

# PRACTICAL PIETY

by Hannah More, 1811

The influence of the religion of the heart, on the conduct of the life

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### **Christianity an Internal Principle**

Christianity bears all the marks of a divine original. It came down from heaven, and its gracious purpose is to carry us up there. Its author is God. It was foretold from the beginning by prophecies, which grew clearer and brighter as they approached the period of their accomplishment. It was confirmed by miracles, which continued until the religion they illustrated was established. It was ratified by the blood of its Author. Its doctrines are pure, sublime, consistent. Its precepts just and holy. Its worship is spiritual. Its service reasonable, and rendered practical by the offers of Divine aid to human weakness. It is sanctioned by the promise of eternal happiness to the faithful, and the threat of everlasting misery to the disobedient. It had no collusion with power, for power sought to crush it. It could not be in any league with the world, for it set out by declaring itself the enemy of the world; it reprobated its maxims, it showed the vanity of its glories, the danger of its riches, the emptiness of its pleasures.

Christianity, though the most perfect rule of life that ever was devised, is far from being barely a rule of life. A religion consisting of a mere code of laws might have sufficed for man in a state of innocence. But man who has broken these laws cannot be saved by a rule which he has violated. What consolation could he find in the perusal of statutes, every one of which, bringing a fresh conviction of his guilt, brings a fresh assurance of his condemnation? The chief object of the Gospel is not to furnish rules for the preservation of innocence, but to hold out the means of salvation to the guilty. It does not proceed upon a supposition, but a fact; not upon what might have suited man in a state of purity, but upon what is suitable to him in the exigencies of his fallen state.

This religion does not consist in an external conformity to practices which, though right in themselves, may be adopted from human motives, and to answer secular purposes. It is not a religion of forms, and modes, and decencies. It is being transformed into the image of God. It is being like-minded with Christ. It is considering him as our sanctification, as well as our redemption. It is endeavoring to live to him here, that we may live with him hereafter. It is desiring earnestly to surrender our will to his, our heart to the conduct of his Spirit, our life to the guidance of his Word.

The change in the human heart, which the Scriptures declare to be necessary, they represent to do not be so much an old principle improved, as a new one

created; not educed out of the former character, but implanted in the new one. This change is there expressed in great varieties of language, and under different figures of speech. Its being so frequently described, or figuratively intimated, in almost every part of the volume of inspiration, entitles the doctrine itself to our reverence, and ought to shield from obloquy the obnoxious terms in which it is sometimes conveyed.

The sacred writings frequently point out the analogy between natural and spiritual things. The same Spirit, which in the creation of the world moved upon the face of the waters, operates on the human character to produce a new heart and a new life. By this operation the affections and faculties of the man receive a new impulse -- his dark understanding is illuminated, his rebellious will is subdued, his irregular desires are rectified; his judgment is informed, his imagination is chastised, his inclinations are sanctified; his hopes and fears are directed to their true and adequate end. Heaven becomes the object of his hopes, and eternal separation from God the object of his fears. His love of the world is transformed into the love of God. The lower faculties are pressed into the new service. The senses have a higher direction. The whole internal frame and constitution receive a nobler bent; the intents and purposes of the mind, a sublimer aim; his aspirations, a loftier flight; his vacillating desires find a fixed object; his vagrant purposes a settled home; his disappointed heart a certain refuge. That heart, no longer the worshiper of the world, is struggling to become its conqueror. Our blessed Redeemer, in overcoming the world, bequeathed us his command to overcome it also; but as he did not give the command without the example, so he did not give the example without the offer of a power to obey the command.

Genuine religion demands not merely an external profession of our allegiance to God, but an inward devotedness of ourselves to his service. It is not a recognition, but a dedication. It puts the Christian into a new state of things, a new condition of being. It raises him above the world, while he lives in it. It disperses the illusions of sense, by opening his eyes to realities, in the place of those shadows which he has been pursuing. It presents this world as a scene whose original beauty sin has darkened and disordered; man as a helpless and dependent creature; Jesus Christ as the repairer of all the evils which sin has caused, and as our restorer to holiness and happiness. Any religion short of this, any at least which has not this for its end and object, is not that religion which the Gospel has presented to us, which our Redeemer came down on earth to teach us by his precepts, to illustrate by his example, to confirm by his death, and to consummate by his resurrection.

If Christianity does not always produce these happy effects to the extent here represented, it has always a tendency to produce them. If we do not see the progress to be such as the Gospel annexes to the transforming power of true

religion, it is not owing to any defect in the principle, but to the remains of sin in the heart: to the imperfectly subdued corruptions of the Christian. Those who are very sincere are still very imperfect. They evidence their sincerity by acknowledging the lowness of their attainments, by lamenting the remainder of their corruptions. Many an humble Christian whom the world reproaches with being extravagant in his zeal, whom it ridicules for being enthusiastic in his aims, and rigid in his practice, is inwardly mourning on the very contrary ground. He would bear their censure more cheerfully, but that he feels his danger lies in the opposite direction. He is secretly abasing himself before his Maker for not carrying far enough that principle which he is accused of carrying too far. The fault which others find in him is excess. The fault he finds in himself is deficiency. He is, alas! too commonly right. His enemies speak of him as they hear. He judges of himself as he feels. But, though humbled to the dust by the deep sense of his own unworthiness, he is "strong in the Lord and in the power of his might." He has, says the venerable Hooker, a Shepherd full of kindness, full of care, and full of power. His prayer is not for reward, but pardon. His plea is not merit, but mercy; but then it is mercy made sure to him by the promise of the Almighty to penitent believers.

The mistake of many in religion appears to be, that they do not begin with the beginning. They do not lay their foundation in the persuasion that man is by nature in a state of alienation from God. They consider him rather as an imperfect than as a fallen creature. They allow that he requires to be improved, but deny that he requires a thorough renovation of heart.

But genuine Christianity can never be grafted on any other stock than the apostasy of man. The design to reinstate beings who have not fallen, to propose a restoration without a previous loss, a cure where there was no radical disease, is altogether an incongruity which would seem too palpable to require confutation, did we not so frequently see the doctrine of redemption maintained by those who deny that man was in a state to require such redemption. But would Christ have been sent "to preach deliverance to the captive," if there had been no captivity? and "the opening of the prison to those who were bound," had men been in no prison, had men been in no bondage.

We are aware that many consider the doctrine in question as a bold charge against our Creator; but may we not venture to ask, Is it not a bolder charge against God's goodness to presume that he had made beings originally wicked, and against God's veracity to believe, that having made such beings, he pronounced them "good?" Is not that doctrine more reasonable which is expressed or implied in every part of Scripture, that the moral corruption of our first parent has been entailed on his whole posterity? that from this corruption they are no more exempt than from natural death?

We must not, however, think falsely of our nature: we must humble, but not degrade it. Our original brightness is obscured, but not extinguished. If we consider ourselves in our natural state, our estimation cannot be too low; when we reflect at what a price we have been bought, we can hardly over-rate ourselves in the view of immortality.

If, indeed, the Almighty had left us to the consequences of our natural state, we might, with more color of reason, have mutinied against his justice. But when we see how graciously he has turned our very lapse into an occasion of improving our condition; how from this evil he was pleased to advance us to a greater good than we had lost; how that life which was forfeited may be restored; how, by grafting the redemption of man on the very circumstance of his fall, he has raised him to the capacity of a higher condition than that which he has forfeited, and to a happiness superior to that from which he fell: what an impression does this give us of the immeasurable wisdom and goodness of God, of the unsearchable riches of Christ!

The religion which it is the object of these pages to recommend, has been sometimes misunderstood, and not seldom misrepresented. It has been described as an unproductive theory, and ridiculed as a fanciful extravagance. For the sake of distinction it is here called the 'religion of the heart'. There it subsists as the fountain of spiritual life; thence it sends forth, as from the central seat of its existence, supplies of life and warmth through the whole frame; there is the soul of virtue, there is the vital principle which animates the whole being of a Christian.

This religion has been the support and consolation of the pious believer in all ages of the church. That it has been perverted both by the cloistered and the uncloistered mystic, not merely to promote abstraction of mind, but inactivity of life, makes nothing against the principle itself. What doctrine of the New Testament has not been made to speak the language of its injudicious advocate, and turned into arms against some other doctrine which it was never meant to oppose?

But if it has been carried to a blameable excess by the pious error of holy men, it has also been adopted by the less innocent fanatic, and abused to the most pernicious purposes. His extravagance has furnished to the enemies of internal religion, arguments, or rather invectives, against the sound and sober exercises of genuine piety. They seize every occasion to represent it as if it were criminal, as the foe of morality; ridiculous, as the infallible test of an unsound mind; mischievous, as hostile to active virtue; and destructive, as the bane of public utility.

But if these charges be really well founded, then were the brightest luminaries of

the Christian church -- then were Horne, and Porteus, and Beveridge; then were Hooker, and Taylor, and Herbert; Hopkins, Leighton, and Usher; Howe, Doddridge, and Baxter; Ridley, Jewel, and Hooper; then were Chrysostom and Augustine, the reformers and the fathers; then were the goodly fellowship of the prophets, then were the noble army of martyrs, then were the glorious company of the apostles, then was the disciple whom Jesus loved, then was Jesus himself -- I shudder at the implication -- dry speculatists, frantic enthusiasts, enemies to virtue, and subverters of the public welfare.

Those who disbelieve, or deride, or reject this inward religion, are much to be compassionated. Their belief that no such principle exists will, it is to be feared, effectually prevent its existing in themselves, at least while they make their own state the measure of their general judgment. Not being sensible of the required dispositions in their own hearts, they establish this as a proof of its impossibility in all cases. This persuasion, as long as they maintain it, will assuredly exclude the reception of divine truth. What they assert can be true in no case, cannot be true in their own. Their hearts will be barred against any influence in the power of which they do not believe. They will not desire it, they will not pray for it, except in the Liturgy, where it is the decided language. They will not addict themselves to those pious exercises to which it invites them, exercises which it ever loves and cherishes. Thus they expect the end, but avoid the way which leads to it: they indulge the hope of glory, while they neglect or pervert the means of grace.

But let not the formal religionist, who has, probably, never sought, and, therefore, never obtained any sense of the spiritual mercies of God, conclude that there is, therefore, no such state. His having no conception of it is no more proof that no such state exists, than it is a proof that the cheering beams of a genial climate have no existence, because the inhabitants of the frozen zone have never felt them.

Where our own heart and experience do not illustrate these truths practically, so as to afford us some evidence of their reality, let us examine our minds, and faithfully follow up our convictions; let us inquire whether God has really been lacking in the accomplishment of his promises, or whether we have not been sadly deficient in yielding to those suggestions of conscience which are the motions of his Spirit? Whether we have not neglected to implore the aids of that Spirit? whether we have not, in various instances, resisted them? Let us ask ourselves -- Have we looked up to our heavenly Father with humble dependence for the supplies of his grace? or have we prayed for these blessings only as a form; and, having acquitted ourselves of the form, do we continue to live as if we had not so prayed? Having repeatedly implored his direction, do we endeavor to submit ourselves to his guidance? Having prayed that his will may be done, do we never stoutly set up our own will in contradiction to his?

If, then, we receive not the promised support and comfort, the failure must rest somewhere. It lies between him who has promised and him to whom the promise is made. There is no alternative: would it not be blasphemy to transfer the failure to God? Let us not then rest until we have cleared up the difficulty. The spirits sink, and the faith fails, if, after a continued round of reading and prayer, after having for years conformed to the letter of the command, after having scrupulously brought in our tale of outward duties, we find ourselves just where we were at setting out.

We complain justly of our own weakness and inability to serve God as we ought. This weakness, its nature, and its measure, God knows far more exactly than we know it: yet he lays on us the obligation both to love and obey him, and will call us to account for the performance of these duties. He never would have said, "Give me your heart " -- "seek you my face " -- "add to your faith virtue" -- "you will not come to me that you might have life" -- had not all these precepts a definite meaning, had not all these been, with the help which he offers us, practicable duties.

Can we suppose that the omniscient God would have given these unqualified commands to powerless, incapable, unimpressible beings? Can we suppose that he would command paralyzed creatures to walk, and then condemn them for not being able to move? He knows, it is true, our natural impotence, but he knows, because he confers, our superinduced strength. There is scarcely a command in the whole Scripture which has not, either immediately, or in some other part, a corresponding prayer, and a corresponding promise. If it says in one place, "Get a new heart," -- it says in another, "a new heart will I give you;" and in a third, "make me a clean heart." For it is worth observing that a diligent inquiry may trace every where this threefold union. If God commands by Paul, "Let not sin reign in your mortal body," he promises by the same apostle, "Sin shall not have dominion over you;" - while, to complete the tripartite agreement, he makes David pray that his "sins may not have dominion over him."

The saints of old, so far from setting up on the stock of their own independent virtue, seemed to have had no idea of any light but what was imparted, of any strength but what was communicated to them from above. Hear their importunate petitions! -- "O send forth your light and your truth." -- Mark their grateful declarations! -- "The Lord is my strength and my salvation!" -- Observe their cordial acknowledgments! -- "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name."

Though we must be careful not to mistake for the Divine agency those impulses which pretend to operate independently of external revelation; which have little reference to it; which set themselves above it; it is, however, that powerful

agency which sanctifies all means, renders all external revelation effectual. Notwithstanding that all the truths of religion, all the doctrines of salvation, are contained in the Holy Scriptures, these very Scriptures require the influence of that Spirit which dictated them to produce an influential faith. This Spirit, by enlightening the mind, converts the rational persuasion, brings the intellectual conviction of divine truth, conveyed in the New Testament, into an operative principle.

A man, from reading, examining, and inquiring, may attain to such a reasonable assurance of the truth of revelation as will remove all doubts from his own mind, and even enable him to refute the objections of others; but this bare intellectual faith alone will not operate against his corrupt affections, will not cure his besetting sin, will not conquer his rebellious will, and may not, therefore, be an efficacious principle. A mere historical faith, the mere evidence of facts, with the soundest reasonings and deductions from them, may not be that faith which will fill him with all joy and peace in believing.

A habitual reference to that spirit which animates the real Christian, is so far from excluding, that it strengthens the truth of revelation, but never contradicts it. The Word of God is always in unison with his Spirit. His Spirit is never in opposition to his Word. Indeed, that this influence is not an imaginary thing is confirmed by the whole tenor of Scripture. We are aware that we are treading on dangerous, because disputed ground; for among the fashionable curtailments of Scripture doctrines, there is not one truth which has been lopped from the modern creed with a most unsparing hand; not one, the defense of which excites more suspicion against its advocates. But if it had been a mere phantom, should we with such jealous repetition have been cautioned against neglecting or opposing it? If the Holy Spirit could not be grieved, might not be quenched, were not likely to be "resisted;" that very Spirit which proclaimed the prohibitions would never have said "Grieve not," "quench not," "resist not." The Bible never warns us against imaginary evil, nor courts us to imaginary good. If, then, we refuse to yield to its guidance, if we reject its directions, if we submit not to its gentle persuasions, for such they are, and not arbitrary compulsions, we shall never attain to that peace and liberty which are the privilege, the promised reward of sincere Christians.

In speaking of that peace which passes understanding, we allude not to those illuminations and raptures, which, if God has in some instances bestowed them, he has nowhere pledged himself to bestow; but of that rational yet elevated hope which flows from an assured persuasion of the paternal love of our Heavenly Father, of that "secret of the Lord," which he himself has assured us "is with those who fear him;" of that life and power of religion which are the privilege of those "who abide under the shadow of the Almighty;" of those who "know in whom they have believed;" of those "who walk not after the flesh, but



after the Spirit;" of those "who endure as seeing him who is invisible."

Many faults may be committed where there is nevertheless a sincere desire to please God. Many infirmities are consistent with a cordial love of our Redeemer. Faith may be sincere where it is not strong. But he who can conscientiously say that he seeks the favor of God above every earthly good; that he delights in his service incomparably more than in any other gratification; that to obey him here and to enjoy his presence hereafter is the prevailing desire of his heart; that his chief sorrow is that he loves him no more and serves him no better; such a man requires no evidence that his heart is changed and his sins forgiven.

For the happiness of a Christian does not consist in mere feelings which may deceive, nor in frames which can only be occasional; but in a settled, calm conviction that God and eternal things have the predominance in his heart; in a clear perception that they have, though with much alloy of infirmity, the supreme, if not undisturbed, possession of his mind; in an experimental persuasion that his chief remaining sorrow is, that he does not surrender himself, with so complete an acquiescence as he ought, to his convictions. These abatements, though sufficient to keep us humble, are not powerful enough to make us unhappy.

The true measure, then, to be taken of our state, is from a perceptible change in our desires, tastes, and pleasures; from a sense of progress, however small, in holiness of heart and life. This seems to be the safest rule of judging; for if mere feelings were allowed to be the criterion, the presumptuous would be inflated with spiritual pride, from the persuasion of enjoying them; while the humble, from their very humility, might be as unreasonably depressed at lacking such evidences.

The recognition of this Divine aid, then, involves no presumption, raises no illusion, causes no inflation; it is sober in its principle, and rational in its exercise. In establishing the law of God, it does not reverse the law of nature; for it leaves us in full possession of those natural faculties which it improves and sanctifies; and so far from inflaming the imagination, its proper tendency is to subdue and regulate it.

A security which outruns our attainments is a most dangerous state, yet it is a state most unwisely coveted. The probable way to be safe hereafter is not to be presumptuous now. If God graciously vouchsafe us inward consolation, it is only to animate us to further progress. It is given us for support in our way, and not for a settled maintenance in our present condition. If the promises are our nourishment, the commandments are our work; and a temperate Christian ought to desire nourishment only in order to carry him through his business. If he so supinely rests on the one as to grow sensual and indolent, he might become not

only unwilling, but incapacitated for the performance of the other. We must not expect to live upon cordials, which only serve to inflame without strengthening. Even without these supports, which we are more ready to desire than to put ourselves in the way to obtain, there is an inward peace in a humble trust in God, and in a simple reliance on his word; there is a repose of spirit, a freedom from solicitude, in a lowly confidence in him, for which the world has nothing to give in exchange.

On the whole, then, the state which we have been describing is not the dream of the enthusiast; it is not the reverie of the visionary, who renounces prescribed duties for fanciful speculations, and embraces shadows for realities; but it is that sober earnest of heaven, that reasonable anticipation of eternal felicity, which God is graciously pleased to grant, not partially, nor arbitrarily, but to all who diligently seek his face, to all to whom his service is freedom, his will a law, his word a delight, his Spirit a guide; to all who love him unfeignedly, to all who devote themselves to him unreservedly, and to all who, with deep self-abasement, yet with filial confidence, prostrate themselves at the foot of his throne, saying, "Lord, lift up the light of your countenance upon us, and we shall be safe."

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## **CHRISTIANITY A PRACTICAL PRINCIPLE**

If God be the author of our spiritual life, the root from which we derive the vital principle, with daily supplies to maintain this vitality, then the best evidence we can give that we have received something of this principle, is an unreserved dedication of ourselves to the actual promotion of his glory.

No man ought to flatter himself that he is in the favor of God whose life is not consecrated to the service of God. Will it not be the only unequivocal proof of such a consecration, that he be more zealous of good works than those who, disallowing the principle on which he performs them, do not even pretend to be actuated by any such motive?

The finest theory never yet carried any man to heaven. A religion of notions which occupies the mind without filling the heart, may obstruct, but cannot advance the salvation of men. If these notions are false they are most pernicious; if true and not operative, they aggravate guilt; if unimportant, though not unjust, they occupy the place which belongs to nobler objects, and sink the mind below its proper level; substituting the things which only ought not to be left undone in the place of those which ought to be done; and causing the grand essentials not to be done at all.

Such a religion is not that which Christ came to teach mankind. All the doctrines of the Gospel are practical principles. The word of God was not written, the Son of God was not incarnate, the Spirit of God was not given, only that Christians might obtain right views and possess just notions. Religion is something more than mere correctness of intellect, justness of conception, and exactness of judgment. It is a life-giving principle. It must be infused into the habit as well as govern in the understanding; it must regulate the will as well as direct the creed. It must not only cast the opinions into a right frame, but the heart into a new mold. It is a transforming as well as a penetrating principle. It changes the tastes, gives activity to the inclinations, and, together with a new heart, produces a new life.

Christianity enjoins the same temper, the same spirit, the same dispositions, on all its real professors. The act, the performance, must depend on circumstances which do not depend on us. The power of doing good is withheld from many, from whom, however, the reward will not be withheld. If the external act constituted the whole value of Christian virtue, then must the Author of all good be himself the Author of injustice, by putting it out of the power of multitudes to fulfill his own commands.

In principles, in tempers, in fervent desires, in holy endeavors, consists the very essence of Christian duty. Nor must we fondly attach ourselves to the practice of some particular virtue, or value ourselves exclusively on some favorite quality; nor must we wrap ourselves up in the performance of some individual actions, as if they formed the sum of Christian duty. But we must embrace the whole law of God in all its aspects, bearings, and relations. We must bring no fancies, no partialities, no prejudices, no exclusive choice or rejection into our religion, but take it as we find it, and obey it as we receive it, as it is exhibited in the Bible, without addition, curtailment, or adulteration.

Nor must we pronounce on a character by a single action really bad, or apparently good: if so, Peter's denial would render him the object of our execration, while we would have judged favorably of the prudent economy of Judas. The catastrophe of the latter who does not know? while the other became a glorious martyr to that Master whom, in a moment of infirmity, he had denied.

A piety altogether spiritual, disconnected with all outward circumstances -- a religion of pure meditation and abstracted devotion, was not made for so compound, so imperfect a creature as man. There have, indeed, been a few sublime spirits, not "touched, but rapt," who, totally cut off from the world, seem almost to have literally soared above this earthly region; who almost appear to have stolen the fire of the seraphim, and to have had no business on earth but to keep alive the celestial flame.

They would, however, have approximated more nearly to the example of their Divine Master, the great standard and only perfect model, had they combined a more diligent discharge of the active duties and beneficences of life with their high devotional attainments. But while we are in little danger of imitating, let us not too harshly censure the pious error of these sublimated spirits. Their number is small. Their example is not catching. Their ethereal fire is not likely, by spreading, to inflame the world. The world will take due care not to come in contact with it, while its distant light and warmth may cast, accidentally, a useful ray on the cold-hearted and the worldly.

But from this small number of refined but inoperative beings we do not intend to draw our notions of practical piety. God did not make a religion for these few exceptions to the general state of the world, but for the world at large; for beings active, busy, restless; whose activity he, by his Word, diverts into its proper channels; whose busy spirit is there directed to the common good; whose restlessness, indicating the unsatisfactoriness of all they find on earth, he points to a higher destination.

Were total seclusion and abstraction designed to have been the general state of the world, God would have given men other laws, other rules, other faculties, and other employments. There is a class of visionary but pious writers who seem to shoot as far beyond the mark as mere naturalists fall short of it. Men of low views and gross minds may be said to be wise below what is written, while those of too subtle refinement are wise above it. The one grovel in the dust from the inertness of their intellectual faculties; while the others are lost in the clouds by stretching themselves beyond their appointed limits. The one build spiritual castles in the air instead of erecting them on the holy ground of Scripture; the other lay their foundation in the sand instead of resting it on the Rock of ages. Thus the superstructure of both is equally unsound.

God is the fountain from which all the streams of goodness flow; the center from which all the rays of blessedness diverge. All our actions are only good as they have a reference to him; the streams must revert back to their fountain, the rays must converge again to their center. If love of God be the governing principle, this powerful spring will actuate all the movements of the rational machine. The essence of religion does not so much consist in actions as affections. Though right actions, therefore, as from an excess of courtesy they are commonly termed, may be performed where there are no right affections; yet are they a mere carcass, utterly destitute of the soul, and therefore, of the substance of virtue.

But neither can right affections substantially and truly subsist without producing right actions; for never let it be forgotten that a pious inclination which has not life and vigor sufficient to ripen into act when the occasion presents itself, and a

right action which does not grow out of a sound principle, will neither of them have any place in the account of real goodness. A good inclination will be contrary to sin, but a mere inclination will not subdue sin.

The love of God, as it is the source of every right action and feeling, so is it the only principle which necessarily involves the love of our fellow-creatures. As man, we do not love man. There is a love of partiality, but not of benevolence; of sensibility, but not of philanthropy; of friends and favorites, of parties and societies, but not of man collectively. It is true we may, and do, without this principle, relieve his distresses, but we do not bear with his faults. We may promote his fortune, but we do not forgive his offences; above all, we are not anxious for his immortal interests. We could not see him lack without pain, but we can see him sin without emotion. We cannot hear of a beggar perishing at our door without horror; but we can without concern witness an acquaintance dying without repentance.

Is it not strange that we must participate something of the Divine nature before we can really love the human? It seems, indeed, to be an insensibility to sin, rather than lack of benevolence to mankind, that makes us naturally pity their temporal, and be careless of their spiritual needs; but does not this very insensibility proceed from the lack of love to God?

As it is the habitual frame and predominating disposition which are the true measure of virtue, incidental good actions are no certain criterion of the state of the heart; for who is there who does not occasionally do them? Having made some progress in attaining this disposition, we must not sit down satisfied with propensities and inclinations to virtuous actions while we rest short of their actual exercise. If the principle be that of sound Christianity, it will never be inert. While we shall never do good with any great effect until we labor to be conformed in some measure to the image of God, we shall best evince our having obtained something of that conformity by a course of steady and active obedience to God.

Every individual should bear in mind that he is sent into this world to act a part in it. And though one may have a more splendid, and another a more obscure part assigned him, yet the actor of each is equally, is awfully accountable. Though God is not a hard, he is an exact Master. His service, though not a severe, is a reasonable service. He accurately proportions his requisitions to his gifts. If he does not expect that one talent should be as productive as five, yet to even a single talent a proportional responsibility is annexed. He who has said, "Give me your heart," will not be satisfied with less; he will not accept the praying lips, nor the mere hand of charity as substitutes.

A real Christian will be more just, sober, and charitable than other men, though

he will not rest for salvation on his justice, sobriety, or charity. He will perform the duties they enjoin in the spirit of Christianity, as instances of devout obedience, as evidences of a heart devoted to God. All virtues, it cannot be too often repeated, are sanctified or unhallowed according to the principle which dictates them, and will be accepted or rejected accordingly. This principle kept in due exercise becomes a habit, and every act strengthens the inclination, adding vigor to the principle and pleasure to the performance.

We cannot be said to be real Christians until Christianity becomes our animating motive, our predominating principle and pursuit, as much as worldly things are the predominating motive, principle, and pursuit of worldly men.

New converts, it is said, are most zealous, but they are not always the most persevering. If their tempers are warm, and they have only been touched on the side of their passions, they start eagerly, march rapidly, and are full of confidence in their own strength. They too often judge others with little charity, and themselves with little humility. While they accuse those who move steadily of standing still, they fancy their own course will never be slackened. If their conversion is not solid, religion in losing its novelty, loses its power. Their speed declines. No, it will be happy if their motion become not retrograde.

Those who are truly sincere will commonly be persevering. If their speed is less eager, it is more steady. As they know their own heart more, they discover its deceitfulness, and learn to distrust themselves. As they become more humble in spirit, they become more charitable in judging. As they grow more firm in principle, they grow more exact in conduct. The rooted habits of a religious life may indeed lose their prominence, because they are become more indented. If they are not embossed, it is because they are burned in.

Where there is uniformity and consistency in the whole character, there will be little relief in an individual action. A good deed will be less striking in an established Christian than a deed less good in one who had been previously careless; good actions being his expected duty and his ordinary practice. Such a Christian, indeed, when his right habits cease to be new and striking, may fear that he is declining; but his quiet and confirmed course is a surer evidence than the more early starts of charity, or fits of piety, which may have drawn more attention, and obtained more applause.

Again: we should cultivate most assiduously, because the work is most difficult, those graces which are most opposite to our natural temper; the value of our good qualities depending much on their being produced by the victory over some natural wrong propensity. The implantation of a virtue is the eradication of a vice. It will cost one man more to keep down a rising passion than to do a brilliant deed. It will try another more to keep back a sparkling but corrupt

thought which his wit had suggested, but which his religion checks, than it would to give a large sum in charity.

A real Christian, being deeply sensible of the worthlessness of any actions which do not spring from the genuine fountain, will aim at such an habitual conformity to the Divine image, that to perform all acts of justice, charity, kindness, temperance, and every kindred virtue, may become the temper, the habitual, the abiding state of his heart, that, like natural streams, they may flow spontaneously from the living source. Practical Christianity, then, is the actual operation of Christian principles. It is lying on the watch for occasions to exemplify them. It is exercising ourselves unto godliness.

A Christian cannot tell in the morning what opportunities he may have of doing good during the day, but if he be a real Christian he can tell that he will try to keep his heart open, his mind prepared, his affections alive, to do whatever may occur in the way of duty. He will, as it were, stand in the way to receive the orders of Providence.

Doing good is his vocation. Nor does the young artisan bind himself by firmer articles to the rigid performance of his master's work, than the indentured Christian to the active service of that Divine Master who himself "went about doing good." He rejects no duty which comes within the sphere of his calling, nor does he think the work he is employed in a good one if he might be doing a better. His having well acquitted himself of a good action is so far from furnishing him with an excuse for avoiding the next, that it is a new reason for his embarking in it. He looks not at the work which he has accomplished, but on that which he has to do. His views are always prospective. His charities are scarcely limited by his power. His will knows no limits. His fortune may have bounds; his benevolence has none. He is, in mind and desire, the benefactor of every miserable man. His heart is open to all the distressed; to the household of faith it overflows. Where the heart is large, however small the ability, a thousand ways of doing good will be invented.

Christian charity is a great enlarger of means. Christian self-denial negatively accomplishes the purpose of the favorite of Fortune in the fables of the nursery - if it cannot fill the purse by a wish, it will not empty it by a vanity.

It provides for others by abridging from itself. Having carefully defined what is necessary and becoming, it allows of no encroachment on its definition. Superfluities it will lop, vanities it will cut off. The deviser of liberal things will find means of effecting them, which to the indolent appear incredible, to the covetous impossible. Christian beneficence takes a large sweep. That circumference cannot be small of which God is the center.

Nor does religious charity in a Christian stand still because not kept in motion by the main-spring of the world. Money may fail, but benevolence will be going on. If he cannot relieve need, he may mitigate sorrow. He may warn the inexperienced, he may instruct the ignorant, he may confirm the doubting. The Christian will find out the cheapest way of being good, as well as of doing good.

If he cannot give money, he may exercise a more difficult virtue; he may forgive injuries. Forgiveness is the economy of the heart. A Christian will find it cheaper to pardon than to resent. Forgiveness saves the expense of anger, the cost of hatred, the waste of tempers. It also puts the soul into a frame which makes the practice of other virtues easy.

The achievement of a hard duty is a great abolisher of difficulties. If great occasions do not arise he will thankfully seize on small ones. If he cannot glorify God by serving others, he knows that he has always something to do in himself; some evil temper to correct, some wrong propensity to reform, some crooked practice to straighten. He will never be at a loss for employment while there is a sin or a misery in the world; he will never be idle while there is a distress to be relieved in another, or a corruption to be cured in his own heart.

We have employments assigned to us for every circumstance in life. When we are alone, we have our thoughts to watch; in the family, our tempers in company, our tongues. It will be a test of our sincerity to our own hearts, and for such tests we should anxiously watch, if we are as assiduous in following up our duty when only the favor of God is to be obtained by it, as in cases where subordinate considerations are taken into the account and bring their portion of influence. We must, therefore, conscientiously examine in what spirit we fulfill those parts of our duty which lie more exclusively between our Creator and our conscience. Whether we are as solicitous about our inward disposition as about the act of which that disposition should be the principle.

If our piety be internal and sincere, we shall lament an evil temper no less than an evil action, conscious that though in its indulgence we may escape human censure, yet to the eye of Omniscience, as both lie equally open, both are equally offensive. Without making any fallible human being our infallible guide and established standard, let us make use of the examples of eminently pious men as incentives to our own growth in every Christian grace.

A generous emulation of the excellences of another is not envy. It is a sanctification of that noble excitement which stirred the soul of Themistocles when he declared that the trophies of Miltiades prevented him from sleeping. The Christian must not stop here. He must imitate the pagan hero in the use to which he converted his restless admiration, which gave him no repose until he himself became equally illustrious by services equally distinguished with those of



his rival.

But to the Christian is held out in the sacred volume, not only models of human excellence but of Divine perfection. What an example of disinterested goodness and unbounded kindness have we in our heavenly Father, who is merciful over all his works, who distributes common blessings without distinction, who bestows the necessary refreshments of life, the shining sun and the refreshing shower, without waiting, as we are apt to do, for personal merit, or attachment, or gratitude: who does not look out for desert, but need, as a qualification for his favors; who does not afflict willingly; who delights in the happiness, and desires the salvation of all his children; who dispenses his daily munificence, and bears with our daily offences; who, in return for our violation of his laws, supplies our necessities; who waits patiently for our repentance, and even solicits us to have mercy on our own souls!

What a model for our humble imitation is that Divine person who was clothed with our humanity; who dwelt among us, that the pattern, being brought near, might be rendered more engaging, the conformity be made more practicable; whose whole life was one unbroken series of universal charity; who, in his complicated bounties, never forgot that man is compounded both of soul and body; who, after teaching the multitude, fed them; who repulsed none for being ignorant; was impatient with none for being dull; despised none for being outcast by the world; rejected none for being sinners; who encouraged those whose importunity others censured; who, in healing sickness, converted souls, who gave bread, and forgave injuries.

It will be the endeavor of the sincere Christian to illustrate his devotions in the morning by his actions during the day. He will try to make his conduct a practical exposition of the Divine prayer which made a part of them. He will desire to "hallow the name of God," to promote the enlargement and "the coming" of the "kingdom of Christ." He will endeavor to do and to suffer his whole will; "to forgive," as he himself trusts that he is forgiven. He will resolve to avoid that "temptation" into which he had been praying "not to be led;" and he will labor to shun the "evil" from which he had been begging to be "delivered."

He thus makes his prayers as practical as the other parts of his religion, and labors to render his conduct as spiritual as his prayers. The commentary and the text are of reciprocal application. If this gracious Savior has left us a perfect model for our devotion in his prayer, he has left a model no less perfect for our practice in his sermon. This divine exposition has been sometimes misunderstood. It was not so much a supplement to a defective law, as the restoration of the purity of a perfect law from the corrupt interpretations of its blind expounders.

These people had ceased to consider it as forbidding the principle of sin, and as only forbidding the act. Christ restores it to its original meaning, spreads it out in its due extent, shows the largeness of its dimensions and the spirit of its institution. He unfolds all its motions, tendencies and relations. Not concerning himself as human legislators are obliged to do, to prohibit a man the act merely which is injurious to others, but the inward temper which is prejudicial to himself.

There cannot be a more striking instance, how emphatically every doctrine of the Gospel has a reference to practical goodness, than is exhibited by Paul in that magnificent picture of the resurrection, in his Epistle to the Corinthians, which has been so happily selected for the consolation of survivors at the last closing scene of mortality. After an inference as triumphant as it is logical, that because "Christ has risen, we shall rise also;" after the most philosophical illustration of the raising of the body from the dust, by the process of grain sown in the earth, and springing up into a new mode of existence; after describing the subjugation of all things to the Redeemer, and his laying down the mediatorial kingdom; after sketching with a seraph's pencil the relative glories of the celestial and terrestrial bodies; after exhausting the grandest images of created nature, and the dissolution of nature itself; after such a display of the solemnities of the great day as makes this world and all its concerns shrink into nothing; in such a moment, when, if ever, the rapt spirit might be supposed too highly wrought for precept and admonition; the apostle, wound up as he was, by the energies of inspiration, to the immediate view of the glorified state, the last trumpet sounding, the change from mortal to immortality effected in the twinkling of an eye, the sting of death drawn out, victory snatched from the grave; then, by a turn as surprising as it is beautiful, he draws a conclusion as unexpectedly practical as his premises were grand and awful: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord." Then at once, by another quick transition, resorting from the duty to the reward, and winding up the whole with an argument as powerful as his rhetoric had been sublime, he adds, "Forasmuch as you know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord."

PRACTICAL PIETY by Hannah More

## **MISTAKES IN RELIGION**

To point out with precision all the mistakes which exist in the present day on the awful subject of religion, would far exceed the limits of this small work. No mention, therefore, is intended to be made of the opinions or the practice of any particular body of people; nor will any notice be taken of any of the peculiarities of the numerous sects and parties which have risen up among us. It will be sufficient for the present purpose to hazard some slight remarks on a few of

those common classes of characters which belong, more or less, to most general bodies.

There are, among many others, THREE DIFFERENT SORTS OF RELIGIOUS PROFESSORS.

1. The religion of one consists in a sturdy defense of what they themselves call orthodoxy, an attendance on public worship, and a general decency of behavior. In their views of religion they are not a little apprehensive of excess, not perceiving that their danger lies on the other side. They are far from rejecting faith or morals, but are somewhat afraid of believing too much, and a little scrupulous about doing too much, lest the former be suspected of fanaticism, and the latter of singularity. These Christians consider religion as a point which they by their regular observances having attained, there is nothing further required but to maintain the point they have reached, by a repetition of the same observances. They are therefore satisfied to remain stationary, considering that whoever has obtained his end is of course saved the labor of pursuit; he is to keep his ground without troubling himself in searching after an imaginary perfection.

These frugal Christians are afraid of nothing so much as excessiveness in their love, and overabundance in their obedience. This kind of fear, however, is always superfluous, but most especially in those who are troubled with the apprehension. They are apt to weigh, in the nicely-poised scales of scrupulous exactness, the duties which must of hard necessity be done, and those which without much risk may be left undone; compounding for a larger indulgence by the relinquishment of a smaller; giving up, through fear, a trivial gratification to which they are less inclined, and snatching doubtfully, as an equivalent, at one they like better. The gratification in both cases being perhaps such as a manly mind would hardly think worth contending for, even were religion out of the question. Nothing but love to God can conquer love of the world. One grain of that Divine principle would make the scale of self indulgence kick the beam.

These people dread nothing so much as enthusiasm. Yet, if to look for effects without their predisposing causes, to depend for heaven on that to which heaven was never promised, be features of enthusiasm, then are they themselves enthusiasts.

2. The religion of a second class we have already described in the two preceding chapters. It consists in a heart devoted to its Maker; inwardly changed in its temper and disposition, yet deeply sensible of its remaining infirmities: continually aspiring, however, to higher improvements in faith, hope and charity, and thinking that "the greatest of these is charity." These, by the former class, are reckoned enthusiasts; but they are in fact, if Christianity be true, acting on

the only rational principles. If the doctrines of the Gospel have any solidity, if its promises have any meaning, these Christians are building on no false ground. They hope that submission to the power of God, obedience to his laws, compliance, with his will, trust in his word, are, through the efficacy of the Eternal Spirit, real evidences, because they are vital acts of genuine faith in Jesus Christ. If they profess not to place their reliance on works, they are, however, more zealous in performing them than the others; who, professing to depend on their good deeds for salvation, are not always diligent in securing it by the very means which they themselves establish to be alone effectual.

