement should be made. The Scribes, who are "instructed unto the kingdom of heaven," or properly qualified to declare its mysteries, resemble the householder, who has a large family to provide for. They should therefore treasure up every useful observation, that they may always be able to communicate something from their stock, for the service of the family. While they

* Jer. xv. 19.

are concerned for their own support, they must employ their fund, whatever it may be, for the benefit of those committed to them, "giving them their portion of meat in due season."

Let prayer be offered to God without ceasing, both for them who preach and them who hear the Gospel, that the former may dispense the word with all fidelity, and the latter receive it with meekness. Let us thankfully accept the salutary provisions which the great Lord of the household has here set before us, and feed upon them to our spiritual nourishment. May we be led to try our own characters, and be alarmed or comforted, as our case may render most expedient! May God in mercy prevent us from being deceived to our eternal ruin; and, "if in any thing we be otherwise minded" than we ought to be, may he "reveal even this unto us!" Amen.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. 18.

Jesus replied to some who professed a regard to him—appeased a storm on the sea—cured two possessed persons—rejected by the Gadarenes—returned to Galilee—healed a woman of her bloody flux—restored Jairus's daughter to life—gave sight to two blind men—expelled a demon—preached again at Nazareth, and in various other places.

“LOOKING unto Jesus” is not only the bounden duty, but the high privilege, of the real Christian; and therefore it will be his daily and delightful employment. Let us not be weary of contemplating our divine Exemplar. Much we have yet to learn, since we have hitherto seen but little, in comparison, of his excellency. As we attend him through the exercise of his public ministry, we shall observe him in almost every place confirming his heavenly doctrines by incontestable miracles, and affording the strongest evidence that he was indeed “the Christ, the Saviour of the world.”

In the evening of the very same day on which he had been teaching the people by parables, he proposed to his disciples to pass over the sea, or the lake of Genesareth*. As they prepared to take ship, a certain person, and, it should seem, a man of some note, being a Scribe, came to Jesus, professing a high regard for him, and a fixed determination to continue with him, as one of his stated followers. The appearance was pleasing and hopeful, so that we might have hastily concluded him to be a real convert.

* Matt. viii. 18—27. Mark iv. 35, &c. Luke viii. 22—25. ix. 57, &c.

But Jesus, who "knew what was in man," discovered an insincerity of heart under this fair disguise. The Scribe probably expected some very lucrative or honourable post, as it was generally thought that the Messiah would establish a temporal dominion. Jesus, however, warned him that no worldly emoluments were to be looked for from the service of so poor and despised a Master. "The foxes," said he, "have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head."

How astonishing the declaration! How low and calamitous the situation to which "The Lord from heaven" submitted! Here then we perceive "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, that we through his poverty might be rich *." And what could his followers expect but to be sharers of his affliction, and therefore to be destitute of all present comforts and conveniences! "The disciple is not above his master, nor the servant above his lord." Such an intimation was enough to stagger the resolution of a man who sought only secular advantages; and it is probable that he instantly withdrew.

In another we perceive a far less regard to Jesus than was due to his high character, and in one too who seems to have been a professed disciple for some time. When our Lord called him to a stated attendance, and a renunciation of all other employments, the man was disposed to procrastinate, and therefore, with a view to excuse himself for a season, desired permission to perform the funeral solemnities of his father. The request appeared reasonable; for religion does not forbid, but rather enjoin, all due respect to be shown to friends and relations. But Jesus, knowing it to be a mere pretence, or at least a mark of some reluctance to engage in the work of God, which might have been augmented by an interview with his former connexions, demanded an immediate compliance with the call. He replied, "Let

* 2 Cor. viii. 9.

the dead bury their dead; but go thou, and preach the kingdom of God." As if he had said, "Sooner let any office be neglected than that of the sacred ministry, to which thou art appointed. Leave it therefore to those, who being dead to God are unfit for his service, to bury their deceased kindred: but delay not thou, through any carnal regards, to enter upon and prosecute thy important function."

An example of like sort occurred on another occasion. A third person professed a resolution to become a follower of Jesus. And what prevented him? He had certain affairs to settle, or friends to take leave of, if not to consult. This might seem to us expedient and proper; but there was a secret unsoundness, a wrong attachment to worldly connexions, a wavering mind, a desire to regain the things which had been renounced, as in the case of Lot's wife. Our Lord, therefore, detecting his hypocrisy, replied, "No man, having put his hand to the plough and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

Do not similar instances present themselves under our own observation? Do not many "halt between two opinions?" or "turn to the Lord, not with their whole heart, but feignedly?" Their supreme affections are fixed upon secular objects; and therefore, though with fair and plausible words they declare their approbation of Christianity, they will comply with its dictates no further than their convenience will admit.

Various excuses are urged. It is said, "We have too much business of another kind, to give that attention to religion which is required;" or, "our connexions are unfavourable to our wishes, and we cannot detach ourselves from them." But will these pretexts bear a serious examination? Or will any deliberately maintain that the care of the soul and the service of Christ may be safely neglected till every worldly obstruction be removed? If you are unwilling to contend with difficulties, the Saviour will disown you, and treat you as avowed opposers.

"But

"But we intend, after a time, to be his faithful disciples. When this or the other scheme is accomplished, we are resolved to trifle no longer, but to obey his injunctions with the utmost ardour, and without reserve." Ah! Sirs, will he admit of such an answer to the solemn call of his Gospel? He requires your submission now; and for you to talk of yielding a compliance only on a future day, is to declare that you prefer the world to him. You do in fact, therefore, reject him, while you plead for a delay. He knows the ground of your excuses; and remember, he detests the double mind, whatever specious disguises it may assume.

When Jesus had taken ship, and launched out into the deep, a severe storm arose, and the disciples were distressed by the apprehension of immediate destruction; for the vessel seemed on the very point of sinking. But where was their beloved Master? Wearied out with the labours of the preceding day, he had fallen asleep. What, could he be ignorant or regardless of the danger of his faithful attendants? No: but he designed to try the strength of their confidence in him, and to show their security under his protection. They awoke him, and cried, in terror and anguish, "Lord, save us, we perish." How strange, how inconsistent, was this! Will not the weakest believer allow that it was impossible to perish, with Jesus in the ship? But eminent perils will sometimes render even advanced Christians strangely forgetful of their own principles, and prove them defective in faith, as indeed they are in every grace. The fears, perplexities, and despondency, which some of them discover in such situations, sufficiently evince it.

Jesus reproved them sharply for their unbelief; and then, to encourage their unreserved reliance upon him in every future difficulty, and to demonstrate that all nature was at his command, he arose with a peculiar majesty, and spake the authoritative word: the furious winds instantly ceased to blow, and the turbulent sea was calm. Such a grand display of his
divine

divine power astonished them: "the men marvelled." They ought, indeed, to have recollected that he was the God of the whole creation; and this very miracle might have led them to that conclusion. "O Lord God of hosts, who is a strong Lord like unto thee? Thou rulest the raging of the sea: when the waves thereof arise, thou stillest them*." But so much darkness yet remained in their minds, that they had no clear or consistent views of "the great mystery of godliness," and perhaps some of them might then consider him as no more than a human being.

The distressed situation of the disciples is an apt emblem of the church, and of many private Christians, in perilous circumstances. It is one principal part of the Redeemer's plan to exercise and prove our faith; and therefore he conducts us through various trials. He affords us his gracious presence, and, while we pass over the tempestuous sea of life, we ought to be satisfied that he is in the vessel with us. If we are his people, we must be secure, because our safety is in him. Let us not presumptuously impeach his wisdom, faithfulness, or love, when he suffers the severest storm to arise, though he should even then seem regardless of our danger. Our busy fears may suggest that we shall surely be lost, and we may be almost overwhelmed with perplexity and despair. His design is that we should show an entire and cheerful dependence upon him; but we soon betray our unbelief, and treat him as the disciples did. If, then, we can trust him no longer than while the calm continues, "where is our faith?" Or, "why are we so fearful?" Let us be ashamed of our doubtful and suspicious temper; and, adoring the power and grace of this mighty God and Saviour, let us learn, with unshaken confidence, to repose ourselves and our concerns in his hands.

The storm being appeased, they arrived in safety at the country of the Gadarenes, opposite to Galilee; and immediately an occasion was offered for the ex-

* Psal. lxxxix. 5, 9.

hibition of his divine character, which excited general attention*. There met him two persons possessed with devils, in a state of the utmost distraction and fury, driven out from society, and incapable of being governed or restrained†. Many circumstances in this case are not to be accounted for on any other supposition than that of a real demoniacal influence. We here perceive, indeed, an awful representation of the wretchedness in which we should be involved, if subjected to the malice of infernal spirits. A considerable number (for their name was Legion) had entered into these unhappy men, and reduced them to the most miserable condition. When our Lord beheld the pitiable objects, he commanded the demons to quit their hold. This they were unwilling to do; and yet they were constrained to acknowledge the superior power of Jesus, as "the Son of the most high God;" and were terrified at his presence, as criminals before their judge. Being perfectly aware of that extremity of torment, which will shortly be executed upon them by Christ himself, they requested that their final punishment might not be inflicted before the time. They entreated him also not to dismiss them entirely from that country; and, probably with a mischievous and destructive intention, desired permission to enter into a numerous herd of swine in the neighbourhood. Permission accordingly was granted, not to gratify, but confound, their malice; and immediately the whole herd, to the amount of two thousand, rushed into the deep with violence, and perished in the waters.

This was a remarkable transaction. It has been treated with impious ridicule; but it ought to be observed, as a sufficient answer to objections, that, by this very occurrence, Jesus has demonstrated the reality of possessions, the malevolence of infernal

* Matt. viii. 28, &c. ix. 1. Mark v. 1—21. Luke viii. 26—40.

† As St. Mark and St. Luke mention only one person, it should seem that one was more fierce, and therefore more an object of notice, than the other.

spirits, and their entire subjection to him; for they owned his dominion when they solicited his leave to execute their purpose. He displayed, likewise, his boundless mercy, in "destroying the works of the devil." At the same time, those who had kept the swine were justly punished, by the loss of them, for their avarice and profaneness, as their employment and traffic were illegal. Let us love and praise our gracious Redeemer, who has come to deliver us from so miserable a bondage as that of the powers of darkness. Let us entreat his exertions in our own behalf, and cry to him, "O Lord, give us not over to their malice, but, by thy mighty aid, extricate us out of their hands, and bring us into the glorious liberty of thy dear children!"