3. There is a third class -- the high-flown professor, who looks down from the giddy heights of antinomian delusion on the other two, abhors the one and despises the other; concludes that the one is lost, and the other in a fair way to be so. Though perhaps not living himself in any course of immorality which requires the sanction of such doctrines, he does not hesitate to imply in his discourse that virtue is heathenish, and good works superfluous, if not dangerous. He does not consider that though the Gospel is an act of oblivion to penitent sinners, yet it no where promises pardon to those who continue to live in a state of rebellion against God and of disobedience to his laws. He forgets to insist to others that it is of little importance even to believe that sin is an evil, (which however they do not always believe,) while they persist to live in it, that to know every thing of duty except the doing it, is to offend God with an aggravation from which ignorance itself is exempt.

It is not giving ourselves up to Christ, in a nameless inexplicable way, which will avail us. God loves a humble, not an audacious faith. To suppose that the blood of Christ redeems us from sin, while sin continues to reign in the soul, is to suppose an impossibility; to maintain that it is effectual for the salvation, and not for the sanctification of the sinner, is to suppose that it acts like an amulet, an incantation, a charm, which is to produce its effect by operating on the imagination, and not on the disease.

The religion which mixes with human passions, and is set on fire by them, will make a stronger blaze than that light which is from above, which sheds a steady and lasting brightness on the path, and communicates a sober but durable warmth to the heart. It is equable and constant; while the other, like culinary fire fed by gross materials, is extinguished the sooner from the fierceness of the flame.

That religion which is merely seated in the passions, is not only liable to wear itself out by its own impetuosity, but to be driven out by some other passion. The dominion of violent passions is short. They dispossess each other. When religion has had its day, it gives way to the next usurper. Its empire is no more solid than it is lasting, when principle and reason do not fix it on the throne.

The first of the above classes consider prudence as the paramount virtue in religion. Their antipodes, the flaming professors, believe a burning zeal to be the exclusive grace. They reverse Paul's collocation of the three Christian graces, and think that the greatest of these is faith. Though even in respect of this grace, their conduct and conversation too often give us reason to lament that they do not bear in mind its genuine and distinctive properties. Their faith, instead of working by love, seems to be adopted, from a notion that it leaves the Christian nothing to do, rather than because it is its nature to lead him to do more and better than other men.

In this case, as in many others, that which is directly contrary to what is wrong is wrong also. If each opponent would only barter half his favorite quality with the favorite quality of the other, both parties would approach nearer to the truth. They might even furnish a complete Christian between them: that is, provided the zeal of the one was sincere, and the prudence of the other honest. But the misfortune is, each is as proud of not possessing the quality he needs, because his adversary has it, as he is proud of possessing that of which the other is destitute and because he is destitute of it.

Among the many mistakes in religion, it is commonly thought that there is something so unintelligible, absurd, and fanatical in the term conversion, that those who employ it run no small hazard of being involved in the ridicule it excites. It is seldom used but ludicrously, or in contempt. This arises partly from the levity and ignorance of the censurer, but perhaps as much from the imprudence and enthusiasm of those who have absurdly confined it to real or supposed instances of sudden or miraculous changes from profligacy to piety.

But surely, with reasonable people, we run no risk in asserting that he, who being awakened by any of those various methods which the Almighty uses to bring his creatures to the knowledge of himself, who, seeing the corruptions that are in the world, and feeling those with which his own heart abounds, is brought, whether gradually or more rapidly, from an evil heart of unbelief to a lively faith in the Redeemer, from a life not only of gross vice, but of worldliness and vanity, to a life of progressive piety; whose humility keeps pace with his progress; who, though his attainments are advancing, is so far from counting himself to have attained, that he presses onward with unabated zeal, and evidences; by the change in his conduct, the change that has taken place in his heart: such a one is surely as sincerely converted, and the effect is as much produced by the same divine energy, as if some instantaneous revolution in his character had given it a miraculous appearance.

The doctrines of Scripture are the same now as when David called them "a law converting the soul, and giving light to the eyes." This is perhaps the most

accurate and comprehensive definition of the change for which we are contending, for it includes both the illumination of the understanding and the alteration in the disposition.

If, then, this obnoxious expression signify nothing more nor less than that change of character which consists in turning from the world to God, however the term may offend, there is nothing ridiculous in the thing. Now, as it is not for the term which we contend, but for the principle conveyed by it; so it is the principle, and not the term, which is the real ground of objection; though it is a little inconsistent that many who would sneer at the idea of conversion would yet take it extremely ill if it were suspected that their hearts were not turned to God.

Reformation, a term against which no objection is ever made, would, if words continued to retain their primitive signification, convey the same idea. For it is plain that to re-form means to make anew. In the present use, however, it does not convey the same meaning in the same extent, nor indeed does it imply the operation of the same principle. Many are reformed on human motives, many are partially reformed; but only those who, as our great poet says, are "reformed altogether," are converted. There is no complete reformation in the conduct effected without a revolution in the heart.

Ceasing from some sins; retaining others in a less degree; or adopting such as are merely creditable; or flying from one sin to another; or ceasing from the external act without any internal change of disposition, is not Christian reformation. The new principle must abolish the old habit; the rooted inclination must be subdued by the substitution of an opposite one. The natural bias must be changed. The actual offence will no more be pardoned than cured, if the inward corruption do not be eradicated. To be "alive unto God through Jesus Christ," must follow "the death unto sin." There cannot be new aims and ends where there is not a new principle to produce them. We shall not choose a new path until a light from heaven direct our choice and "guide our feet." We shall not "run the way of God's commandments" until God himself enlarge our heart.

We do not, however, insist that the change required is such as precludes the possibility of falling into sin; but it is a change which fixes in the soul such a disposition as shall make sin a burden; as shall make the desire of pleasing God the governing desire of a man's heart; as shall make him hate the evil which he does; as shall make the lowness of his attainments the subject of his deepest sorrow. A Christian has hopes and fears, cares and temptations, inclinations and desires, as well as other men. God, in changing the heart, does not extinguish the passions. Were that the case the Christian life would cease to be a warfare.

We are often deceived by that partial improvement which appears in the victory over some one bad quality. But we must not mistake the removal of a symptom

for a radical cure of the disease. An occasional remedy might remove an accidental sickness, but it requires a general regimen to renovate the diseased constitution. It is the natural but melancholy history of the unchanged heart, that, from youth to advanced years, there is no other revolution in the character but such as increases both the number and quality of its defects: that the levity, vanity, and self-sufficiency of the young man are carried into advanced life, and only meet and mix with the defects of a mature period; that instead of crying out with the royal prophet, "O remember not my old sins," he is inflaming his reckoning by new ones: that age, protracting all the faults of youth, furnishes its own contingent of vices; that sloth, suspicion, and covetousness swell the account which religion has not been called in to cancel: that the world, though it has lost the power to delight, has yet lost nothing of its power to enslave. Instead of improving in candor by the inward sense of his own defects, that very consciousness makes him less tolerant of the defects of others, and more suspicious of their apparent virtues.

His charity in a warmer season having failed to bring him in that return of gratitude for which it was partly performed, and having never flowed from the genuine spring, is dried up. His friendships, having been formed on worldly principles, or interest, or ambition, or convivial hilarity, fail him. "One must make some sacrifices to the world," is the prevailing language of the nominal Christian. "What will the world pay you for your sacrifices?" replies the real Christian.

Though he finds that the world is insolvent, that it pays nothing of what it promised, for it cannot bestow what it does not possess -- happiness -- yet he continues to cling to it almost as confidently as if it had never disappointed him.

Were we called upon to name the object under the sun which excites the deepest commiseration in the heart of Christian sensibility, which includes in itself the most affecting incongruities, which contains the sum and substance of real human misery, we should not hesitate to say, an irreligious old age. The mere debility of declining years, even the hopelessness of decrepitude in the pious, though they excite sympathy, yet it is the sympathy of tenderness unmixed with distress. We take and give comfort, from the cheering persuasion that the exhausted body will soon cease to clog its immortal companion; that the dim and failing eyes will soon open on a world of glory.

Dare we paint the reverse of the picture? Dare we suffer the imagination to dwell on the opening prospects of hoary impiety? Dare we figure to ourselves that the weakness, the miseries, the terrors we are now commiserating, are ease, are peace, are happiness, compared with the unutterable perspective?

There is a fatal way of lulling the conscience by entertaining diminishing thoughts of sins long since committed. We persuade ourselves to forget them,

and we therefore persuade ourselves that they are not remembered by God. But though distance diminishes objects to the eye of the beholder, it does not actually lessen them. Their real magnitude remains the same. Deliver us, merciful God, from the delusion of believing that secret sins, of which the world has no cognizance; early sins, which the world has forgotten, but which are known to "Him with whom we have to do," become by secrecy and distance as if they had never been! "Are not these things noted in YOUR book? If we remember them, God may forget them; especially if our remembrance be such as to induce a sound repentance. If we remember them not, he assuredly will. The holy contrition which should accompany this remembrance, while it will not abate our humble trust in our compassionate Redeemer, will keep our conscience tender, and our heart watchful.

We do not deny that there is frequently much kindness and polish, much benevolence and generosity, in men who do not even pretend to be religious. These qualities often flow from constitutional feeling, natural softness of temper, and warm affections; often from an elegant education— that best human sweetener and polisher of social life. We feel a tender regret as we exclaim, "What a fine soil would such dispositions afford to plant religion in!" Well-bred people are accustomed to respect all the decorums of society, to connect inseparably the ideas of personal comfort with public esteem, of generosity with reputation, of order with respectability. They have a keen sense of dishonor, and are careful to avoid everything that may bring the shadow of discredit on their name. Public opinion is the breath by which they live, the standard by which they act; of course they would not lower, by gross misconduct, that standard on which their happiness depends. They have been taught to respect themselves; this they can do with more security while they can retain, on this half-way principle, the respect of others.

In some who make further advances towards religion, we continue to see it in that same low degree which we have always observed. It is dwarfish and stunted; it makes no shoots. Though it gives some signs of life, it does not grow. By a tame and spiritless round, or rather by this fixed and immovable position, we rob ourselves of that fair reward of peace and joy which attends on a humble consciousness of progress, on the feeling of difficulties conquered, on a sense of Divine favor. That religion which is profitable is commonly perceptible. Nothing supports a traveler in his Christian course like the conviction that he is getting on, like looking back on the country he has passed, and, above all, like the sense of that protection which has hitherto carried him on, and of that grace which has promised to support him to the end.

The proper motion of the renewed heart is still directed upward. True religion is of an aspiring nature, continually tending towards that Heaven from where it was transplanted. Its top is high, because its root is deep. It is watered by a



perennial fountain; in its most flourishing state it is always capable of further growth. Real goodness proves itself to be such by a continual desire to be better. No virtue on earth is ever in a complete state. Whatever stage of religion any man has attained, if he is satisfied to rest in that stage, we would not call that man religious. The Gospel seems to consider the highest degree of goodness as the lowest with which a Christian ought to sit down satisfied. We cannot be said to be finished in any Christian grace because there is not one which may not be carried further than we have carried it. This promotes the double purpose of keeping us humble as to our present stage, and of stimulating us to something higher, which we may hope to attain.

That superficial thing which by mere people of the world is dignified by the appellation of religion, though it brings just that degree of credit which makes part of the system of worldly Christians, neither brings comfort for this world, nor security for the next. Outward observances, indispensable as they are, are not religion. They are the accessory, but not the principal; they are important aids and adjuncts, but not the thing itself; they are its aliment, but not its life; the fuel, but not the flame; the scaffolding, but not the edifice. Religion can no more subsist merely by them, than it can subsist without them. They are divinely appointed, and must be conscientiously observed; but observed as a means to promote an end, and not as an end in themselves.

The heartless homage of formal worship, where the vital power does not give life to the form, the cold compliment of ceremonial attendance, without the animating principle, as it will not bring peace to our own mind, so neither will it satisfy a jealous God. That God whose eye is on the heart, who tries the thoughts and searches the imaginations, will not be satisfied that we make him little more than a nominal deity, while the world is the real object of our worship. Such people seem to have almost the whole body of performance; all they lack is the soul. They are constant in their devotions; but the heart, which even the heathen esteem the best part of the sacrifice, they keep away. They read the Scriptures, but rest in the letter, instead of trying themselves by its spirit. They consider it as an enjoined task, but not as the quick and powerful instrument put into their hands of the critical dissection of "piercing and dividing asunder the soul and spirit;" not as the penetrating discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. These well-intentioned people seem to spend, no inconsiderable portion of time in religious exercise, and yet complain that they make little progress. They almost seem to insinuate that the Almighty does not keep his word with them, and manifest that religion to them is not pleasantness, nor her "paths peace."

Of such may we not ask, would you not do better to examine than to complain? to inquire whether you do indeed possess a heart which, notwithstanding its imperfections, is sincerely devoted to God? He who does not desire to be perfect

is not sincere. Would you not do well to convince yourselves that God is not unfaithful, that his promises do not fail, that his goodness is not slackened? May you not be entertaining some secret infidelity, practicing some latent disobedience, withholding some part of your heart, neglecting to exercise that faith, subtracting something from that devotedness to which a Christian should engage himself, and to which the promises of God are annexed? Do you indulge no propensities contrary to his will? Do you never resist the dictates of his Spirit, never shut your eyes to its illumination, nor your heart to its influences? Do you not indulge some cherished sin which obscures the light of grace, some practice which obstructs the growth of virtue, some distrust which chills the warmth of love? The discovery will repay the search, and if you succeed in this scrutiny, let not the detection discourage, but stimulate.

If then you resolve to take up religion in earnest, especially if you have actually adopted its customary forms, rest not in such low attainments as will afford neither present peace nor future happiness. To know Christianity only in its external forms, and its internal dissatisfactions, its superficial appearances without, and its disquieting apprehensions within; to be desirous of standing well with the world as a Christian, yet to be unsupported by a well-founded Christian hope; to depend for happiness on the opinion of men, instead of the favor of God; to go on dragging through the mere exercises of piety, without deriving from them real strength or solid peace; to live in the dread of being called an enthusiast, by outwardly exceeding in religion and in secret consciousness of falling short of it; to be conformed to the world's view of Christianity, rather than to aspire to be transformed by the renewing of your mind -- is a state not of pleasure but of penalty, not of conquest but of hopeless conflict, not of ingenuous love, but of tormenting fear.

It is knowing religion only as the captive in a foreign land knows the country in which he is a prisoner. He hears from the cheerful natives of its beauties, but is himself ignorant of every thing beyond his own gloomy limits. He hears of others as free and happy, but feels nothing himself but the rigors of incarceration.

The Christian character is not understood by the votaries of the world; if it were, they would be struck with its grandeur. It is the very reverse of that lowliness and pusillanimity, that abject spirit, and those narrow views, which they who know it not ascribe to it.

A Christian lives at the height of his being; not only at the top of his spiritual but of his intellectual life. He alone lives in the full exercise of his rational powers. Religion ennobles his reason while it enlarges it.

Let then your soul act up to its high destination; let not that which was made to soar to heaven grovel in the dust. Let it not live so much below itself. You

wonder it is not more fixed, when it is perpetually resting on things which are not fixed themselves. In the rest of a Christian there is stability. Nothing can shake his confidence but sin. Outward attacks and troubles rather fix than unsettle him, as tempests from without only serve to root the oak faster, while an inward canker will gradually rot and decay it.

That religion which sinks Christianity into a mere conformity to religious practices, must always fail of substantial effects. If sin be seated in the heart, if that be its home, that is the place in which it must be combated. It is in vain to attack it in the suburbs when it is lodged in the center. Mere forms can never expel that enemy which they can never reach. By a religion of decencies, our corruptions may perhaps be driven out of sight, but they will never be driven out of possession. If they are expelled from their outworks, they will retreat to their citadel. If they do not appear in the grosser forms prohibited by the Decalogue, still they will exist; the shape may be altered, but the principle will remain; -- they will exist in the spiritual modification of the same sins, equally forbidden by the Divine expositor. He who dares not be revengeful will be unforgiving. He who ventures not to break the letter of the seventh commandment in act, will violate it in the spirit. He who has not courage to renounce heaven by profligacy, will scale it by pride, or forfeit it by unprofitableness.

It is not any vain hope built on some external privilege or performance, on the one hand, nor a presumptuous confidence that our names are written in the book of life, on the other, which can afford a reasonable ground of safety; but it is endeavoring to keep all the commandments of God, it is living to him who died for us, it is being conformed to his image as well as redeemed by his blood. This is Christian virtue, this is the holiness of a believer. A lower motive will produce a lower morality, but such an unsanctified morality God will not accept.

For it will little avail us that Christ has died for us, that he has conquered sin, triumphed over the powers of darkness, and overcome the world, while any sin retains its unresisted dominion in our hearts, while the world is our idol, while our fostered corruptions cause us to prefer darkness to light. We must not persuade ourselves that we are reconciled to God, while our rebellious hearts are not reconciled to holiness.

It is not casting a set of opinions into a mold, and a set of duties into a system, which constitutes the Christian religion. The circumference must have a center, the body must have a soul, the performances must have a principle. Outward observances were wisely constituted to rouse our forgetfulness, to awake our secular spirits, to call back our negligent hearts: but it was never intended that we should stop short in the use of them. They were designed to excite holy thoughts, to quicken us to holy deeds, but not to be used as equivalents for either. But we find it cheaper to serve God in a multitude of exterior acts, than to

starve one interior corruption.

Nothing short of that uniform stable principle, that fixedness in religion which directs a man in all his actions, aims, and pursuits, to God as his ultimate end, can give consistency to his conduct, or tranquility to his soul. This state once attained, he will not waste all his thoughts and designs upon the world; he will not lavish all his affections on so poor a thing as his own advancement. He will desire to devote all to the only object worthy of them -- to God. Our Savior has taken care to provide that our ideas of glorifying him may not run out into fanciful chimeras or subtle inventions, by simply stating -- "herein is my father glorified, that you bear much fruit." This he goes on to inform us is the true evidence of our being of the number of his people, by adding "So shall you be my disciples."

PRACTICAL PIETY by Hannah More

## **PERIODICAL RELIGION**

We deceive ourselves when we fancy that what is emphatically called "the world" is only to be found in this or that situation. The world is everywhere. It is a nature as well as a place; a principle as well as "a local habitation and a name." Though the principle and the nature flourish most in those haunts which are their congenial soil, yet we are too ready, when we withdraw from the world abroad, to bring it home, to lodge it in our own bosom. The natural heart is both its temple and its worshiper.

But the most devoted idolater of the world, with all the capacity and industry which he may have applied to the subject, has never yet been able to accomplish the grand design of uniting the interests of heaven and earth. This experiment, which has been more assiduously and more frequently tried than that of the philosopher for the grand hermetic secret, has been tried with about the same degree of success. The most laborious process of the spiritual chemist to reconcile religion with the world has never yet been competent to make the contending principles coalesce.

But to drop metaphor. Religion was never yet thoroughly relished by a heart full of the world. The world in return cannot be completely enjoyed where there is just religion enough to disturb its false peace. In such minds heaven and earth ruin each other's enjoyments.

Yet life passes in the hopeless project of combining both. It is the object of the worldly system to flatter our passions, of the religious principle to subdue them; we adopt the one practically, while we maintain the other speculatively; we grasp at the gratifications of the one, we will not relinquish the promises of the

other. What makes life so little productive of real happiness is, that we are thus driving at opposite interests at the same time, though not with the same zeal.

It is no wonder that the more abstract doctrines of religion can make little impression on minds supremely engrossed by the objects of sense, when its most obvious and practical truths can but superficially impress them; when all the present objects which absorb their thoughts and affections are of a cast and character which furnish a perpetual hindrance and a powerful counteraction.

There is a religion which is too sincere for hypocrisy, but too transient to be profitable; too superficial to reach the heart, too unproductive to proceed from it. It is rather slight than false. It has discernment enough to distinguish sin, but not firmness enough to oppose it; compunction sufficient to soften the heart, but not vigor sufficient to reform it. It laments when it does wrong, and performs all the functions of repentance of sin except forsaking it. It has everything of devotion except the stability, and gives everything to religion except the heart. This is a religion of times, events, and circumstances; it is brought into play by accidents, and dwindles away with the occasion which called it out. Festivals and fasts, which occur but seldom, are much observed, and it is to be feared because they occur but seldom; while the great festival which comes every week comes too often to be so respectfully treated. The piety of these people comes out much in sickness, but is apt to retreat again as recovery approaches. If they die they are placed by their admirers in the Saint's Calendar; if they recover, they go back into the world they had renounced, and again suspend their amendment as often as death suspends his blow.

There is another class whose views are still lower, who yet cannot so far shake off religion as to be easy without retaining its brief and stated forms, and who contrive to mix up these forms with a faith of a piece with their practice. They blend their inconsistent works with a vague and unwarranted reliance on what the Savior has done for them, and thus patch up a merit and a propitiation of their own, running the hazard of incurring the danger of punishment by their lives, and inventing a scheme to avert it by their creed.

Religion never interferes with their pleasures except by the compliment of a short and occasional suspension. Having got through these periodical acts of devotion, they return to the same scenes of vanity and idleness which they had left for the temporary duty; forgetting that it was the very end of those acts of devotion to cure the vanity and to correct the idleness. Had the periodical observance answered its true design, it would have disinclined them to the pleasure instead of giving them a dispensation for its indulgence. Had they used the devout exercise in a right spirit, and improved it to its true end, it would have set the heart and life at work on all those pursuits which it was calculated to promote. But their project has more ingenuity. By the stated minutes they give to religion, they think cheaply to purchase a protection for the misemployment of

the rest of their time. They make these periodical devotions a kind of spiritual Insurance Office, which is to make up to the adventurers in pleasure any loss or damage which they may sustain in its voyage.

It is of these shallow devotions, these presumed equivalents for a new heart and a new life, that God declares by the prophet that he is "weary." Though, of his own express appointment, they become "an abomination" to him, as soon as the sign comes to be rested in for the thing signified. We Christians have "our new moons and our sacrifices" under other names and other shapes; of which sacrifices, that is, of the spirit in which they are offered, the Almighty has said, "I cannot put up with them: they are iniquity."

Now is this superficial devotion that "giving up ourselves not with our lips only, but with our lives," to our Maker, to which so many solemnly pledge themselves, at least once a week? Is consecrating an hour or two to public worship on the Sunday morning, making the Sabbath "a delight?" Is desecrating the rest of the day by "doing our own ways, finding our own pleasure, speaking our own words," making it "honorable?"

Sometimes in an awakening sermon, these periodical religionists hear, with awe and terror, of the hour of death and the day of judgment. Their hearts are penetrated with the solemn sounds. They confess the awful realities by the impression they make on their own feelings. The sermon ends, and with it the serious reflections it excited. While they listen to these things, especially if the preacher be alarming, they are all in all to them. They return to the world -- and these things are as if they were not, as if they had never been; as if their reality lasted only while they were preached; as if their existence depended only on their being heard; as if truth were no longer truth than while it solicited their notice; as if there were as little stability in religion itself as in their attention to it. As soon as their minds are disengaged from the question, one would think that death and judgment were a mere invention, that heaven and hell were blotted from existence, that eternity ceased to be eternity, in the long intervals in which they ceased to be the object of their consideration.

This is the natural effect of what we venture to denominate periodical religion. It is a transient homage, kept totally distinct and separate from the rest of our lives, instead of its being made the prelude and the principle of a course of pious practice; instead of our weaving our devotions and our actions into one uniform tissue, by doing all in one spirit, and to one end. When worshipers of this description pray for "a clean heart and a right spirit," when they beg of God to "turn away their eyes from beholding vanity," is it not to be feared that they pray to be made what they resolve never to become, that they would be very unwilling to become as good as they pray to be made, and would be sorry to be as penitent as they profess to desire? But, alas! they are in little danger of being

taken at their word; there is too much reason to fear their petitions will not be heard or answered; for prayer for the pardon of sin will obtain no pardon, while we retain the sin, in hope that the prayer will be accepted without the renunciation.

The most solemn office of our religion, the sacred memorial of the death of its Author, the blessed injunction and tender testimony of his dying love, the consolation of the humble believer, the gracious appointment for strengthening his faith, quickening his repentance, awakening his gratitude, and kindling his charity, is too often resorted to on the same erroneous principle. He who ventures to live without the use of this holy institution, lives in a state of disobedience to the last appointment of his Redeemer. He who rests in it as a means for supplying the place of habitual piety, totally mistakes its design, and is fatally deceiving his own soul.

This awful solemnity is, it is to be hoped, rarely approached even by this class of Christians without a desire of approaching it with the pious feelings above described. But, if they carry them to the altar, are they equally anxious to carry them away from it? are they anxious to maintain them after it? Does the rite, so seriously approached, commonly leave any vestige of seriousness behind it? Are they careful to perpetuate the feelings they were so desirous to excite? Do they strive to make them produce solid and substantial effects? Would that this inconstancy of mind were to be found only in the class of characters under consideration! Let the reader, however sincere in his desires, let the writer, however ready to lament the levity of others, seriously ask their own hearts if they can entirely acquit themselves of the inconsistency they are so forward to blame? -- if they do not find the charge brought against others but too applicable to themselves?

Irreverence antecedent to, or during this sacred solemnity, is far less rare than durable improvement after it. If there are, as we are willing to believe, none so profane as to violate the act, except those who impiously use it only as "a pick-lock to a place," there are too few who make it lastingly beneficial; few so thoughtless as not to approach it with resolutions of amendment; few comparatively who carry these resolutions into effect. Fear operates in the previous instance. Why should not love operate in that which is subsequent?

A periodical religion is accompanied with a periodical repentance. This species of repentance is adopted with no small mental reservation. It is partial and disconnected. These fragments of contrition, these broken parcels of penitence, while a succession of worldly pursuits is not only resorted to, but is intended to be resorted to during the whole of the intervening spaces, are not that sorrow which the Almighty has promised to accept. To render them pleasing to God and efficacious to ourselves, there must be an agreement in the parts, an entireness

in the whole web of life. There must be an entire repentance. A periodical contrition preceding the sacred seasons will not wipe out the daily offences, the hourly negligences of a sinful life. Sins half forsaken through fear, and half retained through partially resisted temptation, and partially adopted resolutions, make up but an unprofitable piety.

In the bosom of these professors there is a perpetual conflict between fear and inclination. In conversation you will generally find them very warm in the cause of religion; but it is religion as opposed to infidelity, not as opposed to worldly-mindedness. They defend the worship of God, but desire to be excused from his service. Their heart is the slave of the world, but their blindness hides from them the turpitude of that world. They commend piety, but dread its requisitions. They allow that repentance is necessary, but then how easy is it to find reasons for deferring a necessary evil? Who will hastily adopt a painful measure which he can find a creditable pretense for evading? They censure whatever is ostensibly wrong, but avoiding only part of it, the part they retain robs them of the benefit of their partial renunciation.

Our inherent character, and our necessary commerce with the world, naturally fill our hearts and minds with thoughts and ideas, over which we have unhappily too little control. We find this to be the case when, in our better hours, we attempt to give ourselves up to serious reflection. How many intrusions of worldly thoughts, how many impertinent imaginations, not only irrelevant, but uncalled and unwelcome, crowd in upon the mind so forcibly as scarcely to be repelled by our sincerest efforts! How impotent then, to repel such images, must that mind be which is devoted to worldly pursuits, which yields itself up to them; whose opinions, habits, and conduct are under their allowed influence!

We should fairly adjust the claims of both worlds, and having equitably determined their value, act upon that determination. We shall then fix the proportions and the limits of that attention which each deserves. A just estimate of their respective worth would cool our ardor and tame our immoderate desires after things so really little in themselves, and so short in their duration. Providence has set narrow bounds to life; piety should proportionally narrow our anxieties respecting it; for to be inordinately enamored with any object, the worth of which will not justify the attachment, argues an ill-regulated mind and a defective judgment.

All the strong remarks of devout writers on the littleness of those things which the world calls great, might be looked upon as mere rhetorical flourishes, or as the envious ebullitions of retired men, who could not attain to the things they condemn, did not their brief duration justify the description. Let the censurer only image to himself the world passing away, and the earth vanishing, before long, to all, and to every man at his death, which to him is the end of the world,



and he whom he now despises as a passionate declaimer will then appear a sober reasoner.

Let us not, then, consider a spirit of worldliness as a little infirmity, as a natural, and therefore a pardonable weakness; as a trifling error, which will be overlooked for the sake of our many good qualities. It is, in fact, the essence of our other faults, the temper that stands between us and our salvation, the spirit which is in direct opposition to the Spirit of God. Individual sins may more easily be cured, but this is the principle of all spiritual disease. A worldly spirit, where it is rooted and cherished, runs through the whole character, insinuates itself in all we say, and think, and do. It is this which makes us so dead in religion, so averse to spiritual things, so forgetful of God, so unmindful of eternity, so satisfied with ourselves, so impatient of serious discourse, and so alive to that vain and frivolous communion which excludes intellect almost as much as it excludes piety from our general conversation.

It is not, therefore, our more considerable actions alone which require watching, for they seldom occur. They do not form the habit of life in ourselves, nor the chief importance of our example to others. It is our ordinary behavior, it is our deportment in common life, it is our prevailing turn of mind in general communion, by which we shall profit or corrupt those with whom we associate. It is our conduct in social life which will help to diffuse a spirit of piety or a distaste to it. If we have much influence, this is the place in which particularly to exert it. If we have little, we have still enough to infect the temper and lower the tone of our narrow society.

If we really believe that it is the design of Christianity to raise us to a participation of the Divine nature, the slightest reflection on this elevation of our character would lead us to maintain its dignity in the ordinary communion of life. We should not so much inquire whether we are transgressing any actual prohibition, whether any standing law is pointed against us, as whether we are supporting the dignity of the Christian character; whether we are acting suitably to our profession; whether more exactness in the common occurrences of the day, more correctness in our conversation, would not be such evidences of our religion as, by being obvious and intelligible, might almost insensibly produce important effects.

The most insignificant people must not, through indolence and selfishness, undervalue their own influence. Most people have a little circle, of which they are a sort of center. Its smallness may lessen their quantity of good, but does not diminish the duty of using that little influence wisely. Where is the human being so inconsiderable but that he may in some shape benefit others, either by calling their virtues into exercise, or by setting them an example of virtue himself? But we are humble just in the wrong place. When the exhibition of our talents or

splendid qualities is in question, we are not backward in the display. When a little self-denial is to be exercised; when a little good might be effected by our example, by our discreet management in company, by giving a better turn to conversation, then at once we grow wickedly modest- "Such an insignificant creature as I am can do no good. Had I a higher rank or brighter talents, then, indeed, my influence might be exerted to some purpose." Thus, under the mask of diffidence we justify our indolence, and let slip those lesser occasions of promoting religion, which, if we all improved, how much might the condition of society be raised!

The hackneyed interrogation, "What! must we always be talking about religion?" must have the hackneyed answer -- Far from it. Talking about religion is not being religious. But we may bring the spirit of religion into company, and keep it in perpetual operation, when we do not professedly make it our subject. We may be constantly advancing its interests; we may, without effort or affectation, be giving an example of candor, of moderation, of humility, of forbearance. We may employ our influence by correcting falsehood, by checking levity, by discouraging calumny, by vindicating misrepresented merit, by countenancing every thing which has a good tendency -- in short, by throwing our whole weight, be it great or small, into a right scale.

PRACTICAL PIETY by Hannah More

## **PRAYER**

Prayer is the application of need to Him who only can relieve it, the voice of sin to Him who alone can pardon it. It is the urgency of poverty, the prostration of humility, the fervency of penitence, the confidence of trust. It is not eloquence, but earnestness; not the definition of helplessness, but the feeling of it; not figures of speech, but compunction of soul. It is the "Lord, save us, we perish," of drowning Peter; the cry of faith to the ear of mercy.

Adoration is the noblest employment of created beings; confession, the natural language of guilty creatures; gratitude, the spontaneous expression of pardoned sinners. Prayer is desire; it is not mere conception of the mind, nor a mere effort of the intellect, nor an act of the memory; but an elevation of the soul towards its Maker; a pressing sense of our own ignorance and infirmity; a consciousness of the perfection of God, of his readiness to hear, of his power to help, of his willingness to save. It is not an emotion produced in the senses, nor an effect wrought by the imagination; but a determination of the will, an effusion of the heart.

Prayer is the guide to self-knowledge, by prompting us to look after our sins in order to pray against them; a motive to vigilance, by teaching us to guard

against those sins which, through self-examination, we have been enabled to detect.

Prayer is an act both of the understanding and of the heart. The understanding must apply itself to the knowledge of the Divine perfections, or the heart will not be led to the adoration of them. It would not be a reasonable service, if the mind was excluded. It must be rational worship, or the human worshiper would not bring to the service the distinguishing faculty of his nature, which is reason. It must be spiritual worship, or it would lack the distinctive quality to make it acceptable to him who is a Spirit, and who has declared that he will be worshiped "in spirit and in truth."

Prayer is right in itself as the most powerful means of resisting sin and advancing in holiness. It is above all right, as everything is, in which has the authority of Scripture, the command of God, and the example of Christ.

There is a perfect consistency in all the ordinations of God; a perfect congruity in the whole scheme of his dispensations. If man were not a corrupt creature, such prayer as the Gospel enjoins would not have been necessary. Had not prayer been an important means for curing those corruptions, a God of perfect wisdom would not have ordered it. He would not have prohibited every thing which tends to inflame and promote them, had they not existed; nor would he have commanded every thing that has a tendency to diminish and remove them, had not their existence been fatal. Prayer, therefore, is an indispensable part of his economy, and of our obedience.

It is a hackneyed objection to the use of prayer, that it is offending the omniscience of God to suppose he requires information of our needs. But no objection can be more futile. We do not pray to inform God of our needs, but to express our sense of the needs which he already knows. As he has not so much made his promises to our necessities as to our requests, it is reasonable that our requests should be made before we can hope that our necessities will be relieved. God does not promise to those who "lack", that they shall have, but to those who "ask;" nor to those who need, that they shall "find," but to those who "seek." So far, therefore, from his previous knowledge of our needs being a ground of objection to prayer, it is in fact the true ground for our application. Were he not knowledge itself, our information would be of as little use as our application would be were he not goodness itself.

We cannot attain to a just notion of prayer while we remain ignorant of our own nature, of the nature of God as revealed in Scripture, of our relation to him, and dependence on him. If, therefore, we do not live in the daily study of the Holy Scriptures, we shall lack the highest motives to this duty and the best helps for performing it; if we do, the cogency of these motives, and the inestimable value

of these helps, will render argument unnecessary, and exhortations superfluous.

One cause, therefore, of the dullness of many Christians in prayer, is their slight acquaintance with the sacred volume. They hear it periodically, they read it occasionally, they are contented to know it historically, to consider it superficially; but they do not endeavor to get their minds imbued with its spirit. If they store their memory with its facts, they do not impress their hearts with its truths. They do not regard it as the nutriment on which their spiritual life and growth depend. They do not pray over it; they do not consider all its doctrines as of practical application; they do not cultivate that spiritual discernment which alone can enable them judiciously to appropriate its promises and its denunciations to their own actual case. They do not apply it as an unerring line to ascertain their own rectitude or obligations.

In our retirements we too often fritter away our precious moments -- moments rescued from the world -- in trivial, sometimes, it is to be feared, in corrupt thoughts. But if we must give the reins to our imagination, let us send this excursive faculty to range among great and noble objects. Let it stretch forward, under the sanction of faith and the anticipation of prophecy, to the accomplishment of those glorious promises and tremendous threatenings which will soon be realized in the eternal world. These are topics which, under the safe and sober guidance of Scripture, will fix its largest speculations and sustain its loftiest flights. The same Scripture, while it expands and elevates the mind, will keep it subject to the dominion of truth; while, at the same time, it will teach it that its boldest excursions must fall infinitely short of the astonishing realities of a future state.

Though we cannot pray with a too deep sense of sin, we may make our sins too exclusively the object of our prayers. While we keep, with a self-abasing eye, our own corruptions in view, let us look with equal intentness on that mercy which cleanses from all sin. Let our prayers be all humiliation, but let them not be all complaint. When men indulge no other thought but that they are rebels, the hopelessness of pardon hardens them into disloyalty. Let them look to the mercy of the King, as well as to the rebellion of the subject. If we contemplate his grace as displayed in the Gospel, then, though our humility will increase, our despair will vanish. Gratitude in this, as in human instances, will create affection. "We love him, because he first loved us."

Let us, therefore, always keep our unworthiness in view as a reason why we stand in need of the mercy of God in Christ; but never plead it as a reason why we should not draw near to him to implore that mercy. The best men are unworthy for their own sakes; the worst, on repentance, will be accepted for his sake and through his merits.

In prayer, then, the perfections of God, and especially his mercies in our redemption, should occupy our thoughts as much as our sins; our obligations to him as much as our departures from him. We should keep up in our hearts a constant sense of our own weakness, not with a design to discourage the mind and depress the spirits, but with a view to drive us out of ourselves in search of the Divine assistance. We should contemplate our infirmity in order to draw us to look for his strength, and to seek that power from God which we vainly look for in ourselves: we do not tell a sick friend of his danger in order to grieve or terrify him, but to induce him to apply to his physician, and to have recourse to his remedy.

Among the charges which have been brought against serious piety, one is, that it teaches men to despair. The charge is just in one sense as to the fact, but false in the sense intended. It teaches us to despair, indeed, of ourselves, while it inculcates that faith in a Redeemer which is the true antidote to despair. Faith quickens the doubting spirit, while it humbles the presumptuous. The lowly Christian takes comfort in the blessed promise that God will never forsake those who are his. The presumptuous man is equally right in the doctrine, but wrong in applying it. He takes that comfort to himself which was meant for another class of characters. The mal-appropriation of Scripture promises and threatenings is the cause of much error and delusion.

Some have fallen into error by advocating an unnatural and impracticable disinterestedness, asserting that God is to be loved exclusively for himself, with an absolute renunciation of any view of advantage to ourselves; but that prayer cannot be mercenary, which involves God's glory with our own happiness, and makes his will the law of our requests. Though we are to desire the glory of God supremely; though this ought to be our grand actuating principle, yet he has graciously permitted, commanded, invited us to attach our own happiness to this primary object.

The Bible exhibits not only a beautiful, but an inseparable combination of both, which delivers us from the danger of unnaturally renouncing our own happiness for the promotion of God's glory on the one hand; and, on the other, from seeking any happiness independent of him, and underived from him. In enjoining us to love him supremely, he has connected an unspeakable blessing with a paramount duty, the highest privilege with the most positive command.