The report of this event caused a general consternation among the inhabitants. They flocked in great multitudes to see the Person who had wrought so stupendous a miracle; and, as if struck with a sense of their guilt, and afraid of his presence, lest he should bring some deserved judgments upon them, they unanimously requested him to "depart out of their coasts." Little did they understand what they asked. Shall sinners petition that the Lord of life and glory would leave them to themselves? How dreadful must be the consequence! Better be destitute of all, both friends and substance, than be deserted by the Saviour. Yet such is the folly and stupidity of men; they are unwilling to abandon their sensual pleasures and worldly advantages, or to be disturbed in their old practices, however unjustifiable; and therefore they put from them the ministers and the Gospel of Christ, madly supposing they shall be happier without them. They say unto God, "Depart from us; for we desire not the knowledge of thy ways *."

How different is the disposition of those who have a true spiritual discernment! They desire nothing so much as the presence of Christ, and communion

* Job xxi. 14.

with him. Their language is, "When wilt thou come unto me? O make thine abode with me, and let me remain under thy shadow!" The persons who had been delivered from Satan's influence were instantly restored to reason and comfort; and they were observed to be "sitting at the feet of Jesus," impressed, no doubt, with unspeakable admiration and gratitude for the grace bestowed upon them. They wished to accompany him upon his departure, and solicited his permission "that they might be with him." But he intended them to be the instruments of usefulness among the people, who were so deeply immersed in ignorance and sin. Though he himself deserted the country, he determined to leave these his chosen witnesses there, and therefore sent them to publish throughout their neighbourhood "what great things the Lord had done for them."

We also, considering ourselves alone, may wish to be constantly sitting at the feet of Jesus, under the instructions of his mouth, and the light of his countenance. But, for the present, he has assigned us other work, to which we must attend. We must bear our testimony for him, in the midst of a dark world, "holding forth the word of life," if not by public preaching, yet by our private conversation, and show, in our respective places, "what great things he has done for us." Where are those, then, who have such an evidence to give? What have you received at his hands? He yet distributes his gifts, and works deliverance for men. Have you experienced his power to save? Are you the monuments of his grace? Then commend him to others, and declare to your husband, wife, parents, or children, what he can accomplish for them.

Upon his crossing the lake again, and returning to Galilee, multitudes awaited his arrival, and welcomed him with the liveliest joy. How different the reception which he met with in different places! Immediately various applications for relief were made

made to him, which afforded fresh evidence of his power and compassion*.

It has been repeatedly observed that few persons of rank paid any regard to Jesus; but distress will sometimes constrain those, who would otherwise be most reluctant, to come to him. Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue, and therefore of some eminence, under the apprehension of losing his only daughter, about twelve years of age, who appeared in a dying state, represented her case to Jesus, and, with expressions of profound veneration for his character, most earnestly entreated his gracious interposition. Our Lord acceded to his request, and followed him without delay, accompanied by immense crowds, who were desirous to witness the event.

A circumstance occurred by the way, which deserves our notice. A poor diseased woman, who had suffered exceedingly by a bloody flux for twelve years, and had spent her whole substance upon physicians without obtaining relief, heard of the extraordinary works of Jesus, and felt a strong persuasion in her mind that he had power to heal her. Yet, afraid, or ashamed, to describe her situation, she came behind him, and touched the border of his garment, in a believing expectation of a cure. The cure was instantly performed; and such was the change produced within her, as to convince her of its reality. This was entirely concealed from the observation of the people; but Jesus, who was privy to the whole, determined to use the woman's testimony, and to acquaint them with it. At first, through the tremour of her spirits, and an apprehension of being reproved for presumption, she was unwilling to appear; but, finding it vain to hide herself, she came forward, and, with many tears, declared the miracle in public. Thus he was pleased to manifest his own supernatural influence, and her humble dependence; and for the encouragement, not of her alone, but of others, he

* Matt. ix. 18—34. Mark v. 22, &c. Luke viii. 41, &c.

said, "Daughter, be of good comfort, thy faith hath made thee whole: go in peace."

Here was an instance of much weakness, mixed with real belief; and hereby we are taught that Jesus has compassion on our infirmities, and despises not "the day of small things." Come unto him, you who have many fears. Come, however hopeless your case may seem. Like this poor woman, you may have sought relief in vain for a long season; or rather, like her, you may grow worse and worse. The reason is, your application has hitherto been to "physicians of no value." But, turning from all others to Jesus Christ, reach forth your hand, though it be with much trembling, and desire in faith "to touch him;" and immediately "virtue will go out of him," for the perfecting your recovery.

Before the ruler of the synagogue had reached his own habitation, a fresh trial arose, enough to shake his confidence. A messenger informed him that his daughter was actually dead, and therefore that it was needless for Jesus to proceed any further. Still, however, the Saviour, who attended him, encouraged him to believe and expect her restoration. They came at length to the house, where great lamentations were made for the beloved child; and so unquestionable were the marks of her dissolution, that the intimation of her revival was derided. But Jesus, to whom "belong the issues from death," with a peculiar display of majesty called her forth again to life and vigour. The event, so confessedly miraculous, filled all those who had observed it with unspeakable astonishment; but, to avoid ostentation, or for reasons of prudence, he requested them not to divulge it.

The little narrative conveys much instruction to us. We perceive how uncertain are all human comforts, and are taught to look for painful trials in our families, as well as in our own persons. In such circumstances we may imitate the conduct of Jairus, and apply to Jesus for relief! Yet while we are

waiting for his help, it is possible, that, for the further exercise of our faith, increasing troubles may come upon us. Then, in an especial manner, we are required to believe; nor is any deliverance so great to be expected from that Jesus "who quickeneth the dead."

As he departed thence, two blind men followed him with the most importunate cries for relief: "Thou Son of David, have mercy on us." Nor was their petition vain. They were instantly restored to sight: and, though charged with secrecy, the news published abroad, probably from emotions of the warmest gratitude, the kindness of their Benefactor.

Immediately afterward, a dumb person under demoniacal possession was brought to him, and received a perfect cure at his hands. Well might the people, overwhelmed with astonishment, confess "that was never so seen in Israel." What, then, prevented him from being universally acknowledged in his proper character, as the promised Redeemer? The Pharisees exerted their influence against him, and, though they disputed not the facts, blasphemously ascribed them to the agency of Satan. The malicious cavils had been fully refuted before, and yet they continued to urge the same absurd charges. Just so, in the present day, the weak and profane objections of infidels, which have been repeatedly answered, are produced afresh, and with as much petulance and acrimony as ever. But shall not we conclud from the stupendous miracles of Jesus, that he is "mighty to save?" And, since his power and grace have suffered no diminution, may we not encourage the children of affliction, in all their various distresses, to commend their cases to him, and expect seasonable and effectual relief?

After the above-mentioned occurrences, Jesus returned to Nazareth, the place of his education. The inhabitants of this city had basely rejected him.

* Matt. xiii. 54, &c. ix. 35, &c. Mark. vi. 1-6.

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already, and even attempted to destroy him; yet he did not forsake them, but again delivered his solemn instructions in their synagogue on the sabbath-day. Many of them felt a powerful impression from his preaching. They were astonished at his words: but no good effect ensued; for they took offence. Various objections were raised, chiefly from his mean extraction, the poverty of his relations, and the low trade to which he was brought up. They looked for a Messiah of high original, invested with worldly honour, pomp, and dominion; and they determined never to receive the man in that exalted character whom they knew to be destitute of all such attractive distinctions.

Opposition of a similar nature is made among ourselves. The grand doctrines of the Gospel are often treated with scorn, because they are not acceptable to "wise men after the flesh, the mighty or the noble;" and the truth of Christ is denied, without examination, because some of its advocates possess no eminence of rank or abilities. Prejudices of this kind, though extremely absurd, frequently operate most effectually, and prove destructive. O beware! while you are giving way to captious disputation, Jesus may withdraw. He left Nazareth, and, probably, never more returned. He wrought some miracles among them, and they had credible information of what he performed in other places: but "he did not many mighty works there; nay, he could not, because of their unbelief." How fatal the consequences of their obstinate infidelity! It stopped the hand of Jesus, and expelled him from their city. He expressed his astonishment at their perverseness; but he ceased to argue with them. O fear their condemnation, if your minds are ill affected towards him! While you are raising this or the other objection, he may take his Gospel from you, and send it to another people.

Not discouraged with the persecution at Nazareth, he turned his attention to different towns. He declined

clined not the most arduous exertions, but continued to labour from one city and village to another, declaring the good tidings of salvation, and performing unparalleled acts of mercy. Every where he was followed by immense multitudes, on whom he looked with the most compassionate regard. "They fainted," probably with bodily fatigue: but their spiritual state especially, which was most deplorable, excited his tenderest pity. "They were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd." Their pretended guides were such as knew not how to direct them, and cared not for their safety. Therefore they wandered in the paths of ignorance and sin, which would infallibly lead them to destruction. Alas! what could be done for them? They discovered an earnest desire to be instructed in the word of life; but there were few to teach it. He exhorted his disciples, then, to offer up fervent prayer that God would "give them pastors according to his own heart." Their serious attendance upon his ministry, in such large numbers, was like the promising appearances of the fields, which denoted a plentiful harvest; but labourers were wanted to reap and gather in the valuable produce. And to whom should application be made but to the great Proprietor, who must be concerned for the event? Petitions, therefore, should be addressed to him, to supply the deficiency; that, by a suitable provision of diligent and faithful men, the rich fruit may be secured for himself, and precious souls no longer "destroyed for lack of knowledge."

Such a tender regard for the spiritual and everlasting happiness of the human race was a distinguishing feature in the character of Jesus. This, and this alone, is true benevolence. Where are those, who feel the same generous principle, the same ardent desire to promote the salvation of sinners? You then, will rejoice to see the multitudes of poor ignorant persons, who flock to hear the Gospel preached with plainness and fidelity. Yet you will lament

that so few, even of those whose office demands it of them, labour with assiduity to save immortal creatures from destruction. Much of the harvest seems likely to be lost, for want of proper assistance to collect it. O, what fervent prayer should you present to God on this account? Pray that He himself would send forth his servants, endued with all suitable abilities to do his work. He must ordain them to their high function; and He alone can assist and prosper them. Thousands, alas! among us, are "scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd." If such be your wretched case, be thankful that there are any who are "moved with compassion on you," and who "watch for your souls." They desire to recover you from your wandering state, to bring you back to the fold of Christ, and to lead you into his "green pastures," where are safety and refreshment. Be willing to follow their directions; and, whatever difficulties they may suffer from other quarters, let them meet with no opposition from you, since it is your salvation for which they labour incessantly. You have been "as sheep going astray;" O "return unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls *!"

* 1 Pet. ii. 25.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. 19.

Jesus sent forth his twelve Apostles, with miraculous powers, and gave them a solemn charge, for their direction and encouragement.

ONE principal purpose of our Lord's ministry was to propagate divine truth, and, in particular, to declare and explain the appointed way of access unto God. But, as his public life was so short, and his labours met with so many obstructions, it became expedient to select some faithful men, furnished with proper instructions, to assist him in the work. He had already separated twelve persons out of his constant attendants, who were to observe his directions, and to be employed as chief officers in his church. He had gradually prepared and fitted them for the apostolic function: but hitherto they had acted only under his immediate notice; and now, for the first time, he proceeded to send them out upon a circuit by themselves*.

"No man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God †." The chosen witnesses of Jesus did not obtrude themselves upon him, but waited his summons. He, the great Lord of the harvest, appoints his labourers to their respective posts. When he had assembled them together, in order to deliver their sacred commission to them, he endowed them with miraculous powers, by which, as unquestionable credentials, they might recommend their doctrine, and demonstrate its truth. They were

* Matt. x. 1, &c. xi. 1. Mark vi. 7—13. Luke ix. 1—6.

† Heb. v. 4.

enabled, with a word, to cast out devils, and to cure the most inveterate diseases.

We offer no remarks, in this place, on the names, characters, and connexions of the Apostles, observing only, in general, that we need not inquire any other reason for their selection than the sovereign will and pleasure of the Lord himself. "Ye have not chosen me," said he, "but I have chosen you*." And therefore to the most eminent of them the question might be put, "Who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive †?"

Before their departure, like a tender father concerned for the welfare of his children, whom he is sending out into the world, foreseeing difficulties, snares, and dangers, he instructed, he warned, he encouraged them, with much solemnity and affection. He directed them to go in pairs, "by two and two," that they might afford mutual support and comfort to each other. At first, their commission was subject to certain limitations. They were to address themselves only to the house of Israel; nor were they empowered to offer salvation to any other people till his final separation from them. This was a peculiar honour and favour bestowed upon the Jews: but, alas! how little were they sensible of the privilege! "They knew not the time of their visitation." Do you ask the reason of this marked distinction, or accuse the Saviour of partiality in the distribution of his blessings? He is not accountable to you for any of his matters. He has an indubitable right to do what He will with his own; and, therefore, to send or to withhold his Gospel, as He pleaseth.

But what was the grand object of the embassy of the Apostles? Hear the purport of their instructions: "As heralds, proclaim with a loud voice, and with all the zeal and courage which such a cause demands, that God is now visiting his people in mercy, and about to set up the promised kingdom of the Redeemer.

* John xv. 16.

† 1 Cor. iv. 7.

In attestation of your sacred commission, and of the truth of your doctrine, to prove also that your ministry is designed to answer the most gracious and benevolent purposes, exert the miraculous powers now intrusted to you, as opportunity shall be given, for the relief of the distressed, and not for your own private emolument, which you must cheerfully renounce."

From this part of the charge, how excellent does the religion of Jesus appear! It brings the most reviving intelligence, as it "proclaims the acceptable year of the Lord." It proposes blessings the most valuable, represented by those supernatural cures which the Apostles wrought and dispensed freely, "without money and without price," where no recompense can be expected. Shall we not rejoice that "the kingdom of Heaven" is come unto us? Or shall we hesitate to receive the gracious declarations of these primitive heralds, who exhibited incontestable evidence that they were no other than ambassadors from God? We are assured that in crediting their message we "follow not cunningly-devised fables," while we perceive that "God bore them witness both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will *." We are thankful that their commission, at first so circumscribed, was afterwards enlarged, and that they were commanded to "go into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature †." Otherwise, how would the blessing have been extended to us? But, praised be God, He hath sent his word to the Gentiles, and "granted to them also repentance unto life ‡."

Imagine the twelve standing round their Lord, to receive the law at his mouth, while he proceeds in his address, and gives them directions for their conduct. As they were totally unfurnished for their intended expedition, and without any visible means of subsistence, it is probable that anxious thoughts

* Heb. ii. 4.

† Mark xvi. 15.

‡ Acts xi. 18.

might

might arise in their minds about obtaining the necessary supplies. But thus the Saviour instructed them; "Of that kind of provision, which men generally make for a journey, you will have no need. Nay, you are forbidden to take such things with you as perhaps you might procure, and prudence might seem to require. You are to expect your constant support from that God in whose cause you go forth. "Upon Him," therefore, "cast all your care, for he careth for you;" nor doubt that his providence will sustain you, though it should be in an extraordinary way. Some will be disposed to show you kindness; and you should not scruple to accept your proper maintenance at the hands of those for whom you labour."

"Upon your first entrance into a town, inquire for such persons as are of the best character. With them abide, if they are willing to receive you; nor leave them in fickleness or disgust, whatever your accommodations may be; for you ought not to be solicitous about matters so trifling as mere convenience. When you are admitted into their houses, pay them all due courtesy and respect; and, as the ministers of peace, express your good wishes for their peace and comfort. The benediction which you solemnly pronounce shall rest upon those families which are well affected to my Gospel; but it will not profit such as continue in unbelief. Your prayers, however, though ineffectual for others, will not be lost; for they shall bring down the blessing of God upon your own heads. A tremendous wo awaits those who obstinately reject you; and, while you depart from them, you may intimate their awful state by shaking off the dust of your feet, and thus representing the very place as utterly defiled and devoted to destruction. In the grand, the decisive, day of judgment, those, who have refused to obey the word of my grace, shall perish with more aggravated ruin than even Sodom and Gomorrah, under the vengeance of Almighty God."

In this address we discover some discriminating marks of the faithful preachers of the Gospel in every age. May God raise up among ourselves men of this description, to testify "the truth, as it is in Jesus!" It becomes them not to be anxious for their own temporal support, much less to covet worldly dignities or sensual indulgences. While they carry with them a message of peace and love, they should prove, by the kindness of their deportment, that they wish to promote the happiness of all. Yet, in perfect consistence with this meekness, they should possess such courage and fidelity as "to declare all the counsel of God," and solemnly to warn contemptuous sinners of impending destruction. Is the duty of ministers allowed? But do you, to whom they come, consider also what you owe to them and their doctrine? Do you honour their office? Do you seriously regard their exhortations? Possibly a bold and unreserved declaration of the truth may excite your disgust, and draw forth the hidden corruptions of your hearts; at least it will evince your real dispositions. O beware! Those who long for your salvation must admonish you, that you do not, by a scornful rejection of them, bring upon yourselves certain and aggravated condemnation. Though they do not rank themselves with the Apostles, yet the Gospel which they preach has lost nothing of its importance or obligation by the course of time; and the God of heaven is as much concerned now as ever to vindicate its honour. Most assuredly, therefore, though "the men of Sodom were sinners before the Lord exceedingly*," yet, if you refuse or "neglect so great salvation," your guilt is more heinous than theirs, and your everlasting misery will be far more insupportable.

The Apostles had nothing but violent opposition to expect from the wickedness of the world, or rather, from the corruption of human nature. Their gracious Master, therefore, prepared them for it

* Gen. xiii. 13.

suggesting, at the same time, various considerations to encourage their hopes, and invigorate their zeal. He proceeded, in a most affecting manner, to the following purpose:—

“ Though you are going forth at my command, in my name, and under my protection, you will not be exempt from enemies. You are to be meek and inoffensive; but you will be surrounded by those, who, being of furious dispositions, may endeavour to harass and devour you. It may be right to use every precaution which prudence may dictate for your own preservation; but beware of “ rendering evil for evil;” and learn rather to “ suffer long, and be kind.”

“ Knowing the general depravity of men, trust not yourselves in their hands, but be prepared to meet with bitter persecution from them for your attachment to me. With a show of justice, they will bring you to trial in their courts, and condemn you to the most painful tortures, as the worst of criminals. In this manner you may have occasion to stand before the great men of the earth, and you will embrace the opportunity, to bear witness of me and of my salvation, which otherwise they might not hear of. Such an attestation will be an honour to you, and may prove the means of spiritual benefit to them. Are you discouraged by an apprehension that you shall not be able to speak as you ought, in your own justification, before such auditors? You shall be inspired with wisdom from above; and it shall be immediately suggested by the Holy Ghost what you should advance in vindication of yourselves and the Gospel.”

“ Nor shall your enemies be those only whose regard you have no peculiar claim to, but even your nearest relatives in life will rise up with furious and murderous rage against you. Brethren, parents, and children, will break through the ties of natural affection, while they are opposing and endeavouring to destroy each other, from a hatred of the truth. Such a bitterness of persecution you will meet with
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in every place, on account of your cordial regard to me, that you will be held up as the objects of universal detestation. But maintain your integrity, and your firmness in the faith, without wavering; and, whatever you may suffer by the way, the end will bring a glorious recompense."

"Resistance may drive you from one city, but immediately carry your message to another. Enough remains to be done, nor will you complete your progress through the various parts of Judea till I appear, in awful visitation, to vindicate my cause against its opponents."

"Are you surprised or staggered at being called out to such painful trials? Remember what I, your Lord and Master, have to endure, and what vile reproaches are cast upon my name; and be content that your treatment in the world should resemble mine. Let not your adversaries terrify or discourage you; for the day is at hand when their malignity and your integrity shall be clearly exhibited, and all these dark dispensations unfolded to your view. In the mean time, keep back nothing through fear or reserve; but faithfully and publicly proclaim aloud whatever I have revealed to you in secret. Let them condemn you to the severest tortures: you know the utmost that their malicious rage can inflict. They may destroy the life of the body; but the soul, which is the nobler part, is removed far beyond their reach; so that, though the unanimated flesh be soon reduced to its original dust, the immortal spirit will remain in perfect vigour. But, oh! dread the thought of coming under the indignation of your Almighty Sovereign, whose power extends to another world, and who can render you completely miserable, both in body and soul, and that throughout all eternity."