What a triumph for the humble Christian, to be assured that "the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity," condescends at the same time to dwell in the heart of the contrite— in his heart! to know that God is the God of his life; to know that he is even invited to take the Lord for his God. To close with God's offers, to accept his invitations, to receive God as our portion, must surely be more pleasing to our heavenly Father than separating our happiness from his glory. To

disconnect our interests from his goodness, is at once to detract from his perfections, and to obscure the brightness of our own hopes. The declarations of the inspired writers are confirmed by the authority of the heavenly hosts. They proclaim that the glory of God and the happiness of his creatures, so far from interfering, are connected with each other. We know but of one anthem composed and sung by angels, and this most harmoniously combines "the glory of God in the highest with peace on earth and good will to men."

"The beauty of Scripture," says the great Saxon reformer, "consists in pronouns." This God is our God -- God, even our own God shall bless us. How delightful the appropriation! to glorify him as being in himself consummate excellence, and to love him from the feeling that this excellence is directed to our felicity! Here modesty would be ingratitude -- disinterestedness, rebellion. It would be severing ourselves from Him in whom we live, and move, and are; it would be dissolving the connection which he has condescended to establish between himself and his creatures.

It has been justly observed, that the Scripture-saints make this union the chief ground of their grateful exultation: "My strength," "my rock," "my fortress," "my deliverer!" Again, "let the God of my salvation be exalted!" Now, take away the pronoun, and substitute the article the, how comparatively cold is the impression! The consummation of the joy arises from the peculiarity, the intimacy, the endearment of the relation.

Nor to the liberal Christian is the grateful joy diminished, when he blesses his God as "the God of all those who trust in him." All general blessings, will he say, all providential mercies, are mine individually, are mine as completely as if no other shared in the enjoyment; life, light, the earth and heavens, the sun and stars, whatever sustains the body and recreates the spirits! My obligation is as great as if the mercy had been made purely for me! as great! no, it is greater -- it is augmented by a sense of the millions who participate in the blessing. The same enlargement of personal obligation holds good, no, rises higher in the mercies of redemption. The Lord is my Savior as completely as if he had redeemed only me. That he has redeemed a great multitude, which no man can number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, is diffusion without abatement; it is general participation without individual diminution. Each has all.

In adoring the providence of God, we are apt to be struck with what is new and out of course, while we too much overlook long, habitual, and uninterrupted mercies. But common mercies, if less striking, are more valuable, both because we have them always, and for the reason above assigned, because others share them. The ordinary blessings of life are overlooked for the very reason for which they ought to be most prized because they are most uniformly bestowed. They

are most essential to our support; and when once they are withdrawn, we begin to find that they are also most essential to our comfort. Nothing raises the price of a blessing like its removal, whereas it was its continuance which should have taught us its value. We require novelties to awaken our gratitude, not considering that it is the duration of mercies which enhances their value. We want fresh excitements. We consider mercies long enjoyed as things of course, as things to which we have a sort of presumptive claim; as if God had no right to withdraw what he has once bestowed, as if he were obliged to continue what he has once been pleased to confer.

But that the sun has shone unremittingly from the day that God created it, is not a less stupendous exertion of power than that the hand which fixed in the heavens, and marked out its progress through them, once said by his servant, "Sun, stand you still upon Gibeon." That it has gone on in his strength, driving its uninterrupted career, and "rejoicing as a giant to run his course," for six thousand years, is a more astonishing exhibition of omnipotence than that he should have been once suspended by the hand which set it in motion. That the ordinances of heaven, that the established laws of nature should have been for one day interrupted to serve a particular occasion, is a less real wonder, and certainly a less substantial blessing, than that in such a multitude of ages they should have pursued their appointed course, for the comfort of the whole system;

Forever singing, as they shine,  
The hand that made us is divine.

As the affections of the Christian ought to be set on things above, so it is for those who his prayers will be chiefly addressed. God, in promising to "give to those who delight in him the desire of their heart," could never mean temporal things; for these they might desire improperly as to the object, and inordinately as to the degree. The promise relates principally to spiritual blessings. He not only gives us these mercies, but the very desire to obtain them is also his gift. Here our prayer requires no qualifying, no conditioning, no limitation. We cannot err in our choice, for God himself is the object of it; we cannot exceed in the degree, unless it were possible to love him too well, or to please him too much.

We should pray for worldly comforts, and for a blessing on our earthly plans, though lawful in themselves, conditionally, and with a reservation; because, after having been earnest in our requests for them, it may happen that when we come to the petition, "your will be done," we may in these very words be praying that our previous petitions may not be granted. In this brief request consists the vital principle, the essential spirit of prayer. God shows his munificence in encouraging us to ask most earnestly for the greatest things, by promising that the smaller "shall be added unto us." We therefore acknowledge his liberality most when we request the highest favors. He manifests his infinite superiority to

earthly fathers by chiefly delighting to confer those spiritual gifts which they less solicitously desire for their children than those worldly advantages on which God sets so little value.

Nothing short of a sincere devotedness to God can enable us to maintain an equality of mind under unequal circumstances. We murmur that we have not the things we ask amiss, not knowing that they are withheld by the same mercy by which the things that are good for us are granted. Things good in themselves may not be good for us. A resigned spirit is the proper disposition to prepare us for receiving mercies, or for having them denied. Resignation of soul, like the allegiance of a good subject, is always in readiness, though not in action; whereas an impatient mind is a spirit of disaffection, always prepared to revolt when the will of the sovereign is in opposition to that of the subject. This seditious principle is the infallible characteristic of an unrenewed mind.

A sincere love of God will make us thankful when our prayers are granted, and patient and cheerful when they are denied. He who feels his heart rise against any Divine dispensation, ought not to rest until by serious meditation and earnest prayer it be molded into submission. A habit of acquiescence in the will of God will so operate on the faculties of his mind, that even his judgment will embrace the conviction that what he once so ardently desired would not have been that good thing which his blindness had conspired with his wishes to make him believe it to be. He will recollect the many instances in which, if his importunity had prevailed, the thing which ignorance requested, and wisdom denied, would have insured his misery. Every fresh disappointment will teach him to distrust himself and to confide in God. Experience will instruct him that there may be a better way of hearing our requests than that of granting them. Happy for us, that He to whom they are addressed knows which is best, and acts upon that knowledge:

"Still lift for good the supplicating voice,  
But leave to Heaven the measure and the choice;  
Implore his aid, in his decisions rest;  
Secure whatever he gives, he gives the best."

We should endeavor to render our private devotions effectual remedies for our own particular sins. Prayer against sin in general is too indefinite to reach the individual case. We must bring it home to our own heart, else we may be confessing another man's sins and overlooking our own. If we have any predominant fault, we should pray more especially against that fault. If we pray for any virtue of which we particularly stand in need, we should dwell on our own deficiencies in that virtue, until our souls become deeply affected with our need of it. Our prayers should be circumstantial, not, as was before observed, for the information of Infinite Wisdom, but for the stirring up of our own dull affections. And as the recapitulation of our needs tends to keep up a sense of



our dependence, the enlarging on our special mercies will tend to keep alive a sense of gratitude; while indiscriminate petitions, confessions, and thanksgivings leave the mind to wander in indefinite devotion and unaffecting generalities without personality and without appropriation. It must be obvious that we except those grand universal points in which all have an equal interest, and which must always form the essence of public prayer.

On the blessing attending importunity in prayer the Gospel is abundantly explicit. God perhaps delays to give, that we may persevere in asking. He may require importunity for our own sakes, that the frequency and urgency of the petition may bring our hearts into that frame to which he will be favorable.

As we ought to live in a spirit of obedience to his commands, so we should live in a frame of waiting for his blessing on our prayers, and in a spirit of gratitude when we have obtained it. This is that "preparation of the heart" which would always keep us in a posture for duty. If we desert the duty because an immediate blessing does not visibly attend it, it shows that we do not serve God out of conscience, but selfishness; that we grudge expending on him that service which brings us in no immediate interest. Though he grant not our petition, let us never be tempted to withdraw our application.

Our reluctant devotions may remind us of the remark of a certain great political wit, who apologized for his late attendance in parliament by his being detained while a party of soldiers were dragging a volunteer to his duty. How many excuses do we find for not being in time! How many apologies for brevity! How many evasions for neglect! How unwilling, too often, are we to come into the Divine presence; how reluctant to remain in it! Those hours which are least valuable for business, which are least seasonable for pleasure, we commonly give to religion. Our energies, which were exerted in the society we have just left, are sunk as we approach the Divine presence. Our hearts, which were all alacrity in some frivolous conversation, become cold and inanimate, as if it were the natural property of devotion to freeze the affections. Our animal spirits, which so readily performed their functions before, now slacken their vigor and lose their vivacity. The sluggish body sympathizes with the unwilling mind, and each promotes the deadness of the other: both are slow in listening to the call of duty; both are soon weary in performing it. How do our fancies rove back to the pleasures we have been enjoying! How apt are the diversified images of those pleasures to mix themselves with our better thoughts, to pull down our higher aspirations! As prayer requires all the energies of the compound being of man, so we too often feel as if there were a conspiracy of body, soul, and spirit to disincline and disqualify us for it.

When the heart is once sincerely turned to religion, we need not, every time we pray, examine into every truth, and seek for conviction over and over again; but

may assume that those doctrines are true, the truth of which we have already proved. From a general and fixed impression of these principles will result a taste, a disposedness, a love, so intimate, that the convictions of the understanding will become the affections of the heart. To be deeply impressed with a few fundamental truths, to digest them thoroughly, to meditate on them seriously, to pray over them fervently, to get them deeply rooted in the heart, will be more productive of faith and holiness, than to labor after variety, ingenuity, or elegance. The indulgence of imagination will rather distract than edify. Searching after ingenious thoughts will rather divert the attention from God to ourselves, than promote fixedness of thought, singleness of intention, and devotedness of spirit. Whatever is subtle and refined is in danger of being unscriptural. If we do not guard the mind, it will learn to wander in quest of novelties. It will learn to set more value on original thoughts than devout affections. It is the business of prayer to cast down imaginations which gratify the natural activity of the mind, while they leave the heart unhumiliated.

We should confine ourselves to the present business of the present moment; we should keep the mind in a state of perpetual dependence. "Now is the accepted time." "Today we must hear his voice." "Give us this day our daily bread." The manna will not keep until tomorrow: tomorrow will have its own needs, and must have its own petitions. Tomorrow we must seek afresh the bread of heaven.

We should, however, avoid coming to our devotions with unfurnished minds. We should be always laying in materials for prayer, by a diligent course of serious reading, by treasuring up in our minds the most important truths. If we rush into the Divine presence with a vacant, or ignorant and unprepared mind, with a heart full of the world; as we shall feel no disposition or qualification for the work we are about to engage in, so we cannot expect that our petitions will be heard or granted. There must be some congruity between the heart and the object, some affinity between the state of our minds and the business in which they are employed, if we would expect success in the work.

We are often deceived both as to the principle and the effect of our prayers. When from some external cause the heart is glad, the spirits light, the thoughts ready, the tongue voluble, a kind of spontaneous eloquence is the result; with this we are pleased, and this ready flow we are willing to impose on ourselves for piety.

On the other hand, when the mind is dejected, the animal spirits low, the thoughts confused, when apposite words do not readily present themselves, we are apt to accuse our hearts of lack of fervor, to lament our weakness, and to mourn that because we have had no pleasure in praying, our prayers have, therefore, not ascended to the throne of mercy. In both cases we perhaps judge ourselves unfairly. These unready accents, these faltering praises, these ill-

expressed petitions, may find more acceptance than the florid talk with which we were so well satisfied: the latter consisted, it may be, of shining thoughts floating on the fancy, eloquent words dwelling only on the lips; the former was the sighing of a contrite heart, abased by the feeling of its own unworthiness and awed by the perfections of a holy and heart-searching God. The heart is dissatisfied with its own dull and tasteless repetitions, which, with all their imperfections, Infinite Goodness may perhaps hear with favor. We may not only be elated with the fluency, but even with the fervency of our prayers. Vanity may grow out of the very act of renouncing it; and we may begin to feel proud at having humbled ourselves so eloquently.

There is, however, a strain and spirit of prayer equally distinct from that facility and copiousness for which we certainly are never the better in the sight of God, and from that constraint and dryness for which we may be never the worse. There is a simple, solid, pious strain of prayer in which the supplicant is so filled and occupied with a sense of his own dependence, and of the importance of the things for which he asks, and so persuaded of the power and grace of God, through Christ, to give him those things, that while he is engaged in it he does not merely imagine, but feels assured that God is near to him as a reconciled father, so that every burden and doubt are taken off from his mind. "He knows," as John expresses it, "that he has the petitions he desired of God," and feels the truth of that promise, "While they are yet speaking I will hear." This is the perfection of prayer.

PRACTICAL PIETY by Hannah More

## **CULTIVATION OF A DEVOTIONAL SPIRIT**

To maintain a devotional spirit two things are especially necessary; habitually to cultivate the disposition, and habitually to avoid whatever is unfavorable to it. Frequent retirement and recollection are indispensable together with such a general course of reading, as, if it does not actually promote the spirit we are endeavoring to maintain, shall never be hostile to it. We should avoid as much as in us lies all such society, all such amusements as excite tempers which it is the daily business of a Christian to subdue, and all those feelings which it is his constant duty to suppress.

And here may we venture to observe, that if some things which are apparently innocent, and do not assume an alarming aspect, or bear a dangerous character; things which the generality of decorous people affirm (how truly we know not) to be safe for them; yet if we find that these things stir up in us improper propensities; if they awaken thoughts which ought not to be excited; if they abate our love for religious exercises, or infringe on our time for performing them; if they make spiritual concerns appear insipid; if they wind our hearts a

little more about the world; in short, if we have formerly found them injurious to our own souls, then let no example or persuasion, no belief of their alleged innocence, no plea of their perfect safety, tempt us to indulge in them. It matters little to our security what they are to others. Our business is with ourselves. Our responsibility is on our own heads. Others cannot know the side on which we are assailable. Let our own unbiased judgment determine our opinion; let our own experience decide for our own conduct.

In speaking of books, we cannot forbear noticing that very prevalent sort of reading which is little less productive of evil, little less prejudicial to moral and mental improvement, than that which carries a more formidable appearance. We cannot confine our censure to those more corrupt writings which deprave the heart, debauch the imagination, and poison the principles. Of these the turpitude is so obvious that no caution on this head, it is presumed, can be necessary. But if justice forbids us to confound the insipid with the mischievous, the idle, with the vicious, and the frivolous with the profligate, still we can only admit of shades -- deep shades, we allow -- of difference.

These works, if comparatively harmless, yet debase the taste, slacken the intellectual nerve, let down the understanding, set the imagination loose, and send it gadding among low and worthless objects. They not only run away with the time which should be given to better things, but gradually destroy all taste for better things. They sink the mind to their own standard, and give it a sluggish reluctance, we had almost said a moral incapacity, for every thing above their level. The mind, by long habit of stooping, loses its erectness, and yields to its degradation. It becomes so low and narrow by the littleness of the things which engage it, that it requires a painful effort to lift itself high enough, or to open itself wide enough, to embrace great and noble objects. The appetite is vitiated. Excess, instead of producing a surfeit by weakening the digestion, only induces a loathing for stronger nourishment. The faculties which might have been expanding in works of science, or soaring in the contemplation of genius, become satisfied with the impertinences of the most ordinary fiction, lose their relish for the severity of truth, the elegance of taste, and the soberness of religion. Lulled in the torpor of repose, the intellect dozes, and enjoys, in its waking dream,

"All the wild trash of sleep without its rest."

In avoiding books which excite the passions, it would seem strange to include even some devotional works. Yet such as merely kindle warm feelings are not always the safest. Let us rather prefer those which, while they tend to raise a devotional spirit, awaken the affections without disordering them; which, while they elevate the desires, purify them; which show us our own nature, and lay open its corruptions. Such as show us the malignity of sin, the deceitfulness of

our hearts, the febleness of our best resolutions; such as teach us to pull off the mask from the fairest appearances, and discover every hiding place where some lurking evil would conceal itself; such as show us not what we appear to others, but what we really are; such as, cooperating with our interior feelings, and showing us our natural state, point out our absolute need of a Redeemer, lead us to seek to him for pardon, from a conviction that there is no other refuge, no other salvation. Let us be conversant with such writings as teach us that, while we long to obtain the remission of our transgressions, we must not desire the remission of our duties. Let us seek for such a Savior as will not only deliver us from the punishment of sin, but from its dominion also.

And let us ever bear in mind that the end of prayer is not answered when the prayer is finished. We should regard prayer as a means to a farther end. The act of prayer is not sufficient, we must cultivate a spirit of prayer. And though, when the actual devotion is over, we cannot amid the distractions of company and business always be thinking of heavenly things, yet the desire, the frame, the propensity, the willingness to return to them, we must, however difficult, endeavor to maintain.

The proper temper for prayer should precede the act. The disposition should be wrought in the mind before the exercise is begun. To bring a proud temper to an humble prayer, a luxurious habit to a self-denying prayer, or a worldly disposition to a spiritually-minded prayer, is a positive anomaly. A habit is more powerful than an act, and a previously indulged temper during the day will not, it is to be feared, be fully counteracted by the exercise of a few minutes devotion at night.

Prayer is designed for a perpetual renovation of the motives to virtue; if, therefore, the cause is not followed by its consequence -- a consequence inevitable but for the impediments we bring to it, we rob our nature of its highest privilege, and are in danger of incurring a penalty where we are looking for a blessing.

That the habitual tendency of the life should be the preparation for the stated prayer, is naturally suggested to us by our blessed Redeemer in his sermon on the Mount. He announced the precepts of holiness and their corresponding beatitudes; he gave the spiritual exposition of the law, the directions for almsgiving, the exhortation to love our enemies, no, the essence and spirit of the whole Decalogue, previous to his delivering his own Divine prayer as a pattern for ours. Let us learn from this that the preparation of prayer is, therefore, to live in all those pursuits which we may safely beg of God to bless, and in a conflict with all those temptations into which we pray not to be led.

If God be the center to which our hearts are tending, every line in our lives must meet in him. With this point in view, there will be a harmony between our

prayers and our practice, a consistency between devotion and conduct which will make every part turn to this one end, bear upon this one point. For the beauty of the Christian scheme consists not in parts (however good in themselves) which tend to separate views and lead to different ends; but it arises from its being one entire, uniform, connected plan, "compacted of that which every joint supplies," and of which all the parts terminate in this one grand ultimate point. The design of prayer, therefore, as we before observed, is not merely to make us devout while we are engaged in it, but that its odor may be diffused through all the intermediate spaces of the day, enter into all its occupations, duties, and tempers. Nor must its results be partial or limited to easy and pleasant duties, but extend to such as are less alluring. When we pray, for instance, for our enemies, the prayer must be rendered practical, must be made a means of softening our spirit and cooling our resentment toward them. If we deserve their enmity the true spirit of prayer will put us upon endeavoring to cure the fault which has excited it. If we do not deserve it, it will put us on striving for a peaceful temper, and we shall endeavor not to let slip so favorable an occasion of cultivating it. There is no such softener of animosity, no such soother of resentment, no such allayer of hatred, as sincere, cordial prayer.

It is obvious that the precept to pray without ceasing can never mean to enjoin a continual course of actual prayer. But while it more directly enjoins us to embrace all proper occasions of performing this sacred duty, or rather of claiming this valuable privilege, so it plainly implies that we should try to keep up constantly that sense of the Divine presence which shall maintain the disposition. In order to this, we should inure our minds to reflection; we should encourage serious thoughts. A good thought barely passing through the mind will make little impression on it. We must arrest it, constrain it to remain with us, expand, amplify, and, as it were, take it to pieces. It must be distinctly unfolded and carefully examined, or it will leave no precise idea; it must be fixed and incorporated, or it will produce no practical effect. We must not dismiss it until it has left some trace on the mind, until it has made some impression on the heart.

On the other hand, if we give the reins to a loose ungoverned imagination, at other times if we abandon our minds to frivolous thoughts, if we fill them with corrupt images; if we cherish sensual ideas during the rest of the day, can we expect that none of these images will intrude, that none of these impressions will be revived, but that the temple, into which foul things have been invited, will be cleansed at a given moment; that worldly thoughts will recede and give place at once to pure and holy thoughts? Will that Spirit, grieved by impurity, or resisted by levity, return with his warm beams and cheering influences to the contaminated mansion from which he has been driven out? Is it amazing if, finding no entrance into a heart filled with vanity, he should withdraw himself?

We cannot in retiring into our closets change our natures as we do our clothes.

The disposition we carry there will be likely to remain with us. We have no right to expect that a new temper will meet us at the door. We can only hope that the spirit we bring there will be cherished and improved. It is not easy, rather it is not possible to graft genuine devotion on a life of an opposite tendency; nor can we delight ourselves regularly for a few stated moments in that God whom we have not been serving during the day. We may, indeed, to quiet our conscience, take up the employment of prayer, but cannot take up the state of mind which will make the employment beneficial to ourselves, or the prayer acceptable to God, if all the previous hours of the day we have been careless of ourselves and unmindful of our Maker. They will not pray differently from the rest of the world who do not live differently.

What a contradiction is it to lament the weakness, the misery, and the corruption of our nature in our devotions, and then to rush into a life, though not perhaps of vice, yet of indulgences calculated to increase that weakness, to inflame those corruptions, and to lead to that misery! There is either no meaning in our prayers, or no sense in our conduct. In the one we mock God, in the other we deceive ourselves.

Will not he who keeps up an habitual communion with his Maker, who is vigilant in thought, self-denying in action, who strives to keep his heart from wrong desires, his mind from vain imaginations, and his lips from idle words, bring a more prepared spirit, a more collected mind, be more engaged, more penetrated, more present to the occasion? Will he not feel more delight in this devout exercise, reap more benefit from it, than he who lives at random, prays from custom, and who, though he dares not omit the form, is a stranger to its spirit?

We speak not here to the self-sufficient formalist, or the careless profligate. Among those whom we now take the liberty to address, are to be found, especially in the higher class of females, the amiable and the interesting, and, in many respects, the virtuous and correct; characters so engaging, so evidently made for better things, so capable of reaching high degrees of excellence, so formed to give the tone to Christian practice as well as to fashion; so calculated to give a beautiful impression of that religion which they profess without sufficiently adorning, which they believe without fairly exemplifying; that we cannot forbear taking a tender interest in their welfare, we cannot forbear breathing a fervent prayer that they may yet reach the elevation for which they were intended; that they may hold out a uniform and consistent pattern of "whatever things are pure, honest, just, lovely, and of good report!" This the apostle goes on to intimate can only be done by thinking on these things. Things can only influence our practice as they engage our attention. Would not then a confirmed habit of serious thought tend to correct that inconsideration which, we are willing to hope, more than lack of principle, lies at the bottom of the

inconsistency we are lamenting?

If, as it is generally allowed, the great difficulty of our spiritual life is to make the future predominate over the present, do we not, by the conduct we are regretting, aggravate what it is in our power to diminish? Miscalculation of the relative value of things is one of the greatest errors of our spiritual life. We estimate them in an inverse proportion to their value, as well as to their duration: we lavish earnest and durable thoughts on things so trifling that they deserve little regard, so temporary that they "perish with the using," while we bestow only slight attention on things of infinite worth; only transient thoughts on things of eternal duration.

Those who are so far conscientious as not to omit a regular course of devotion, and who yet allow themselves, at the same time, to go on in a course of amusements which excite a directly opposite spirit, are inconceivably augmenting their own difficulties. They are eagerly heaping up fuel in the day on the fire which they intend to extinguish in the evening; they are voluntarily adding to the temptations against which they mean to request grace to struggle. To acknowledge, at the same time, that we find it hard to serve God as we ought, and yet to be systematically indulging habits which must naturally increase the difficulty, makes our character almost ridiculous, while it renders our duty almost impracticable.

While we make our way more difficult by those very indulgences with which we think to cheer and refresh it, the determined Christian becomes his own pioneer; he makes his path easy by voluntarily clearing it of the obstacles which impede his progress.

These habitual indulgences seem a contradiction to that obvious law, that one virtue always involves another; for we cannot labor after any grace -- that of prayer, for instance -- without resisting whatever is opposite to it. If, then, we lament that it is so hard to serve God, let us not by our conduct furnish arguments against ourselves; for, as if the difficulty were not great enough in itself, we are continually heaping up mountains in our way, by indulging in such pursuits and passions as make a small labor an insurmountable one.

We may often judge better of our state by the result than by the act of prayer; our very defects, our coldness, deadness, wanderings, may leave more contrition on the soul than the happiest turn of thought. The feeling of our needs, the confession of our sins, the acknowledgment of our dependence, the renunciation of ourselves, the supplication for mercy, the application to the "fountain opened for sin," the cordial entreaty for the aid of the Spirit, the relinquishment of our own will, resolutions of better obedience, petitions that these resolutions may be directed and sanctified -- these are the subjects in which the supplicant should



be engaged, by which his thoughts should be absorbed.

Can they be so absorbed, if many of the intervening hours are passed in pursuits of a totally different complexion -- pursuits which raise the passions which we are seeking to allay? Will the cherished vanities go at our bidding? Will the required dispositions come at our calling? Do we find our tempers so obedient, our passions so subservient, in the other concerns of life? If not, what reason have we to expect their submission in this grand concern? We should, therefore, endeavor to believe as we pray, to think as we pray, to feel as we pray, and to act as we pray. Prayer must not be a solitary, independent exercise; but an exercise interwoven with many, and inseparably connected with that golden chain of Christian duties, of which, when so connected, it forms one of the most important links.

Let us be careful that our cares, occupations, and amusements may be always such that we may not be afraid to implore the Divine blessing on them; this is the criterion of their safety, and of our duty. Let us endeavor that in each, in all, one continually growing sentiment and feeling of loving, serving, and pleasing God, maintain its predominant station in the heart.

An additional reason why we should live in the perpetual use of prayer, seems to be, that our blessed Redeemer, after having given both the example and the command while on earth, condescends still to be our unceasing intercessor in heaven. Can we ever cease petitioning for ourselves, when we believe that he never ceases interceding for us?

If we are so unhappy as now to find little pleasure in this holy exercise, that however is so far from being a reason for discontinuing it, that it affords the strongest argument for perseverance. That which was at first a form will become a pleasure; that which was a burden will become a privilege; that which we impose upon ourselves as a medicine will become necessary as nourishment, and desirable as a gratification. That which is now short and superficial will become copious and solid. The chariot-wheel is warmed by its own motion. Use will make that easy which was at first painful. That which is once become easy will soon be rendered pleasant. Instead of repining at the performance, we shall be unhappy at the omission. When a man recovering from sickness attempts to walk, he does not discontinue the exercise because he feels himself weak, nor even because the effort is painful. He rather redoubles his exertion. It is from his perseverance that he looks for strength. An additional turn every day diminishes his repugnance, augments his vigor, improves his spirits. That effort which was submitted to because it was salutary, is continued because the feeling of renovated strength renders it delightful.

PRACTICAL PIETY by Hannah More

## **THE LOVE OF GOD**

Our love to God arises out of need; God's love to us out of fullness. Our indigence draws us to that power which can relieve, and to that goodness which can bless us. His overflowing love delights to make us partakers of the bounties he graciously imparts, not only in the gifts of his providence, but in the richer communications of his grace. We can only be said to love God when we endeavor to glorify him, when we desire a participation of his nature, when we study to imitate his perfections.

We are sometimes inclined to suspect the love of God to us. We are too little suspicious of our lack of love to him. Yet if we examine the case by evidence, as we should examine any common question, what real instances can we produce of our love to him? What imaginable instance can we not produce of his love to us? If neglect, forgetfulness, ingratitude, disobedience, coldness in our affections, deadness in our duty, be evidences of our love to him, such evidences, but such only, we can abundantly allege. If life, and all the countless catalogue of mercies that makes life pleasant, be proofs of his love to us, these he has given us in hand; -- if life eternal, if blessedness that knows no measure and no end, be proofs of love, these he has given us in promise to the Christian, we had almost said, he has given them in possession.

When the adoring soul is gratefully expatiating on the inexhaustible instances of the love of God to us, let it never forget to rise to its most exalted pitch, to rest on its loftiest object, His inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the crowning point; this is the gift which imparts their highest value to all his other gifts. It combines whatever can render Divine munificence complete -- pardon of sin, acceptance with God, perfection and perpetuity of blessedness. Well may the Christian in the devout contemplation of this sublime mystery which the highest of all created intelligences "desire to look into," exclaim in grateful rapture, "You are the God that do wonders!" A redeemed world is the triumph of infinity. Power and goodness, truth and mercy, righteousness and peace incorporated and lost in each other!

Love is a grace of such preeminent distinction, that the Redeemer is emphatically designated by it as, "He who loved us." This is such a characteristic style and title that no name is appended to it.

It must be an irksome thing to serve a master whom we do not love, a master whom we are compelled to obey, though we think his requisitions hard, and his commands unreasonable; under whose eye we know that we continually live, though his presence is not only undelightful but formidable.

Now every creature must obey God, whether he loves him or not: he must act always in his sight, whether he delights in him or not; and to a heart of any feeling, to a spirit of any liberality, nothing is so grating as constrained obedience. To love God, to serve him because we love him, is therefore no less our highest happiness than our most bounden duty. Love makes all labor light. We serve with alacrity, where we love with cordiality.

Where the heart is devoted to an object, we require not to be perpetually reminded of our obligations to obey him; they present themselves spontaneously, we fulfill them readily, I had almost said, involuntarily: we do not think so much of the service as of the object. The principle which suggests the work inspires the pleasure: to neglect it would be an injury to our feelings. The performance is the gratification. The omission is not more a pain to the conscience than a wound to the affections. The implantation of this vital root perpetuates virtuous practice, and secures internal peace.

Though we cannot be always thinking of God, we may be always employed in his service. There must be intervals of our communion with him, but there must be no intermission of our attachment to him. The tender father who labors for his children does not always employ his thoughts about them: he cannot be always conversing with them or concerning them, yet he is always engaged in promoting their interests. His affection for them is an inwoven principle, of which he gives the most unequivocal evidence, by the assiduousness of his application in their service.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart," is the primary law of our religion. But we are continually framing excuses, flying to false refuges, clinging to false holds, resting on false supports: as they are uncertain, they disappoint us; as they are weak, they fail us; but as they are numerous, when one fails another presents itself. Until they slip from under us, we never suspect how much we rested upon them. Life glides away in a perpetual succession of these false dependences and successive privations.

There is, as we have elsewhere observed, a striking analogy between the natural and spiritual life; the weakness and helplessness of the Christian resemble those of the infant; neither of them becomes strong, vigorous, and full grown at once, but through a long and often painful course. This keeps up a sense of dependence, and accustoms us to lean on the hand which fosters us. There is in both conditions an imperceptible chain of depending circumstances, by which we are carried on insensibly to the vigor of maturity. The operation which is not always obvious is always progressive. By attempting to walk alone we discover our weakness, the experience of that weakness humbles us, and every fall drives us back to the sustaining hand whose assistance we vainly flattered ourselves we

no longer needed.

In some halcyon moments we are willing to persuade ourselves that religion has made an entire conquest over our heart; that we have renounced the dominion of the world, have conquered our attachment to earthly things. We flatter ourselves that nothing can now again obstruct our entire submission. But we know not what spirit we are of. We say this in the calm of repose and in the stillness of the passions; when our path is smooth, our prospect smiling, danger distant, temptation absent, when we have many comforts and no trials. Suddenly some loss, some disappointment, some privation, tears off the mask, reveals us to ourselves. We at once discover that though the smaller fibers and lesser roots which fasten us down to earth may have been loosened by preceding storms, yet our substantial hold on earth is not shaken, the sap root is not cut, we are yet fast rooted to the soil, and still stronger tempests must be sent to make us let go our hold.

It might be useful to adopt the habit of stating our own case as strongly to ourselves as if it were the case of another; to express in so many words, thoughts which are not apt to assume any specific or palpable form; thoughts which we avoid shaping into language, but slur over, generalize, soften, and do away. How indignant, for instance, should we feel (though we ourselves make the complaint) to be told by others that we do not love our Maker and Preserver!

But let us put the question fairly to ourselves. Do we really love him? Do we love him with a supreme, no, even with an equal affection? Is there no friend, no child, no reputation, no pleasure, no society, no possession, which we do not prefer to him? It is easy to affirm in a general way that there is none. But let us particularize, individualize the question -- bring it home to our own hearts in some actual instance, in some tangible shape. Let us commune with our own consciences; with our own feelings, with our own experience; let us question pointedly, and answer honestly. Let us not be more ashamed to detect the fault than to have been guilty of it.

This, then, will commonly be the result. Let the friend, child, reputation, possession, pleasure, be endangered, but especially let it be taken away by some stroke of Providence. The scales fall from our eyes; we see, we feel, we acknowledge, with brokenness of heart, not only for our loss, but for our sin, that though we did love God, yet we loved him not superlatively; that we loved the blessing, threatened or taken back, still more. But this is one of the cases in which the goodness of God brings us to repentance. By the operation of his grace, the taking back of the gift brings back the heart to the Giver. The Almighty by his Spirit takes possession of the temple from which the idol is driven out: God is reinstated in his rights, and becomes the supreme and undisputed Lord of our reverential affections.

There are three requirements to our proper enjoyment of every earthly blessing which God bestows on us -- a thankful reflection on the goodness of the giver, a deep sense of the unworthiness of the receiver, and a sober recollection of the precarious tenure by which we hold it. The first would make us grateful, the second humble, the last moderate.

But how seldom do we receive his favors in this spirit! As if religious gratitude were to be confined to the appointed days of public thanksgiving, how rarely in common society do we hear any recognition of Omnipotence even on those striking and heart-rejoicing occasions, when "with his own right hand, and with his holy arm, he has gotten himself the victory!" Let us never detract from the merit of our valiant leaders, but rather honor them the more for this manifestation of Divine power in their favor; but let us never lose sight of Him "who teaches their hands to war and their fingers to fight." Let us never forget that "He is the rock, that his work is perfect, and all his ways are judgment."

How many seem to show not only their lack of trust in God, but that he is not in all their thoughts, by their appearing to leave them entirely out of their concerns, by projecting their affairs without any reference to him, by setting out on the stock of their own unassisted wisdom, contriving and acting independently of God; expecting prosperity in the event, without seeking his direction in the outset, and taking to themselves the whole honor of the success, without any recognition of his hand! Do they not thus virtually imitate what Sophocles makes his blustering atheist boast: "Let other men expect to conquer with the assistance of the gods, I intend to gain honor without them"?

The Christian will rather rejoice to ascribe the glory of his prosperity to the same hand to which our own manly queen gladly ascribed her signal victory. When, after the defeat of the Armada, impiously termed invincible, her enemies, in order to lower the value of her agency, alleged that the victory was not owing to her, but to God, who raised the storm; she heroically declared that the visible interference of God in her favor was that part of the success from which she derived the truest honor.

Incidents and occasions every day arise which not only call on us to trust in God, but which furnish us with suitable occasions of vindicating, if I may presume to use the expression, the character and conduct of the Almighty in the government of human affairs; yet there is no duty which we perform with less alacrity. Strange, that we should treat the Lord of heaven and earth with less confidence than we exercise towards each other! that we should vindicate the honor of a common acquaintance with more zeal than that of our insulted Maker and Preserver!

If we hear a friend accused of any act of injustice, though we cannot bring any positive proof why he should be acquitted of this specific charge, yet we resent the injury offered to his character; we clear him of the individual allegation on the ground of his general conduct, inferring that from the numerous instances we can produce of his rectitude on other occasions, he cannot be guilty of the alleged injustice. We reason from analogy, and in general we reason fairly.

But when we presume to judge of the Most High, instead of vindicating his rectitude on the same grounds, under a Providence seemingly severe; instead of reverting, as in the case of our friend, to the thousand instances we have formerly tasted of his kindness; instead of giving God the same credit we give to his erring creature, and inferring, from his past goodness, that the present inexplicable dispensation must be consistent, though we cannot explain how, with his general character, we mutinously accuse him of inconsistency, no, of injustice. We admit, virtually, the most monstrous anomaly in the character of the perfect God.

But what a clue has revelation furnished to the intricate labyrinth which seems to involve the conduct which we impiously question! It unrolls the volume of Divine Providence, lays open the mysterious map of Infinite Wisdom, throws a bright light on the darkest dispensations, vindicates the inequality of appearances, and points to that blessed region, where, to all who have truly loved and served God, every apparent wrong shall be proved to have been unimpeachably right, every affliction a mercy, and the severest trials the choicest blessings.

So blind has sin made us, that the glory of God is concealed from us by the very means which, could we discern aright, would display it. That train of second causes, which he has so marvelously disposed, obstructs our view of himself. We are so filled with wonder at the immediate effect, that our short sight penetrates not to the first cause; to see Him as he is, is reserved to be the happiness of a better world. We shall then indeed admire him in his saints, and in all those who believe; we shall see how necessary it was for those, whose bliss is now so perfect, to have been poor, and despised, and oppressed. We shall see why the "ungodly were in such prosperity." Let us give God credit here for what we shall then fully know; let us adore now what we shall understand hereafter.

Those who take up Christianity on a false ground will never adhere to it. If they adopt it merely for the peace and pleasantness it brings, they will abandon it as soon as they find their adherence to it will bring them into difficulty, distress, or discredit. It seldom answers, therefore, to attempt making proselytes by hanging out false colors. The Christian "endures as seeing him who is invisible." He who adopts Christianity for the sake of immediate enjoyment will not do a virtuous action that is disagreeable to himself, nor resist a temptation that is alluring; present pleasure being his motive. There is no sure basis for virtue but the love

of God in Christ Jesus, and the bright hope for which that love is pledged. Without this, as soon as the paths of piety become rough and thorny, we shall stray into pleasanter pastures.

Christianity, however, has her own peculiar advantages. In the transaction of all worldly affairs there are many and great difficulties. There may be several ways out of which to choose. Men of the first understanding are not always certain which of these ways is the best. People of the deepest penetration are full of doubt and perplexity; their minds are undecided how to act, lest, while they pursue one road, they may be neglecting another which might better have conducted them to their proposed end.

In Christianity the case is different, and in this respect easy. As a Christian can have but one object in view, he is also certain there is but one way of attaining it. Where there is but one end, it prevents all possibility of choosing wrong; where there is but one road, it takes away all perplexity as to the course of pursuit. That we so often wander wide of the mark, is not from any lack of plainness in the path, but from the perverseness of our will in not choosing it, from the indolence of our minds in not following it up. In our attachment to earthly things, even the most innocent, there is always a danger of excess; but from this danger we are here perfectly exempt, for there is no possibility of excess in our love to that Being who has demanded the whole heart. This peremptory requisition cuts off all debate. Had God required only a portion, even were it a large portion, we might be puzzled in settling the quantum. We might be plotting how large a part we might venture to keep back, without absolutely forfeiting our safety! we might be haggling for deductions, bargaining for abatements, and be perpetually compromising with our Maker. But the injunction is entire, the command is definite, the portion is unequivocal. Though it is so compressed in the expression, yet it is so expansive and ample in the measure; it is so distinct a claim, so imperative a requisition of all the faculties of the mind and strength, all the affections of the heart and soul, that there is not the least opening left for litigation; no place for anything but absolute, unreserved compliance.

Everything which relates to God is infinite. We must, therefore, while we keep our hearts humble, keep our aims high. Our highest services, indeed, are but finite, imperfect. But as God is unlimited in goodness, he should have our unlimited love. The best we can offer is poor, but let us not withhold that best. He deserves incomparably more than we have to give; let us not give him less than all. If he has ennobled our corrupt nature with spiritual affections, let us not refuse their noblest aspirations to their noblest object. Let him not behold us so prodigally lavishing our affections on the lowest of his bounties, as to have nothing left for himself. As the standard of everything in Christianity is high, let us endeavor to act in it with the highest intention of mind, with the largest use of

our faculties. Let us obey him with the most intense love, adore him with the most fervent gratitude. Let us praise him according to his excellent greatness. Let us serve him with all the strength of our capacity, with all the devotion of our will.

Grace being a new principle added to our natural powers, as it determines the desires to a higher object, so it adds vigor to their activity. We shall best prove its dominion over us by desiring to exert ourselves in the cause of heaven with the same energy with which we once exerted ourselves in the cause of the world. The world was too little to fill our whole capacity. Scaliger lamented how much was lost because so fine a poet as Claudian, in his choice of a subject, wanted matter worthy of his talents; but it is the felicity of the Christian to have chosen a theme to which all the powers of his heart and of his understanding will be found inadequate. It is the glory of Christianity to supply an object worthy the entire consecration of every power, faculty, and affection of an immaterial immortal being.

PRACTICAL PIETY by Hannah More, 1811

Chapter 8

## **THE HAND OF GOD TO BE ACKNOWLEDGED IN THE DAILY CIRCUMSTANCES OF LIFE**

If we would indeed love God, let us acquaint ourselves with Him. God has assured us in His Scriptures that there is no other way to be at peace. As we cannot love an unknown God, so neither can we know him, or even approach a knowledge of Him, except on the terms which He Himself holds out to us. Neither will He save us except by the method which He has Himself prescribed. His very perfections, those just objects of our adoration, all stand in the way of guilty creatures. His justice is the flaming sword which excludes us from the Paradise we have forfeited. His purity is so opposed to our corruptions, His wisdom to our follies, that were it not for His atoning sacrifice, those very attributes which are now our trust, would be our terror. The most opposite images of human conception are required to show us who God is to us in our natural state, and who He is to us after we become regenerate. The "consuming fire" is transformed into essential love.

As we cannot know the Almighty perfectly, so we cannot love Him with that pure flame which animates glorified spirits. But there is a preliminary acquaintance with Him, an initial love of Him, for which He has equipped us by His works, by His word, and by His Spirit. Even in this weak and barren soil some germs will shoot up, some blossoms will open. That celestial plant, when watered by the dews of heaven, and ripened by the Sun of Righteousness will, in a more friendly



environment, expand into the fullness of perfection, and bear immortal fruits in the Paradise of God.

A cold and unemotional person, who longs after the fervent love of the supreme Being he sees in others, may take comfort if he finds a similar indifference in his worldly attachments. But if his affections are intense towards the perishable things of earth, while they are dead toward spiritual things, it is not because he is destitute of passions, but only that they are directed toward the wrong object. If however, he loves God with that measure of feeling with which God has endowed him, he will neither be punished nor rewarded for the fact that his stock is greater or smaller than that of his fellow creatures.

In those times when our sense of spiritual things is weak and low, we must not give way to distrust, but warm our hearts with the recollection of our better moments. Our motives to love are not now diminished, but when our spiritual frame is lower, our natural spirits are weaker. Where there is languor there will be discouragements. But we must press on. "Faint yet pursuing," must sometimes be the Christian's motto.

There is more merit (if ever we dare apply so arrogant a word to our worthless efforts), in persevering under depression and discomfort, than in the happiest flow of devotion when the tide of health and spirits runs high. Where there is less gratification there is less interest. Our love may be equally pure though not equally fervent when we persist in serving our heavenly Father with the same constancy, though it may seem that He has withdrawn from us our familiar consolations. Perseverance may bring us to the very qualities the absence for which we have longed, "O tarry the Lord's leisure, be strong and He shall comfort your heart."

We are too ready to imagine that we are spiritual because we know something of religion. We appropriate to ourselves the pious sentiments we read, and we talk as if the thoughts of other men's heads were really the feeling of our own hearts. But piety is not rooted in the memory, but in the affections. The memory provides assistance in this, though it is a bad substitute. Instead of being elated when we meditate on some of the Psalmist's more beautiful passages, we should feel a deep self-abasement on the reflection, that even though our situation may sometimes resemble his, yet how unsuited to our hearts seem the ardent expressions of his repentance, the overflowing of his gratitude, the depth of his submission, the entireness of his self-dedication and the fervor of his love. But one who indeed can once say with him, "You are my portion," will, like him, surrender himself unreservedly to His service.

It is important that we never allow our faith, any more than our love, to be depressed or elevated by mistaking for its operations the ramblings of a busy

imagination. Faith must not look for its character to erratic flights of fantasy. Once faith has fixed her foot on the immutable Rock of Ages, fastened her firm eye on the cross, and stretched out her triumphant hand to seize the promised crown, she will not allow her stability to depend on imagination's constant shiftings. She will not be driven to despair by the blackest shades of anxiety, nor be betrayed into a careless security by its most flattering and vivid allurements.

One cause for the fluctuations in our faith is that we are too ready to judge the Almighty as if He were one of us. We judge Him not by His own declarations of what He is and what He will do, but by our own low standards. Because we are too little disposed to forgive those who have offended us, therefore we conclude that God is not ready to pardon our offenses. We suspect Him of being implacable, because we are apt to be so. When we do forgive, it is usually grudgingly and superficially, therefore we infer that God will not forgive freely and fully. We make a hypocritical distinction between forgiving and forgetting injuries. But God cleans the slate when He grants the pardon. He not only says, "your sins and your iniquities will I forgive," but "I will remember them no more."

We are disposed to emphasize the smallness of our offenses, as a plea for their forgiveness; whereas God, to exhibit the boundlessness of His own mercy, has taught us to enter a plea directly contrary to that: "Lord, pardon my guilt, for it is great." To natural reason this argument of David is most extraordinary. But while he felt that the greatness of his own iniquity left him no human resource, he felt that God's mercy was greater even than his sin. What a large, what a magnificent picture this gives us of God's power and goodness, that, instead of pleading the smallness of our own offenses as a motive for pardon, we plead only the abundance of the divine compassion!

We are told that it is the duty of the Christian to "seek God." Yet it would be less repulsive to our corrupt nature to go on a pilgrimage to distant lands than to seek Him within our own hearts. Our own heart is truly an unknown territory, a land more foreign to us than the regions of the polar circle. Yet that heart is the place in which we must seek an acquaintance with God. It is there we must worship Him, if we would worship Him in spirit and in truth.

But alas, the heart is not a home for a worldly man; it is scarcely a home for a Christian. If business and pleasure are our natural inclinations, the resulting emptiness, sloth and insensibility—too often worse than the inclinations themselves, disqualify too many Christians and make them unwilling to pursue spiritual things.

I have observed that a common beggar if overtaken by a shower of rain, would rather find shelter under the wall of a churchyard, than to enter through the open church door while divine services are going on. It is less annoying to him to

be drenched with the storm, than to enjoy the convenience of a shelter and a seat, if he must enjoy them at the heavy price of listening to the sermon.

While we condemn the beggar, let us look into our own hearts; can we not detect some of the same indolence, reticence, and distaste for serious things? Do we not find that we sometimes prefer our very pains, vexations and inconveniences to communing with our Maker? Happy are we if we would not rather be absorbed in our petty cares and little disturbances. We too often make them the means of occupying our minds and of drawing them away from that devout fellowship with God which demands the liveliest exercise of our rational powers, and the highest elevation of our spiritual affections. It should be easily understood that the dread of being driven to this sacred fellowship is a chief cause of that activity and restlessness which sets the world in such perpetual motion.

Though we are ready to express our general confidence in God's goodness, what practical evidences can we produce to prove that we really do trust Him? Does this trust deliver us from worldly anxiety? Does it free us from the same agitation of spirits which those who make no such profession endure? Does it relieve the mind of doubt and distrust? Does it fortify us against temptations? Does it produce in us "that work of righteousness which is peace," that effect of righteousness which is "quietness and assurance forever"? Do we commit ourselves and our concerns to God in word merely, or in reality? Does this implicit reliance simplify our desires? Does it induce us to credit the testimony of His word and the promises of His Gospel? Do we not entertain some secret suspicions of His faithfulness and truth in our hearts when we persuade others in an attempt to persuade ourselves that we unreservedly trust Him?

In the preceding chapter we endeavored to illustrate how our lack of love for God is exposed when we are slower to vindicate the divine conduct than to justify the action of a mere human acquaintance. The same illustration may express our reluctance to trust in God. If a trusted friend does us a kindness, though he may not think it necessary to explain the particular manner in which he intends to do it, we take him at his word. Assured of the result, we are neither inquisitive about the mode nor the details. But do we treat our Almighty Friend with the same liberal confidence? Do we not murmur because we do not know where He is leading us and cannot follow His movements step by step? Do we wait for the development of His plan in full assurance that the results will be ultimately good? Do we trust that He is abundantly able to do more for us than we can ask or think, if by our suspicions we do not offend Him, and if by our infidelity we do not provoke Him? In short, do we not think ourselves utterly undone, when we have only Providence to trust in?

We are ready to acknowledge God in His mercies—no, we confess Him in the

daily enjoyments of life. In some of these common mercies, such as a bright day, a refreshing shower, or delightful scene, we discover that an excitement of spirits, a sort of carnal enjoyment, though of a refined nature, mixes itself with our devotional feelings; and though we confess and adore the bountiful Giver, we do it with a little mixture of self-complacency and human gratification. Fortunately He pardons and accepts us for this mixture.

But we must also look for Him in scenes less animating; we must acknowledge Him on occasions less exhilarating, less gratifying to our senses. It is not only in His promises that God manifests His mercy. His threatenings are proofs of the same compassionate love. His warnings are intended to snatch us from punishment.

We may also trace His hand not only in the wonderful visitations of life, not only in the severer dispensations of His providence, but in vexations so trivial that we should hesitate to recognize that they are providential appointments, if we did not know that our daily life is made up of unimportant circumstances rather than of great events. As they are of sufficient importance to exercise the Christian desires and affections, we may trace the hand of our Heavenly Father in those daily little disappointments, the hourly vexations which occur even in the most prosperous circumstances, and which are inseparable from the condition of humanity. We must trace that same beneficent hand, secretly at work for our purification and our correction, in the imperfections and unpleasantness of those around us, in the perverseness of those with whom we transact business, and in those interruptions which break in upon our favorite engagements.

We are perhaps too much addicted to our innocent delights, or we are too fond of our leisure, our learning or even of our religious devotion. But while we say with Peter, "It is good for us to be here," the divine vision is withdrawn, and we are compelled to come down from the mount. Or perhaps we do not use our time of prayer for the purposes for which it was granted, and to which we had resolved to devote it, and our time is broken in upon to make us more sensible of its value. Or we feel a self-satisfaction in our leisure, a pride in our books or of the good things we are intending to say or do. A check then becomes necessary, but it is given in a most imperceptible way. The hand that gives it is unseen, is unsuspected, yet it is the same gracious hand which directs the more important events of life. Some annoying interruption breaks in on our projected privacy and calls us to a sacrifice of our inclination, to a renunciation of our own will. These incessant tests of our temper, if well received, may be more salutary to the mind than the finest passage we had intended to read, or the most sublime sentiment we had fancied to write.

Instead of searching for great mortifications, as a certain class of pious writers recommends, let us cheerfully bear and diligently receive these smaller trials

which God prepares for us. Submission to a cross which He inflicts, to a disappointment which He sends, to a contradiction of our self-love which He appoints, is a far better exercise than great penances of our own choosing. Perpetual conquests over impatience, ill temper and self-will, indicate a better spirit than any self-imposed mortifications. We may traverse oceans and scale mountains on uncommanded pilgrimages without pleasing God. We may please Him without any other exertion than by crossing our own will.

Perhaps you had been busying your imagination with some projected scheme, not only lawful, but laudable. The design was basically good, but the involvement of your own will might interfere and even taint the purity of your best intentions. Your motives were so mixed that it was difficult to separate them. Sudden sickness obstructed the design. You naturally lament the failure, not perceiving that however good the work might be for others, the sickness was better for yourself. An act of charity was in your intention, but God saw that you should have required the exercise of a more difficult virtue; that the humility and resignation, the patience and contrition of a sick bed were more necessary for you.

He accepts your plan as far as it was designed for His glory, but then He calls you to other duties, which were more honoring for Him, and of which the Master was the better judge. He sets aside your work and orders you to wait, which may be the more difficult part of your task. To the extent that your motive was pure, you will receive the reward of your unperformed charity, though not the gratification of the performance. If it was not pure, you are rescued from the danger attending a right action performed on a worldly principle. You may be the better Christian, though one good deed is subtracted from your catalogue.

By a life of activity and usefulness, you would have, perhaps, attracted the public esteem. The love of prestige begins to mix itself with your better motives. You do not, it is presumed, act entirely, or chiefly for human applause; but you are too concerned about it. It is a delicious poison which begins to infuse itself into your purest cup. You acknowledge indeed the sublimity of higher motives, but you begin to feel that the human incentive is necessary, and your spirits would flag if it were withdrawn. This yearning for praise would gradually tarnish the purity of your best actions. He who sees your heart as well as your works, mercifully snatches you from the perils of prosperity.

Malice in others may be awakened. Your most meritorious actions are ascribed to the most corrupt motives. You are attacked just where your character is most vulnerable. The enemies whom your success raised up, are raised up by God, not to punish you but to save you. We are far from suggesting that He can ever be the author of evil; He does not excite or approve the attack, but He uses your accusers as instruments of your purification. Your fame was too dear to you. It is

a costly sacrifice, but God requires it. It must be offered up. You would gladly embrace another offering, but this is the offering He chooses. And while He graciously continues to employ you for His glory, He thus teaches you to renounce your own. He sends this trial as a test, by which you are to try yourself. He thus instructs you not to abandon your Christian exertions, but to elevate the principle which inspired them, to rid it from all impure mixtures.

By thus stripping away the most engaging duties of this dangerous delight, by infusing some drops of bitterness into our sweetest drink, He graciously compels us to return to Himself. By taking away the buttresses by which we are perpetually propping up our sagging self-images, they fall to the ground. We are, as it were, driven back to Him, who condescends to receive us, though He knows we would not have returned to Him if everything else had not failed us. He makes us feel our weakness, that we may resort to His strength. He makes us sensible of our hitherto unperceived sins, that we may take refuge in His everlasting compassion.

PRACTICAL PIETY by Hannah More, 1811

Chapter 9

## **CHRISTIANITY UNIVERSAL IN ITS REQUIREMENTS**

It is not unusual to see people ignore some of the most solemn demands of Scripture by acting as if they do not apply to them. They consider these demands as belonging to the first age of the Gospel and to the individuals to whom they were immediately addressed. Consequently, they say, the need to observe them does not apply to "contemporary Christians."

These exceptions are particularly made for some of the most important teachings so forcibly and repeatedly expressed in the Epistles. Such reasoners persuade themselves that it was only the Ephesians who were "dead in trespasses and sin." "It was only the Galatians," they say, who were told "not to fulfill the lusts of the flesh." It was only the Philippians who were "enemies of the cross of Christ." Since they know neither the Ephesians, Galatians or Philippians, they have little or nothing to do with the reproofs or threatenings which were originally directed to the converts among those people. They console themselves with the belief that it was only these pagans who "walked according to the course of this world," who were "strangers from the covenants of promise" and were "without God in the world."

But these self-satisfied critics would do well to learn that not only "circumcision nor uncircumcision avails nothing," but neither does "baptism or no baptism" (I mean as a mere form). The need in both cases is "a new creature." An irreligious

person who professes to be a Christian is as much "a stranger and foreigner" as is an unbeliever. He is no more "a fellow citizen of the saints and of the household of God" than a Colossian or Galatian was before the Gospel came to him.

Before their conversion, the people to whom the apostles preached had no vices to which we are not also susceptible, but they certainly had difficulties afterwards from which we are happily exempt. There were indeed differences between them and us in external situations and local circumstances, and we should take these into account. We can recognize that the epistles were addressed to specific situations, but not exclusively so. The purpose of the Scriptures—the conversion and instruction of the whole world—were far beyond limitation to any one period. Yes, these first-century converts were called miraculously "out of darkness into the marvelous light of the Gospel." Yes, they were changed from gross blindness to illumination. Yes, by embracing the new faith they were exposed to persecution, reproach and dishonor. They were a few who had to struggle against the world. The laws, principalities and powers which support our faith oppose theirs. We cannot lose sight of these distinctions. We have inherited advantages they never knew.

But however the condition of the external state of the Church might differ, there can be no difference in the interior state of the individual Christian. On whatever high principles of devotedness to God and love to man they were called to act, we are called to act in precisely the same. It may be that their faith was called to more painful exertions, their self-denial to harder sacrifices and their renunciation of earthly things to severer trials. But this would naturally be the case. The first introduction of Christianity had to combat the pride, prejudices and enmity of corrupt human nature invested with worldly power. Those in power could not fail to perceive how much this new faith opposed itself to their corruptions and that it was introducing a spirit in direct and avowed hostility to the spirit of the world.

We can be deeply thankful that we experience the diminished difficulties of an established faith, but let us never forget that Christianity allows no diminishment of the quality or abatement in the spirit which constituted a Christian in the first ages of the Church.

Christianity is precisely the same religion now as it was when our Savior was on earth. The spirit of the world is exactly the same now as it was then. And if the most eminent of the apostles, under the guidance of inspiration, was given to lament their conflicts with their own corrupt nature (the power of temptation combining with their natural inclinations to evil), how can we expect that a weaker faith and slackened zeal will be accepted in us? Believers then were not called to a more elevated devotion, a higher degree of purity, deeper humility or

greater virtue, patience and sincerity than we are called today. The promises are not limited to the period in which they were made, and the aid of the Spirit is not confined to those on whom He was first poured out. Peter expressly declared that the Holy Spirit was promised not only to them and<sup>94</sup> their children, "but to all who are afar off, even to as many as the Lord our God shall call."

If the same salvation is now offered as was offered at first, is it not obvious that it must be worked out in the same way? The Gospel retains the same authority in all ages. It maintains the same universality among all ranks. Christianity has no bylaws, no individual exemptions, no individual immunities. That there is no appropriate way for a prince or a philosopher to achieve his own salvation is probably one reason why greatness and wisdom have so often rejected it. But if rank cannot plead its privileges neither can genius claim its distinctions. Christianity does not owe its success to the arts of rhetoric or the reason of schools, because God intended by it to make "foolish the wisdom of the world." This actually explains why the disputers of this world have always been its enemies.

It would have been unworthy of the infinite God to have imparted a partial religion. There is but one gate and that a "strait one." There is but one way and that a "narrow one." The Gospel enjoins the same principles of love and obedience on all of every condition. It offers the same aids under the same difficulties, the same supports under all trials, the same pardon to all penitents, the same Savior to all believers and the same rewards to all who "endure to the end." The temptations of one condition and the trials of another may call for the exercise of different qualities for the performance of different duties, but the same personal holiness is commanded for all. External acts of virtue may be promoted by some circumstances and impeded by others, but the graces of inward godliness are of universal force and eternal obligation.

The universality of its requirements is one of Christianity's most distinguishing characteristics. In the pagan world it seemed sufficient that a few exalted people, a few fine geniuses should soar above the mass. But it was never expected that the mob of Rome or Athens should aspire to any religious feelings in common with Socrates.

The most incontrovertible proof that "the world did not know God through wisdom" is furnished by ancient Greece. At the very time and in the very country in which knowledge and taste had attained their utmost perfection, when education had given laws to human intellect, atheism first assumed a shape and established itself into a school of philosophy. It was at the moment when the intellectual powers of Greece were carried to their highest pitch that it was settled as an infallible truth in this philosophy that the senses were the highest natural light of mankind. And it was in the most enlightened age of Rome that



this atheistic philosophy was transplanted there.

It seems as if the most accomplished nations stood in the most pressing need of the light of revelation; for it was not to the dark corners of the earth that the apostles had their earliest missions. One of Paul's first and noblest expositions of Christian truth was made before the most august assembly in the world, on the Areopagus in Athens—although it appears that only one person was converted. In Rome some of the apostle's earliest converts belonged to the Imperial Palace. It was to the metropolis of cultivated Italy, to the "regions of Achaia," to the opulent and luxurious city of Corinth, in preference to the barbarous countries of the uncivilized world that some of his first epistles are addressed.

Even natural religion was little understood by those who professed it. It was full of obscurity until viewed by the clear light of the Gospel. Not only did natural religion need to be clearly comprehended, but reason itself remained to be carried to its highest pitch in countries where revelation was professed. Natural religion could not see itself by its own light, reason could not extricate itself from the labyrinth of error and ignorance in which false religion had involved the world. Grace has raised nature. Revelation has given a lift to reason and taught her to despise the follies and corruptions which obscured her brightness. If nature is now delivered from darkness, it was the helping hand of revelation which raised her from the rubbish in which she lay buried.

Christianity has not only given us right conceptions of God, of His holiness, of the way in which He would be worshiped, it has really taught us the right use of reason. It has given us those principles of examining and appraising by which we are enabled to judge the absurdity of false religions. "For to what else can be ascribed," says Sherlock, "that in every nation that names the name of Christ, even reason and nature see and condemn the follies to which others are still, for want of the same help, held in subjection?"

Suppose, however, that Plato and others seem to have been taught of heaven, yet the point is that their philosophy made no provision for the common people. The millions were left to live without knowledge and to die without hope. For what knowledge or what hope could he acquired from their preposterous though amusing and elegant mythology? But they provided no common principle of hope or fear, of faith or practice, no source of consolation, no bond of charity, no communion of everlasting interests, no equality between the wise and the ignorant, the master and the slave, the Greek and the barbarian.

A religion was needed which would apply to everyone. Christianity happily filled the common urgent need. It furnished an adequate answer to the universal distress. Instead of perpetual but unexpiating sacrifices to appease imaginary deities, it presents "one oblation once offered, a full, perfect and sufficient

sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world." It presents one consistent scheme of morals growing out of one uniform system of doctrines; one perfect rule of practice depending on one principle of faith. It offers grace for both. It encircles the whole sphere of duty with the broad and golden zone of charity, stamped with the inscription, "A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another."

Were this command uniformly observed, the whole frame of society would be cemented and consolidated into one indissoluble bond of universal brotherhood. This divinely enacted law is the seminal principle of justice, charity, patience, forbearance—in short, of all social virtue. That it does not produce these excellent effects is not owing to any defect in the principle, but in our corrupt nature which so reluctantly and imperfectly obeys it. If it were conscientiously adopted and substantially acted upon, if it were received in its true spirit and obeyed from the heart, human laws might be rescinded, courts of justice abolished and treatises of morality burned. War would no longer be an art, nor military tactics a science. We should be patient and kind, and so far from "seeking that which is another's," we would not even seek our own.

But let not the soldier or the lawyer be alarmed. Their expertise is not in danger! The world does not intend to act upon the divine principle which would injure their professions, and until this revolution actually takes place, our fortunes will not be secure without the exertions of the law, nor our lives without the protection of the military.

All the virtues have their appropriate place and rank in Scripture. They are introduced as individually beautiful, and as organically connected. But perhaps no Christian grace was ever more beautifully described than charity. Her incomparable painter, Paul, has drawn her at full length in all her fair proportions. Every attitude is full of grace, every feature full of beauty. The whole portrayal is perfect and entire, lacking nothing.

Who can look at this finished piece without blushing at our own lack of likeness to it? Perhaps a more frequent contemplation of this exquisite figure, accompanied with earnest endeavor to become more like it, would gradually lead us, not simply to admire the picture, but would at length incorporate us into the divine original.

PRACTICAL PIETY by Hannah More, 1811

Chapter 10

**CHRISTIAN HOLINESS**

Christianity, as we have attempted to show, calls for the same standards of goodness in different stations and in every person. No one can be allowed to rest in moral laxity and plead his exemption for aiming higher. Those who keep its standards in their eye, though they may not reach the highest attainments, will not be satisfied with such as are unworthy. The obvious inferiority will produce compunction; compunction will stimulate them to press on. Those who lose sight of their standard, however, will be satisfied with the height they have already reached. They are not likely to be the object of God's favor who take their determined stand on the very lowest step in the scale of perfection, who do not even aspire above it, whose aim seems to do not be so much to please God as to escape punishment. Many people will doubtless be accepted, though their progress has been small. Their difficulties may have been great, their natural capacity weak; their temptations were strong, and their instruction may have been defective.

Revelation has furnished injunctions as well as motives to holiness; not only motives, but examples. "Be therefore perfect" (according to your measure and degree) "as your Father who is in heaven is perfect." And what says the Old Testament? It accords with the New: "Be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." This was the injunction of God himself, not given exclusively to Moses, the leader and legislator, or to a few distinguished officers, but to an immense body of people, even to the whole assembled host of Israel; to men of all ranks, professions, capacities, and characters, to the ministers of religion and the uninstructed, to enlightened rulers, and to feeble women. "God," says an excellent writer, "had already given to his people particular laws suited to their different needs and various conditions, but the command to be holy was a general (or universal) law."

"Who is like unto You, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like unto You, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?" This is perhaps the most sublime praise addressed to God which the Scriptures have recorded. The word "holy" is more frequently affixed to the name of God than to any other. It has been remarked that the great blasphemy of the Assyrian monarch, Sennacherib, is not focused on his hostility against the Almighty God, but his crime is aggravated because he had committed it against the Holy One of Israel.

When God condescended to give a pledge for the performance of His promise, He swears by His holiness, as if it was the distinguishing quality which was more especially binding. It seems connected and interwoven with all the divine perfections. Which of His excellences can we contemplate as separated from this? Is not His justice stamped with sanctity? It is free from any tincture of vindictiveness, and is therefore a holy justice. His mercy has none of the partiality or favoritism, or capricious fondness of human kindness, but is a holy mercy. His holiness is not more the source of His mercies than of His

punishments. If His holiness in His severities to us needed a justification, there cannot be a more substantial illustration of it than the passage already quoted. For God is called "glorious in holiness" immediately after He had vindicated the honor of His name by the miraculous destruction of the army of Pharaoh.

Does it not follow "That a righteous Lord loves righteousness," and that He will require in His creatures a desire to imitate as well as to adore that attribute by which He Himself wills to be distinguished? We cannot indeed, like God, be essentially holy. God is the essence of holiness, and we can have no holiness nor any other good thing unless we derive it from Him. It is His by nature, but our privilege.

If God loves holiness because it is His image, He must consequently hate sin because it defaces His image. If He glorifies His own mercy and goodness in rewarding virtue, He no less vindicates the honor of His holiness in the punishment of vice. A perfect God can no more approve of sin in His creatures than He can commit it Himself. He may forgive sin on His own conditions, but there are no conditions on which He can be reconciled to it. The infinite goodness of God may delight in the beneficial purposes to which His infinite wisdom has made the sins of His creatures to serve, but sin itself will always be abhorrent to His nature. His wisdom may turn it to a merciful end, but His indignation at the offence cannot be diminished. He loves humankind, for He cannot but love His own work. He hates sin; for that was man's own invention, and no part of the work which God had made. Even in the imperfect administration of human laws, impunity of crimes would be construed into approval of theirs.

The law of holiness then, is a law binding in all people without distinction, not limited to the period nor to the people to whom it was given. It reached through the whole Old Testament period, and extends with wider demands and higher sanctions, to every Christian of every denomination, of every age and every country.

A more sublime motive cannot be found as to why we should be holy than because "the Lord our God is holy." Men of the world have no objection to the terms virtue, morality, integrity, rectitude, but they associate something hypocritical with the term "holiness," and neither use it in a good sense when applied to others, nor would wish to have it applied to themselves, but apply it with a little suspicion, and not a little derision, to Puritans and "enthusiasts." This epithet however is surely rescued from every injurious association if we consider it as the chosen attribute of the Most High. We do not presume to apply the terms virtue, honesty and morality to God, but we ascribe holiness to Him because He first ascribed it to Himself, as the consummation of all His perfections.

Shall so imperfect a being as man then, ridicule the application of this term to others, or be ashamed of it himself? There is a reason indeed which should make him ashamed of the appropriation: that of not deserving it. This comprehensive appellation includes all the Christian graces, all the virtues in their just proportion, order, and harmony. And as in God, glory and holiness are united, so the Apostle combines "sanctification and honor" as the glory of man.

Traces of the holiness of God may be found in His works, to those who view them with the eye of faith. They are more plainly visible in His providences; but it is in His Word that we must chiefly look for the manifestations of His holiness. He is everywhere described as perfectly holy in Himself, as a Model to be imitated by His creatures.

The doctrine of redemption is inseparably connected with the doctrine of sanctification. As one writer has observed, "If the blood of Christ reconciles us to the justice of God, the Spirit of Christ is to reconcile us to the holiness of God." When we are told therefore that Christ is made unto us "righteousness," we are in the same place taught that He is made unto us "sanctification"; that is, He is both Justifier and Sanctifier. In vain shall we deceive ourselves by resting on His sacrifice, while we neglect to imitate His example.

The glorious spirits which surround the throne of God are not represented as singing Hallelujahs to His omnipotence, nor even to His mercy, but they perpetually cry "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Hosts." It is significant, too, that the angels who adore Him for His holiness are the ministers of His justice.

This infinitely blessed Being then, to whom angels and archangels, and all the hosts of heaven are continually ascribing holiness, has commanded us to be holy. To be holy because God is holy, is both an argument and a command: an argument founded on the perfections of God, and a command to imitate Him. This command is given to creatures, fallen indeed, but to whom God graciously promises strength for the imitation. If in God holiness implies an aggregate of perfection, in humanity, even in our low degree, it is an incorporation of the Christian graces.

The holiness of God indeed is not limited; ours is bounded, finite, imperfect. Yet let us dare to extend our little sphere. Let our desires be large, though our capacities are small. Let our aims be lofty, though our attainments are low. Let us be careful to see that no day pass without some increase in our holiness, some added height in our aspiration, some wider expansion in the compass of our virtues. Let us strive every day for some superiority to the preceding day, something that shall distinctly mark the passing scene with progress; something that shall inspire a humble hope that we are less unfit for heaven today than we

were yesterday.

The celebrated artist who has recorded that he passed no day without drawing a line, drew it not for repetition, but for progress; not to produce a given number of strokes, but to forward his work, to complete his design. The Christian, like the painter, does not draw his lines at random. We have a Model to imitate as well as an outline to fill. Every touch conforms us more and more to the great Original. He who has transfused most of the life of God into his soul has copied it most successfully.

"To seek happiness," says one of the Fathers, "is to desire God, and to find Him in that happiness." Our very happiness therefore is not our independent possession. It flows from that eternal Mind which is the Source and Sum of happiness. In vain we look for felicity in all around us. It can only be found in that original fountain, where we and all we are and have, are derived. Where then is the imaginary wise man of the school of Zeno? What is the perfection of virtue supposed by Aristotle? They have no existence but in the romance of philosophy.

Happiness must be imperfect in an imperfect state. Our Christian faith is introductory happiness, and points to its perfection; but as the best people possess it but imperfectly, they cannot be perfectly happy. Nothing can confer completeness which is itself incomplete. "With You, O Lord, is the fountain of life, and in Your light only we shall see light."

Whatever shall still remain lacking in our attainments, and much will still remain, let this last, greatest, highest consideration stimulate our faint exertions—that God has negatively promised the beatific vision, the enjoyment of His presence to this attainment—by specifically proclaiming that without holiness no man shall see His face. To know God is the foundation of that eternal life which will hereafter be perfected by seeing Him. As there is no stronger reason why we must not look for perfect happiness in this life than because there is no perfect holiness, so the nearer we advance toward holiness, the greater progress we shall make towards perfect happiness. We must cultivate those tendencies and tempers here which must be carried to perfection in a happier place.

But since holiness is the essential ingredient of happiness, so must it be its precursor. As sin has destroyed our happiness, so sin must be destroyed before our happiness can be restored. Our nature must be renovated before our felicity can be established. This is according to the nature of things as well as agreeable to the law and will of God. Let us then carefully look to the subduing in our inmost hearts all those dispositions that are unlike God, all those actions, thoughts and tendencies that are contrary to God.

Independently therefore of all the other motives to holiness which our faith suggests; independently of the fear of punishment, independently even of the hope of glory, let us be holy from this ennobling, elevating motive, because the Lord our God is holy. And when our virtue flags, let it be renewed by this imperative motive, backed by this irresistible argument. The motive for imitation, and the Being to be imitated seem almost to identify us with infinity. It is a connection which endears, an assimilation which dignifies, a resemblance which elevates. The apostle has added to the prophet an assurance which makes the crown and consummation of the promise, that though we know not yet what we shall be, "we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is."

In what a beautiful variety of glowing expressions, and admiring strains, do the Scripture worthies delight to represent God! They speak not only in relation to what He is to them, but to the supreme excellence of His own transcendent perfections. Those who dwell with unwearied repetition on the adorable theme ransack language; they exhaust all the expressions of praise and wonder and admiration, all the images of astonishment and delight to laud and magnify His glorious name. They praise him, they bless Him, they worship Him, they glorify Him, they give thanks to Him for His great glory, saying, "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts, Heaven and earth are full of the majesty of Your glory."

They glorify Him in relation to themselves. "I will magnify You, O Lord my strength. My help comes of God. The Lord Himself is the portion of my inheritance." At another time soaring with a noble unselfishness and quite losing sight of self and all created glories, they adore Him for His excellencies. "Oh the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" Then bursting to a rapture of adoration, and burning with a more intense flame, they assemble His attributes: "To the King eternal, immortal, invisible, be honor and glory forever and ever." One is lost in admiration of His wisdom. His ascription is "to the only wise God." Another in triumphant strains overflows with transport at the consideration of the attribute of His holiness: "Lord, who is like unto You, there is none holy as the Lord. Sing praises unto the Lord, oh you saints of His, and give thanks unto Him for a remembrance of His holiness."

The prophets and apostles were not deterred from pouring out the overflowings of their fervent spirits, they were not restrained from celebrating the perfections of their Creator through the fear of being called "enthusiasts." The saints of old were not prevented from breathing out their rapturous Hosannas to the King of saints, through the cowardly dread of being branded as fanatics. The conceptions of their minds expanded with the view of the glorious constellation of the Divine attributes; and the affections of their hearts warmed with the thought that those attributes were all concentrated in mercy. They display a sublime oblivion of themselves, forgetting everything but God. Their own needs dwindle to a point. Their own concerns and the universe itself shrink into

nothing. They seem absorbed in the dazzling brilliance of Deity, lost in the radiant beams of His infinite glory.

PRACTICAL PIETY by Hannah More, 1811

Chapter 11.

## **ON THE COMPARATIVELY SMALL FAULTS AND VIRTUES**

The "Fishers of Men," as if exclusively bent on catching the greater sinners, often make the openings of the moral net so wide that it cannot retain sinners of more ordinary size which everywhere abound. Their catch might be more abundant, if the net were woven tighter so the smaller, slipperier sinner could not slide through. Such souls, having happily escaped entanglement, plunge back again into their native element, enjoy their escape, and hope for time to grow bigger before they are in danger of being caught.

It is important to practice the smaller virtues, to avoid scrupulously the lesser sins, and to bear patiently with minor trials. The sin of always yielding tends to produce debility of mind which brings defeat, while the grace of always resisting in comparatively small points tends to produce that vigor of mind on which hangs victory.

Conscience is moral discernment. It quickly perceives good and evil and prompts the mind to adopt the one or avoid the other. God has furnished the body with senses, and the soul with conscience, an instinct to avoid the approach of danger and a spontaneous reaction to any attack whose suddenness and surprise allows no time for thoughtful consideration. If kept tenderly alive by paying continual attention to its admonitions, an enlightened conscience would especially preserve us from those smaller sins, and stimulate us to those lesser duties which we are falsely apt to overlook. We are prone to think they are too insignificant to be judged in the court of faith or too trivial to be weighed by the standard of Scripture.

By cherishing this quick sense of rectitude—this sudden flash from heaven, which is in fact the motion of the Spirit—we intuitively reject what is wrong before we have time to examine why it is wrong, and seize on what is right before we have time to examine why it is right. Should we not then be careful how we extinguish this sacred spark? Will anything be more likely to extinguish it than to neglect its hourly reminders to perform the smaller duties? Will anything more effectively smother it than to ignore the lesser faults, which make up a large part of human life, and will naturally fix and determine our character? Will not our neglect or observance of the voice of conscience incline or indispose us for those more important duties, of which these smaller ones are connecting links?



Vices derive their existence from wildness, confusion and disorganization. The discord of the passions is owing to their having different views, conflicting aims, and opposite ends. The rebellious vices have no common head. Each is all to itself. They promote their own operations by disturbing those of others, but in disturbing, they do not destroy them. Though they are all of one family, they live on no friendly terms. Extravagance hates covetousness as much as if it were a virtue. The life of every sin is a life of conflict which causes the torment, but not the death of its opposite sin.

On the other hand, without being united the Christian graces could not be perfected. The smaller virtues are the threads and filaments which gently but firmly tie them together. There is an attractive power in goodness which draws each part to the other. This harmony of the virtues is derived from their having one common center in which all meet. In vice there is a strong repulsion. Though bad men seek each other, they do not love each other. Each seeks the other in order to promote his own purposes, but at the same time he hates him.

Perhaps the beauty of the lesser virtues may be illustrated by gazing into the heavens at that long and luminous track of minute and almost imperceptible stars. Though separately they are too inconsiderable to attract attention, yet from their number and confluence they form that soft and shining stream of light which is everywhere discernible.

Every Christian should consider religion as a fort which he is called to defend. The lowest soldier in the army, if he add patriotism to valor, will fight as earnestly as if the glory of the whole contest depended on his single arm. But he brings his watchfulness as well as his courage into action. He strenuously defends every pass he is appointed to guard, without inquiring whether it be great or small. There is not any defect in religion or morals so little as to be of no consequence. Worldly things may be little because their aim and end may be little. Things are great or small, not according to their apparent importance, but according to the magnitude of their purpose and the importance of their consequences.