"Be not distressed by the apprehension of such calamitous events as may await you here. The God of heaven and earth, whose immediate charge you are, cannot forget or desert you. He exercises an universal providence; so that he marks and deter-

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mines the situation of every creature, though ever so small or worthless, and disposes all their circumstances as He pleases. You, therefore, who are in a peculiar manner the objects of his care, and most valuable in his esteem, may cheerfully confide in his protection. He knows and overrules your minutest concerns, and on this ground you should possess an unshaken fortitude in his service."

"Are you, then, bold and faithful in your profession and defence of my truth? You shall be gloriously distinguished as my beloved friends, and receive a public approbation, and a high recompense of reward, in the presence of my heavenly Father. But those, who, through shame, cowardice, or any worldly regards, shrink from that open declaration of attachment to me, and from those exertions of duty which my Gospel requires, shall be disowned and rejected, with everlasting abhorrence, for the baseness and malignity of their conduct."

"You may have expected much outward prosperity and peace from the coming of the Messiah, and the establishment of his kingdom; but the real consequence will be directly contrary. Though the tendency of my religion be most excellent, yet, through the corruption of man opposing it, all manner of confusion and violence will ensue. The fiercest contentions between the nearest relatives will take place; so that none, probably, will be so incensed against my faithful servants, as those who may dwell in the same family, and are connected with them by the closest bonds of friendship and of kindred."

"It is necessary, then, that you should be prepared for the most painful separation. If there be any one, even parent or child, whose favour you prefer to mine, you can have no proper sense of my worth, or of my claims upon you; nor can you possess any part in my salvation. You must be willing to sacrifice your ease, your reputation, and secular interest, for my sake and the Gospel's, and resolutely submit

submit to all hardships and indignities. I, your Leader and Commander, go before you, and therefore you should not hesitate to follow me through much tribulation. Perhaps a violent death may close your sufferings here. Be it so. Those who apostatize from me may lengthen out their existence upon earth a few days longer; but they shall be destroyed for ever; while you, who may shed your blood in my cause and service, shall live and reign, beyond the reach of persecutors, in everlasting happiness and glory. This is enough surely to fix your determination, and inspire you with increasing confidence and zeal."

"You will sustain an important character; nor is it a matter of indifference how you are treated in the world. I solemnly declare, that whatever kindness is shown unto you, while you are acting in my name, it shall be considered as a mark of unfeigned regard to me and my Father; for you go forth as our representatives and ambassadors. He who shall cordially receive my prophets or ministers for the sake of that Gospel which they preach, or even any faithful disciples in private life, from a pure disinterested respect to their character, shall be abundantly repaid for his pious liberality towards them; he shall partake with them of that bliss and glory to which they shall shortly be admitted."

"I commend you, therefore, as my dear children, to the notice of all who are concerned for my cause. If any one shall afford you the least attention or refreshment by the way, administering only a cup of cold water for your relief, because you belong to me, and are employed in my service, I pledge myself to return that act of kindness in an ample manner. I will not forget, but publicly own, approve, and reward, the labours of love which shall be wrought for my name's sake."

Such was the purport of our Lord's most affecting address to his twelve Apostles, when he sent them forth to evangelize the land. Such tender and earnest

nest wishes did he express for their encouragement, support, and success in their arduous work. Having received their commission and the solemn charge, they proceeded, as they were directed, on the momentous expedition. They carried with them from place to place the gracious overtures of reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ, and called upon all, without exception, to humble themselves before him, under a conviction of their guilt, and to turn from their evil ways with sincere contrition and renovation of heart. Nor did Jesus himself cease from his own vigorous exertions. He continued to bear part of the burden, and persevered in his progress, that he might diffuse the knowledge of salvation all around.

While we contemplate the office and character of the Apostles, as here exhibited, we are furnished with strong arguments for the authenticity and salutary tendency of the Gospel. Such a plan could never be the contrivance of men: it must be "the power of God, and the wisdom of God*." It is also so replete with blessings calculated to relieve our wretchedness, that we need not hesitate to pronounce it "worthy of all acceptance†." The subject will likewise lead us, as we have already intimated, to consider what manner of persons they ought to be in modern times, who are the "ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God." The case of these primitive ambassadors was, in many respects, peculiar. But all those, surely, to whom "the word of reconciliation is committed," should possess the same views and dispositions which were required in them.

We may carry the application further, and remark that the holy and heavenly tempers here inculcated are indispensably necessary, not merely for those who preach, but for those who profess, the Gospel. Though you be not invested with a public office in the church of Christ, yet, as called by his name, you should be meek, gentle, and inoffensive. You must

* 1 Cor. i. 24.

† 1 Tim. i. 15.

be willing to bear the most ignominious and scornful treatment for the sake of your Lord and Master. You must cheerfully submit to the heaviest calamities, in the way of duty, without distrusting the providence of God; and, in every possible situation, avow your attachment to Christ, whatever painful consequences you may suffer. You can never be at liberty to deny him, though your most beloved friends, or those on whom you depend for sustenance, should require you to do it. Let father and mother, wife and children, be dear to you, as they ought to be; but let Jesus be dearer than all. He claims and he deserves your cordial and supreme regard. You do not, therefore, understand his excellency, or your obligations to him, unless you prefer his favour, and the advancement of his glory, to every worldly possession or enjoyment, unless you can give up your nearest kindred, your reputation, emolument, ease, or life itself, for his sake, whenever they come in competition.

Where then shall we find such love to the Saviour, such zeal for his name? It is evident that many are totally destitute of these holy principles. Are there not those who are enslaved to sensual pleasures, and determined, as far as possible, to gratify every inclination of their hearts? And to what purpose should we inculcate upon them the necessity of taking up the cross, and following Jesus? they would turn away their ears in contempt or indignation. Yet we must declare the offensive truth, that "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life," are as inconsistent with real Christianity now as they were in primitive times. "Whosoever, therefore, will be a friend of the world, is the enemy of God *."

Is it sufficient to assume expressions of respect, and, with demure appearance, upon your bended knees, to pretend a high regard for the Saviour, while you are afraid to advance one step further in

* James iv. 4.

his service than may be agreeable to the general maxims and customs of the place in which you live? Does he not account such compliments an insult more odious to him than an avowed opposition? This temporizing spirit is as foolish as it is sinful: it pleads prudence, but it tends to destruction. You may contrive to avoid persecution, and procure applause and preferment among men; but what will these avail if Jesus disown you? What shame, confusion, and horror, will overwhelm you, when convicted, before the assembled universe, of treating him with insolent contempt!

May we all, therefore, be persuaded to follow him wherever he shall lead, and to undergo all extremities in his service! Why such a regard to present conveniencies? Why such fear of our fellow-creatures, and distrust of God? Do not these things argue much unbelief, and betray an earthly mind? Let us rise above our little difficulties, and confide in that God who takes care for the very sparrows, and hath numbered the hairs of our heads. He will not be inattentive to our wants, even in this life, if we be faithful to him: and a glorious reward is laid up in heaven for those who are willing to hazard every consequence, from a zealous adherence to his cause. Relying on his promise, may we now surrender ourselves and our all to him! Then shall we stand with confidence and joy before him at the great day of his appearing. Amen.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. 20.

Jesus, on the return of his Apostles, withdrew with them—fed five thousand by a miracle—retired from the multitude—walked on the sea—stilled the tempest—taught in the synagogue at Capernaum—cavilled at by the Jews, and forsaken by many disciples.

As we advance in the prosecution of our design, and contemplate the wonderful acts of the Son of man, we meet with additional proofs of his high dignity, and the perfection of his character. If we fix our attentive regard on this bright Luminary, such beams of glory will break forth upon us as will fill and almost overpower the soul with admiration of his excellency.

When the Apostles returned from the circuit on which they were sent, they brought back to their Lord an account of their ministry, of the miracles they had performed, and the doctrines they had taught*. Immediately he withdrew with them to a solitary place, that they might be relieved from their fatigue, and, probably, that they might retire for the purposes of devotion. This was the more necessary, as the vast crowds of people allowed them no leisure. It is expedient for all, especially for those who are actively employed in the sacred functions of religion, to secure some moments to themselves, by retreating from their public engagements, that both their minds and bodies may be recruited.

To obtain the desired privacy, he passed over part of the sea of Galilee; and great multitudes

* Matt. xiv. 13, &c. Mark vi. 30, &c. Luke ix. 10, & John vi. 1, &c.

who had observed his departure, followed him with much eagerness, "because they saw his miracles." They were induced to attend him, many at least, we fear, by no better motives than curiosity or astonishment. The compassionate Jesus, however, upon coming to the shore, where they were ready to receive him, could not look upon them without feeling the most tender concern for their state, remarking, as he had done on a former occasion, that "they were as sheep not having a shepherd." On this account, foregoing his intended rest, he began to renew his labours, and went up with them to a mountain; that he might be heard with convenience: there he opened the nature of his kingdom, and manifested his power by restoring health and vigour to them that were diseased. Blessed Jesus! we beseech thee still to look with pity "on the ignorant, and on them that are out of the way." How immense are their numbers, and how wretched is their condition! Stretch out thine arm to recover them from the paths of error, and reveal thy glories to them. Instruct them in thy truth, and take them into thy fold, as the sheep of thy pasture.

At the close of the day, the disciples, having no stock of provisions, would have dismissed the people. But Jesus, unwilling to send them away without refreshment, proposed a distribution of the food which was at hand. Accordingly, at his word, preparations were made for the wondrous entertainment. They were all marshalled in ranks, and seated in the open air upon the grass. But whence shall a sufficient quantity of meat be procured for so large a multitude; as there were present five thousand men, besides women and children? This was, indeed, a severe trial of the faith of his disciples, who were able to produce no greater store than five loaves and two small fishes. These, however, were brought forth, and, in the hands of Jesus, by an all-creating power, they were so multiplied as to be more than enough to satisfy the whole company. "They did

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all eat, and were filled;" and, when the fragments were collected, it was found that such had been the miraculous increase, that the remainder far exceeded the original provisions.

What a grandeur do we perceive in this entertainment, surpassing that which attends the most sumptuous tables of princes! What a fervour of devotion appeared in the great Master of the feast, while he looked up in prayer for the divine blessing, and taught the people to expect their food from Heaven! What an exalted majesty, mixed with the kindest condescension, distinguished his behaviour! Was not every one, then, struck with admiration, and disposed to revere and love him? They concluded without hesitation, and they concluded rightly, "This is of a truth that Prophet that should come into the world."