The acquisition of even the smallest virtue is actually a conquest over the opposite vice and doubles our moral strength. The spiritual enemy has one subject less, and the conqueror one virtue more. By being negligent in small things, we are not aware how much we injure Christianity in the eyes of the world. How can we expect people to believe that we are in earnest in great points when they see that we cannot withstand a trivial temptation? At a distance they may respect of our general characters. Then they get to know us and discover the same failings, littleness, and bad tempers as they have been accustomed to encounter in the most ordinary people. Shall not the Christian be anxious to support the credit of his holy profession by not betraying in everyday

life any temperament that is inconsistent with his faith?

It is not difficult to attract respect on great occasions, where we are kept faithful by knowing that the public eye is fixed upon us. Then it is easy to maintain our dignity, but to labor to maintain it in the seclusion of domestic privacy requires more watchfulness, and is no less a duty for the consistent Christian.

Our neglect of minor duties and virtues is particularly injurious to the minds of our families. If they see us "weak and infirm of purpose," peevish, irresolute, capricious, passionate or inconsistent in our daily conduct, they will not give us credit for those higher qualities which we may possess and those superior duties which we may be more careful to fulfill. They may not see evidence by which to judge whether our thinking is true; but there will be obvious and decisive proofs of the state and temper of our hearts. Our greater qualities will do them little good, while our lesser but incessant faults do them much injury. Seeing us so defective in the daily course of our behavior at home, though our children may obey us because they are obliged to it, they will neither love nor esteem us enough to be influenced by our instruction or advice.

In all that relates to God and to himself, the Christian knows of no small faults. He considers sins, whatever their magnitude, as an offence against his Maker. Nothing that offends Him can be insignificant. Nothing can be trifling that makes a bad habit fasten itself to us. Faults which we are accustomed to consider as small are apt to be repeated without reservation. The habit of committing them is strengthened by the repetition. Frequency renders us at first indifferent, and then insensible. The hopelessness attending a long-indulged custom generates carelessness, until for lack of exercise, the power of resistance is first weakened, then destroyed.

But there is a still more serious point of view to consider. Do small faults, continually repeated, always retain their original weakness? Is a bad temper which is never repressed not worse after years of indulgence than when we first gave the reins to it? Does that which we first allowed ourselves under the name of harmless levity on serious subjects, never proceed to profaneness? Does what was once admired as proper spirit, never grow into pride, never swell into insolence? Does the habit of loose talking or allowed exaggeration never lead to falsehood, never move into deceit? Before we positively determine that small faults are innocent, we must try to prove that they shall never outgrow their primitive dimensions. We must make certain that the infant shall never become a giant.

For example, procrastination is reckoned among the most excusable of our faults, and weighs so lightly on our minds that we scarcely apologize for it. But, what if, from mere sloth and indolence, we had put off giving assistance to one

friend under distress, or advice to another under temptation. Can we be sure that had we not delayed we might have preserved the well-being of the one, or saved the soul of the other?

It is not enough that we perform duties; we must perform them at the right time. We must do the duty of every day in its own season. Every day has its own demanding duties; we must not depend upon today for fulfilling those which we neglected yesterday, for today might not have been granted to us. Tomorrow will be equally demanding with its own duties; and the succeeding day, if we live to see it, will be ready with its proper claims.

Indecision, though it is not so often caused by reflection as by the lack of it, may be just as mischievous, for if we spend too much time in balancing probabilities, the period for action is lost. While we are busily considering difficulties which may never occur, reconciling differences which perhaps do not exist, and trying to balance things of nearly the same weight, the opportunity is lost for producing that good which a firm and bold decision would have effected.

Idleness, though itself the most inactive of all the vices, is however the path by which they all enter, the stage on which they all act. Though supremely passive itself, it lends a willing hand to all evil. It aids and encourages every sin. If it does nothing itself, it connives all the mischief that is done by others.

Vanity is exceedingly misplaced when ranked with small faults. It is under the guise of harmlessness that it does all its mischief. Vanity is often found in the company of great virtues, and by mixing itself in it, mars the whole collection. The use our spiritual enemy makes of it is a master stroke. When he cannot prevent us from doing right actions he can accomplish his purpose almost as well by making us vain about them. When he cannot deprive others of our good works he can defeat the effect in us by poisoning our motive. When he cannot rob others of the good effect of the deed, he can gain his point by robbing the doer of his reward.

Irritability is another of the minor miseries. Life itself, though sufficiently unhappy, cannot devise misfortunes as often as the irritable person can supply impatience. Violence and belligerence are the common resource of those whose knowledge is small, and whose arguments are weak. Anger is the common refuge of insignificance. People who feel their character to be slight, hope to give it weight by inflation. But the blown balloon at its fullest distension is still empty.

Trifling is ranked among the venial faults. But, consider that time is one grand gift given to us in order that we may secure eternal life. If we trifle away that time so as to lose that eternal life, then it will serve to fulfill the very aim of sin. A life devoted to trifles not only takes away the inclination, but the capacity for

higher pursuits. The truths of Christianity scarcely have more influence on a frivolous than on a depraved character. If the mind is so absorbed not merely with what is vicious, but with what is useless, it loses all interest in a life of piety. It matters little what causes this lack of interest. If such a fault cannot be accused of being a great moral evil, it at least reveals a low state of mind that a being who has eternity at stake can abandon itself to trivial pursuits. If the great concern of life cannot be secured without habitual watchfulness, how is it to be secured by habitual carelessness? It will afford little comfort to the trifler when at the last reckoning he accuses the more ostensible offender of worse behavior. The trifler will not be weighed in the scale with the profligate, but in the balance of the sanctuary.

Some will rationalize and excuse their lesser faults. They may even determine at what period of their lives such vices may be adopted without discredit, at what age one bad habit may give way to another more in character. Having accepted it as a matter of course that to a certain age certain faults are neutral, they proceed to act as if they even thought them inevitable.

But let us not believe that any failing, much less any vice, is necessarily a part of any particular state or age, or that it is irresistible at any time. We may accustom ourselves to talk of vanity and extravagance as belonging to the young, and avarice and cantankerousness to old, until the next step will be that we shall think ourselves justified in adopting them. Whoever is eager to find excuses for vice and folly will feel less able to resist them.

We make a final excuse for ourselves when we ask whether or not the evil is of a greater or lesser magnitude. If the fault is great, we lament our inability to resist it, and if small, we deny the importance of doing so. We plead that we cannot withstand a great temptation, and that a small one is not worth withstanding. We rationalize that if the temptation or the fault is great, we should resist it because of its very magnitude, and if it is small, giving it up can cost but little. The conscientious habit of conquering the lesser sin, however, will give considerable strength towards subduing the greater.

Then there is the person who, winding himself up occasionally to certain 'shining actions', thinks himself fully justified in breaking loose from the shackles of restraint in smaller things. He is not ashamed to gain favor through good deeds, at the same time permitting himself indulgences which, though allowed, are far from innocent. He thus secures to himself praise and popularity by means that are sure to gain it, and immunity from rebuke as he indulges himself in his favorite fault, practically exclaiming, "Is it not a little one?"

Vanity is at the bottom of almost all, may we not say, of all our sins. We think more of distinguishing than of saving ourselves. We overlook the hourly

occasions which occur for serving, aiding and comforting those around us, while we perform an act of well-known generosity. The habit in the former case, however, better shows the disposition and bent of the mind, than the solitary act of splendor. The apostle does not say whatever great things you do, but "whatever things you do, do all to the glory of God." Actions are less weighed by their bulk than their motive. The racer proceeds in his course more effectively by a steady unslackened pace, than by starts of violent but unequal effort.

That great moral law, that rule of the highest court of appeal, to which every man can always resort is this: "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you." This law, if faithfully obeyed, would be an infallible remedy for all the disorders of self-love, and would establish the exercise of all the smaller virtues. Its strict observance would not only put a stop to all injustice, but to all unkindness; not only to oppressive acts, but to cruel speech. Even haughty looks and arrogant gestures would be banished from the face of society if we asked ourselves how we should like to receive what we are not ashamed to give.

Until we thus morally trade place, person, and circumstance with those of our brother, we shall never treat him with the tenderness this gracious law enjoins. To treat a fellow creature with harsh language is not indeed a crime like robbing him of his estate or destroying his reputation. They are, however, all the offspring of the same family. They are the same in quality, though not in degree. All flow from the same fountain, though in streams of different magnitude. All are indications of a departure from that principle which is included in the law of love.

The reason those called "religious people" often differ so little from others in small trials is that instead of bringing religion to their aid in their lesser vexations, they either allow the disturbances to prey upon their minds, or they look to the wrong things for their removal. Those who are rendered unhappy by frivolous troubles, seek comfort in frivolous enjoyments. But we should apply the same remedy to ordinary trials as to great ones. For just as small anxieties spring from the same cause as great trials namely, the uncertain and imperfect condition of human life—so they require the same remedy. Meeting common cares with a right spirit would impart a smoothness to the temper, a spirit of cheerfulness to the heart which would mightily break the force of heavier trials.

You seek help in your faith in dealing with great evils. Why does it not occur to you to seek it in the less? Is it that you think the instrument greater than the occasion demands? You would exercise your faith at the loss of your child, so exercise it at the loss of your temper. As no calamity is too great for the power of Christianity to mitigate, so none is too small to experience its beneficial results.

Our behavior under the ordinary accidents of life forms a characteristic distinction between different classes of Christians. Those least advanced resort to religion on great occasions. What makes it appear of so little comparative value is that the medicine prepared by the great Physician is discarded instead of being taken. The patient does not use it except in extreme cases. A remedy, however potent, if not applied, can bring no healing. But he who has adopted one fixed rule for the government of his life, will try to keep the remedy in perpetual use.

Mundane duties are not great in themselves, but they become important by being constantly demanded. They make up in frequency what they lack in magnitude. How few of us are called to carry the doctrines of Christianity into distant lands, but which of us is not called every day to adorn those doctrines by gentleness in our own bearing, by kindness and patience to all about us?

Vanity provides no motive for performing unseen duties. No love of fame inspires that virtue of which fame will never hear. There can be but one motive, and that the purest, for the exercise of virtues when the report of them will never reach beyond the little circle whose happiness they promote. They do not fill the world with our renown, but they fill our own family with comfort. And if they have the love of God for their motive, they will have His favor for their reward.

What we refer to here are habitual and unresisted faults: habitual, because they go by unresisted, and allowed because they are considered to be too insignificant to call for resistance. Faults into which we fall inadvertently, though that is no reason for committing them, may not be without their uses. When we see them for what they are, they renew the conviction of our own sinful nature, make us little in our own eyes, increase our sense of dependence on God, promote watchfulness, deepen humility, and quicken repentance.

We must, however, be careful not to entangle our consciences with groundless apprehensions. We have a merciful Father, not a hard master to deal with. We must not harass our minds with a suspicious dread, as if the Almighty were laying snares to entrap us. Nor should we be terrified with imaginary fears, as if He were on the watch to punish every casual error. Being immutable and impeccable is not part of human nature. He who made us best knows of what we are made. Our compassionate High Priest will bear with much infirmity and will pardon much involuntary weakness.

But every man who looks into his own heart must know the difficulties he has in serving God faithfully. Yet, though he earnestly desires to serve Him, it is lamentable that he is not more attentive to remove all that hinders him by trying to avoid the inferior sins, resisting the lesser temptations, and by practicing the smaller virtues. The neglect of these obstructs his way, and keeps him back in

the performance of higher duties. Instead of little renunciations being grievous, and slight self-denials being hardship, they in reality soften grievances and diminish hardship. They are the private drill which trains us for public service.

We are hourly furnished with occasions for showing our piety by the spirit in which the quiet, unobserved actions of life are performed. The sacrifices may be too little to be observed except by him to whom they are offered. But small services, scarcely perceptible to any eye but his for whom they are made, bear the true character of love to God, as they are the infallible marks of charity to our fellow creatures.

By enjoining small duties, the spirit of which is everywhere implied in the Gospel, God's intention seems to be to make the great ones easier for us. He makes the light yoke of Christ still lighter, not by lessening duty, but by increasing its ease through its familiarity. These little habits at once indicate the sentiment of the soul and improve it.

It is an awesome consideration, and one which every Christian should bring home to our own bosoms, whether or not small faults willfully persisted in, may in time not only dim the light of conscience, but extinguish the spirit of grace. Will indulgence in small faults ultimately dissolve all power of resistance against great evils? We should earnestly seek to remember that perhaps among the first objects which may meet our eyes when we open them on the eternal world, may be a tremendous book. In that book, together with our great and actual sins, may be recorded in no less prominent characters, an ample page of omissions and of neglected opportunities. There we may read a list of those good intentions, which indolence, indecision, thoughtlessness, vanity, trifling, and procrastination served to frustrate and to prevent.

PRACTICAL PIETY by Hannah More, 1811

Chapter 12

### **SELF-EXAMINATION**

In this age of exploration every kind of ignorance is regarded as dishonorable. In almost every sort of knowledge there is a competition for superiority. It is true that intellectual attainments are never to be undervalued. All knowledge is excellent as far as it goes, and as long as it lasts. But how short the period is before "knowledge will pass away!" Shall we then regard it as dishonorable to be ignorant in anything which relates to life and literature, to taste and science, and not feel ashamed to live in ignorance of our own hearts?

To have a flourishing estate, but a mind in disorder; to keep exact accounts with

others, but no reckoning with our Maker; to have an accurate knowledge of profit or loss in our business, but to remain utterly ignorant as to whether our spiritual state is improving or declining; to calculate at the end of every year how much we have increased or diminished our fortune, but to be careless whether we have gained or lost in faith and holiness—this is a grievous miscalculation of the comparative value of things. To pay attention to things in an inverse proportion to their importance is surely proof that our learning has not improved our judgment.

The distinguishing faculty of self-inspection would not have been given us if it had not been intended that we should use it regularly. It is surely just as sensible to look well to our spiritual as to our worldly possessions. We have appetites to control, imaginations to restrain, tempers to regulate, passions to subdue, and how can this internal work be done, how can our thoughts be kept within proper bounds, how can appropriate direction be given to our affections, how can our inward state be preserved from continual insurrection if we do not exercise this capacity to inspect ourselves? Without constant discipline, imagination will become an outlaw and conscience a rebel.

This inward eye is given to us for a continual watch upon the soul. Both the formation and the growth of our moral and religious character depends upon a constant vigilance over the soul's interior movements. A sporadic glance is not enough for a thing so deep. An unsteady view will not suffice for a thing so wavering, nor a casual look for a thing so deceitful as the human heart. Such an object must be observed under a variety of aspects, because it is always shifting its position, always changing its appearances.

We should examine not only our conduct but our opinions. Our actions themselves will be obvious enough. It is our inward motivations which require the scrutiny. These we should follow to their remotest springs, scrutinize to their deepest recesses, trace through their most perplexing windings. And lest we should in our pursuit wander in uncertainty and blindness, let us make use of that guiding clue which the Almighty has furnished by His Word and by His Spirit. He will conduct us through the intricacies of this labyrinth. "What I know not, teach me" should be our constant petition in all our researches.

If we would turn our thoughts inward we would abate much of the self-complacency with which we swallow the flattery of others. If we would examine our motives keenly, we would frequently blush at the praises our actions receive. Let us then conscientiously enquire not only what we do, but why we do it.

Self-inspection is the only means to preserve us from self-conceit. Self-acquaintance will give us a far more deep and intimate knowledge of our own errors than we can possibly have by curiously inquiring into the errors of others.



We are eager enough to blame them without knowing their motives. We are just as eager to vindicate ourselves, though we cannot be entirely ignorant of our own. Thus two virtues will be acquired by the same act of self-examination: humility and candor. An impartial review of our own infirmities is the likeliest way to make us tender and compassionate to those of others.

We shall not be liable to overrate our own judgment when we perceive that it often forms such false estimates. It is so captivated with trifles, so elated with petty successes, so dejected with little disappointments, that when others commend our charity, which we know is so cold; when others extol our piety, which we feel to be so dead; when they applaud the strength of our faith, which we know to be so faint and feeble, we cannot possibly be intoxicated with the applause which never would have been given, had the applauder known us as we know, or ought to know ourselves.

If we contradict him, it may only be to have a further virtue attributed to us—humility, which perhaps we deserve to have ascribed to us as little as those which we have been renouncing. If we kept a sharp lookout we would not be proud of praises which cannot apply to us, but would rather grieve at the fraud we commit by tacitly accepting a character to which we have so little real pretension. To be delighted at finding that people think so much better of us than we are conscious of deserving is in effect to rejoice in the success of our own deceit.

We shall also become more patient and forgiving, and shall better endure the harsh judgment of others when we perceive that their opinion of us nearly coincides with our own real, though unacknowledged, sentiments. There is much less injury incurred by others thinking too badly of us than in our thinking too well of ourselves.

It is evident then, that to live at random, without any self-examination, is not the life of a rational, much less an immortal, least of all an accountable being. To pray occasionally, without a deliberate course of prayer, to be liberal without a plan, and charitable without a motive, to let the mind float on the current of public opinion, to be every hour liable to death without any habitual preparation for it, to carry within us a soul which we believe will exist through all the countless ages of eternity, and yet to make little enquiry whether that eternity is likely to be happy or miserable—all this is totally thoughtless. If adopted in the ordinary concerns of life, such a way to live would ruin a man's reputation for common sense. Yet he who lives without self-examination is absolutely guilty of this folly.

Nothing more plainly shows us what weak, vacillating creatures we are than the difficulty we find in holding ourselves to the very self-scrutiny we had

deliberately resolved on. Some trifle which we should be ashamed to dwell upon at any time intrudes itself on the moments dedicated to serious thought. Recollection is interrupted. The whole chain of reflection is broken so that the scattered links cannot again be united. And so inconsistent are we that we are sometimes not sorry to have a plausible pretense for interrupting the very employment to which we had just committed ourselves. For lack of this inward acquaintance, we remain in utter ignorance of our inability to meet even the ordinary trials of life with cheerfulness.

Nursed in the lap of luxury, we have no notion that we have but a loose hold on the things of this world, and of the world itself. But let some accident take away not the world, but some trifle on which we thought we set no value while we possessed it, we find to our astonishment that we hold, not the world only, but even this trivial possession with a pretty tight grasp. Such detections of our self-ignorance ought at least to humble us.

There is a spurious sort of self-examination which does not serve to enlighten but to blind. People who have given up some notorious vice, who have softened some shades of a glaring sin, or substituted some outward forms in the place of open irreligion, may look on their change of character with pleasure. They compare themselves with what they were and view the alteration with self-complacency. They deceive themselves by taking their standard from their former conduct, or from the character of others who are worse, instead of taking it from the unerring rule of Scripture. He looks more at the discredit than the sinfulness of his former life. Being more ashamed of what is disreputable than grieved at what is vicious, he is, in this state of shallow reformation, more in danger in proportion as he gives himself more credit. He is not aware that having a fault or two less will not carry him to heaven while his heart is still glued to the world and estranged from God.

If we ever look into our hearts at all, we are naturally most inclined to it when we think we have been acting right. In this case, self-inspection gratifies self-love. We have no great difficulty in directing our attention to an object when that object presents us with pleasing images.

But it is a painful effort to compel the mind to turn in on itself when the view only presents subjects for regret and remorse. This painful duty however must be performed, and will bring more healing in proportion as it is less pleasant. Let us establish it into a habit to ponder our faults. We need not feed our vanity with the recollection of our virtues. They will, if that vanity does not obliterate them, be recorded elsewhere.

We are also most disposed to look at those parts of our character which will best bear it, and which consequently least need it; at those parts which afford most

self-gratification. If a covetous man, for instance, examines himself, instead of turning his attention to the guilty part, he applies the probe where he knows it will not go very deep; he turns from his greed to that abstention of which his very avarice is perhaps the source. Another, who is the slave of passion, fondly rests upon some act of generosity, which he considers as a fair exchange for some favorite vice that would cost him more to renounce than he is willing to part with.

We are all too much disposed to dwell on that smiling side of the view which pleases and deceives us, and to shut our eyes upon that part which we do not choose to see, because we are resolved not to stop that particular sin. Self-love always holds a screen between the superficial self-examiner and his faults. The nominal Christian wraps himself up in forms which he makes himself believe are religion. He exults in what he does, overlooks what he ought to do and never suspects that what is done at all can be done amiss.

We are usually so indolent that we seldom examine a truth on more than one side, so we generally take care that it shall be that side which shall confirm some old prejudices. We will not take pains to correct those prejudices and to rectify our judgment, lest it should oblige us to discard a favorite opinion. We are still as eager to judge and as presumptuous to decide as if we fully possessed the grounds on which a sound judgment may be made, and a just decision formed.

We should watch ourselves whether we observe a simple rule of truth and justice in our conversations as well as in our ordinary transactions. Are we exact in our measures of commendation and censure? Do we not bestow extravagant praise where simple approval alone is due? Do we not withhold commendation, where if given, it would support modesty and encourage merit? Do we reprimand as immoral what deserves only a slight censure as imprudent? Do we not sometimes pretend to overrate ordinary merit in the hope of securing to ourselves the reputation of candor, so that we may on other occasions, with less suspicion, depreciate established excellence? We may be extolling ordinary merit because we think that it can come into no competition with us, and we denigrate excellence because it obviously eclipses us.

It is only by scrutinizing the heart that we can know it. Any careless observer may see that his watch has stopped by casting an eye on its face, but it is only the expert who takes it to pieces and examines every spring and every wheel separately. By ascertaining the precise cause of the problem he sets the watch right and restores the hidden movements.

The illusions of intellectual vision would be corrected by a close habit of cultivating an acquaintance with our hearts. We fill much too large a space in our own imaginations and fancy that we take more room in the world than

Providence assigns to an individual who has to divide his allotment with so many millions who are all of equal importance in their own eyes. The conscientious practice we have been recommending would greatly assist in reducing us to our proper dimensions and limiting us to our proper place. We would be astonished if we could see our real smallness and the speck we actually occupy. When shall we learn from our own feelings how much consequence every person is to himself or herself?

Self-examination must not be occasional, but regular. Let us settle our accounts frequently. Little articles will run up to a large amount if they are not cleared off. Even our innocent days, as we may choose to call them, will not have passed without furnishing their measure of faults. Our deadness in devotion, our eagerness for human applause, our care to conceal our faults rather than to correct them, our negligent performance of some relative duty, our imprudence in conversation, especially at table, our inconsideration, driving to the very edge of permitted indulgences—let us keep all our numerous items in small sums. We can examine them while the particulars are fresh in our memory. Otherwise, we may find when we come to settle the grand account, (the final judgement), that these faults have not been forgotten.

And let one subject of our frequent inquiry be to ask whether, since we last examined our hearts, our secular affairs or our eternal concerns have had the predominance. We do not mean which of them occupied most of our time. Naturally, the larger portion must necessarily be absorbed in the cares of the present life. What we need to ask is how have we conducted ourselves when a competition arose between the interests of both.

That general burst of sins which so frequently rushes in on the consciences of the dying would be much moderated by previous habitual self-examination. The sorrow must be as precise as the sin. Indefinite repentance is no repentance. And it is one helpful use of self-enquiry to remind us that all unforsaken sins are unrepented sins.

To a Christian there is this substantial comfort which follows minute self-inspection: when we find fewer sins to be noted and more victories over temptations obtained, we have solid evidence of our advancement which well repays our trouble.

The faithful searcher into his own heart feels himself in the situation of Ezekiel, who being conducted in vision from one idol to another, the spirit at sight of each repeatedly exclaims, "Here is another abomination!" The prophet was commanded to dig deeper, and the further he penetrated, the more evils he found, while the spirit continued to cry out, "I will show you yet more abominations."

Self-examination, by detecting self-love, self-denial by weakening its powers and self-government by reducing its tyranny, turns the disposition of the soul from its natural bias, controls the disorderly appetite, and under the influence of divine grace restores to the person the dominion over himself that God first gave us over the lower creatures. Desires, passions and appetites are brought to move somewhat more in their appointed order—as subjects, not tyrants. In the end, self-examination restores us to dominion over our own will, and in good measure enthrones us in that empire which we forfeited by sin.

We now begin to survey our interior, the awful world within, not with complacency but with the control of a sovereign, and we still find too much rebellion to feel ourselves secure. Therefore we continue our inspection with vigilance but without agitation. We continue to experience a remainder of insubordination and disorder, but this calls forth a stricter supervision rather than driving us to relax our discipline.

This self-inspection somewhat resembles the correction of a literary effort. After many careful revisions, though some grosser faults may be removed, though the errors are neither quite so numerous nor so glaring as at first, yet the critic perpetually perceives faults which he had not perceived before. Negligences appear which he had overlooked and even defects show up which had passed as benefits before. He finds much to amend and even to erase in what he had previously admired. When by rigorous reprimands the most acknowledged faults are corrected, his critical discernment, improved by exercise and a greater familiarity with his subject, still detects and will forever detect new imperfections. But he neither throws aside his work nor leaves off his criticism. If it does not make the work more perfect, it will at least make the author more humble. Conscious that if it is not quite so bad as it was, it is still an immeasurable distance from the desired excellence.

Is it not astonishing that we should go on repeating periodically, "Search me, O God, and know my faults," yet neglect to examine ourselves? Is there not something more like defiance than devotion to invite the inspection of Omniscience to that heart which we ourselves neglect to inspect? How can any of us as Christians solemnly cry out to God, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life," while we neglect to examine our hearts and are afraid of testing our thoughts, dreading to ask if there be any way of wickedness in us, knowing that the inquiry ought to lead to the expulsion of sin?

In our self-inquisition let us fortify our virtue by calling things by their proper names. Self-love is particularly ingenious in inventing disguises of this kind. Let

us lay them open, strip them bare, face them and give them as little quarter as if they were the faults of another. Let us not call wounded pride, sensitivity. Self-love is made up of soft and sickly sensibilities. Not that sensibility which melts at the sorrows of others, but that which cannot endure the least suffering itself. It is alive in every pore where self is concerned. A touch is a wound. It is careless in inflicting pain, but exquisitely awake in feeling it. It defends itself before it is attacked, revenges affronts before they are offered, and resents as an insult the very suspicion of an imperfection.

In order then to unmask our heart, let us not be content to examine our vices, let us examine our virtues also, those smaller faults. Let us scrutinize to the bottom those qualities and actions which have more particularly obtained public estimation. Let us inquire if they were genuine in the motivation, singular in the intention, and honest in the prosecution. Let us ask ourselves if in some admired instances our generosity had any trace of vanity, our charity any taint of ostentation. We must question whether when we did such a right action which brought us credit, would we have persisted in doing it if we had foreseen that it would incur censure?

Do we never deceive ourselves by mistaking a natural slothfulness, for Christian moderation? Do we never transform our love of ease, into deadness of the world? Do we make our carnal activity, into Christian zeal? Do we mistake our obstinacy for firmness, our pride for fortitude, our selfishness for feeling, our love of controversy for the love of God, and our indolence of temper for deadness to human applause? When we have stripped our good qualities bare, when we have made all due deductions for natural temperament, easiness of disposition, self-interest, desire of admiration, of every nonessential attachment, every illegitimate motive, let us fairly add up the account; and we shall be mortified to see how little there will remain.

Pride may impose itself upon us even in the guise of repentance. The humble Christian is grieved at his faults; the proud man is angry at them. He is indignant when he discovers he has done wrong, not so much because his sin offends God, but because it has let him see that he is not quite so good as he had tried to make himself believe. It is more necessary to stimulate us to the humbling of our pride than to the performance of certain good actions. The former is more difficult and it is less pleasant.

That very pride will of itself stimulate to the performance of many things that are laudable. These performances will reproduce pride since they were produced by it, whereas humility has no outward stimulus. Divine grace alone produces it. It is so far from being energized by the love of fame, that it is not humility until it has laid the desire of fame in the dust.

As we have said, if an actual virtue consists in the dominion over the contrary vice, then humility is the conquest over pride; charity over selfishness. It is not only a victory over the natural disposition, but a substitution of the opposite quality. This proves that all virtue is founded in self-denial and self-denial in self-knowledge, and self-knowledge in self-examination.

Pride so insinuates itself in all we do and say and think, that our apparent humility often has its origin in pride. That very impatience which we feel at the perception of our faults is produced by the astonishment at finding that we are not perfect. This sense of our sins should make us humble, but not desperate. It should teach us to distrust everything in ourselves, and to hope for everything from God. The more we lay open the wounds which sin has made, the more earnestly shall we seek the remedy which Christ has provided.

But instead of seeking for self-knowledge, we are glancing about us for grounds for self-exaltation. We almost resemble the Pharisee who with so much self-complacency delivered the catalogue of his own virtues and other men's sins. Or like the Tartars, who thought they possessed the qualities of those they murdered, the Pharisee fancied that the sins of which he accused the publican would swell the amount of his own good deeds. Like him we take a few items from memory, and a few more from imagination.

Instead of pulling down the edifice which pride has raised, we look around on our good works for buttresses to prop it up. We excuse ourselves from the accusation of many faults by alleging that they are common, and certainly not unique to ourselves. This is one of the weakest of our deceits. Faults are not less personally ours because others commit them. The responsibility for sin can be divided just as matter can. Is there any lessening of our responsibility for our sin just because others are guilty of the same?

Self-love is a very diligent motivation, and generally has two concerns in hand at the same time. It is as busy in concealing our own defects, as in detecting those of others, especially those of the wise and good. We might indeed direct its activity in the latter instance to our own advantage, for if the faults of good men are injurious to themselves, they might be rendered profitable to us, if we were careful to convert them to their true use. But instead of turning them into a means of promoting our own watchfulness, we employ them mischievously in two ways. We lessen our respect for pious characters when we see the infirmities which are blended with their fine qualities, and we turn their failings into a justification of our own, which are not like theirs since ours are overshadowed with virtues. To admire the excellences of others without imitating them is fruitless admiration. And to condemn their errors without avoiding them is unprofitable judgment.

When we are compelled by our conscience to acknowledge and regret any fault we have recently committed, this fault so presses upon our recollection that we seem to forget that we have any other. This single error fills our mind and we look at it as through a microscope, which confines sight to that one object exclusively. Other sins indeed are more effectually shut out because we are examining this one. Thus, while the object in question is magnified, the others seem as if they did not exist.

It seems to be established into a kind of system not to profit by anything outside us, and not to cultivate a knowledge of anything within us. Though we are perpetually remarking on the defects of others, when does the remark lead us to study and to root out the same defects in our own hearts? Almost every day we hear of the death of others, but does it induce us to reflect on death as a thing in which we have an individual concern? We consider the death of a friend as a loss, but seldom apply it as a warning. The death of others we lament, and the faults of others we censure, but how seldom do we make use of the one for our own change, or the other for our own preparation for death?

It is the fashion of the times to try experiments in the arts, in agriculture and philosophy. In every science the diligent professor is always afraid there may be some secret which he has not yet attained, some hidden principle which would reward the labor of discovery, something even which the diligent and intelligent person has actually found out, but which has before this eluded his pursuit. Shall the Christian stop short in his scrutiny? Shall he not examine and inquire until he lays hold on the very heart and core of the faith?

Why should experimental philosophy be the prevailing study while experimental religion be branded as the badge of enthusiasm, and the jargon of a hollow profession? Shall we never labor to establish the distinction between appearance and reality, between studying religion critically and embracing it practically; between having our conduct creditable and our heart sanctified? Shall we not aspire to do the best things from the highest motives, and elevate our aims by our attainments? Why should we remain in the vestibule when the sanctuary is open? Why should we be content to dwell in the outer courts when we are invited to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus?

Natural reason is not likely to furnish arguments sufficiently convincing, nor motives sufficiently powerful to drive us to a close self-inspection. Our corruptions foster this ignorance. To this they owe their undisputed possession of our hearts. No principle short of Christianity is strong enough to impel us to a study so disagreeable as that of a study of our faults. Humility is the prime grace of Christianity, and this grace can never take root and flourish in a heart that lives in ignorance of itself. If we do not know the magnitude and extent of our sins, if we do not know the imperfection of our virtues, the failure of our best



resolutions, the sickness of our purest purposes, we cannot be humble. If we are not humble, we cannot be Christians.

But we can ask, is there to be no end to this vigilance? Is there no assigned period when this self-denial may become unnecessary? Is there no given point when we may be freed from this annoying self-inspection? Is the matured Christian to be a slave to the same drudgery as the novice? The true answer is—we may cease to watch when our spiritual enemy ceases to assail. We may cease to be on guard when there is no longer any temptation from without. We may cease our self-denial when there is no more corruption within us. We may give the reins to our imagination when we are sure its tendencies will be toward heaven. We may dismiss repentance when sin is abolished. We may indulge selfishness when we can do it without danger to our souls. We may neglect prayer when we no longer need the favor of God. We may cease to praise Him when He ceases to be gracious to us. To discontinue our vigilance at any time short of this will be to defeat all the virtues we have practiced on earth and to put in danger all our hopes of happiness in heaven.

PRACTICAL PIETY by Hannah More, 1811 Chapter 13

Chapter 13

### **SELF-LOVE**

"The idol Self," says an excellent old divine, "has made more desolation among men than ever was made in those places where idols were served by human sacrifices. It has preyed more fiercely on human lives than Molech." To worship images is a more obvious idolatry, but scarcely more degrading than to set up self in opposition to God. To devote ourselves to this service is as perfect slavery, as the service of God is perfect freedom. If we cannot imitate the sacrifice of Christ in His death, we are called to imitate the sacrifice of Himself in doing His will. Even the Son of God declared, "I came not to do my own will, but the will of Him who sent me." This was His grand lesson, this was His distinguishing character.

Self-will is the ever flowing fountain of all the evil which deforms our hearts, of all the boiling passions which inflame and disorder society; the root of bitterness on which all its corrupt fruits grow. We set up our own understanding against the wisdom of God, and our own passions against the will of God. If we could ascertain the precise period when sensuality ceased to govern the animal part of our nature, and pride ceased to govern the intellectual part, that period would form the most memorable era of the Christian life; from that moment on we begin a new date of liberty and happiness; from that stage we set out on a new

career of peace, liberty and virtue.

Self-love is a Proteus of all shapes, shades and complexions. It has the power of expansions and contractions as best serves the occasion. There is no crevice so small through which its subtle essence cannot stretch itself to fill. It is of all degrees of refinement; so coarse and hungry as to gorge itself with the grossest adulation, so fastidious as to require a homage as refined as itself; so artful as to elude the detection of ordinary observers, so specious as to escape the observation of the very heart in which it reigns paramount. Yet, though so extravagant in its appetites, it can adopt a moderation which imposes, a delicacy which veils its deformity, an artificial character which keeps its real one out of sight.

We are apt to speak of self-love as if it were only a symptom, whereas it is the disease itself. It is a malignant disease which has possession of the moral constitution and leaves nothing uncorrupted by its touch. This corrupting principle pollutes, by coming into contact with it, whatever is in itself great and noble. The poet, Alexander Pope, erroneously called self-love "a little pebble that stirred the lake, and made it the well—spring of human progress." His lines are as follows:

Self-love thus pushed to social, to divine,  
Gives you to make your neighbor's blessing thine.  
Self-love but serves the virtuous mind to make  
As a small pebble stirs the peaceful lake.

The Apostle James appears to have been of a different opinion from Pope. James speaks as if he suspected that the pebble stirred the lake a little too roughly. He traces this mischievous principle from its birth to the largest extent of its malign influence. The question, "where come wars and fightings among you?" he answers by another question: "come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?"

The same pervading spirit which creates hostility between nations, creates animosity among neighbors and discord in families. It is the same principle which, having in the beginning made Cain a murderer in his father's house, has been ever since in perpetual operation. It has been transmitted in one unbroken line of succession through that long chain of crimes of which history is composed, to the present triumphant spoiler of Europe [Napoleon]. In cultivated societies, laws repress the overt act in private individuals by punishment, but the Christian religion is the only thing that has ever been devised to cleanse the spring.

"The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, who can know it?" This proposition, this interrogation, we read with complacency, and both the

statement and the question being a portion of Scripture, we think it would not be decent to contradict it. We read it, however, with a secret reservation that it is only the heart of all the rest of the world that is meant, and we rarely make the application which the Scripture intended. Each hopes that there is one heart that might escape the charge, and he makes the single exception in favor of his own. But if the exception which everyone makes were true, there would not be a deceitful or wicked heart in the world.

As a theory we are ready enough to admire self-knowledge, but when it comes to practice, we are as blindfolded as if our happiness depended on our ignorance. To lay hold on a religious truth, and to maintain our hold, is no easy matter. We like to have an intellectual knowledge of divine things, but to cultivate a spiritual acquaintance with them cannot be easily achieved. We can even force ourselves to believe that which we do not understand more easily than we can bring ourselves to choose that which crosses our will or our passions. One of the first duties of a Christian is to endeavor to conquer this antipathy to the self-denying doctrines against which the human heart so sturdily holds out.

The scholar takes incredible pains for the acquisition of knowledge. The philosopher cheerfully consumes the midnight oil in his laborious pursuits; he willingly sacrifices food and rest to conquer a difficulty in science. Here the labor is pleasant, the fatigue is welcome, the very difficulty is not without its charms. Why do we react so differently in our religious pursuits? Because in the most laborious human studies, there is no opposition to the will, there is no combat of the affections. If the passions are at all implicated, if self-love is at all concerned, it is rather in the way of gratification than of opposition.

There is such a thing as a mechanical Christianity. There are good imitations of religion, so well executed and so resembling as not only to deceive the spectator but the artist. If properly used, the careful reading of pious books is one of the most beneficial means to preserve us from the influence of self-love. These very books, however, in the hands of the lazy and self-satisfied, produce an effect directly contrary to that which they were intended to produce, and which they actually do produce on minds properly prepared for them. They inflate where they were intended to humble. Some hypochondriacs amuse their melancholy hours by consulting every available medical book, and fancy they can find their own ailment in the ailment of every patient, until they believe they actually feel every pain of which they read, though they read a case diametrically opposite to their own.

So the religious soul, weakened by self-love, may be unreasonably elated when reading books that describe a religious state far beyond their own. He feels his spiritual pulse by a watch that has no rhythm in common with it, yet he fancies

that they go exactly alike. He dwells with delight on symptoms, not one of which belongs to him, and flatters himself with their supposed agreement. He looks in those books for signs of grace, and he observes them with complete self-application; he traces the evidences of being in God's favor, and those evidences he finds in himself.

Self-ignorance appropriates truths faithfully stated but wholly inapplicable. The presumption of the novice arrogates to itself the experience of the advanced Christian. He is persuaded that it is his own case and seizes on the consolations which belong only to the most elevated piety. Self-knowledge would correct the judgment. It would teach us to use the pattern held out as an original to copy, instead of leading us to fancy that we are already wrought into the likeness. It would teach us when we read the history of an established Christian, to labor after a conformity to it, instead of mistaking it for the description of our own character.

Human prudence, daily experience, self-love, all teach us to distrust others, but all motives combined do not teach us to distrust ourselves; we confide unreservedly in our own heart, though as a guide it misleads, as a counselor it betrays. It is both defendant and judge. Self-love blinds the defendant through ignorance; and moves the judge to acquit through partiality.

Though we praise ourselves for our discretion in not confiding too implicitly in others, yet it would be difficult to find any friend, neighbor, or even an enemy who has deceived us so often as we have deceived ourselves. If an acquaintance betray us, we take warning, are on the watch, and are careful not to trust him again. But however frequently the bosom traitor deceives and misleads, no such determined stand is made against his treachery: we lie as open to his next treachery: we lie as open to his next assault as if he had never betrayed us! We do not profit by the remembrance of the past delusion to guard against the future.

Yet if another deceive us, it is only in matters respecting this world, but we deceive ourselves in things of eternal importance. The treachery of others can only affect our fortune or our fame, or at worst, our peace; but the eternal traitor may mislead us to our everlasting destruction. We are too much disposed to suspect others who probably have neither the inclination nor the power to injure us, but we seldom suspect our own heart, though it possesses and uses both.

We ought however fairly to distinguish between the simple VANITY and the HYPOCRISY of self-love. Those who content themselves with talking as if the praise of virtue implied the practice, and who expect to be thought good because they commend goodness, only propagate the deceit which has misled them.

Hypocrisy, on the other hand, does not even believe herself. She has deeper motives, she has designs to answer, competitions to promote, projects to effect. But mere vanity can subsist on the thin air of the admiration she solicits, without intending to get anything by it. She is gratuitous in her loquacity; for she is ready to display her own merit to those who have nothing to give in return, whose applause brings no profit, and whose censure no disgrace. Self-love feels strengthened by the number of voices in its favor, and is less anxious about the goodness of the work than the loudness of the acclamation. Success is merit in the eyes of both.

But even though we may put more refinement into our self-love, it is self-love still. No subtlety of reasoning, no elegance of taste, though it may disguise the inmost motive, can destroy it. We are still too much in love with flattery even though we may profess to despise that praise which depends on the acclamations of the masses. But if we are over-anxious for the admiration of the better-born and the better-bred, this by no means proves that we are not vain, it only proves that our vanity has better taste. Our appetite is not coarse enough perhaps to relish that popularity which ordinary ambition covets, but do we never feed in secret on the applause of more distinguishing judges? Is not their having extolled our merit a confirmation of their discernment, and the chief ground of our high opinion of theirs?

But if any circumstances arise to induce them to change the too-favorable opinion which they had formed of us, though their general character remain as unimpeachable as when we most admired them, do we not begin to judge them unfavorably? Do we not begin to question their claim to that discernment which we ascribed to them, to suspect the soundness of their judgment on which we had commented so loudly? We do well if we do not entertain some doubt of the uprightness of their motive, as we probably question the reality of their friendship. We do not candidly allow for the effect which prejudice, which misinformation, which partiality may produce even on an upright mind. Still less does it enter into our calculation that we may actually have deserved their disapproval, that something in our conduct may have incurred the change in theirs.

It is no low attainment to detect this lurking injustice in our hearts, to strive against it, to pray against it, and especially to conquer it. We may consider that we have acquired a sound principle of integrity when prejudice no longer blinds our judgment, when resentment does not bias our justice and when we do not make our opinion of others correspond to the opinion they entertain of us. We must have no false estimate which shall incline us to condemnation of others, or to partiality to ourselves. The principle of impartiality must be kept sound or our determinations will not be accurate.

In order to strengthen this principle, we should make it a test of our sincerity to search out and to commend the good qualities of those who do not like us. But this must be done without affectation, and without insincerity. We must practice no false candor. If we are not on our guard, we may be seeking praise for our generosity, while we are only being just. These refinements of self-love are the dangers only of spirits of the higher order, but to such they are dangers.

The *INGENUITY* of self-love is inexhaustible. If people extol us, we feel our good opinion of ourselves confirmed. If they dislike us, we do not think the worse of ourselves, but of them; it is not we who lack merit, but they who lack true insight. We persuade ourselves that they are not so much insensible to our worth, as jealous of it. There is no shift, stratagem, or device which we do not employ to make us stand well with ourselves.

We are too apt to calculate unfairly in two ways: by referring to some one signal act of generosity, as if such acts were the common habit of our lives; and by treating our habitual faults, not as common habits, but occasional failures. There is scarcely any fault in another, which offends us more than vanity, though perhaps there is none that really injures us so little. We have no patience that another should be as full of self-love as we allow ourselves to be; so full of himself as to have little leisure to pay attention to us. We are particularly quick-sighted to the smallest of his imperfections which interferes with our self-esteem, while we are lenient to his more grave offenses which, by not coming in contact with our vanity, do not shock our self-love.

Is it not strange that though we love ourselves so much better than we love any other person, yet there is hardly one, however little we value him, that we had not rather be alone with, that we had not rather converse with, that we had not rather come to close quarters with, than ourselves? Scarcely one whose private history, whose thoughts, feelings, actions and motives we had not rather pry into than our own? Do we not use every art and contrivance to avoid getting at the truth of our own character? Do we not endeavor to keep ourselves ignorant of what everyone else knows respecting our faults, and do we not account that man our enemy who takes on himself the best office of a friend—that of opening to us our real state and condition?

The little satisfaction people find when they faithfully look within makes them fly more eagerly to the things without. Early practice and long habit might conquer the repugnance to look at home, and the fondness for looking abroad. We might perhaps collect a reasonably just knowledge of our own character if we could ascertain the real opinions of others concerning us. But that opinion being, except in a moment of resentment, carefully kept from us by our own precautions, profits us nothing. We do not choose to know their secret sentiments because we do not choose to be cured of our error; because we "love

darkness rather than light;" because we conceive that in parting with our vanity, we should part with the only comfort we have, that of being ignorant of our own faults.

Self-knowledge would materially contribute to our happiness by curing us of that self-sufficiency which is continually exposing us to mortifications. The hourly irritations and vexations which pride undergoes are far more than equivalents for the short intoxications of pleasure which they snatch.

The enemy within (our deceitful heart) is always in a confederacy with the enemy without, whether that enemy be the world or the devil. The domestic foe (our deceitful heart) accommodates itself to their allurements, flatters our weaknesses, throws a veil over our vices, tarnishes our good deeds, guilds our bad ones, hoodwinks our judgment, and works hard to conceal our internal springs of action.

Self-love has the talent of imitating whatever the world admires, even though it should happen to be Christian virtues. Because we regard our reputation, self-love leads us to avoid all vices, not only to escape punishment, but disgrace if we committed them. It can even assume the zeal and copy the activity of Christian charity. It attributes to our conduct those proprieties and graces which are manifested in the conduct of those who are actuated by a sounder motive. The difference lies in the ends proposed. The object of the one is to please God, of the other, to win the praises of people.

Self-love, judging the feelings of others by its own, is aware that nothing excites so much odium as its own character would do, if nakedly exhibited. We feel, by our own disgust at its exhibition in others, how much disgust we ourselves should excite if we did not clothe it with gentle manners and a polished address. Where therefore we would not condescend "to take the lowest place, to think others better than ourselves, to be courteous and pitiful" on the true Scripture ground, politeness steps in as the accredited substitute of humility— and the counterfeit "gem" is willingly worn by those who will not go to the expense of the real jewel.

There is a certain elegance of mind which will often restrain a well-bred man from sordid pleasures and gross sensualism. He will be led by his good taste perhaps not only to abhor the excesses of vice, but to admire the theory of virtue. But it is only the excesses of vice which he will abhor. Exquisite gratification, sober luxury, incessant but not unmeasured enjoyment form the principle of his plan of life. If he observes a temperance in his pleasures, it is only because excess would take off the edge, destroy the zest, and abridge the gratification.

By resisting gross vice he flatters himself that he is a temperate man and that he has made all the sacrifices which self-denial imposes. Inwardly satisfied, he compares himself with those who have sunk into coarser indulgences, and he enjoys his own superiority in health, credit and unimpaired faculties, and exults in the dignity of his own character.

There is, if the expression may be allowed, a sort of religious self-deceit and affectation of humility which is in reality full of self, which is entirely occupied with self, and which only looks at things as they refer to self. This religious vanity operates in two ways. First, we not only lash out at the imputation by others, of the smallest individual fault to ourselves; while at the same time we pretend to charge ourselves with more corruption than is attributed to us. On the other hand, while we are lamenting our general lack of all goodness, we fight for every particle that is questioned by others. The one quality that is in question always happens to be the very one to which we must lay claim, however deficient in others. Thus, while renouncing the pretension to every virtue, "we depreciate ourselves into all." We had rather talk even of our faults than not occupy the foreground of the canvas.

Humility does not consist in telling our faults, but in willing to be told of them; in hearing them patiently and even thankfully; in correcting ourselves when told; in not hating those who tell us of them. If we were little in our own eyes, and felt our real insignificance, we would avoid false humility as much as mere obvious vanity. But we seldom dwell on our faults except in a general way, rarely on those of which we are really guilty. We do it in the hope of being contradicted, and thus of being confirmed in the secret good opinion we hold of ourselves. It is not enough that we inveigh against ourselves. We must in a manner forget ourselves. This oblivion of self from a pure principle would go further towards our advancement in Christian virtue than the most splendid actions performed on the opposite ground.

That self-knowledge which teaches us humility teaches us compassion also. The sick pity the sick. They sympathize with the disorder of which they feel the symptoms in themselves. Self-knowledge also checks injustice by establishing the equitable principle of showing the kindness we expect to receive. It represses ambition by convincing us how little we are entitled to superiority. It renders adversity profitable by letting us see how much we deserve it. It makes prosperity safe, by directing our hearts to Him who confers it, instead of receiving it as the consequence of our own deserving.

We even carry our self-importance to the foot of the throne of God. When prostrate there we are not required, it is true, to forget ourselves, but we are required to remember HIM. We have indeed much sin to lament, but we have also much mercy to adore. We have much to ask, but we have likewise much to



acknowledge. Yet our infinite obligations to God do not fill our hearts half as much as a petty uneasiness of our own, nor HIS infinite perfections as much as our own smallest need! The great, the only effectual antidote to self-love is to get the love of God and of our neighbor firmly rooted in the heart. Yet let us ever bear in mind that dependence on our fellow creatures is as carefully to be avoided as love of them is to be cultivated. There is none but God on whom the principle of love and dependence form but a single duty.

PRACTICAL PIETY by Hannah More, 1811

Chapter 14

### **ON THE CONDUCT OF CHRISTIANS IN THEIR RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE IRRELIGIOUS**

As serious Christians our relationships with unbelievers should exhibit a combination of integrity and discretion. We must consider ourselves not only as having our own reputation, but the honor of Christianity in our keeping. While we must, on the one hand, set our face as a flint against anything that may be construed as compromising, denying or concealing any Christian truth in order to curry favor. We must, on the other hand, be very careful never to maintain a Christian point of view with an unchristian disposition. When trying to convince others we must be cautious not to irritate them needlessly. We must distinguish between upholding God's honor and vindicating our own pride, and we must be careful never to stubbornly support the one under the guise of maintaining the other. The resultant dislike of the messenger will be quickly transferred to his God, and the adversary's unfavorable opinion of religion will be magnified by the faults of its advocate. At the same time the intemperate advocate disqualifies himself from being of any future service to the person who had been offended by his offensive manner.

As serious Christians we feel an honest indignation at hearing those truths treated so lightly on which our everlasting hopes depend. We cannot but feel our hearts rise at the affront offered to our Maker. But instead of calling down fire from heaven on the reviler's head, we should raise a secret supplication to God, which, if it does not change the heart of the opponent, will not only tranquilize our own, but soften it toward our adversary. We cannot easily hate the person for whom we pray.

Those of us who advocate the sacred cause of Christianity should be keenly aware that our being religious will never atone for our being disagreeable. Our orthodoxy will not justify our uncharitableness, nor will our zeal make up for our

indiscretion. We must not persuade ourselves that we have been serving God when we have only been indulging our own resentment. A fiery defense may actually prejudice the cause we might perhaps have advanced by a more temperate argument. Keeping a judicious silence when we are being provoked may be painful, but the pain and grief borne in silence will show real forbearance.

Sometimes we hear unwise Christians boasting about the attacks which their own indiscretion has invited. With more vanity than truth they apply the strong and ill-chosen term "persecution" to the sneers and ridicule which some impropriety on their part has occasioned. Now and then it is to be feared the censure may be deserved, and the noble defender of the Christian faith may possibly be only displaying his fallen nature. Even a good man may be blameable in some instances, for which his censurers will naturally have to keep a keen eye. How necessary it is on these occasions to remember that our Lord cautioned us to distinguish for whose sake we are being scorned. Peter also warned us, "If you are reproached for the name of Christ you are blessed.... But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or a thief, or a wrongdoer, or a mischief-maker."

This close scrutiny by worldly men of those who profess to be Christians is not without very important uses. It serves to promote circumspection in the real Christian, and the detection of those who are insincere, forming a broad and useful line of distinction between these two classes of characters that are frequently but erroneously confused.

The world believes, or at least pretends to believe, that the correct and elegant-minded Christian is oblivious to negative traits such as eccentricity, bad taste, and a propensity to stray from the straight line of prudence, and his adversaries delight to see this. But if the more mature Christians tolerate those infirmities in others, it is not because they do not clearly perceive and entirely condemn them. We bear with them only for the sake of their zeal, sincerity and the general usefulness of these imperfect Christians. Their good qualities are totally overlooked by the censorer, who is ever attempting to exaggerate the failings which Christian charity laments without excusing. Compassion bears with them, believing that impropriety is less harmful than carelessness, bad judgment less harmful than a bad heart, and some little excess of zeal better than gross immorality or total indifference.

We are not ignorant of how much truth itself offends. It is important therefore, not to add to the unavoidable offense by mixing the faults of our own character with the cause we support, because we may be certain that the enemy will take care never to separate them. He will always maintain the fatal association in his own mind. He will never think or speak of the Christian faith without associating it with the real or imputed bad qualities of Christian people he knows or has

heard of.

Let not then the friends of truth unnecessarily increase the number of her enemies. Let her not have to sustain the assaults which her divine character inevitably subjects her to, with the infirmities and foibles of her unwise or unworthy champions. But we sometimes justify our rash behavior under the pretext that our superior spirituality cannot tolerate the faults of others. The Pharisee overflowing with wickedness himself, made the exactness of his own virtue a pretense for looking with horror on the publican, whom our Savior regarded with compassionate tenderness, while He strongly condemned the hypocritical attitude of his accuser. "Compassion," says an admirable French writer, "is that law which Jesus Christ came down to bring to the world, to repair the divisions which sin has introduced into it; to be the proof of the reconciliation of man with God, by bringing him into obedience to the divine law; to reconcile him to Himself by subjugating his passions to his reason; and finally, to reconcile him to all mankind by curing him of the desire to domineer over them."

But we disqualify ourselves from becoming the instruments of God in promoting the spiritual good of anyone if we obstruct the avenue to his heart through our imprudence. We not only disqualify ourselves from doing good to all whom we disgust, but should we not take some responsibility for the failure of all the good we might have done them if we had not forfeited our influence by our indiscretion? If we do not assist others with their spiritual and bodily needs, Christ will consider it as not having been done to Himself. Our own reputation is so inseparably connected with that of Christianity that we should be careful of one for the sake of the other.

The methods of doing good in society are various. We should sharpen our discernment to discover them and our zeal to put them in practice. If we cannot open a man's eyes to the truth of our faith by our arguments, we may perhaps open them to its beauty by our moderation. Though he may dislike Christianity in itself, he may, admiring the forbearance of the Christian, he at last led to admire the Christian's God. If he has hitherto refused to listen to the written evidences of faith, the temperament of her advocate may be evidence of such an engaging kind that his heart may be opened by the sweetness of the one to the truth of the other. He will at least allow that Christianity cannot be so bad when its fruits are so agreeable. The conduct of the disciple may in time bring him to the feet of the Master. A new combination may be formed in his mind. He may begin to see what he had supposed as opposites are now being reconciled. He may begin to couple honesty with Christianity.

But if the mild advocate fails to convince, he may attract. Even if he fails to attract, he will at least leave on the mind of the adversary such favorable impressions as may induce him to inquire further. He may be able to engage him

on some future occasion with better results, enlarging on the entrance his restraint will have obtained for him.

But even if the temperate pleader should not be so fortunate as to produce any considerable effect on the mind of his antagonist, he is still benefitting of his own soul. He is at least imitating the faith and patience of the saints; he is cultivating that meek and quiet spirit which his blessed Master commanded and commended.

If all bitterness, malice and evil-speaking are expressly forbidden in ordinary cases, surely the prohibition must more particularly apply in the case of religious controversy. Suppose Voltaire and Hume had received their impression of our faith (as one would really suppose they had) from the defenses of Christianity by their able contemporary, Bishop Warburton. They saw this Goliath of learning delivering his ponderous blows, attacking with the same powerful weapons both the enemies of Christianity and also its friends who disagreed with him on points of faith. He did not meet them as his opponents but pounced on them as his prey, not seeking to defend himself but delighting in unprovoked hostility. When Voltaire and Hume saw Warburton's tactics, would they not exclaim with pleasure, "See how these Christians hate one another"? On the other hand, had Warburton's vast powers of mind and knowledge been sanctified by the angelic meekness of Leighton, they would have been compelled to acknowledge, if Christianity is false, it is after all so amiable that it deserves to be true.

If we aspired to furnish the most complete triumph to infidels, contentious theology would be our best device. They enjoy the wounds the combatants inflict on each other, not so much from the personal injury which either might sustain as from the conviction that every attack, however it may end, weakens the Christian cause. In all engagements with a foreign foe, they know that Christianity must come off triumphantly, therefore all their hopes are founded on attacks within Christianity itself.

If a forbearing temper should be maintained towards unbelievers, how much more towards those who share the same faith. As it is deplorable that there is so much hostility carried on by good men who profess the same faith, so it is a striking proof of the contentiousness of human nature that people can overlook larger problems (slavery, e.g., difficulties that conscience ought not to ignore) and fight over the smaller details, details so insignificant that the world would not even know they existed if the disputants were not so impatient to inform it by their ill-tempered arguments.

While we should never withhold a clear and honest confession of the great tenets of our faith, let us discreetly avoid dwelling on minor distinctions, since they do not affect the essentials either of faith or practice. In this way we may

allow others to maintain their opinions while we steadily hold fast our own.

It almost seems that the smaller the point being contested the greater the hostility. We can remember when two great nations were on the point of war over a small parcel of land in another hemisphere. It was so little known that the very name had scarcely reached us, so inconsiderable that its possession would have added nothing to the strength of either. So in theological disputes, more stress is often laid on the most insignificant things.

Is this the catholic spirit which embraces with compassion all children of our common Father without vindicating or approving their faults or opinions, and like its gracious Author, "would not that any should perish"? A preference for remote opinions over those close at hand is by no means confined to Christians.

It is a delicate point neither to vindicate the truth in so coarse a manner as to excite a prejudice against it; nor to make any concessions for the hope of obtaining popularity. "If it be possible, as much as lies in you, live peaceably with all men" can no more mean that we should exhibit a false openness which conciliates at the expense of sincerity, than that we should defend the truth with such an intolerant spirit that we injure our cause by our own indiscretion.

As the apostle beautifully advises us, every Christian should adorn our doctrine, not by power, but "by the meekness and gentleness of Christ." But we must carefully avoid adopting the ornamental appearance of an amiable temperament as a substitute for true piety. Condescending manners may be one of the numberless modifications of self-love by which a reputation is often obtained but which is not fairly earned. Carefully to examine whether we please others for their edification or in order to gain praise and popularity, is the bounden duty of a Christian.

We should not be angry with the blind for not seeing, nor with the proud for not acknowledging their blindness. Perhaps we ourselves were once as blind and as proud! We, under their circumstances, might have been more perversely wrong than they are, if we had not been treated by our teachers with more patient tenderness than we are disposed to exercise towards them. Tyre and Sidon, we are assured by Jesus Himself, would have repented had they enjoyed the privileges which Chorazin and Bethsaida threw away. Surely we may, for the love of God and for the love of our opponent's soul, do that which well-bred people do through a concern for politeness. Why should a Christian be more ready to offend against the rule of charity than a gentleman against the law of decorum? Candor in judging is like lack of prejudice in acting; both are statutes of the royal law.

Men also feel that they have a right to their own opinions. It is often more difficult to part with this right than with the opinion itself. If our object be the good of our opponent, if it be to promote the cause of truth and not to contend for victory, we shall remember this. We shall consider what value we put upon our own opinion. Why should our opponent's opinion, though a false one, be less dear to him if he believes it true? This consideration will teach us not to expect too much at first. It will teach us the prudence of seeking some general point in which we cannot fail to agree. This will let him see that we do not differ from him for the sake of differing, and our conciliating spirit may bring him to a willingness to listen to arguments on topics where our disagreement is wider.

In disputing, for instance, with those who wholly reject the divine authority of the Scriptures, we gain nothing by quoting them and insisting vehemently on the proof which is to be drawn from them, to support our point in the debate. Their unquestionable truth avails nothing to those who will not allow it. But if we take some common ground on which both parties can stand, and reason from the analogies of natural religion and the recognized course of God's providence, to the ways in which He has declared He will deal with us as revealed in the Bible, our opponent may be struck with the similarity. He then may be more disposed to considerations which may end in the happiest manner. He may finally become less averse to listening to us and accept beliefs which he might otherwise never have seen as having any value.

Where a disputant cannot endure what he sneeringly calls the strictness of evangelical religion, he will have no objection to acknowledging the momentous truths of man's responsibility to his Maker, of the omniscience, omnipresence, majesty and purity of God. Strive then to meet him on these grounds and respectfully ask him if he can sincerely affirm that he is acting upon the truths he already acknowledges. Is he living and acting in all respects as an accountable person ought to live and is he really conscious that he is continually under the eye of a just and holy God? You will find he cannot stand on these grounds. Either he must be contented to receive the truth as revealed in the Gospel, or be convicted of inconsistency or self-deceit or hypocrisy. You will at least make his own ground untenable, if you cannot, indeed, bring him over to yours. But while the opponent is effecting his retreat, do not cut off the means of his return.

Some Christians approve Christianity as knowledge rather than as truth. They like it as it enlarges their view of things, opens to them a wider field of inquiry, a fresh source of discovery and another topic of critical investigation. They consider it as extending the limits of their research rather than as a means of changing their lives. It furnishes their understanding with a fund of riches on which they are eager to draw, not so much for the improvement of the heart as of the intellect. They consider it a thesis on which to raise interesting discussions rather than as promises from which to build a rule of life.

There is something in the presentation of sacred subjects by these people which according to our conception is not only mistaken but dangerous. We refer to their treatment of faith as a mere science divested of its practical application, taken as a code of philosophical speculation rather than of active belief. After they have spent half a life upon proofs, which is a mere vestibule to be passed through on the way into the temple of Christianity, we accompany them into their edifice and find it composed of materials all too identical with their former taste. Questions of criticism, grammar, history, metaphysics; questions of mathematics and sciences meet us in what Paul calls the place where "charity out of a pure heart and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned, from which" he adds, "some having swerved, have turned aside to vain jangling."

We do not mean to apply this term "jangling" to all scientific discussions of faith, for we would be the last to deny their use or question their necessity. Our main objection lies in the supremacy given to such topics by our disputants and to the spirit too often manifested in their discussions. It is a preponderance which makes us fear that they consider these things as faith itself, as substitutes rather than aids and allies of devotion. At the same time, a cold and philosophical spirit studiously maintained seems to confirm the suspicion that religion with them is not inadvertently, but essentially and solely an exercise of the wits, a field for display of intellectual prowess as if the salvation of souls were a thing of no importance.

These prize fighters in theology remind us of the philosophers of other schools: we feel as if we were reading Newton against Descartes. The practical part of religion in short is forgotten, and lost in its theories; and what is worst of all, a temperament hostile to the spirit of Christianity is employed to defend or illustrate its positions.

This latter effect might be traced further into another allied cause: the habit of treating religion as a field of knowledge capable of demonstration. On a subject supported only by moral evidence, we lament to see questions dogmatically proved instead of being temperately argued. No, we could almost smile at the sight of some intricate and barren novelty in religion demonstrated to the satisfaction of some ingenious theorist who draws upon a hundred confutations of every position he maintains. The concealed attitudes of the debate are often such as might make angels weep. Such speculators who are more anxious to make proselytes to their opinion than converts to a principle will not be so likely to convince an opponent, as the Christian who is known to act upon his convictions and whose genuine piety will put life and heart into his reasonings. The opponent probably knows already all the ingenious arguments which books supply. Ingenuity therefore will less likely touch them than godly sincerity, which he cannot help but see that the heart of his antagonist is dictating to his lips.

There is a simple energy in pure Christian truth which a false motive imitates in vain. The "knowledge which puffs up" will make few real converts when unaccompanied by the "charity which builds up."

To remove prejudices is the bounden duty of a Christian, but we must take care not to remove them by conceding our integrity. We must not wound our conscience to save our credibility. If an ill-bred roughness disgusts another, a dishonest concession undoes oneself. We must remove all obstructions to the reception of truth, but truth itself we must not dilute. In clearing away the impediments, we must secure the principle.

If our own reputation is attacked, we must defend it with every lawful means, and we must not sacrifice that valuable possession to any demand but of conscience, to any call but the imperative call of duty. If our good name is put in competition with any other earthly good, we must preserve it, no matter how dear the other good may be. But if the competition lies between our reputation and our conscience, we have no hesitation in making the sacrifice, costly as it is. Sensitive people feel that their fame is as dear as life itself, but as Christians we know that it is not life to our souls.

For the same reason that we must not be over-anxious to vindicate our fame, we must be careful to preserve it from any unjust allegation. Paul has set us an admirable example in both respects, and we should never consider him in one point of view without recollecting his conduct in the other. So profound is his humility that he declares himself "less than the least of all saints." Not content with his comparative depreciation, he proclaims his actual corruptions. "In me, that is, in my flesh, there is no good thing." Yet this deep self-abasement did not prevent him from asserting his own worth by declaring that he was not behind the very chief of the apostles. Again, "As the truth of Christ is in me, no man shall stop me of this boasting," he says. He then enumerates with a manly dignity, tempered with a noble modesty, a multitude of instances of his unparalleled sufferings and his unrivaled zeal. Where his own personal feelings were in question, how self-abasing! But where the unjust imputation involved honor of Christ and the credit of the Christian faith, what carefulness it wrought in him, yes, what clearing of himself; yes what indignation, yes, what zeal!

While we rejoice in the promises annexed to the beatitudes, we should be cautious of applying to ourselves promises which do not belong to us, particularly that which is attached to the last beatitude. When our fame is attacked, let us carefully inquire if we are "suffering for righteousness' sake," or for our own faults. Let us examine whether we may not deserve the censures we have incurred. Even if we are suffering in the cause of God, may we not have brought discredit on that holy cause by our imprudence, our obstinacy, our vanity; by our zeal without knowledge and our earnestness without moderation? Let us inquire



whether our revilers have not some foundation for the charge, whether we have not sought our own glory more than that of God, whether we are not more disappointed at missing the praise which we thought our good works were entitled to bring us, than the wound Christianity may have sustained. Let us ask whether, though our views were right and pure on the whole, we neglected to count the cost and expected unmixed approval, uninterrupted success and a full tide of prosperity, totally forgetting the reproaches received and the shame sustained by the Man of Sorrows.

If we can acquit ourselves as to the general purity of our motives, the general integrity of our conduct and the sincerity of our efforts, then we may indeed, though with deep humility, take to ourselves the comfort of this divine beatitude. When we find that men only speak evil of us for His sake in whose cause we have labored, however that labor may have been mingled with imperfection, we may indeed "rejoice and be exceeding glad." Submission may be elevated into gratitude and forgiveness into love.

PRACTICAL PIETY by Hannah More, 1811

Chapter 15

### **CHRISTIAN WATCHFULNESS**

Of all the motives to vigilance and self discipline which Christianity presents, there is not one more powerful than the danger of a slackening in zeal and declining devotion. Would that we could affirm that coldness in religion is confined to the irreligious! If it is melancholy to observe an absence of Christianity where no great profession of it was ever made, it is far more grievous to mark its decline where it once appeared not only to exist but to flourish. We feel the same distinct sort of compassion with which we view the financial distresses of those who have been always indigent, and of those who have fallen into poverty from a state of opulence. Our concern differs not only in degree but in kind.

These changes are a call to awaken watchfulness, humility and self-inspection in those who think that they stand but need to be vigilant lest they fall. There is not any one circumstance which ought more to alarm and quicken the Christian than that of finding oneself growing languid and indifferent after having made a profession and found progress in the Christian walk. Such indifference gives the irreligious person reason to suspect that either there never was any truth in the profession of the person in question, or that there is no truth in religion itself. Critics will be persuaded that religion is weak and soon exhausted, and that a Christian's faith is by no means sufficiently powerful to carry him on his course. Religion's detractor is assured that piety is only an outer garment, put on for show or convenience, and that when it ceases to be needed for either, it is laid

aside. The evil spreads beyond the one indifferent believer, implying that all religious people are equally unsound or equally deluded, although some may be more prudent, or more fortunate or greater hypocrites than others. After one promising believer falls away, the old suspicion recurs and is confirmed, and the defection of others is thought to be inevitable.

The probability is that the one who fell away never was a sound and genuine Christian. His religion was perhaps entered into accidentally, built on some false ground, produced by some ephemeral cause. Although it cannot be fairly judged that he intended by his profession and prominent zeal to deceive others, it is probable that he himself was deceived. Perhaps he was too sure of himself; his early profession was probably rather bold and ostentatious. He may have imprudently fixed his stand on ground so high that it would not be easily tenable, and from which a descent would be all too observable. Although at first he thought he never could be too sure of his own strength, he allowed himself to criticize the infirmities of others, especially those whom he had apparently outstripped. Though they had started together, he had left them behind in the race.

Might it not be a safer course at the outset of the Christian life if a modest and self-distrusting humility were to impose a temporary restraint on the bravado of outward profession. A little knowledge of the human heart, a little suspicion of its deceitfulness, would not only moderate the intemperance of an ill-understood zeal, but would save the credit of the Christian faith, which receives a fresh wound from every desertion from her standard.

Some of the most distinguished Christians in this country began their religious career with this graceful humility. They would not allow their change of character and their adoption of new principles and a new course, to be blazoned abroad until the principles they had adopted were established and worked into their character. Their progress proved to be such as might have been inferred from the modesty of their beginnings. They have gone on with a perseverance which difficulties have only strengthened and experience confirmed, and will through divine aid doubtless go on, shining more and more unto the perfect day.

Now let us return to the less-steady convert. Perhaps religion was only, as we have hinted elsewhere, one pursuit among many which he had taken up when other pursuits had failed, and which he now lays down because his faith, not being rooted and grounded, fails also. It is also possible that the temptations coming from the outside might coincide with the inner failure. If vanity is his infirmity, he will recoil from the pointed disapproval of his superiors. If the love of novelty is his besetting weakness, the very uniqueness and strictness of religion, which first was attractive, now is repulsive. The flattering attention which he received, when his life was so different from the manners of the world,

now disgusts him. The very opposition which once animated, now cools him. He is discouraged by the reality of the required Christian self-denial, which in anticipation had appeared so delightful. Perhaps his fancy had been fired by some acts of Christian heroism, which he felt an ambition to imitate. The truth is, religion had only taken hold of his imagination, his heart had been left out of the question.

Perhaps religion was originally seen as something only to be believed, but now he finds that it must be lived. Above all the one falling away did not take into consideration the CONSISTENCY which the Christian life demands. Whereas warm affections rendered the practice of some right actions easy at the beginning; not included in the reckoning were the self-denial, the perseverance, and the renouncing of one's own will to which everyone pledges himself who is enlisted under the banner of Christ. The cross which it was easy to venerate, is found hard to bear.

On the other hand, a faltering Christian might have adopted religion when he was in affliction, and he is now happy. It may have been when he was in bad circumstances, and he is now grown affluent. Or it may have been taken on as something he needed to add to his recommendation to some party or project with which he wanted to associate. It may have been something that would enable him to accomplish certain goals he had in view; or something that, with the new acquaintance he wished to cultivate, might obliterate certain blemishes from his former conduct, and whitewash a somewhat sullied reputation.

Now in his more independent situation, it may be that he is surrounded by temptations, softened by blandishments, allured by pleasures which he never expected would arise to weaken his resolutions. These new enchantments make it not so easy to be pious as when he had little to lose and everything to desire, as when the world wore a frowning, and religion an inviting aspect. Or he is perhaps, by the "changes and chances" of life, transferred from a sober and humble society, where to be religious was honorable, to a more fashionable set of associates, where, as the disclosure of his piety would add nothing to his credit, he began to take pains to conceal it until it has fallen into that gradual oblivion which is the natural consequence of its being kept out of sight.

But we proceed to a far more interesting and important character. While the one whom we have been slightly sketching may by his inconstancy do much harm, this person might by his consistency and perseverance achieve indispensable good. Even the sincere and established Christian needs to keep a vigilant eye upon his own heart, especially if his situation in life be easy, and his course smooth and prosperous. If we do not keep our ground, we do not advance in it. Indeed, it will be a sure proof that we have gone back, if we have not advanced.

In a world so beset with snares even sound Christians may experience a slow but certain decline in devotion, a decline scarcely perceptible at first, but more visible in its subsequent stages. Therefore, when we suspect our hearts of any departure from faithfulness, we should compare ourselves with what we were at the supposed height of our devotion, and not to any other time. The gradual progress of decline is observable only when these two remote states are brought into contrast.

Among other causes of our loss of interest in Christ is the indiscreet forming of some worldly connection, especially that of marriage. In this union the irreligious more frequently draw away the religious to their side, rather than the contrary which is easily understood by those who are at all acquainted with the human heart.

It is also possible for a sincere but incautious Christian to be led by a strong affection to make some little sacrifices of principle for the advancement of a loved one or for the pursuit of a cherished cause. It may be observed in passing that those with the most tender hearts are the most susceptible to these disconcerting affections.

We must also take precautions against letting the wealth or position of another believer influence our intent to be honest with them. We become easily deceived because the film over our spiritual eyes grows gradually thicker, and the change is imperceptible to us. So we rationalize our diminished opposition to the faults of a friendly benefactor. We make slight, temporary concessions, tempering measures which we view now as perhaps too severe, when in fact all we have in mind is how that person or cause will benefit us. At the same time we grow cold in the pursuit of the rest of our duties. We begin to lament that in our present situation we can see only small effects of our labors, not perceiving that God may have withdrawn his blessing.

Many Christian parents may be similarly shortsighted with their children. In our plans for their lives we should neither entertain ambitious views, nor consider methods inconsistent with the strictness of our Christian faith. We must "seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness," avoiding the over-anxious attitude of many who do not profess our faith. We can cheerfully confide in that gracious and cheering promise, that God who is "both their sun and shield, who will give grace and glory, no good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly."

It is one of the trials of faith appended to the sacred office that its ministers, like Father Abraham are liable to go out "not knowing where they go," and this not only at their first entrance into their profession but throughout life, an inconvenience to which no other profession is necessarily liable, a trial which is

not perhaps fairly estimated.

This remark will naturally raise a laugh among those who at once hold the ministry in contempt, deride its ministers, and think their well-earned pay lavishly and even unnecessarily bestowed. They will probably exclaim in a sarcastic manner, "It is surely a great cause of commiseration to be transferred from a starving assistantship to a position of financial security, or from the lower class of a country parish to the high society of an affluent church."

While there is the positive aspect of the change from a state of uncertainty to a state of independence, from a life of poverty to comfort, or from a marginal to an affluent provision, we cannot discount the feelings and affections of the heart. While money may be that chief good of which ancient philosophy says so much, there are feelings which a man of acute sensibility values more intimately than silver or gold.

Is it absolutely nothing to resign his local comforts, to break up his local attachments, to have new connections to form, and that frequently at an advanced period of life? Connections perhaps less valuable than those he is leaving? Is it nothing for a faithful Minister to be separated from an affectionate people, a people not only whose friendship but whose progress has constituted his happiness here, as it will make his joy and crown of rejoicing hereafter?

Men of delicate minds estimate things by their affections as well as by their circumstances; to a man of a certain cast of character, a change however advantageous may be rather an exile than a promotion. While he gratefully accepts the good, he receives it with an edifying acknowledgment of the imperfection of the best human things. These considerations we confess add the additional feelings of kindness to their persons and of sympathy with their vicissitudes, to our respect and veneration for their holy office.

To themselves, however, the precarious tenure of their situation presents an instructive emblem of the uncertain condition of human life, of the transitory nature of the world itself. Their liability to a sudden removal gives them the advantage of being more especially reminded of the necessity and duty of keeping in a continual posture of preparation, having "their loins girded, their shoes on their feet, and their staff in their hand." They have also the same promises which supported the Israelites in the desert. The same assurance which cheered Abraham may still cheer the true servants of God under all difficulties. "Fear not—I am your shield and your exceeding great reward."

But there are perils on the right hand and on the left. It is not among the least that though a pious Clergyman may at first have tasted with trembling caution of the delicious cup of applause, he may gradually grow, as thirst is increased by

indulgence, to drink too deeply of the enchanted chalice. The dangers arising from anything that is good are formidable, because unsuspected. And such are the perils of popularity that we will venture to say that the victorious general who had conquered a kingdom, or the sagacious statesman who had preserved it, is almost in less danger of being spoilt by acclamation than the popular preacher; because, although their danger is likely to happen but once, his is perpetual. Theirs is only on a day of triumph, his day of triumph occurs every week; we mean the admiration he excites. Every fresh success ought to be a fresh motive to humiliation; he who feels this danger will vigilantly guard against swallowing too greedily the indiscriminate and often undistinguishing plaudits which either his doctrines or his manner, his talents or his voice may procure for him.

If he is not prudent as well as pious, he may be brought to humour his audience, and his audience to flatter him with a dangerous emulation, until they will scarcely endure truth itself from any other lips. No, he may imperceptibly be led not to be always satisfied with the attention and improvement of his hearers, unless the attention be sweetened by flattery and the improvement followed by exclusive attachment. The spirit of exclusive fondness generates a spirit of controversy. Some of the followers will rather improve in faulty reasoning to support their views. They will be more busied in opposing Paul to Apollos than looking unto "Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith." Religious gossip may substitute for religion itself. A party spirit is thus generated, and Christianity may begin to be considered as a thing to be discussed and disputed, to be heard and talked about, rather than as the productive motivation for virtuous conduct.