Do we draw the same inference? There are strong and convincing reasons which should lead us to it. When we compare the ancient predictions of the *Messiah* with the various parts of the life and character of Jesus, we must allow their accomplishment in him, and maintain that he is indeed the promised Saviour. Yet it is possible that the evidence may constrain us to assent to the fact, even while we refuse to give to this Prophet that regard which his high office demands from us. Are we, then, with profound veneration sitting at his feet, and looking to him for instruction? Do we understand or credit the message which he has brought from Heaven? Are we not strangely perverse and infatuated if we acknowledge him to be the Teacher of Israel, the Christ of God, and yet remain unconcerned about his doctrine? Either say at once, He is a base impostor (which few will dare to assert); or else bow with unfeigned submission to him, and pray, "Shew me thy ways, O Lord, and teach me thy paths. Make known to me the glorious truths of thy salvation; and speak effectually to my heart, for thy servant heareth."

Or, allowing his sacred character, are we afraid to follow

follow him? The miracle we have considered is calculated to fix and confirm our dependence upon him, as able to provide for our support, and exercising a tender care for our bodies as well as souls. If we are ever so necessitous, we perceive with what ease he can multiply our store. In a thousand ways, which we cannot foresee, he can furnish our tables with plenty. This very instruction was meant to be conveyed to us; and, accordingly, the disciples were afterwards reprov'd for not remembering the extraordinary occurrence to better purpose, when they were apprehensive of wanting bread to eat*. Let us learn, then, to "cast all our care upon him," believing that he will "feed us with food convenient for us."

The astonished multitude, concluding him to be the Messiah, and expecting, agreeably to their carnal notions, that he would set up a temporal dominion, were desirous immediately to invest him with regal honours. But so far from entertaining any ambitious designs, or discovering any ostentation, he took pains to avoid public notice and applause. He now withdrew from them in haste. He directed his disciples, also, to depart, and to cross the lake to Bethsaida: perhaps he was anxious to prevent them from favouring the foolish wishes of the people. In the mean time he himself retired to a mountain for prayer, and spent the chief part of the night in his private devotions. Ah! how unlike to him are those of his professed followers, who are solicitous to procure and preserve the pomp and power of this present world! Or, what resemblance to the holy Jesus do those bear, who have no relish for religious solitude, and can spare no time for the exalted purpose of maintaining communion with God?

The disciples were on the sea, where they were overtaken by a storm, and tossed about, for many hours together, upon the boisterous waves. Their situation was distressing: the night was dark, the water tempestuous, the wind violent and contrary:

* Matt. xvi. 9.

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they had spent their strength in vain with rowing; dangers threatened them; and their dear Lord and Master was absent. Jesus, however, could not be unmindful of them; he knew their difficulties, and drew near for their help. He had been retired till near the morning, when he came to them "walking upon the sea." How did he convince them of their safety under his protection! How did he encourage them to face every storm, in his service, while they saw the deep itself subject to his command!

So strange was the sight, that, as they imagined it was not possible for a real human body to be supported by the waves, they concluded it was an apparition, and gave way to perplexing fears. But he, to relieve them from their distress, graciously revealed himself, saying, "Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid." This was enough. The sound of his voice, speaking comfort in such awful circumstances, revived and cheered their hearts. Peter supposed that *he also should be able to walk on the boisterous sea, if his Lord would permit him to attempt it.* The leave, which he rashly solicited, was granted, that his forwardness might be checked by a sad proof of the weakness of his principles. When he felt the violence of the storm, his faith failed, and he began to sink; so that, if Jesus had not stretched out his compassionate hand to save him, he must have perished in the deep.

Jesus then entered the vessel, and restored peace and comfort to his disciples. Immediately the rage of the wind abated, and they were brought to the very point of land which they aimed at. What proofs of power, what marks of dignity, were here! Yet what modesty and condescension appeared in our Lord's constant deportment! He did not display his ability in an ostentatious manner, or even for his own accommodation. He submitted to travel on foot, with much fatigue, when he could have instantly transported himself to the most distant place. His attendants were filled with inexpressible astonishment,

ment, and the more so as they had not duly considered the miracle of the preceding day. They fell down before him, with the strongest emotions of gratitude and love, and with expressions of profound adoration, crying out, "Of a truth thou art the Son of God!" The inhabitants, also, of the neighbouring coasts, no sooner received intelligence of him, than they flocked after him with great eagerness, entreating his compassion toward the sick; and, merely by the touch of his garment, the most inveterate diseases were removed.

Shall not We, likewise, be encouraged to apply to him, who has all power in his hand, and who, in so many instances, has proved himself "mighty to save?" Our faith may be tried, as that of his disciples was, and, probably, our weakness will soon be evinced. "Lord, help our unbelief." He is often pleased to suffer a violent storm to arise, and his people may seem as if they were left alone upon the deep, toiling in extreme distress, ready to perish. But he will graciously interpose, in due season, to save them. He will manifest himself to them, appease the rage of the tempest, quiet their fears, and "bring them unto their desired haven." "Oh, that men would praise the Lord for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men!"

The multitude, who had been desirous that Jesus should assume the government, and from whom he had withdrawn, sought after him again with renewed ardour. They had travelled far on foot, and then they crossed the lake in search of him. At length they found him in the synagogue at Capernaum, and, after expressing their surprise at his removal to that place, which they could not account for, they received a solemn reproof for the low and carnal motives upon which they followed him. The miraculous entertainment he had afforded them raised their expectations of his possessing a temporal dominion, and they were still in hopes of exalting and enriching

* Psal. cvii. 30, 31.

themselves

themselves by his service. A poor reason, indeed, for pretending an attachment to Jesus! Yet, we fear, a regard to secular advantages has been the ground of much of that religious zeal which has been admired in the world. But it is a mean and contemptible principle. He called upon them, therefore, to turn their attention from the care of the perishable body to that of the immortal soul, and to employ their utmost eagerness and diligence for the attainment of those blessings, which would remain for ever. He declared, also, that he himself, as "the Son of man," had received a commission, from God the Father, freely to bestow this eternal happiness and glory.

They professed an earnest desire to do the will of God; and therefore our Lord asserted the necessity of believing on the Saviour, as a duty indispensably requisite above all others, the grand injunction of the new dispensation, and the appointed method of acceptance with God. His words implied that he was the Christ whom they should receive. Yet many of them were unwilling to admit his claims, and insolently demanded his credentials, as if he had already exhibited none which deserved regard. He had performed various miracles in their neighbourhood, of which they must have had authentic information; and their own eyes had seen unquestionable proofs of his divine mission: and still they presumed to ask, "What dost thou work?" Unbelief is always unreasonable; it cavils at the plainest testimonies, and determines never to be satisfied. We need not, therefore, be surprised at the outcry for stronger evidence, as it is generally made by those whom no evidence will convince.

It was intimated to Jesus that his miracles were far inferior to those of Moses, who had fully demonstrated his sacred character and legation by supporting their ancestors in the wilderness with manna from heaven. He replied that the Lord God was then dispensing to them bread infinitely more excellent

lent than that which Moses had been the means of communicating, and that this bread was no other than the very Person who had descended from the highest heavens, for the purpose of giving life to a perishing world. The extraordinary and important declaration probably impressed the minds of some of his audience, and constrained them to cry out, though they comprehended not the full import of their own words, "Lord, evermore give us this bread!" There cannot be a more suitable petition for ourselves to offer up: only let us understand and feel its meaning. Who is not anxious to preserve life? What immense pains are taken to procure that sustenance which merely supports the body! And shall we not be solicitous to gain a happy existence beyond the grave? Are we told that God has graciously made provision for this very end in the Gospel of his Son? And shall we not, instead of proudly and petulantly quarrelling with it, seriously inquire into its nature, and the method in which the benefit may be conveyed? Such a disposition, surely, becomes our character and situation. Let us hear, then, the further instructions of Jesus on this most interesting subject.

He declared explicitly, and without reserve, that he himself is that spiritual food on which our everlasting salvation depends; that by faith alone the blessing is obtained; and that the believer, in a sincere application to him, shall be delivered from those carnal desires which can never be satisfied, and shall find his soul contented and delighted in him. Still he observed that many of those, who then saw him with their eyes, and had the best opportunity of examining his pretensions, contemptuously rejected the gracious offer. How shall this be accounted for? The true reason is assigned by our Lord. In our fallen and depraved state, such is our natural blindness, pride, and love of the world, that we are all unwilling to accept the salvation provided, by submitting to Jesus, and fixing our whole reliance upon

upon him. Yet, that the glorious plan of redemption may not be defeated by our folly and perverseness God hath secured a people for himself by his own covenant; and these, under the strong influence of his Spirit, abandon their opposition to Jesus, and bow before him with an unreserved subjection, thankful to partake of mercy in the appointed way. We adore that power, which hath wrought effectually in all them that believe. While we admire the change we confess and praise the free and sovereign grace of our God, which hath produced it.

But, lest this high and mysterious doctrine should be abused, or any humble penitents be discouraged Jesus also declared his readiness to receive the applications of all who come, in all possible circumstances and solemnly pledged his word that no objection whatever should prevail against them. This he confirmed by remarking that the final salvation of his people was the very end for which he had left the glory of heaven, and that it was also the grand object of his Father's counsels. On this ground he instructed them to expect from him the completion of their happiness in an everlasting state, and promised, again and again, that, though their bodies must go down to the dust, the grave should not detain them forever, but that his arm would rescue them from death at the last day. Will not these assurances suffice us? Jesus possesses all fulness of grace for the recovery of them that are lost. The invitation is sent to all without exception: the offer is freely made to those who sincerely desire it; and all obstructions are removed but those which sinners themselves obstinately continue to throw in the way. What more do you wish for than a favourable acceptance? Why then do you remain at a distance from him since he bids you to draw nigh, and engages to give you a cordial welcome? There is no decree which can exclude you from his mercy, if only you will submit to his proposals. His hand is stretched out to communicate his blessings; and his bowels yearn

with compassion toward every poor supplicant who is humbled at his feet.