We owe, indeed, lively gratitude and affectionate attachment to the Minister who has faithfully labored for our edification; but the author has sometimes noticed a manner adopted by some injudicious adherents, especially of her own sex, which seems rather to erect their favorite into the head of a sect, than to reverence him as the pastor of a flock. This mode of evincing an attachment, amiable in itself, is doubtless as distressing to the delicacy of the Minister as it is unfavorable to religion, to which it is apt to give an air of partisanship.

May we be allowed to remark on the cause of declension in piety in some ministers who formerly exhibited evident marks of that seriousness in their lives which they continue to urge from the pulpit. May it not be partly due to an unhappy notion that the same exactness in his private devotion, the same watchfulness in his daily conduct, is not equally necessary in the advanced progress as in the first stages of a religious course? He does not desist from warning his hearers of the continual necessity of these things, but is he not in some danger of not applying the necessity to himself? May he not begin to rest satisfied with the preaching without the practice? It is not probable indeed that he goes so far as to establish himself as an exempt case, that he slides from

indolence into the exemption, as if its avoidance were not so necessary for him as for others.

Even the very sacredness of his profession is not without a snare. He may repeat the holy offices so often that he may be in danger on the one hand of sinking into the notion that it is a mere profession, or on the other, of so resting in it as to make it supersede the necessity of that strict personal religion with which he set out. He may at least be satisfied with the occasional, without the consistent practice. There is a danger—we advert only to its possibility—that his very exactness in the public exercise of his function may lead him to little justifications of his laxity in secret duties. His zealous exposition of the Scriptures to others may satisfy him, though it does not always lead to a practical application of them to himself.

But God, by requiring exemplary diligence in the devotion of his appointed servants, would heap up in their minds a daily sense of their dependence on him. If he does not continually teach by His Spirit those who teach others, they have little reason to expect success, and that Spirit will not be given where it is not sought; or, which is an awful consideration, may be withdrawn where it had been given and not improved as it might.

Should this unhappily ever be the case, it would almost reduce the minister of Christ to a mere engine, a vehicle through which knowledge was barely to pass, like the ancient oracles who had nothing to do with the information but to convey it. Perhaps the public success of the best men had been, under God, principally owing to this; that their faithful ministration in the Temple has been uniformly preceded and followed by petitions in the closet; that the truths implanted in the one have chiefly flourished from having been watered by the tears and nourished by the prayers of the other.

We will hazard but one more observation on this dangerous and delicate subject. If the indefatigable laborer in his great Master's vineyard, has, as must be the case, produced the desired effect, where his warmest hopes had been excited—if he feels that he has not benefited others as he had earnestly desired, this is precisely the moment to benefit himself, and is perhaps permitted for that very end. Where his usefulness has been obviously great, the true Christian will be humbled by the recollection that he is only an instrument. Where it has been less, the defeat of his hopes offers the best occasion, which he will not fail to use, for improving his humility. Thus he may always be assured that good has been done somewhere, so that in any case his labor will not have been in vain in the Lord.

PRACTICAL PIETY by Hannah More, 1811

## Chapter 16

### **TRUE AND FALSE ZEAL**

One of the most important ends of cultivating self-knowledge is to discover what is the real bent of our mind and which are the strongest tendencies of our character; to discover where our disposition requires restraint, and where we may be safely trusted with some liberty of indulgence. Our religious fervor needs the most consummate prudence to restrain its excesses without freezing its energies.

If, on the contrary, timidity is our natural propensity, we shall be in danger of falling into coldness and inactivity with regard to ourselves, and into passive compliance with the request of others, or too easy a conformity with their habits. It will therefore be an evident proof of Christian self-government when a man restrains the outward expression of over-ardent zeal where it would be unseasonable or unsafe; while he will practice the same Christian self-denial if he has a fearful and diffident character, to burst the fetters of timidity where duty requires a holy boldness and when he is called upon to lose all lesser fears in the fear of God.

One of the first objects of a Christian is to get his understanding and his conscience thoroughly enlightened; to take an exact survey, not only of the whole comprehensive scheme of Christianity, but of his own nature; to discover, in order to correct, the defects in his judgment; and to ascertain the deficiencies even of his best qualities. Through ignorance in these respects, though he may be following up some good tendency, though he is even persuaded that he is not wrong in his motive or his purpose, he may yet be wrong in the scope, the mode, or in the application, though right in the principle. He must therefore watch over his better qualities with a suspicious eye and guard his very virtues from deviation and excess.

Zeal is an indispensable ingredient in the composition of a great character. Without it no great eminence, secular or religious, has ever been attained. It is essential to the acquisition of excellence in arts and arms, in learning and piety. Without it no man will be able to reach the perfection of his nature, or to animate others to aim at that perfection. Yet it will surely mislead the dedicated Christian if his knowledge of what is right and just does not keep pace with the principle itself.

Zeal, indeed, is not so much a single virtue, as it is the principle which gives life and coloring, grace and goodness, warmth and energy to every other virtue. It is that feeling which exalts the relish of every duty and sheds a luster in the practice of every virtue. It embellishes every image of the mind with its glowing



tints and animates every quality of the heart with its invigorating motion. It may be said of zeal that though by itself it never made a great man, yet no man has ever made himself conspicuously great where it has been lacking.

Many things, however, must concur before we can determine whether zeal is really a virtue or a vice. Those who are contending for the one or for the other will be in the situation of the two knights who, meeting on a crossroad, were on the point of fighting about the composition of a cross that was between them. One insisted it was gold; the other maintained it was silver. The duel was prevented by the interference of a passenger who desired them to change their positions. Both crossed over to the opposite side and found that the cross was gold on one side and silver on the other. Each acknowledged his opponent to be right.

It may be disputed whether fire be a good or an evil. The man who feels himself cheered by its kindly warmth is assured that it is a benefit, but he whose house it has just burned down will give another verdict. Not only the cause, therefore, in which zeal is exercised must be good, but the zeal itself must be under proper regulation. If it is not, it will be like the rapidity of the traveler who gets on the wrong road, carrying him so much the farther out of his way, or if he be on the right road, will carry him involuntarily beyond his destination. That degree of zeal is equally misleading which detains us short of our goal, or which pushes us beyond it.

The Apostle suggests a useful precaution by expressly asserting that it is "in a good cause" that we "must be zealously affected." This implies a further truth, that where the cause is not good the mischief is proportionate with the zeal. But the possibility of misdirected zeal should not totally discourage us from being zealous.

If the injustice, the intolerance and persecution with which a misguided zeal has so often afflicted the Church of Christ be lamented as a deplorable evil, yet the overruling wisdom of Providence, fashioning good out of evil, made those very calamities the instruments of producing that true and lively zeal to which we owe the glorious band of martyrs and confessors, those brightest ornaments of the best periods of the Church. This effect, though a clear vindication of that divine goodness which allows evil, is no excuse for the one who perpetuates it.

It is curious to observe the contrary operations of true and false zeal, which though apparently only different modifications of the same quality, are, when brought into contact, repugnant and even destructive to each other. There is no attribute of the human mind where the different effects of the same principle have such a total opposition, for is it not obvious that the same principle which actuates the tyrant in dragging the martyr to the stake, can under another

direction, enable the martyr to embrace it?

As a striking proof that the necessity for caution is not imaginary, it has been observed that the Holy Scriptures record more instances of bad zeal than of good zeal. This furnishes the most authoritative argument for regulating this impetuous principle, and for governing it by all those restrictions demanded by a feeling so calculated for good and so capable of evil.

It was zeal, but of a blind and furious character, which produced the massacre on the day of St. Bartholomew, a day to which the mournful strains of Job have been so well applied: "Let that day perish. Let it not be joined to the days of the year. Let darkness and the shadow of death stain it." It was zeal most bloody, combined with a perfidy the most detestable, which inflamed the detestable Catherine de Medici, when she, under the alluring mask of a public festivity, contrived a general mass of wholesale destruction of some twenty-five to fifty thousand French Protestants. The royal and pontifical assassins, not satisfied with the sin, converted it into a triumph. Medals were struck in honor of a deed which has no parallel in the annals of pagan persecution.

Even glory did not satisfy the pernicious plotters of this direful tragedy. Devotion was called in to be the crown and consummation of their crime. The blackest hypocrisy was made use of to sanctify the foulest murder. The iniquity could not be complete without solemnly thanking God for its success. The Pope and Cardinals proceeded to St. Mark's Church, where they praised the Almighty for so great a blessing conferred on the Pope of Rome and the Catholic world. A solemn jubilee completed the preposterous pretense. This zeal of devotion was much worse than even the zeal of murder, as thanking God for enabling us to commit a sin is worse than the commission itself. A wicked piety is still more disgusting than a wicked act. God is less offended by the sin itself than by the thank-offering of its perpetrators. It looks like a black attempt to involve the Creator in the crime.

For a complete contrast to this pernicious zeal we need not, blessed be God, travel back into remote history, nor abroad into distant realms. This happy land of civil and religious liberty can furnish a countless catalog of instances of a pure, a wise, and a well directed zeal. Not to swell the list, we will only mention that it has in our own age produced the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, the British and Foreign Bible Society, and the abolition of the African slave trade. Three as noble and, we trust, as lasting monuments as ever national virtue erected in true piety. These are institutions which bear the authentic stamp of Christianity and embrace the best interests of almost the whole of the habitable globe "without partiality and without hypocrisy."

Why we hear so much in praise of zeal from a certain class of religious

characters is partly owing to their having taken up a notion that zeal is necessary for the care of other people's salvation, rather than for their own. Indeed the casual prying into a neighbor's house, though much more entertaining, is not nearly as troublesome as the constant inspection of one's own. It is observable that the outcry against zeal among the irreligious is raised on nearly the same ground as the clamor in its favor by these professors of religion. The former suspect that the zeal of the religionists is consumed in censuring their impiety, and in eagerness for their conversion, instead of being directed to themselves. This supposed anxiety they resent, and they give a practical proof of their resentment by resolving not to profit by it.

Two very erroneous opinions exist respecting zeal. It is commonly supposed to indicate a lack of charity; actually it is a firm friend rather than an enemy. Indeed, charity is such a reliable criterion of its sincerity, that we should be suspect of zeal which is unaccompanied by this fair ally.

Another opinion equally erroneous is prevalent—that where there is much zeal, there is little or no prudence. Now a sound and sober zeal is not such an idiot as to neglect to provide for its own success by taking every precaution which prudence can suggest. True zeal therefore will be as discreet as it is fervent, well knowing that its warmest efforts will be neither effectual, nor lasting, without those provisions which discretion alone can make. No quality is ever possessed in perfection where its opposite is lacking; zeal is not Christian fervor, but animal heat, if not associated with charity and prudence.

That most valuable faculty of intellectual man, the judgment, the enlightened, impartial, unbiased judgment must be kept in perpetual use, both to ascertain that the cause be good, and to determine the degree of its importance in any given case, so that we may not blindly assign an undue value to an inferior good. Without the discrimination we may be fighting a windmill when we fancy we are attacking a fort! We must prove not only whether the thing contended for be right, but whether it be essential; whether in our eagerness to attain this lesser good we may not be sacrificing or neglecting things of more real consequence; whether the value we assign to it may not be even imaginary.

Above all we should examine if we contend for a cause chiefly because it happens to fall in with our own feelings or our own party, more than for its intrinsic worth. We should also consider whether we do not wish to distinguish ourselves by our tenacity, rather than being committed to the principle itself.

This zeal, hotly exercised over mere circumstantial or ceremonial differences, has unhappily helped in causing irreparable separations and dissensions in the Christian world, even where the champions on both sides were great and good people. Many of the points over which they have argued were not worth insisting

upon where the opponents agreed in the grand fundamentals of faith and practice.

But to consider zeal as a general question, as a thing of everyday experience, we can say that he whose religious devotion is most sincere is likely to be the most zealous. But though zeal is an indication, and even an essential part of sincerity, a burning zeal is sometimes seen where the sincerity is somewhat questionable.

For where zeal is generated by ignorance, it is commonly fostered by self-will. That which we have embraced through false judgment we maintain through false honor. Pride is generally called in to nurse the offspring of error. We frequently see those who are perversely zealous for points which can add nothing to the cause of Christian truth, while they are cold and indifferent about the great things which involve the salvation of man.

Though all significant truths and all indispensable duties are made so obvious in the Bible that those "may run who read it," people tend to argue over issues that are unworthy of the heat they excite. Different systems are built on the same texts, so that he who fights for them is not always sure whether he is right or not, and if he wins his point, he can make no moral use of his victory. The correctness of his argument indeed is not his concern. It is enough that he has conquered. The importance of the object never depended on its worth, but on the opinion of his right to maintain that worth.

The Gospel assigns very different degrees of importance to allowed practices and commanded duties. It by no means censures those who were rigorous in their payment of the most inconsiderable tithes; but since this duty was not only competing with, but preferred before the most important duties, even justice, mercy and faith, the flagrant hypocrisy was pointedly censured by Meekness itself. This opposition of a scrupulous exactness in paying the petty demand on three paltry herbs to the neglect of the three cardinal Christian virtues, exhibits as complete and instructive a specimen as can be imagined of that frivolous and false zeal which, vanishing in trifles, wholly overlooks those grand points on which hangs eternal life. This passage serves to corroborate a striking fact, that there is scarcely in Scripture any precept enforced which has not some actual example attached to it. The historical parts of the Bible, therefore, are of inestimable value, were it only on this single ground, that the appended truths and principles so abundantly scattered throughout them are in general so happily illustrated by them. They are not dry aphorisms and cold propositions, which stand singly and disconnected, but precepts growing out of the occasion. The recollection of the principles recalls to mind the instructive story which they enrich, while the reminder of the circumstance impresses the lesson upon the heart. Thus the doctrine like a precious gem is at once preserved and embellished by the narrative being made a frame in which to enshrine it.

True zeal will first exercise itself in the earnest desire to obtain greater illumination in our own minds; in fervent prayer that the growing light may operate to the improvement of our conduct; that the influences of divine grace may become more outwardly perceptible by the increasing correctness of our behavior; that every holy affection may be followed by its correspondent act, whether of obedience or of resignation, of doing, or of suffering.

But the effects of a genuine and enlightened zeal will not stop here. It will be visible in our discourse with those to whom we may possibly be of help. The exercise of our zeal, when not done with a bustling kind of interference and offensive forwardness, is proper and useful. Wherever zeal appears, it will be clearly visible, in the same way that a fire will emit both light and heat. We should labor principally to maintain in our own minds the attitudes which our faith has initiated there. The brightest flame will decay if no means are used to keep it alive. Pure zeal will cherish every holy affection, and by increasing every pious disposition will move us to every duty. It will add new force to our hatred of sin, fresh contrition to our repentance, additional vigor to our resolutions, and will impart increased energy to every virtue. It will give life to our devotions, and spirit to all our actions.

When a true zeal has fixed these right affections in our own hearts, the same principle will, as we have already observed, make us earnest to excite them in others. No good man wishes to go to heaven alone, and none ever wished others to go there without earnestly endeavoring to awaken right affections in them. That will be a false zeal which does not begin with the regulation of our own hearts. That will be a narrow zeal which stops where it begins. A true zeal will extend itself through the whole sphere of its possessor's influence. Christian zeal, like Christian charity, will begin at home, but neither the one nor the other must end there.

But that we must not confine our zeal to mere conversation is not only implied but expressed in Scripture. The apostle does not exhort us to be zealous only of good words but of good works. True zeal ever produces true benevolence. It would extend the blessings which we ourselves enjoy to the whole human race. It will consequently stir us up to exert all our influence to the extension of religion, to the advancement of every well conceived and well conducted plan, calculated to enlarge the limits of human happiness, and more especially to promote the eternal interests of humankind.

But if we do not first strenuously labor for our own illumination, how shall we presume to enlighten others? It is a dangerous presumption to busy ourselves in improving others before we have diligently sought our own improvement. Yet it is a vanity not uncommon that the first feelings, be they true or false, which

resemble devotion, the first faint ray of knowledge which has imperfectly dawned, excites in certain raw minds an eager impatience to communicate to others what they themselves have not yet attained. Hence the novel swarms of uninstructed instructors, of teachers who have had no time to learn. The act previous to the imparting knowledge should seem to be that of acquiring it. Nothing would so effectually check an irregular zeal for a temperate zeal, as the personal discipline, the self-acquaintance which we have so repeatedly recommended.

True Christian zeal will always be known by its distinguishing and inseparable properties. It will be warm indeed, not from temperament but principle. It will be humble, or it will not be Christian zeal. It will restrain its impetuosity that it may the more effectually promote its object. It will be temperate, softening what is strong in the act by gentleness in the manner. It will be tolerating, willing to grant what it would itself desire. It will be forbearing, in the hope that the offence it seeks to correct may be an occasional lapse rather than a habit of the mind. It will be candid, making a tender allowance for those imperfections which beings, fallible themselves, ought to expect from human infirmity. It will be a friendly admonishment, instead of irritating by the adoption of violence, instead of mortifying by the assumption of superiority.

He, who in private society allows himself in violent anger or unhallowed bitterness or acrimonious railing to reprehend the faults of another, might, did his power keep pace with his inclination, have recourse to other weapons. He would probably banish and burn, confiscate and imprison, and think then, as he thinks now, that he is doing God service.

If there be any quality which demands clear sight, a tight rein and a strict watchfulness, zeal is that quality. The heart where zeal is lacking has no true life, where it is not guarded, no security. The prudence with which zeal is exercised is the surest evidence of its integrity; for if intemperate, it raises enemies not only to ourselves but to God. It augments the natural enmity to religion instead of increasing her friends.

But if tempered by charity, if blended with benevolence, if sweetened by kindness, if shown to be honest by its influence on your own conduct, and gentle by its effect on your manners, zeal may lead your irreligious acquaintance to inquire more closely to what distinguishes them from you. You will already by this mildness have won their affections. Your next step may be to gain over their judgment. They may be led to examine what solid grounds of difference exist between us and them, what substantial reason you have for not going their way, and what sound argument they can offer for not going yours.

But it may possibly be asked, after all, where do we perceive any symptoms of

this inflammatory distemper? Should not the prevalence, or at least the existence of a disease be ascertained before applying the remedy? That an illness exists is sufficiently obvious, though it must be confessed that among the higher classes it has not hitherto spread very widely. Its progress is not likely to be very alarming, nor its effects very malignant. It is to be lamented that in every class indeed, coldness and indifference, carelessness and neglect, are the reigning epidemics. These are diseases far more difficult to cure, diseases as dangerous to the patient as they are distressing to the physician, who generally finds it more difficult to raise a sluggish habit than to lower an occasional heat. The imprudently zealous man, if he be sincere, may by a discreet regimen, be brought to a state of complete sanity; but to rouse from a state of morbid indifference, to brace from a total relaxation of the system, must be the immediate work of the Great Physician of souls; of Him who can effect even this, by His spirit accompanying this powerful word: "Awake, you that sleep, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light."

PRACTICAL PIETY by Hannah More, 1811

Chapter 17

### **INSENSIBILITY TO ETERNAL THINGS**

Insensibility to eternal things in beings who are standing on the brink of eternity is a madness which would be considered a wonder if it were not so common. Suppose we had the prospect of inheriting a great estate and a splendid mansion which we knew would be ours in a few days, and in the meantime we rented a paltry cottage in bad repair, ready to fall, and from which we knew we must at all events soon be turned out. Would it be wisdom or common sense to overlook totally our near and noble inheritance and to be so fondly attached to our falling tenement that we spent a great part of our time and thoughts in supporting its ruins by props, and concealing its decay by decorations? To be so absorbed in the little sordid pleasures of this frail abode so as not even to cultivate a taste for the delights of the mansion where such treasures are laid up for us—this is an excess of folly which must be seen to be believed.

It is a striking fact that the recognized uncertainty of life drives worldly people to make sure of everything except their eternal concerns. It leads them to be up-to-date in their accounts and exact in their transactions. They are afraid of risking even a little property on so precarious a thing as life, without insuring their inheritance. There are some who even speculate on the uncertainty of life as a trade. It is strange that this accurate calculation of the duration of life should not involve a serious attention to its end! Strange, too, that in the prudent care not to risk a fraction of property, equal care should not be taken not to risk eternal salvation!

We are not speaking here of grossly wicked people. We are not supposing that their wealth has been obtained by injustice or increased by oppression. We are only describing a soul drawn aside from God by the alluring baits of the world. The shining bangles are obtained, but the race is lost!

To worldly people of a more serious nature, business may be as formidable an enemy of the soul as pleasure is to those of a lighter character. Business has so sober an air that it looks like virtue, and virtuous it certainly is when carried on in a proper spirit with due moderation in the fear of God. To have a lawful employment and to pursue it with diligence is not only right and honorable in itself, but is one of the best safeguards against temptation.

We can point out the diligence that business demands, the self-denying practices it imposes, the patience, regularity and industry indispensable to its success. These are habits of virtue that are a daily discipline to a moral person in business. The world, as a matter of fact, could not survive without business. But attention paid to these realities often detracts us from interests in the eternal world, when we can neglect to lay up a treasure in heaven in order to lay up the treasure of earth—a supply which we perhaps do not need and do not intend to use. In this case we are a bad judge of the relative value of things.

Business has an honorable aspect in that it is opposed to idleness, the most hopeless offspring of the whole progeny of sin. People in business, comparing themselves with those who squander their living, feel a fair and natural consciousness of their own value and of the superiority of their own pursuits. But it is by making comparisons with others that we deceive ourselves. Business, whether professional, commercial or political, endangers the mind which looks down on the pursuit of pleasure as beneath a thinking being. But if business absorbs the heart's affections, if it swallows up time to the neglect of eternity, if it generates a worldly spirit or encourages covetousness and engages the mind in ambitious pursuits, it may be as dangerous as its more frivolous rival.

The grand evil of both lies in the alienation of the heart from God. Actually, in one respect, the danger is greater to the one who is best employed. Those who pursue pleasure, however thoughtless, can never make themselves believe they are doing right. But those plunged in the work of serious business cannot easily persuade themselves that they are doing wrong.

Compensation and trade are the devices which worldly religion incessantly keeps in play. It is a life of barter—so much indulgence for so many good works. The implied accusation is that "we have a rigorous Master," and that therefore it is only fair to pay ourselves for the severity of His demands, just as an overworked servant steals a holiday. They set bounds to God's right to command, lest it



should encroach on their privilege to do as they please.

We have mentioned elsewhere that if we invite people to embrace the Christian faith on the grounds that they will obtain present pleasure, they will desert it as soon as they find themselves disappointed. People are too ready to clamor for the pleasures of devotion before they have entitled themselves to them. We would be angry at those employees who asked to receive their wages before they would begin to work. This is not meant to establish the merit of works, but rather the necessity of seeking that transforming and purifying change which marks the real Christian. It is a matter of the heart and a genuine change in one's attitude.

But if we consider this world on true scriptural grounds as a place of testing, and see religion as a school for happiness, the consummation of which is only to be enjoyed in heaven, then the Christian hope will support us and the Christian faith will strengthen us. We can serve diligently, wait patiently, love cordially, obey faithfully and be steadfast under all trials. We can be sustained by the cheering promise held out to those "who endure to the end."

There are some who seem to have a graduated scale of vices. They keep clear of the lowest degrees on this scale, but they are not diligent in avoiding the "highest" vices on their scale. They forget that the same motive which operates in the greater operates on the lesser as well. A life of incessant gratification does not alarm the conscience, but it is surely unfavorable to faith, destructive of its motivations, and opposed to its spirit, as are the more obvious vices.

These are the habits that relax the mind and remove resolve from the heart, thereby fostering indifference to our spiritual state and insensibility to the things of eternity. A life of pleasure, if it leads into a life of actual sin, disqualifies us for holiness, happiness and heaven. It not only alienates the heart from God, but it lays it open to every temptation that natural temperament may invite, or incidental circumstances allure. The worst passions lie dormant in hearts that are given up to selfish indulgences, always ready to spring into action as any occasion invites them.

Sensual pleasure and irreligion play into each other's hands: each can cause the other. The slackness of the inward motivation confirms the carelessness of the conduct, while the negligent conduct protects itself under the supposed security of unbelief. The instance of the rich man in the parable of Lazarus strikingly illustrates this truth.

It is as essential that we inquire whether these unfeeling attitudes and selfish habits offend society and discredit us with the world, as it is important that we realize that they feed our corruptions and put us in a position unfavorable to all

interior improvement. Let us ask whether they offend God and endanger the soul, whether the gratification of self is the life which the Redeemer taught or lived. Let us ask whether sensuality is a suitable preparation for that state where God Himself, who is Spirit, will constitute all the happiness of spiritual beings.

But these are not the only dangers. The intellectual vices, the spiritual offenses may destroy the soul without much injury to one's reputation. Unlike sensuality, these do not have their seasons of change and repose. Here the motive is in continual operation. Envy has no interruption. Ambition never cools. Pride never sleeps. The inclination to these at least is always awake. An intemperate person is sometimes sober, but a proud person is never humble. Where vanity reigns, it reigns always. These interior sins are more difficult to eradicate. They are harder to detect, harder to come at, and, as the citadel sometimes holds out after the outer defenses of a castle are breached, these sins of the heart are the last conquered in the moral warfare.

Here lies the distinction between the worldly and the religious person. It is frightening enough for the Christian that we feel any propensity to vice. Against these inclinations we must watch, strive and pray. Although we are thankful for the victory when we have resisted the temptation, we feel no elation of heart while conscious of our inward dispositions. Nothing but divine grace enables us to keep them from breaking out into a flame. We feel the only way to obtain the pardon of sin is to stop sinning, that although repentance itself is not a savior, there still can be no salvation where there is no repentance. Above all, we know that the promise of remission of sin by the death of Christ is the only solid ground of comfort. However correct our present life may be, the weight of past offenses would hang so heavy on our conscience that without the atoning blood of our Redeemer, despair of pardon for the past would leave us hopeless. We would continue to sin in the same way that a bankrupt person may continue to be extravagant because no present frugality could redeem their former debts.

It is sometimes pleaded that the work that busy and important people have leaves them no time for their religious duties. These apologies are never offered for the poor man, although to him every day brings the inevitable return of his many hours of work without intermission or moderation.

But surely the more important and responsible the position a person holds, the more demanding is the call for faith, not only in the way of example, but even in the way of success. If it is indeed granted that there is such a thing as divine interventions, if it is allowed that God has a blessing to bestow, then the ordinary man who has only himself to govern requires aid, but how urgent is the person's necessity who has to govern millions? What an awful idea that the weight of a nation might rest on the head of one whose heart does not look up for higher support!

The politician, the warrior and the orator find it peculiarly hard to renounce in themselves that wisdom and strength to which they believe the rest of the world is looking up. The person of station or of genius, when invited to the self-denying duties of Christianity often draws back, like the one who went away sorrowing because he had great possessions.

To know that they must come to an end stamps vanity on all the glories of this life. To know that they must come to an end soon stamps folly, not only on the one who sacrifices his conscience for their acquisition, but also on the person who, though upright in the discharge of his duties, discharges them without any reference to God. If the conqueror or the orator would reflect when the laurel crown is placed on his brow, how soon it will be followed by the shroud, the delirium of ambition would be cooled and the intoxication of prosperity removed.

There is a general kind of belief in Christianity prevalent in the world which, by soothing the conscience, prevents self-inquiry. That the holy Scriptures contain the will of God they do not question. That they contain the best system of morals, they frequently assert. But they do not feel the necessity of acquiring a correct notion of the teachings those Scriptures contain. The depravity of man, the atonement made by Christ, the work of the Holy Spirit—these they consider as the theoretical part of religion which they can easily neglect. By a kind of self-flattery, they satisfy themselves with the idea that they are acceptable to their Maker, a state they mistakenly believe they can attain without humility, faith and the rebirth of life.

People absorbed in a multitude of secular concerns, decent but unawakened, listen with a kind of respectful insensibility to the overtures of spiritual conviction. They consider the Church as venerable because of her antiquity and important because of her connection to the state. No one is more alive to her political, nor more dead to her spiritual importance. They are anxious for her existence, but indifferent to her doctrines. These they consider as a general matter in which they have no personal concern. They consider religious observances as something attractive but unreal, a serious custom made respectable by long and public usage. They admit that the poor who have little to enjoy and the idle who have little to do, cannot do better than to give over to God that time which cannot be turned to more profitable account. Religion, they think, may properly make use of leisure and occupy old age. Yet when it comes to themselves, they are at a loss to determine the precise period when the leisure is sufficient or the age is enough advanced. Goals recede as the destined season approaches. They continue to intend moving, but they continue to stand still.

Compare their drowsy sabbaths with the animation of the days of business and

you would not think they were the same individual. The one is to be gotten over, the others are enjoyed. They go from the dull decencies, the shadowy forms (as they perceive them) of public worship, to the solid realities of their worldly concerns. These they consider as their bounden, and exclusive duties. The others indeed may not be wrong, but these, they are sure, are right. The world is their element. Here they are substantially engaged. Here their whole mind is alive, their understanding wide awake, all their energies in full play. Here they have an object worthy of their widest expansions, and here their desires and affections are absorbed.

The faint impression of the Sunday sermon fades away to be as faintly revived on the following Sunday, again to fade in the succeeding week. To the sermon they bring a formal ceremonious attendance. To the world they bring all their heart, soul, mind and strength. To the one they resort in conformity to law and custom. To induce them to resort to the other, they need no law, no sanction, no invitation. Their will is enough. Their passions are volunteers. The invisible things of heaven are clouded in shadow. The world is lord of the present. Riches, honors, power fill their mind with brilliant images. They are certain, tangible, and they assume form and bulk. In these, therefore, they cannot be mistaken. The eagerness of competition and the struggle for superiority fill their mind with an emotion, their soul with an agitation and their affections with an interest which, though very unlike happiness, they deceive themselves into thinking that it is the road to it. This artificial pleasure, this tumultuous feeling, does at least produce that one negative satisfaction of which worldly people are in search—it keeps them from themselves.

Even in circumstances where there is no success, the mere occupation, the crowd of objectives, the succession of engagements and the very tumult and hurry have their gratifications. The bustle gives false peace by leaving no leisure for reflection. They put their consciences to sleep by asserting they have good intentions. They comfort themselves with the believable pretense that they lack time and the vague resolution of giving up to God the dregs of life, while feeling the world deserves the better part of it. Thus dealing with their Maker, life wears away, its end drawing ever nearer, and that delayed promise to give God the last part is not fulfilled. The assigned hour of retreat either never arrives, or if it does arrive, sloth and sensuality are resorted to as a fair reward for a life of labor and anxiety. They die in the shackles of the world.

If we do not earnestly desire to be delivered from the dominion of these worldly tendencies, it is because we do not believe in the condemnation attached to their indulgence. We may indeed believe it as we believe any other general proposition or inconsequential fact, but we do not believe it as a danger which has any reference to us. We disclose this practical unbelief in the most unequivocal way by thinking so much more about the most frivolous concern in

which we are sure we have an interest, than about this most important of all concerns.

When we are indifferent to eternal things, we add to our peril. If shutting our eyes to a danger would prevent it, to shut them would not only be a happiness but a duty. But to trade eternal safety for momentary ease is a wretched bargain. The reason why we do not value eternal things is because we do not think of them. The mind is so full of what is present that it has no room to admit a thought of what is to come. We are guilty of not giving the same attention to an eternal soul which prudent souls give to a common business transaction. We complain that life is short, and yet throw away the best part of it, only giving over to religion that portion which is good for nothing else. Life would be long enough if we assigned its best period to the best purpose.

Do not say that the requirements of religion are severe. Ask rather if they are necessary. If a thing must absolutely be done and if eternal misery will be incurred by not doing it, it is fruitless to enquire whether it be hard or easy. Inquire only whether it is indispensable, whether it is commanded. The duty on which our eternal state depends is not a thing to be debated, but done. The duty which is too imperative to be evaded is not to be argued about, but performed. To continue quietly in sin because you do not intend to sin is to live on an expected inheritance which will probably never be yours.

It is folly to say that religion drives people to despair when it only teaches them by a healthy fear to avoid destruction. The fear of God differs from all other fear, for it is accompanied with trust, confidence and love. "Blessed is the one who fears always," is no paradox to one who entertains this holy fear. It sets us above the fear of ordinary troubles. It fills our heart. We are not distraught by those inferior apprehensions which unsettle the soul and unhinge the peace of worldly people. Our mind is occupied with one grand concern and is therefore less liable to be shaken than little minds which are filled with little things. Can that principle lead to despair which proclaims the mercy of God in Jesus Christ to be greater than all the sins in the world?

If despair prevents your returning to God, do not add to your list of offenses that of doubting the forgiveness which He sincerely offers. You have already wronged God in His holiness. Do not wrong Him in His mercy. You may offend Him more by despairing of His pardon than by all the sins which have made that pardon necessary. Repentance, if one may venture the bold remark, almost disarms God of the power to punish. Here are His style and title as proclaimed by Himself: "The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, patience and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty;" that is, those who by unrepented guilt exclude themselves from the offered mercy.

If unfaithfulness or indifference, which is practical unfaithfulness, keeps you back, then as reasonable beings, ask yourselves a few short questions: For what purpose was I sent into the world? Is my soul immortal? Am I really placed here in a state of trial, or is this span my all? Is there an eternal state? If there is, will the use I make of this life decide my condition in that state? I know there is death, but is there a judgment?

Do not rest until you have cleared up, not your own proofs for heaven (it will be some time before you arrive at that stage) but whether there is any heaven. Is not Christianity important enough for you diligently to explore? Is not eternal life too valuable to be entirely overlooked, and eternal destruction, if a reality, worth avoiding? If you make these interrogations sincerely, you will make them practically. They will lead you to examine your own personal interest in these things. Evils which are ruining us for lack of attention lessen from the moment our attention to them begins. True or false, the question is worth settling. Do not waver then between doubt and certainty. If the evidence is inadmissible, reject it. But if you can once ascertain these cardinal points, then throw away your time if you can, and trifle with eternity if you dare!

It is one of the striking characteristics of the Almighty that "He is strong and patient." It is a standing evidence of His patience that "He is provoked every day." How beautifully do these characteristics complement each other. If He were not strong, His patience would lack its distinguishing perfection. If He were not patient, His strength would instantly crush those who provoke Him every day.

Oh you, who have a long space given you for repentance, confess that the forbearance of God, when seen as coupled with His strength, is His most astonishing attribute. Think of those whom you knew who have since passed away—companions of your early life, your associates in actual vice, or your confederates in guilty pleasures. They are the sharers of your thoughtless meetings, your jovial revelry, your worldly schemes, your ambitious projects. Think how many of those companions have been cut off, perhaps without warning, possibly without repentance. They have been presented to their judge. Their doom, whatever it is, is now fixed. Yours is mercifully suspended. Adore the mercy; embrace the suspension.

Only suppose if they could be permitted to come back to this world, if they were allowed another period of trial, how they would spend their restored life! How earnest would be their penitence, how intense their devotion, how profound their humility, how holy their actions! Think then that you still have in your power that for which they would give millions of worlds. "Hell," says one writer, "is truth seen too late." In almost every mind there sometimes float indefinite and general

purposes of repentance. The operation of these purposes is often repelled by a real, though denied, skepticism. Because the sentence is not executed speedily, they suspect it has never been pronounced. They, therefore, think they may safely continue to defer their intended, but unshaped, purpose. Though they sometimes visit the sickbeds of others and see how much disease disqualifies one from performing all duties, yet it is to this period of incapacity that they continue to defer this vital need to repent.

What an image of the divine condescension does it convey that "the goodness of God leads to repentance"! It does not barely invite, but it conducts. Every warning is more or less an invitation. Every visitation is a lighter stroke to avert a heavier blow. This was the way in which the heathen world understood signs and wonders, and on this interpretation of them they acted. Any alarming warning, whether rational or superstitious, drove them to their temples, their sacrifices. Does our clearer light always carry us farther? Does it, in these instances, always carry us as far as natural conscience carried them?

The final period of the worldly person at length arrives, but they will not believe their danger. Even if they fearfully glance around to every surrounding face, looking for an intimation of it, every face, it is too probable, is in league to deceive them. What a noble opportunity is now offered to the Christian physician to show a kindness far superior to any they have ever shown, just as the concerns of the soul are superior to those of the body! Let them not fear prudently to reveal a truth for which the patient may bless them in eternity! Is it sometimes to be feared that in the hope of prolonging for a little while the existence of the perishing body, they rob the never-dying soul of its last chance of pardon? Does not the concern for the immortal part united with their care of the afflicted body bring the Christian physician to a nearer imitation of that divine Physician who never healed the one without manifesting a tender concern for the other?

But the deceit is short and fruitless. The amazed spirit is about to dislodge. Who shall speak of its terror and dismay? Then the person cries out in the bitterness of their soul, "What ability have I, now that I am dying, to acquire a good heart, to unlearn false beliefs, to renounce bad practices and establish right habits, to begin to love God and hate sin?" How is the stupendous concern of salvation to be worked out by a mind incompetent to do it in the most favorable conditions?

The infinite importance of what a person has to do, the goading conviction that it must be done, and the impossibility of beginning a repentance which should have been completed—all these complicated concerns together add to the sufferings of a body which stands in little need of these additional burdens.

It would be well if we were now and then to call to our minds, while in sound

health, the solemn certainties of a dying bed. It would be well if we accustomed ourselves to see things now as we shall wish we had seen them. Surely the most sluggish insensibility can be roused by seeing for itself the rapid approach of death, the nearness of our unalterable doom and our instant transition to that state of unutterable blessing or unimaginable woe to which death will in a moment consign us. Such a mental image would assist us in dissipating all other illusions. It would help us realize what is invisible, and to bring near what we think of as remote. It would disenchant us from the world, tear off its painted mask, shrink its pleasures into their proper dimensions, its concerns into their real value, and its promises into nothingness.

Terrible as the evil is, if it must be met, do not hesitate to present it to your imagination. Do this, not to lacerate your feelings, but to arm your resolution, not to arouse more distress, but to strengthen your faith. If it terrifies you at first, draw a little nearer more gradually, and familiarity will lessen the terror. If you cannot face the image, how will you encounter the reality?

Let us then picture for ourselves the moment when all we cling to shall elude our grasp, when every earthly good shall be to us as if it had never been, when our eyes open on the eternal spiritual world. Then there shall be no relief for the fainting body, no refuge for the parting soul except that single refuge to which perhaps we have never thought of resorting—the everlasting mercies of God in Christ Jesus.