Jesus having spoken in high terms of his descent from heaven, and of the benefits to be derived from himself, the Jews, who were not acquainted with his divine extraction, and supposed him to be no more than the son of Joseph, his reputed father, began to cavil at his expressions. To silence their objections, and turn their attention to themselves, he replied to the following effect:—

“ Instead of indulging a captious disposition, seriously consider your own awful circumstances, and implore direction and assistance from above. For, such is the natural ignorance and perverseness of man in his fallen state, that he cannot be induced to seek or accept salvation in my name, but by the powerful operation of God upon his mind. Your own prophets have instructed you to ask and expect this very influence; and every one who has obtained it will acknowledge my claims, and yield me an unfeigned submission. In this way only my blessings are to be secured. Mistake me not, as if the Father would manifest himself in a visible manner: He speaks to you by him who is come from his immediate presence; and I, his faithful Witness, declare with the most solemn and repeated asseverations, that he, who places his whole affiance upon me, is received into the divine favour, and possesses a sure title to eternal happiness.”

“ I am, therefore, that bread, which alone can afford true sustenance to your souls. How far superior to the manna by which your ancestors were supported! That was the means of preserving their existence in this world only for a short season; whereas the spiritual food which I propose will effectually secure you from perishing for ever. I myself am that food, of which the manna was a faint and imperfect representation: I came down from the highest heavens to communicate everlasting life to all those, throughout the whole world, who by faith shall partake

take of the sacred provision. For this very purpose I have assumed a human body, which I shall shortly offer up as an expiatory sacrifice, to rescue sinners from deserved ruin, and procure for them the possession of endless felicity."

Declarations so strong, so new, and mysterious, excited various sentiments in the minds of the Jews, who, therefore, began to dispute with each other concerning them. Through their carnal and perverse dispositions they could not comprehend how Jesus could "give them his flesh to eat." Probably most of them were disposed to deride the doctrine as altogether absurd. But he proceeded to confirm it by the most express and vehement assertions, without deigning to answer every cavil which a proud objector might bring.

"However you may scorn the warning, I solemnly assure you that you are totally destitute of real spiritual life, unless you be quickened by believing on the Son of man, as suffering and dying for you *. He surrenders up his body to the most violent tortures, and consents to shed his blood; and the benefits of this atonement will be communicated to you through

* It would be doing the utmost violence to language to explain our Lord's expressions in any other sense than as referring to his intended sacrifice of himself. If he be no more than a teacher of virtue, and if he save us only by his good instructions, with what propriety of speech could he talk of giving his flesh to eat, and his blood to drink? This figure, doubtless, must be understood as representing his death, and our salvation as resulting from it, agreeably to those other declarations of the Scriptures, which ascribe our redemption to his blood. Allowing the reference to his atonement, the whole appears consistent, and demands our most serious regard; but otherwise it must be thought strange and incongruous.

The Lord's supper was not at this time instituted; and therefore, though many of the expressions may be properly accommodated to that sacrament, which is an emblematical representation of the flesh and blood of Christ given to us as our spiritual food and sustenance, yet we are not warranted in drawing any conclusions from the passage before us with respect to the efficacy of that ordinance. Those who communicate by faith do indeed eat the flesh and drink the blood of Christ, and they are vitally united to him. But the bare participation of the outward elements proves not a believing application to the Saviour, nor does it necessarily implant or increase the divine principle of life in the soul.

faith.

faith. As the common food of your bodies must be received, that it may afford the necessary sustenance, so must you feast upon the sacrifice which my death will make, in order to derive from it true nourishment and vigour to your souls. The man who thus maintains an habitual regard to me, as his grand and sole support, "who eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood," possesses the principle of immortal life within him, and I engage to raise his very dust from the grave in a glorified state. He is furnished with an entertainment more delightful than the most sumptuous provisions can be to the senses. He is joined to me by a mysterious and inseparable union, which even resembles that of the eternal Father and the incarnate Son, and by virtue of which his soul shall be sustained and invigorated, through the constant communications of the Spirit. So far, then, does the heavenly manna surpass, in its excellent effects, that miraculous food which was granted to your progenitors in the wilderness. That imparted a benefit comparatively mean in its nature, and short in its continuance; but this, which is now exhibited, will secure life and happiness of the most exalted kind, and durable as eternity."

Such was the purport of our Lord's address to the Jews, and it is equally interesting to us as it was to them. Have we seriously considered it, and the important doctrines it involves? What impressions, then, are produced in our minds? Are we, like them, disposed to murmur, because Jesus claims such an exalted dignity? Or are we inclined to enter into curious speculations, and dispute against the plain assertions of the Bible, because they contain some things which baffle our comprehension? How presumptuous is such a spirit! Rather let us consider our blindness and extreme depravity, and suspect our own conclusions. Let us fervently implore those divine influences which God hath promised, and which the wisest and best of men continually need. Our understandings must be illuminated,

minated, truly to discern the appointed method of salvation in the Gospel; our carnal prejudices and affections must be subdued, that our objections against it may be effectually silenced; and our will must be brought under a holy bias, that we may yield a cordial compliance.

Jesus is exhibited as the heavenly manna, which alone can nourish our souls to life eternal: Have we made use of him in this character? He condescended to be made "partaker of flesh and blood," that, dying in our nature, he might expiate our guilt: Have we fixed our regard upon him as our atoning sacrifice? It is solemnly declared, that, without a real participation of Christ by faith, we must remain in a state of spiritual death: Have we been sufficiently aware of the absolute necessity of believing? It is not enough that we give a cool assent to this fact, that Jesus hath died for us; but we must place our whole reliance upon him, and expect pardon, peace, and everlasting glory, as obtained for us by his blood: Do we constantly maintain such a temper of mind towards him? Great and blessed are the effects of this humble and cordial application to the Saviour: Can we testify of their reality and excellence? Do we daily feed on the sacred sustenance here provided for us, and find in it the most exquisite delight? Are we sensible of any communion between Jesus and our own souls? And do we derive from him refreshment when we are weary, strength when we faint, and comfort when we are oppressed with troubles? If this be our case, we may rejoice in the confidence that he will bring us forth at the general resurrection with triumph and exceeding joy, and grant us a sure abode in his own glorious presence for evermore.

Such a free declaration of the mysteries of faith, and especially such a particular application of them to the consciences of the hearers, will generally excite offence; nor should the ministers of Christ be surprised at that effect, when they observe the recep-
tion

tion which their Master met with. Many, even of his professed friends and disciples, began to cavil at his doctrine as harsh and unintelligible. He perceived their inward dissatisfaction, and replied to the very objections which they were afraid to utter. He intimated that he should soon return to heaven, from whence he had come down; and that his ascension, which might puzzle them as much as what he had asserted, would prove the justice of his claims. To prevent their abuse of the subject, he guarded them against a literal acception of his words, and directed them to the spiritual sense, in which alone they could be understood with profit. But he remarked, that, as he had been aware of their secret unbelief from the very first, he had insisted on divine influences, as necessary to remove the opposition of their hearts against them.

From that time, many, who had long followed him, perceiving, probably, that their hypocrisy was detected, totally withdrew, and returned no more. Nay, such was the desertion, that it might seem as if the very twelve were staggered, and ready to depart. Jesus, therefore, called upon them to declare explicitly whether they would abide with him or no, that so their service might not appear to be constrained, but voluntary. The most distant proposal, however, of apostatizing from the Saviour, will ever strike the sincere believer with horror. Accordingly, Peter stood forth, as the mouth of the Apostles, maintaining their immovable attachment to him, and steadfast dependence upon him for eternal life; rejecting, also, with fixed resolution, the thought of forsaking him, as big with misery and ruin. This was, indeed, a good confession. Yet, that they might still exercise a holy jealousy, and not be shaken in their minds by what would soon take place among themselves, he intimated that even in their small company, which he had selected for his own peculiar society, there was one person who possessed so malignant a disposition, as to resemble the devil himself. Ah!

what

what terror, what distressing inquiries, must this excite among them!

Is it any objection, then, to the Christian church at the present day, that it contains many unsound members? Falsehearted professors are to be expected at all times; but, in general, some temptation or other will occur, which will manifest their insincerity. Frequently they are offended by the plain dealing of their ministers; and it is no wonder that they depart from those who suspect them of hypocrisy. How awful is their case! "It had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness*." May the example awaken the attention of all who bear the Christian name! Happy those who are preserved unshaken, in the midst of numerous apostates. We ask, then, of what kind is your attachment to Jesus? "Will ye also go away?" Are you, "who seemed to be pillars, moved from your hope?" You must, indeed, be left to your own choice; but we entreat you to form that choice deliberately, with a full view of all the consequences before you. If you depart from Christ, to whom can you betake yourselves? Is there any other refuge? Are "the words of eternal life" to be found any where besides? We exhort you, then, that, whatever difficulties may arise, you would not "draw back unto perdition," but "with purpose of heart cleave unto the Lord."

* 2 Pet. ii. 21.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. 21.

Jesus replied to the cavils of Pharisees—cautioned the people against them—tried and commended the faith of a woman of Canaan—wrought many cures—fed four thousand by a miracle—opposed by Pharisees and Sadducees—restored sight to a blind man at Bethsaida—declared his character, and foretold his passion, to his disciples, requiring them also to suffer with him.

THOUGH we are informed of many minute occurrences in the life of Jesus, yet many are concealed from us. We are not told whether he was present at the celebration of the passover, which succeeded the transactions recorded in the preceding section. But it is probable that, at that season of national concourse, various reports of Him, who engaged universal attention, were carried from Galilee to Jerusalem, and that these excited the envious displeasure of the public and most distinguished teachers of religion. It is certain, however, that many of that description, the Scribes and Pharisees, went down from the city, and, as it is likely, to Capernaum, though at a considerable distance, for the express purpose of collecting some grounds of accusation, or of bringing him into discredit with the people*. These men, with all their pretences to sanctity, were the most violent opposers of the Saviour, and were evidently actuated by the basest motives in their conduct towards him. They discovered great zeal by taking so long a journey; but it was in a bad cause.

* Matt. xv. 1—20. Mark vii. 1—23.

Nor is it uncommon for those who resist the truth to be at immense pains and expense for the accomplishment of their purposes, and even to suppose that they are "doing God service," at the very time they are filled with enmity against him.

Persons so disposed will seldom be at a loss for objections. Something or other, in the most exemplary behaviour, will appear censurable to the envious and malicious eye. What cause of complaint, then, did these insidious adversaries find against the holy Jesus? They upbraided him with the contempt which his disciples showed for their traditions in eating without first washing their hands. How ridiculous and how palpable was their hypocrisy, who laid such stress on outward purifications, and perceived not their need of inward sanctity! Men are ever prone to depend on a strict observance of rites and ceremonies, even of their own invention, and to substitute them for "the power of godliness," or to imagine that these will compensate the neglect of the most express moral injunctions. Jesus, therefore, convicted them of their glaring inconsistency in preferring their superstitious institutions to the absolute precepts of God. He produced one instance, in which they virtually abrogated the fifth commandment; for they excused those, who, through a false pretext of piety, and of devoting their substance to God, refused to relieve their aged parents in distress. They accounted it sufficient to say, "We have bound ourselves by a vow to give our money to the treasury, or some sacred use, and are therefore freed from the obligation of contributing to the support of our father or our mother."

It is indispensably required that we "learn first to show piety at home, and to requite our parents; for that is good and acceptable before God *." We cannot, therefore, credit their professions of religion, who violate so plain and strict an injunction; nor can any sacrifices to God, however costly, be accepted

* 1 Tim. v. 4.

in lieu of this important duty. Yet in many such ways did these corrupt teachers flatter their deluded followers. Our Lord observed that their vile dissimulation was accurately described by one of their own prophets. For, like those of old, they "drew near to God with their mouth, and with their lips did honour him, but removed their heart far from him *." And do none of modern times resemble them? Have we not those, who with a rigorous exactness insist on the particular distinctions of their own party, and institutions of merely human authority, while they allow themselves to transgress, in various instances, the eternal rules of righteousness, and suppose that their ceremonial scrupulosity or religious zeal will be a sufficient vindication of their conduct? Ah! what will avail the most specious pretences to devotion before that God, who "desireth truth in the inward parts?" "In vain do we worship him," if we offer him only the service of the lips, or attempt to substitute any observances instead of that holy obedience which he requires.

This was a proper occasion (and Jesus therefore embraced it) to warn the people not to be misled by such ignorant expounders of the law, and to show them that the depravity of the heart is the grand source of impurity, which renders us defiled in the sight of God. The Pharisees, offended with his plain reproofs, and confounded in their designs, had gone away in disgust. On that account, the disciples in private expressed their fears for the consequence; but he bad them not to be disturbed by those perverse opposers of the truth, inasmuch as both they, and their infatuated followers, would soon be overwhelmed with final and remediless destruction.

It is an awful case when those who know not the way to heaven undertake to be public instructors. How fatal the effects to themselves and others! The deceived and the deceiver, however they may flatter and be flattered, shall perish together. Let us not,

* Isa. xxix. 13.

therefore,

therefore, blindly and implicitly submit to the opinions and dictates of men, though they may bear a respectable character, or even fill the highest stations in the church; but let us form our judgment, not from human decisions, but from "the law and the testimony," since, whoever may be our teachers, we must answer for ourselves before the bar of God.

The declarations of our Lord were not well understood even by his own disciples. Having reproved them, therefore, in secret, for their dulness of comprehension, he affirmed in plainer terms that the heart is the seat and source of all moral pollution, that the food which is received for the proper nourishment of the body brings no defilement upon the soul, but that the man is rendered unclean and offensive before God only in consequence of his inward depravity, and that which proceeds from it. This is a doctrine which calls for deep humiliation and constant circumspection. It is easy to eat with clean hands, but would that purge the conscience? Ah! "Who can say, I have made my heart clean; I am pure from my sin*?" According to the description which Jesus here gave, our fallen nature is so fruitful of evil, that it puts forth, as its common produce, all manner of impurity. Hence we are taught to account for the various kinds of iniquity in the world. Corrupt reasonings, irregular desires, sensual affections, lewdness, violence, dishonesty, avarice, malevolence, treachery, envy, profaneness, pride, and folly, have but one and the same origin: "they come from within." What then shall we think of the fountain which sends forth such filthy streams? How suitable is the confession of Job, "Behold, I am vile!" How exactly adapted to our case is that gracious promise of the new covenant, "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean:—a new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you†."

* Prov. xx. 9.

† Ezek. xxxvi. 25, 26.

Jesus, withdrawing from the observation of his malicious enemies, went into the neighbourhood of Tyre and Sidon, which was a remote part of the land*. Here, for proper reasons doubtless, he sought to conceal himself, but found it impracticable. He was soon discovered, and applied to for relief; but his visit is distinguished only by one little occurrence, which exhibits a character very opposite to that we have seen in the Pharisees. A poor distressed woman, not "of the stock of Israel," but descended probably from the ancient Canaanites, is here produced as a surprising instance of the rich grace of God: and it is likely too that her case was intended to intimate that mercy would shortly appear for the outcasts of the Gentiles. She had heard of the wonderful works of Jesus, from which, it should seem, she believed him to be the very Saviour whom the Jews were taught to expect from the family of David. Under this conviction she had recourse to him, in behalf of her beloved daughter, who was grievously afflicted with a demoniacal possession. She implored his kind interposition for her child, and urged her request with peculiar ardour.

The case was truly pitiable: but the behaviour of Jesus on this occasion was somewhat singular. We have hitherto observed him attentive to every cry of distress, and ready to render his assistance wherever it was solicited. But now he appeared totally regardless of the importunate suppliant, and returned no answer to her prayer. After some time, the disciples interceded for her, perhaps through real compassion, or being wearied with her incessant cries. Yet even this application seemed to meet with an absolute refusal, because the immediate objects of his commission were "the lost sheep of the house of Israel," and not "sinners of the Gentiles." What, then, could be alleged in her behalf? She determined not to give up her petition, but rather to press it with greater earnestness, though she had nothing to plead but her

* Matt. xv. 21—29. Mark vii. 24, &c.

misery. She cast herself at his feet, in adoration of his power and grace, exclaiming, with evident expressions of inward anguish, and yet of entire reliance upon him, "Lord, help me." Still the Saviour appeared deaf to her entreaties, and even to reject her with contempt; for he replied, that the Jews, as children of the family, had a prior claim to his regard, and that it would be improper to cast their bread to "the dogs;" such being the low estimation in which the Gentiles were held.

From this severe repulse we might have considered her case as desperate; but she, with unshaken dependence, "against hope believed in hope." Her difficulties increased her ardour, so that she turned the very objections urged against her into an argument in her own favour. Allowing the justness of our Lord's allusion, and that she deserved to be treated no otherwise than the dogs, she begged permission to gather some crumbs under the Master's table, which the children would not use; intimating that, as his grace was so large, like the provisions of a rich entertainment, some small portion of it might be extended to her, worthless as she was, without injury to his peculiar people.

We might possibly accuse the Saviour of acting with rigorous cruelty towards this poor woman; but the close of the narrative unfolds the reasons of his conduct. Though for some time he appeared unrelenting and inexorable, yet at length his compassion broke forth; and then it was found that he had withheld from her the desired mercy only that he might exercise her faith, for its further increase, and exhibit it to public view for the instruction and encouragement of others. When, therefore, she had given full proof of her unfeigned humility, and firm reliance upon him, he no longer frowned, but granted her petition in the most gracious manner: he declared his warmest approbation of her principles, and assured her of the perfect and instantaneous recovery of her daughter.

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What, then, do we learn from this incident? We hear of Jesus; but do we believe him to be "the Son of David," the "Lord," who can "have mercy on us?" Have we no request to make, no blessing to implore from him? Let us pray with importunity, and take no denial. Perhaps he may deal with us as he did with the woman of Canaan, by seeming to disregard our distress, and to reject our suit with disdain. But let not this apparent neglect deter us: though repulsed again and again, let us renew our application with fresh ardour, and doubt not a happy issue. He may require us to wait long for the very mercy which he means to bestow. In the mean time, we are to manifest our deep contrition, and the strength of our confidence in his power, faithfulness, and love. Nay, though our guilt and depravity may be urged against us, as rendering us unsuitable objects for the Saviour's notice, we may solicit him the more earnestly to glorify himself in our deliverance. But, ah! how much impatience do we discover! How hardly do we bear the least delay! How soon do we give up our expectation in despondency, as if "the mercy of God were clean gone for ever, and his promise had failed for evermore!" How wretched, then, would be our condition, if he should treat us according to our own unbelieving apprehensions!

Jesus, having left the neighbourhood of Tyre and Sidon, came near to the sea of Galilee, where he ascended a mountain, probably for the purpose of instructing the multitudes who followed him. Here the case of one deprived entirely of his hearing, and almost of his speech, was submitted to him; nor was his help implored in vain. Devoutly looking up in prayer, and then pronouncing the word with peculiar majesty, he instantly restored the obstructed faculties to their proper functions. That he might avoid ostentation, or that he might not provoke the malice of his enemies, he desired the matter to be concealed from public notice; but the cure appeared so wonderful, that it was soon proclaimed abroad,
and

and all expressed their admiration of his character, saying, "He hath done all things well."

Nor was this the only miracle which he performed there. Many other infirm and diseased persons were brought and cast at his feet, who excited his pity, and experienced his power to heal*. These astonishing events could not but make a deep impression on the minds of the people, who therefore "glorified the God of Israel" for his gracious interposition. And shall we hear of them with a careless indifference? Shall we not be induced, from such proofs of the strength and mercy of our Redeemer, to trust, and love, and praise, and serve him? Shall we not perceive herein the performance of ancient promises, and bless God, who "hath remembered his holy covenant, and raised up an horn of salvation for us?"

The dignity of Jesus was displayed in other instances. Again he put forth his creative power, as on a former occasion, to supply the necessities of those who attended his ministry. Moved with compassion for the people, who had continued with him three days together, and were then quite destitute of food, and many of them at a distance from their own homes, he furnished a table for them in the open fields. He directed his disciples to impart to them their own provisions. These were seven loaves and a few small fishes; but, poor as the stock was, it was so increased in the distribution, that four thousand persons, besides women and children, were fed and satisfied. The remains of this miraculous feast, as of the former, exceeded the original store, seven baskets of fragments being gathered up. He has afforded us sufficient encouragement, surely, to depend upon him for our daily bread. Only let us follow him in the way of duty, and he will not suffer us to "want any good thing." He "giveth food to all flesh;" nay, "the earth is his, and the fulness thereof;" so that he can, without difficulty,

* Matt. xv. 30, &c. Mark viii. 1—10.

supply all our need. He has instructed us also, we perceive, to be frugal in the midst of plenty, and not to lavish, by an useless profusion, what his bounty bestows. In every case it is proper to "gather up the fragments, that nothing be lost."

Having dismissed the multitude, he crossed the sea to the coasts of Magdala. Here a fresh attack was made upon him by a company of Pharisees and Sadducees united, who wished to insnare him*. These men were as repugnant to each other in their principles as possible, the former being superstitious in the extreme, the latter perfectly licentious; but they came together to tempt Jesus. We see that persons of opposite tempers, of different sentiments, and of adverse parties, who cordially hate one another, can lay aside their animosities for a season, and forget their mutual malevolence, that they may join their strength and interest in acting against Christ. These subtle antagonists, like modern infidels, objected to the sufficiency of his evidence, and demanded of him another sort of attestation than what he had yet given. They desired "a sign from heaven," intending, probably, some splendid appearance in the skies. But is it not the height of pride and insolence for sinners to prescribe unto God what measures of conduct he should pursue, what kind of a revelation he should afford them, or by what particular testimonies it should be confirmed? Men presumptuously despise and reject the plain and incontestable proofs by which he has evinced the truth of his Gospel, and arrogantly call for those which he has wisely denied, and which would be ineffectual to convince them.

Many discover an acute discernment in their attention to worldly things, who betray the grossest ignorance and stupor in spiritual concerns. They will also transact their secular affairs with confidence, where they have nothing to depend on but mere conjecture, and yet hazard their eternal salva-

* Matt. xvi. 1—12. Mark viii. 11—21.

tion while they are petulantly objecting to the infallible credentials of the holy Scriptures. Such was the case of those captious disputants who attacked the Saviour: and on this ground he reproved their inconsistency in forming an accurate judgment of the weather, and obstinately refusing to "discern the signs of the times." He then declared, with deep distress for their awful state, that no such evidence as they desired would be granted, except it were his own resurrection on the third day; and then he left them to themselves, departing to the opposite side of the lake. Let their case stand as a solemn admonition to those who study to invalidate revelation by their subtle arguments. Alas! while you are debating, Jesus may entirely withdraw himself from you, and give you up to corrupt reasonings, and confirmed obduracy of heart.

When they had crossed the sea, the disciples of Jesus were distressed to find that they had nearly exhausted their whole stock of provisions. Their Master, to turn off their attention to a more profitable subject, cautioned them to "beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees," intending thereby to guard them against the dangerous opinions of those false teachers, whom he had lately combated. But they were so anxious about their bodily sustenance, that they considered him only as directing them what bread they were to avoid. He reproved them, therefore, very sharply, for their dullness of comprehension in spiritual things, and for their distrusting fears of wanting food to eat, after having twice seen, as they had done, thousands supported by a miracle. Do not most of our own painful apprehensions arise from our ignorance and unbelief, and from a forgetfulness of the Lord's gracious interpositions in our favour? Oh! what shame and confusion belong to us, because we have profited no more by our past experience!

Jesus then declared explicitly that he meant to guard them against those corrupt doctrines of his opposers
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which might be compared to leaven. How insinuating, how infectious, is error! How soon it spreads its influence, though often imperceptibly! Are we aware of the dangerous consequence of admitting it? Or do we foolishly imagine that all opinions are equally safe? Are there no fatal mistakes, in our own days, of which we should be suspicious? Yes, there never was a time when such a caution was more necessary. Take heed, then, that ye be not "carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive *."

Jesus came to Bethsaida, where he was requested to extend his compassion to a blind man †. He readily consented; and yet he chose not to perform the miracle within the confines of the town, nor would he suffer the person to return thither, to publish his case; which might be intended as a mark of his displeasure against the unbelieving inhabitants. Many of the astonishing effects of his power and grace at this time also are purposely concealed from the observation of sinners, who would be disposed to treat them with contempt and derision. But the day is approaching when all his wonderful works, and the excellency of his character, shall be made known to the assembled universe, to the unspeakable joy of faithful people, and the confusion of his enemies.

When he had withdrawn the man to a little distance from the city, he restored his sight, though in a gradual manner. At the first touch of the Saviour, some faint glimmerings of light were conveyed to the darkened eyes, so that things were perceived very obscurely, and men appeared "as trees walking." But, upon the second touch, every object was seen distinctly. In each one of his miracles, Jesus exhibited his divine perfections: but he did not confine himself to a particular mode of operation. In some instances, we apprehend, the full blaze of day was

* Eph. iv. 14.

† Mark viii. 22—26.

suddenly

suddenly poured in upon the blind; but here was a regular advance from one degree of clearness to another. It is the same in spiritual concerns. He alone "giveth light and understanding to the simple;" but the methods of his grace are different in different persons. We must not dictate to him, nor set up the case of any Christian as a standard to which that of all others must be accommodated. Some are instantaneously "called out of darkness into marvellous light;" whilst many attain, by a slow progress, to the knowledge of the truth. The least measure of divine illumination is an earnest for good. It is like the twilight of the morning, which announces the rising of the sun. Though much obscurity, therefore, may attend your present views, be encouraged to wait upon the Saviour, in hope of receiving a more distinct perception. "The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day *."

Jesus now changed his situation, and betook himself to Cesarea-Philippi, in the northern extremity of Judea †. In that neighbourhood, being retired with his disciples, he inquired of them what were the general sentiments of men concerning him. When informed that he was thought to be either John the Baptist, or some one of the ancient prophets, who was risen from the dead, he urged them to declare their own opinion of his character. To this there could be no other answer from his own attendants than what Peter immediately returned in the name of the rest, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." The confession was explicit, decided, and ingenuous; and Jesus pronounced the favoured Apostle who made it peculiarly blessed, having received his knowledge, not by his natural abilities, or any human aid, but by divine communication. Then, having asserted the infallible security

* Prov. iv. 18.

† Matt. xvi. 13, &c. Mark viii. 27, &c. ix. 1. Luke ix. 18—2

of his church against all assaults of the powers of darkness, he promised to use Peter as a principal instrument in building that sacred edifice, and settling the concerns of his government. This amounted to a clear and explicit avowal that he was indeed the Saviour, possessed of supreme authority; but it passed only in private; and, from motives of prudence, he charged them not to divulge the matter till the proper season.

What are our conclusions respecting the extraordinary Character before us? Do we know him to be the Christ? Let us not presume on our own sagacity, the advantages of education, or any assistance from men, but implore the divine influence upon our minds, "that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto us the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him *." Or are we grounded on the only sure foundation, "the Rock," which cannot be moved? Then let us exult in our high privileges; and, trusting to the promise, let us defy the fiercest attacks of our most malicious enemies.

Jesus, having expressly acknowledged his real character, began to speak to his disciples with less reserve concerning himself, and the particular means by which he should accomplish redemption for his people. He, therefore, plainly foretold his approaching sufferings, death, and resurrection. But such a Saviour they had not looked for; and the declaration staggered their faith. Peter, in particular, with his usual forwardness, dared to object to the scheme, as unworthy of his Master, and to dissuade him from it. This brought upon him a sharp rebuke, for he had evidently betrayed very low and carnal conceptions of the kingdom of Christ, and appeared even as an accomplice of Satan, in opposing his Lord's designs. Let us seek for proper views of the way of salvation. If Peter was acting a diabolical part, when

* Eph. i. 17.

he tempted Jesus to relinquish the end for which he came into the world, let us be well established in this fundamental article of our creed, that "we have redemption through his blood," and that "he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself*."

From this circumstance Jesus was led to address, not his disciples only, but the multitude at large, on the necessity of being willing to suffer with him. Let us attend to his solemn declarations; for they concern ourselves. Do we profess a regard to him? He exhorts us to enter upon a strict course of self-denial, and to submit to extreme difficulties, even to martyrdom itself, in his cause. We must testify a grateful sense of his love, and a pure desire to promote his glory, by sacrificing ease, interest, reputation, and life itself, when we are required, for his sake. An inordinate attachment to present enjoyments will ruin us for ever; but a cheerful renunciation of every thing dear and valuable upon earth, in the service of Christ, will be recompenced with eternal blessedness hereafter.

Are any deterred, by such considerations, from following the Saviour? Then make your choice, and, if you please, prefer the world to him. Secure its best delights, and, if it be possible, possess the whole of its pomps, its dominion, or its pleasures: what will you have gained? Can you estimate your profit, when you shall be rejected of God, and your souls lost, beyond the power of recovery, for ever? Is there any equivalent to be offered, by which you could purchase a release from hell, or even a mitigation of its torments? And are your immortal spirits in danger of perishing? Yes: "the Judge standeth before the door;"—"the Son of man shall come," with all the glory of his divine majesty, and with the whole retinue of heaven; and you must appear at his tribunal, to receive "according to your works." What, then, have you to look for at his hands, if you have

* Eph. i. 7. Heb. ix. 26.

opposed his cause, or, through the base principle of fear or shame, have declined the profession of his Gospel, or the society of his people? Think you that he will then own you, and number you among his saints? No: he will separate you from the company of those to whom you durst not avow an attachment upon earth; he will reject you with abhorrence, and consign you to a state of unutterable confusion, torment, and despair.

Such was the purport of our Lord's solemn admonitions; and in the same manner should sinners of the present day be warned. Perhaps the objection might be raised, If he were indeed of that exalted dignity which he represented, why did not his glory immediately appear? And it might be with a view to obviate the difficulty that he assured the persons around him that some of them should not die till they had seen a grand exhibition of his majesty, which might be considered as the commencement of his government. Some have supposed that this referred to his transfiguration, which soon followed; but it has more generally been explained of that remarkable display of his power which took place in the destruction of Jerusalem, to the overthrow of his enemies, and the establishment of his church. That event he frequently described as his coming; and it was an awful emblem of his future and more illustrious advent for the final judgment of the world.

His predictions have been in part fulfilled; and in due time, when his righteous purposes are effected, they will all have their full completion. He will be revealed in his glory, as he hath told us; "and every eye shall see him." How shall we stand before him? What is our hope and expectation? Does the prospect of his manifestation fill us with delight? For so it ought to do, if we be indeed partakers of his salvation. It is the privilege of his faithful people to look and long for his appearing, crying "Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly." But such as remain at enmity

enmity against him have abundant cause to dread "the day of the Lord." In vain will they call upon the rocks and mountains to cover them, and hide them from his face. They must be arraigned at his bar; and their everlasting doom shall be pronounced from his mouth.—May we find mercy of the Lord in that day, and enter with him into his kingdom for ever! Amen.