Reader! whoever you are who have neglected to remember that to die is the end for which you were born, know that you have a personal interest in this scene. Do not turn away from it in disdain, however feebly it may have been represented. You may escape any other evil of life, but its end you cannot escape. Do not defer then life's weightiest concern to its weakest period. Do not begin the preparation when you should be completing the work. Do not delay the business which demands your best faculties to the period of their greatest weakness and near extinction. Do not leave the work which requires an age to do, to be done in a moment, a moment which may not be granted. The alternative is tremendous. The difference is that of being saved or lost. It is no light thing to eternally perish.

PRACTICAL PIETY by Hannah More, 1811

Chapter 18

## **ON THE SUFFERINGS OF GOOD MEN**

Affliction is the school in which great virtues are acquired and in which great characters are formed. It is like a spiritual gymnasium in which the disciples of



Christ are trained in robust exercise, hardy exertion and severe conflict.

We do not hear of military heroes in peacetime, nor of the most distinguished saints in the quiet and unmolested periods of church history. The courage in the warrior and the devotion in the saint continue to survive, ready to be brought into action when perils beset the country or trials assail the Church, but it must be admitted that in long periods of inaction both are susceptible to decay.

The Christian in our comparatively tranquil day is happily exempt from the trials and terrors which the annals of persecution record. Thanks to the establishment of the church, and thanks to the of our laws and to the mild and tolerating spirit of both, one is far from being liable to pains and penalties for his attachment to his religion.

The Christian is still not exempt from his individual trials. We can include those cruel mockings which Paul appropriately ranked in the same list with bonds, imprisonments, exiles and martyrdom itself. We can also add those misrepresentations and attacks to which the zealous Christian is particularly liable. The true Christian is not only called to struggle with trials of large dimensions, but with the daily demands and difficulties of this earthly life.

The pampered Christian, thus continually gravitating to the earth, would have his heart solely bent toward the trials of daily life, unmindful of the crown God gives to His true servants when this mortal life is over.

It is an unspeakable blessing that no events are left to the choice of beings who in their blindness would constantly choose wrongly. Were circumstances at our own disposal, we would choose for ourselves nothing but ease and success, nothing but riches and fame, nothing but perpetual youth, health and unmitigated happiness. We are placed on earth temporarily, and our situation in eternity depends on the use we make of this present time. Therefore nothing would be more dangerous than such a power to choose for ourselves.

If a surgeon were to put into the hand of a wounded patient the probe or the scalpel, how tenderly would he treat himself! How skin-deep would be the examination, how slight the incision! The patient would escape the pain, but the wound might prove fatal. The surgeon therefore wisely uses his instruments himself. He goes deep perhaps, but not deeper than the case demands. The pain may be acute, but the life is preserved. Thus He in whose hand we are, is too good and loves us too well to trust us with our own surgery. He knows that we will not contradict our own inclinations, that we will not impose on ourselves any voluntary pain, however necessary the infliction, however healthful the effect. God graciously does this for us Himself because otherwise He knows it would never be done.

A Christian is liable to the same sorrows and sufferings as others. Nowhere do we have a promise of immunity from the troubles of life, but we do have a merciful promise of support when we go through them. Therefore we consider them from another view. We bear them with another spirit, utilize them to other purposes than those whose view is limited to this world. Whatever may be the instruments of our suffering, whether sickness, losses, vilification, persecutions, we know that they all proceed from God. All methods are HIS instruments. All secondary causes operate by HIS directing hand.

We said that a Christian is liable to the same sufferings as other men. Might we not repeat what we have said before, that our very Christian profession is often the cause of our sufferings? They are the badge of our discipleship, the evidences of our Father's love. They are at once the marks of God's favor and the preparations for our own future happiness.

What were the arguments held out through the whole New Testament to encourage the world to embrace the faith it taught? What was the condition of Paul's introduction to Christianity? It was not, "I will crown him with honor and prosperity, with dignity and pleasure," but "I will show him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake."

What were the chief virtues which Christ taught? What were the graces He most recommended by His example? Were they not self-denial, mortification, patience, renouncing ease and pleasure? These are the marks which have always distinguished Christianity from all the other religions of the world, and therefore prove its divine origin. Ease, splendor, external prosperity, conquest had no part in its establishment. Other empires have been founded in the blood of the vanquished. The dominion of Christ was founded in His own blood. Most of the beatitudes which He pronounced in His infinite compassion have the sorrows of the earth for their subject but the joys of heaven for their completion.

To establish this religion in the world the Almighty, as His own Word assures us, subverted kingdoms and altered the face of nations. "For thus says the Lord of Hosts," says Haggai, "yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens and the earth, and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all nations and the Desire of all nations shall come." Could a religion, the kingdom of which was to be founded by such awful means, be established and perpetuated without involving the sufferings of its subjects?

If the Christian life had been meant to be a path of roses, would the life of the Author of Christianity have been a path strewn with thorns? "He made for us," says Jeremy Taylor, "a covenant of sufferings; His very promises were sufferings, His rewards were sufferings, and His arguments to invite men to follow Him were

only taken from sufferings in this life and the reward for these sufferings hereafter."

No prince but the Prince of Peace ever set out with a proclamation of the future nature of his empire. No other king desiring to allay avarice and check ambition ever invited his subjects by the unattractive declaration that his "kingdom was not of this world." No other sovereign ever declared that it was not dignity or honors, valor or talents that made them worthy of him, but it is their "taking up the cross" that brings them close to Him. If no other lord ever made the sorrows which would attend his followers a motive for their allegiance, we must remember that no other ever had the goodness to promise or the power to make good His promise that He would give rest to "the heavy laden." Other kings have overcome the world for their own ambition, but none other ever made the suffering involved in achieving that conquest a ground for motivating his followers to faithfulness.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul enumerates the honors and distinctions prepared for his most favored converts, that they should not only believe in Christ, but that they should also suffer for him. Any other religion would use such a promise to deter, not to attract potential converts. That a religion should flourish under such discouraging invitations, with the threat of degrading circumstances and absolute losses, is unanswerable evidence that our faith was not of human origin.

It is among the mercies of God that he strengthens servants by hardening them through adverse circumstances, instead of leaving them to languish under the shining but withering sun of unclouded prosperity. When they cannot be attracted to Him by gentler influences, He sends these storms and tempests which purify while they alarm. Our gracious Father knows how long the happiness of eternity will be for His children.

The character of Christianity may be seen by how often the Scriptures use the image of military conflict to illustrate it. Suffering is the initiation into a Christian's calling. It is our education for heaven. Shall the scholar rebel at the discipline which is to fit him for his profession, or the soldier at the exercise which is to qualify him for victory?

But our trials do not all spring from outside ourselves. We would think them comparatively easy if we had only the opposition of men to struggle against, or even the severer measures of God to sustain. If we have a conflict with the world, we have a harder conflict within ourselves. Our bosom foe is our most unyielding enemy. This is what makes our other trials heavy, which makes our power for enduring them weak, which renders our conquest over them slow and inconclusive.

This world is the stage on which worldly men act. The things of the world and the applause of the world are the rewards which they propose for themselves. These they often attain, and are thereby satisfied. They aim at no higher end. But let us not long for the success of those whose motives we reject, whose practices we dare not adopt, whose end we deplore. If we feel any inclination to murmur when we see the worldly in great prosperity, let us ask ourselves if we would tread their path to attain their end, if we would do their work to obtain their wages. We know that we would not. Let us then cheerfully leave them to scramble for the prizes and jostle for the places which the world temptingly holds out, but which we will not purchase at the world's price.

Good causes are not always conducted by good men. A good cause may be connected with something that is not good. The right cause is promoted and effected by some lesser, or even unworthy one. Whereas worldly people may be suspicious of a cause espoused by Christians, the support of influential people outside the Church can well erase their suspicions. The character of the lofty cause may perhaps have to be lowered to suit the general taste, even to obtain the acceptance of the people for whose benefit it is intended.

We still fall into the error of which the prophet so long ago complained: "We call the proud happy" (Mal. 3:15) and the wicked fortunate. We may find ourselves envious of the powerful and influential. We feel this way, even when we remember that after the person has finished the work, the divine Employer throws that person aside, cut off and left to perish.

But you ENVY the powerful in the meantime, even though they have sacrificed every principle of justice, truth and mercy. Is this a man to be envied? Is this a prosperity to be coveted? Would you incur the penalties of that happiness?

But is it happiness to commit sin, to be abhorred by the upright in character, to offend God, and to ruin one's own soul? Do you really consider a temporary success compensation enough for deeds which will insure eternal misery to the doer? Is the successful bad person happy? Of what materials then is happiness made? Is it composed of a disturbed mind and an unquiet conscience? Are doubt and difficulty, are terror and apprehension, are distrust and suspicion, the gratification for which Christians would renounce their peace, displease their Maker, and would risk their soul? Think of the hidden vulture that feeds on the hearts of successful wickedness, and your longings and envy will cease. Your indignation will be changed into compassion, your denunciations into prayer.

But if such a person feels neither the scourge of conscience nor the sting of remorse, pity that individual the more. Pity them for the very want of that addition to their unhappiness, for if they added to their miseries the anticipation

of their punishment, they might be led by repentance to avoid it. Can you reckon the blinding of their eyes and the hardening of their heart any part of their happiness? This opinion, however, is being expressed whenever we grudge the prosperity of the wicked. God, by delaying the punishment of bad people may have designs of mercy of which we know nothing—mercy perhaps to them, or if not to them, yet mercy to those who are suffering because of their actions, whom He intends through these bad instruments, to punish, and by punishing, eventually to save.

There is a sentiment even more bizarre than envy which prosperous wickedness excites in certain minds, and that is RESPECT; but this feeling is never raised unless both the wickedness and the prosperity be on a grand scale. This sentiment exposes the belief that God does not govern human affairs, or that our motives do not concern Him, or that prosperity is a certain proof of His favor.

But though God may be patient with triumphant wickedness, He does not wink at or connive with it. The difference between being permitted and being supported, between being employed and approved, is greater than we are ready to acknowledge. Perhaps "the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full." God has always the means of punishment as well as of pardon in His own hands. However, for God to punish at the exact moment when we demand it, might abort His greater plan and diminish the larger consequences. "They have drunk their hemlock," says a fine writer, "but the poison does not yet work." Let us not be impatient to administer a sentence which infinite justice sees right to defer. Let us think more of restraining our own vindictive tempers than of precipitating their destruction. They may yet repent of the crimes they are perpetrating. By some scheme, intricate and unintelligible to us, God may still pardon the sin which we think exceeds the limits even of His mercy.

We contrive to make revenge itself look like religion. We call down thunder on many a head under the pretense that those on whom we invoke it are God's enemies, when perhaps we invoke it because they are ours. Though they should go on fully prosperous to the end, will it not cure our impatience to know that their end must come? Will it not satisfy us that they must die, that they must come to judgment? Which is to be envied, the Christian who dies ending their brief sorrows, or the one who closes a prosperous life and enters on a miserable eternity? The first has nothing to fear if the promises of the Gospel be true, the other has nothing to hope for, if they are factual. The Word of God must be a lie, heaven a fable, hell an invention, before the impenitent sinner can be safe. Is that person to be envied whose security depends on their falsehood? Is the other to be pitied whose hope is founded on their reality?

In estimating the comparative happiness of good and bad people, we should ever bear in mind that of all the calamities which can be inflicted or suffered, sin

is the greatest; and of all punishments, insensibility to sin is the heaviest which the wrath of God inflicts in this world. God lets the wicked continue their smooth and prosperous course to the awful destiny in store for them, which will only be revealed when there is no longer any room for mercy.

We can see this same truth without looking to the hereafter and consulting only the present suffering. If we put the inward consolation derived from communion with God, the humble confidence of prayer, the devout trust in divine protection on the scale opposite to all the unjust power ever bestowed or guilty wealth ever possessed, we shall have no hesitation in deciding on which side even present happiness lies.

With a mind thus fixed, with a faith thus firm, one great object so absorbs the Christian that our peace is not tossed about by the things which confuse ordinary people. The Christian afflicted in the world may say, "My fortune is shattered; but since I made not gold my confidence while I possessed it, in losing it I have not lost myself. I leaned not on power, for I knew its instability. Had prosperity been my dependence, I would have fallen when it was removed."

Many lament the Christian who suffers while innocent. Surely believers should not try to avoid suffering by sinful conformity to worldly standards! Think how ease would be destroyed by the price paid for it! How short a time he would enjoy it, even if it were not bought at the expense of his soul!

Because of the BENEFITS that suffering brings to the Christian's character, we can say that suffering itself is the reward of virtue. It becomes not only the instrument of promoting virtue, but the instrument of rewarding it. Besides, God promises a future reward to his children who suffer. To suppose that He cannot ultimately compensate His virtuous afflicted children is to believe Him less powerful than an earthly father—to suppose that He will not, is to believe Him less merciful.

Great trials are more often proofs of God's favor than of displeasure. An inferior officer will suffice for inferior expeditions, but the Sovereign selects the ablest general for the most difficult service. And not only does the King evidence his favor by the selection, but the soldier proves his attachment by rejoicing in the preference. One victory gained is no reason for his being set aside. One conquest only qualifies him for new attacks, suggests a reason for his being again employed.

The sufferings of good men by no means contradict the promise "that the meek shall inherit the earth." They "possess" it in such a way that they are willing to give it up when called to do so.

The belief that trials will facilitate salvation is another source of consolation. Sufferings also diminish the dread of death by cheapening the price of life. The affections even of the devout Christian are too much drawn downwards. Our heart too fondly cleaves to the dust, though we know that only trouble can spring from it. How would it be if we invariably possessed present enjoyments, and if a long panorama of delights lay always open before us? We have a far greater comfort in our own honest consciousness. Our Christian feelings under trials are a cheering evidence that our devotion is sincere. The gold has been melted down, and its purity is ascertained.

Among our other advantages, the afflicted Christian can apply to the mercy of God, but not as a new and uncertain resource. We do not come as an alien before a strange master, but as a child into the well-known presence of a tender father. We did not use prayer as a final resort to be used only in the great water floods. We had long and diligently sought God in the calm; we had clung to him, before we were driven to Him. We had sought God's favor while we still enjoyed the favor of the world. We did not defer our meditations on heavenly things to the disconsolate hour when earth had nothing for us. We can cheerfully associate our faith with those former days of felicity, when, with everything before us out of which to choose, we chose God. We not only feel the support derived from our present prayers, but the benefit of all those which we offered up in the day of joy and gladness. We will especially derive comfort from the supplications we had made for the anticipated though unknown trial of the present hour, and which in such a world of change it was reasonable to expect.

Let us confess then, that in all the trying circumstances of this changeful scene there is something infinitely soothing to the feelings of a Christian and inexpressibly tranquillizing to our mind— to know that we have nothing to do with events but to submit to them. We have nothing to do with the revolutions of life but to acquiesce in them as the offerings of eternal wisdom. We do not need to take the management out of the hands of Providence, but submissively to follow the divine leading. We do not have to scheme for tomorrow, but to live in the present with cheerful resignation. Let us be thankful that as we can not by foreseeing prevent them, we can be thankful for ignorance where knowledge would only prolong and not prevent our suffering. We have grace which has promised that our strength shall be proportioned to our day.

By the goodness of God these trials may be used for the noblest purposes. The quiet acquiescence of the heart and the submission of the will under actual trials, great or small, are more acceptable to God and more indicative of true faith, than the strongest general resolutions of firm action and deep submission under the most trying of imagined events. In the latter case it is the imagination which submits: in the former case it is the will.

We are too ready to imagine that there is no other way to serve God but by active exertions; exertions which only indulge our natural appetite, and gratify our own inclinations. It is an error to imagine that God who puts us into different situations, puts it out of our power to glorify him. Every circumstance may be turned to some good, either for ourselves or for others. Joseph in his prison under the strongest restrictions, loss of liberty, and a shattered reputation, made way for both his own high advancement and for the deliverance of Israel. Daniel in his dungeon, not only the destined prey, but in the very jaws of furious beasts, converted the king of Babylon and brought him to the knowledge of the true God. Could prosperity have achieved the former? Would not prosperity have prevented the latter?

We may often wonder why many of God's servants who are eminently fitted to instruct and reform the people of the land are disqualified by disease and thereby set aside from their public duty of which the necessity is so obvious and the fruits so remarkable. It may also cause us concern that many others possess uninterrupted health and strength, who are little gifted and at that, not even motivated to assist the welfare of the world in which they live.

But God's ways are not as our ways. He is not accountable to His creatures. The questioner needs to know why it is right. The suffering Christian believes and feels it to be right, humbly acknowledging the necessity of the affliction which friends are lamenting. This believer feels the mercy of what others are seeing as injustice. With deep humility this one is persuaded that if the affliction is not yet withdrawn, it is because it has not yet accomplished the purpose for which it was sent. The deprivation is probably intended both for the individual interests of the sufferer and for the reproof of those who have neglected to profit by this believer's labors. Perhaps God especially draws still nearer to Himself the one who had drawn so many others.

We are too ready to consider suffering as an indication of God's displeasure, not so much against sin in general as against the individual sufferer. Were this the case then those saints and martyrs who have pined in exile and groaned in dungeons and expired on scaffolds would have been the objects of God's peculiar wrath instead of His favor. But the truth is that our unbelief enters into almost all our reasoning on these topics. We do not constantly take into account a future state. We want God, if I may hazard the expression, to justify Himself as He goes. We cannot give Him even such long credit as the length of a human life. He must every moment be vindicating His character against every skeptical critic. He must unravel His plans to every shallow judge, revealing the knowledge of His design before its operations are completed. If we may adopt a phrase from a more common use, we will trust Him no farther than we can see Him. Though He has said, "Judge nothing before the time," we judge instantly, and therefore rashly, and in a word falsely. We would have more patience with God if



we kept the brevity of earthly prosperity and suffering, the certainty of God's justice, and the eternity of future blessedness perpetually in view.

Even in judging fiction we are more just. During the reading of a tragedy, though we feel for the distresses of those involved, yet we do not form an ultimate judgment of the propriety or injustice of their sufferings until the end. We give the poet credit either that they will extricate them from their distresses, or eventually explain the justice of them. We do not condemn them at the end of every scene for the trials which the sufferers do not appear to have deserved, nor for the sufferings which do not always seem to have arisen from their own misconduct. We behold the trials of the virtuous with sympathy and the successes of the wicked with indignation, but we do not pass our final sentence until the poet has passed his. We reserve our decisive judgment until the last scene closes and until the curtain drops. Shall we not treat the schemes of infinite Wisdom with as much respect as the plot of a drama?

If we might borrow an illustration from the legal profession, in a court of justice the bystanders do not give their sentence in the midst of a trial. We wait patiently until all the evidence is collected, carefully detailed and finally summed up. We then commonly applaud the justice of the jury and the equity of the judge, even though human decisions are imperfect and fallible. The felon they condemn, we rarely acquit; where they release the accused, we rarely denounce it. It is only infinite Wisdom on whose purposes we cannot rely; it is only infinite Mercy whose operations we cannot trust. It is only "the judge of all the earth" who cannot do right. We reverse the order of God by summoning Him to our bar, at whose awful bar we shall soon be judged.

But to return to our more immediate point: the apparently unfair distribution of prosperity between good and bad people. While the good constantly derive their happiness from a sense of God's omniscience, the other finds it frightful. The eye of God is a pillar of light to the one, and a cloud of darkness to the other. The awful thought, "You, God, see all!" is as much a terror to people who dread His justice as it is a joy to those who derive all their support from it.

The one who may feel sad, is safe, while the other, though confident, is insecure. He is as far from peace as he is from God. Every day brings Christians nearer to their crown; sinners are every day working their way nearer to their ruin. The hour of death, which the one dreads as something worse than extinction, is to the other the hour of nativity, the birthday of immortality. At the height of his sufferings the good person knows that he will soon die. At the zenith of his success the sinner has a similar assurance, but how different is the result of the same conviction! An invincible faith sustains the one in the severest straits, while an unavoidable dread gives the lie to the proudest triumphs of the other.

The only happy person, after all, is not the one whom worldly prosperity renders apparently happy, but the one who no change of worldly circumstances can make essentially miserable. The latter's peace does not depend on external events, but on an internal support; not on that success which is common to all, but on that hope which is his peculiar privilege. It rests on that promise which is the sole prerogative of the Christian.

PRACTICAL PIETY by Hannah More, 1811

Chapter 19

## **THE TEMPER AND CONDUCT OF THE CHRISTIAN IN SICKNESS AND IN DEATH**

The pagan philosophers have given many admirable precepts for enduring misfortunes; but lacking the motives and supports of the Christian faith, though they excite much intellectual admiration, they produce little practical results. The stars which glittered in their moral night, though bright, imparted no warmth. Their dissertations on death had no charm to extract death's sting. We receive no support from their elaborate treatises on immortality because they did not know Him who "brought life and immortality to light." Their consolations could not strip the grave of its terrors, for to them it was not "swallowed up in victory." To conceive of the soul as an immortal principle, without the pardon of its sins, was but cold comfort. Their future state was but a happy guess; their heaven but a conjecture. When we read their compositions, we admire the manner in which the medicine is administered, but we do not find it effectual for the cure. The beauty of the sentiment we applaud, but our heart continues to ache. There is no healing balm in their elegant prescription.

These four little words, "Your will be done," contain a remedy of more powerful efficacy than all the discipline of the Stoic school. What sufferer ever derived any ease from the observation, that "pain is very troublesome, but I am resolved never to acknowledge it to be an evil"? He does not directly say that pain is not an evil, but by a sophistical turn professes that philosophy will never confess it to be an evil. But what consolation does the sufferer draw from the quibbling nicety? "What difference is there," as Tillotson well inquires, "between things being troublesome and being evil, when all the evil of an affliction lies in the trouble it creates to us?"

Christianity knows none of these fanciful distinctions. She never pretends to insist that pain is not an evil, but she does more; she converts it into a good. Christianity therefore teaches a fortitude more noble than philosophy; just as meeting pain with resignation to the hand that inflicts it, is more heroic than

denying it to be an evil.

To submit on the mere human ground that there is no alternative, is not resignation but hopelessness. To bear affliction solely because impatience will not remove it may be a just reason for bearing it, but it is an inferior one. It savors rather of despair than submission when not sanctioned by a higher principle. "It is the Lord, let Him do what seems to Him good," is at once a motive of more powerful obligation than all the documents which philosophy ever suggested; a firmer ground of support than all the energies that natural strength ever supplied.

Under any painful visitation, sickness for instance, God permits us to think the affliction "not joyous but grievous." But though He allows us to feel dejected, we must not allow ourselves to be so. There is again a sort of heroism in bearing up against affliction, which some adopt on the ground that it raises their character and confers dignity on their suffering. This philosophic firmness is far from being the attitude which Christianity inspires.

When we are compelled by the Hand of God to endure sufferings, we must not endure them on the poor principle that they are inevitable. We must not, with a sullen courage, collect ourselves into a center of our own; into a cold apathy to everything else and a proud praise of all within. We must not concentrate our scattered faults into a sort of dignified selfishness nor adopt an independent correctness. A gloomy Stoicism is not Christian heroism. A melancholy passivity is not Christian resignation.

Nor must we compensate ourselves for our outward self-control by secret murmurings. It is inward discontent that we must endeavor to repress. It is the discontent of the heart, the unexpressed but not unfelt murmur, against which we must pray for grace and struggle for resistance. We must not suppress our discontents before others, and feed on them in private. It is the hidden rebellion of the will we must subdue, if we would submit as Christians. Nor must we justify our impatience by saying that if our affliction did not disqualify us from being useful to our families and active in the service of God, we could bear it more cheerfully. Let us rather be assured that our suffering does not disqualify us for that duty which we most need, and to which God calls us by that very suffering.

A constant posture of defense against the attacks of our great spiritual enemy is a better security than an occasional blow or victory. It is also a better preparation for all the occurrences of life. It is not some notable act of mortification, but a habitual state of discipline which will prepare us for great trials. A soul ever on the watch, fervent in prayer, diligent in self-inspection, frequent in meditation, fortified against the vanities of time by repeated views of eternity will be better able to resist temptation. "Strong in the Lord and in the

power of His might," the heart will be enabled to resist temptation and expel the tempter. To a mind so prepared, the thoughts of sickness will not be new, for it knows it is the "condition of the battle." The prospect of death will not be surprising, for he knows it is its termination.

When we face serious illness and the prospect of death, we must summon all the fortitude and all the resignation of the Christian. The principles we have been learning must now be made practical. The speculations we have admired must now become reality. All that we have been studying was in order to furnish materials for this great need. All the strength we have been collecting must now be brought into action. We must now draw to a point all the scattered arguments, all the different motives, and all the cheering promises of faith. We must exemplify all the rules we have given to others. We must embody all the resolutions we have formed for ourselves. We must reduce our precepts to experience. We must pass from discourses on submission to its exercise; from dissertations on suffering to enduring it. We must heroically call up the determinations of our better days. We must recollect what we have said about the support of faith and hope when our strength was in full vigor, when our heart was at ease, and our mind undisturbed. Let us collect all that remains to us of mental strength. Let us implore the aid of holy hope and fervent faith, to show that Christian commitment is not a beautiful theory but a soul-sustaining truth.

The strongest faith is needed in the hardest trials. To the confirmed Christian the highest degree of grace is commonly imparted during those trials. Do not injure that faith on which you rested when your mind was strong by suspecting its validity now that it is weak. That which had your full assent in perfect health, which was then firmly rooted in your spirit and grounded in your understanding, must not be damaged by the doubts of a weakened reason and the misgivings of an impaired judgment. You may not now be able to reason clearly, but you may derive strong consolation from conclusions which were once fully established in your mind.

The reflecting Christian will consider the natural evil of sickness as the consequence and punishment of moral evil. We will mourn, not only that we suffer pain, but because that pain is the effect of sin. If our race had not sinned we would not have suffered. The heaviest aggravation of our pain is to know that we have deserved it. But it is a counterbalance to this trial to know that our merciful Father has no pleasure in the sufferings of His children; that He chastens them in love; that He never inflicts a stroke which He could safely spare; that He inflicts it to purify as well as to punish, to caution as well as to cure.

What a support in the dreary season of sickness it is to reflect that the Captain of our salvation was made perfect through sufferings! What a comfort to remember

that if we suffer with Him we shall also reign with Him! This implies also the reverse, that if we do not suffer with Him—that is, if we suffer merely because we cannot help it, without reference to Him, without suffering for His sake and in His Spirit, we shall not reign with Him. If it is not sanctified, suffering it will avail but little. We shall not be paid for having suffered, as too many people believe, but our fitness for the kingdom of glory will be increased if we suffer according to His will and after His example.

Those who are brought to serious reflection by the salutary affliction of a sick bed, will look back with astonishment on their former false estimate of worldly things. Riches! Beauty! Pleasure! Genius! Fame! What are they in the eyes of the sick and dying?

Riches! These are so far from affording them a moment's ease, that it will be well if no remembrance of their misuse aggravate their present pains. They feel as if they only wished to live that they might henceforth dedicate their riches to the purposes for which they were given.

Beauty! What is beauty? they cry, as they consider their own sunken eyes, hollow cheeks, and pallid countenance. They acknowledge with the Psalmist that, "You make his beauty to consume away like a moth: surely every man is vanity." Psalm 39:11

Genius! What is it? Without faith, genius is only a lamp on the gate of a palace. It may serve to cast a gleam of light on those outside, but the inhabitant sits in darkness.

Pleasure! That has not left a trace behind it. It died in the birth, and is not therefore worthy to come into this bill of mortality.

Fame! Of this their very soul acknowledges the emptiness. They are astonished that they could ever have been so infatuated as to run after a sound, to pursue a shadow, to embrace a cloud. Augustus asked his friends as they surrounded his dying bed, if he had acted his part well. When they answered in the affirmative, he cried, "Applaud!" But the acclamations of the whole universe would mock rather than soothe the dying Christian if unsupported by the hope of God's approval. They now rate at its true value the fame which was so often eclipsed by envy, and which will be so soon forgotten in death. They have no ambition left but for heaven, where there will be neither envy, death, nor forgetfulness.

When capable of reflection, the sick Christian will go over the sins and errors of his past life, humbling himself for them as sincerely as if he had never repented of them before, imploring forgiveness as fervently as if he did not believe they were long since forgiven. The remembrance of our former offenses will grieve

us, but the humble hope that they are pardoned will fill us "with joy unspeakable and full of glory."

Even in this state of helplessness we may improve our self-acquaintance. We may detect new deficiencies in our character, fresh imperfections in our virtues. Omissions will now strike us with the force of actual sins. Resignation, which we fancied was so easy when only the sufferings of others required it, we now find to be difficult when called on to practice it ourselves. We may have sometimes wondered at their impatience; we are now humbled at our own. We will not only try to bear patiently the pains we actually suffer, but will recollect gratefully those from which we have been delivered, and which we may have formerly found less bearable than our present sufferings.

In the extremity of pain we feel there is no consolation but in humble acquiescence in God's will. It may be that we can pray but little, but that little will be fervent. We can articulate perhaps not at all, but our prayer is addressed to One who sees the heart, who can interpret its language, who requires not words, but love. A pang endured without a murmur, or only such an involuntary groan as nature compels and faith regrets, is itself a prayer.

If surrounded with all the accommodations of affluence, let us compare our own situation with that of thousands, who probably with greater merit and under more severe trials have not one of our means of relief. When invited to take a distasteful remedy, let us reflect how many perishing fellow creatures may be pining for that remedy, suffering additional distress from their inability to procure it.

In the lulls between bouts of severe pain we can turn our few advantages to the best account. We can make the most of every short respite, patiently bearing with little disappointments, little delays, with the awkwardness or accidental neglect of our attendants. Thankful for general kindness, we can accept good will instead of perfection. The suffering Christian will be grateful for small reliefs, little alleviations, short snatches of rest. Abated pain will be positive pleasure. The freer use of limbs which had nearly lost their activity, will be enjoyments.

The sufferer has perhaps often regretted that one of the worst effects of sickness is the selfishness it too naturally induces. We can resist the temptation to this by not being exacting and unreasonable in our requirements. Through our tenderness to the feelings of others, we can be careful not to add to their distress by any appearance of discontent.

What a lesson against selfishness have we in the conduct of our dying Redeemer! It was while bearing His cross to the place of execution that He said to the sorrowing multitude, "Weep not for me, but for yourselves and for your

children." While enduring the agonies of crucifixion He endeavored to mitigate the sorrows of His mother and of His friend by tenderly committing them to each other's care. While sustaining the pangs of death, He gave the immediate promise of heaven to the expiring criminal.

Christians should review, if able, not only the sins, but the mercies of our past life. If we were previously accustomed to unbroken health, we can bless God for the long period in which we have enjoyed it. If continued infirmity has been our portion, we will feel grateful that we have had such a long and gradual weaning from the world. From either state we can derive consolation. If the pain is new, what a mercy to have hitherto escaped it! If habitual, we bear more easily what we have borne long.

We can also review our temporal blessings and deliverances, our domestic comforts, our Christian friendships. Among other mercies, our now "purged eyes" will add up our difficulties, our sorrows and trials and find a new and heavenly light thrown on that passage "It is good for me that I have been afflicted." It seems to us as if hitherto, we had only heard it with the hearing of our ears, but now our eyes see it.

If we are real Christians, and have had enemies, we will always have prayed for them, but now we will be thankful for them. We will the more earnestly implore mercy for them as instruments which have helped to fit us for our present state. He will look up with holy gratitude to the great Physician, who by a kind of "divine chemistry" in making up events, has made that one unpalatable ingredient, at the bitterness of which we once revolted, the very means by which all other things have worked together for good; had they worked separately they would not have worked efficaciously.

Under the most severe visitation, let us compare our own sufferings with the cup which our Redeemer drank for our sakes. Let us compare our condition with that of the Son of God. He was deserted in His most trying hour; deserted probably by those whose limbs, sight and life He had restored, whose souls He had come to save. We are surrounded by unwearied friends; every pain is mitigated by sympathy, every need not only relieved but prevented. When our souls are "exceeding sorrowful," our friends participate in our sorrow; when desired "to watch" with us, they watch not "one hour" but many, not falling asleep, not forsaking us in our "agony" but sympathizing where they cannot relieve.

Besides this, we must acknowledge with the penitent malefactor, "We indeed suffer justly but this man has done nothing amiss." We suffer for our offenses the inevitable penalty of our fallen nature. He bore our sins and those of the whole human race. How cheering in this forlorn state to reflect that He not only suffered for us then, but is sympathizing with us now; that "in all our afflictions

He is afflicted." (Isa. 63:9) The tenderness of His sympathy seems to add a value to our sacrifice, while the severity of our suffering makes His sympathy more dear to us.

If our intellectual powers be mercifully preserved, how many virtues may now be brought into exercise which had either lain dormant or been considered as of inferior worth in the prosperous day of activity. The Christian disposition indeed seems to be more evident and to be exercised more vigorously on a sick bed. The passive virtues, the least brilliant but the most difficult, are then particularly called into action. To suffer the whole will of God on the tedious bed of suffering is often more trying than to perform the most shining exploit on the stage of the world. The hero in the field of battle has the love of fame as well as patriotism to support him. He knows that the witnesses of his valor will be the heralds of his renown. The martyr at the stake is divinely strengthened. Extraordinary grace is imparted for extraordinary trials. The martyr's pangs are exquisite but they are short. The crown is in sight; it is almost in possession. By faith, Stephen said, "I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God." But to be strong in faith and patient in hope in a long and lingering sickness is an example of more general use and ordinary application, than the sublime heroism of the martyr. We read of the martyr with astonishment. Our faith is strengthened, and our admiration kindled. But we read it without that peculiar reference to our own circumstances which we feel in cases that are likely to apply to ourselves. With a dying friend we have not only a feeling of tenderness, but there is also a community of interests. The certain conviction that his case must soon be our own, makes it our own now. To the martyr's stake we feel that we are not likely to be brought. To the dying bed we must inevitably come.

Accommodating our state of mind to the nature of our disease, the dying Christian will derive consolation in any case, either from thinking how forcibly a sudden sickness breaks the chain which binds us to the world, or how gently a gradual decay unties it. We will feel and acknowledge the necessity of all we suffer to wean us from life. We admire the divine goodness which commissions the infirmities of sickness to divest the world of its enchantments and to strip death of some of its most formidable terrors. We feel much less reluctant to leave a body exhausted by suffering rather than one in the vigor of health.

Sickness, instead of narrowing the heart in self-centeredness, which is its worst effect on a carnal mind, enlarges the Christian's heart. We earnestly exhort those around us to defer no act of repentance, no labor of love, no deed of justice, no work of mercy, because of the sickness in which we now lie.

How many motives has the Christian to restrain his murmurs! MURMURING offends God because it injures His goodness and because it perverts the occasion



which God has now afforded for giving an opportunity to display an example of patience. Let us not complain that we have nothing to do in sickness when we are furnished with the opportunity and called to the duty of resignation. The duty indeed is always ours, but the occasion is now more prominently given. Let us not say even in this depressed state that we have nothing to be thankful for. If sleep be afforded, let us acknowledge the blessing. If wearisome nights be our portion, let us remember they are "appointed to us." Let us mitigate the grievance of watchfulness by considering it as a sort of prolongation of life; as the gift of more minutes granted for meditation and prayer. If we are not able to employ it to either of these purposes, there is a fresh occasion for exercising that resignation which will be accepted for both.

If reason is continued, yet with sufferings too intense for any spiritual duty, the sick Christian may take comfort that the business of life was accomplished before the sickness began. We will not be terrified if duties are superseded, for we have nothing to do but to die. This is the act for which all other acts, all other duties, and all other means, have been preparing us. They who have long been accustomed to look death in the face, and who have often anticipated the agonies of their deteriorating nature, and who have accustomed themselves to pray for support under them, will now feel the blessed effect of those petitions which have long been treasured in heaven. To those very anticipatory prayers we may now owe the humble confidence of hope in this inevitable hour. Accustomed to contemplation, we will not, at least, have the dreadful addition of surprise and novelty to aggravate the trying situation. It has long been familiar to our mind, though beforehand it could only exist as a faint picture compared to a reality. Faith will not so much dwell on the open grave, as look forward to the glories to which it leads. The hope of heaven will soften the pangs which lie in the way to it. On heaven we can fix our eyes rather than on the fearful intervening circumstances. We will not dwell on the struggle which is for a moment, but on the crown which is forever. We will endeavor to think less of death than of its Conqueror, less of the grave than its Spoiler, less of the body in ruins than of the spirit in glory, less of the darkness of our closing day than of the opening dawn of immortality. In some brighter moments, when viewing our eternal redemption drawing near, we may exclaim, "Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers: the snare is broken, and we are escaped."

If we ever wish for recovery, it is in order to glorify God by our future life more than we have done in the past. But as we know the deceitfulness of our heart, we are not certain that this would be the case. Yet should we be restored, we humbly resolve in a better strength than our own, to dedicate our life to the Restorer.

When death nears, our prospects as to this world are at an end also. We commit ourselves unreservedly to our heavenly Father. But though secure in our

destination, we may still dread the passage. The Christian will rejoice that our rest is at hand, though we may shudder at the unknown transit. Though faith is strong, nature may be weak. No in this awful crisis strong faith is sometimes rendered faint through the weakness of nature.

At the moment when our faith is looking round for every additional confirmation, we may rejoice in those blessed certainties, those glorious realizations which Scripture affords. We may take comfort that the strongest witnesses given by the apostles to the reality of the heavenly state were not mere speculation. They spoke what they knew and testified what they had seen. "I reckon," says Paul, "that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us." He said this after he had been caught up into the third heaven, and after he had beheld the glories to which he alludes. The author of the Book of Revelation, having described the indescribable glories of the new Jerusalem, thus puts new life and power into his description: "I John saw these things, and heard them."

The power to distinguish objects increases as they grow nearer. Christians feel that they are entering a state where every care will cease, every fear vanish, every desire be fulfilled, every sin be done away, and every grace perfected. There will be no more temptations to resist, no more passions to subdue, no more insensibility to mercies, no more deadness in service, no more wandering in prayer, no more sorrows to be felt for themselves, nor tears to be shed for others. They are going where their devotion will be without apathy, their love without alloy; their doubts will turn to certainty, their expectation to enjoyment, and their hope to fruition. All will be perfect, for God will be all in all.

We know that we shall derive all our happiness immediately from God. It will no longer pass through any of those channels which now sully its purity. It will be offered us through no second cause which may fail, no intermediate agent which may deceive, no uncertain medium which may disappoint. The bliss is not only certain, but perfect—not only perfect, but eternal.

As we approach the land of realities, the shadows of this earth cease to interest or mislead us. The films are removed from our eyes. Objects are stripped of their false luster. Nothing that is really little any longer looks great. The mists of vanity are dispersed. Everything which is to have an end appears small, appears nothing. Eternal things assume their proper magnitude—for we behold them with a true vision. We have ceased to lean on the world for we have found it both a reed and a spear. It has failed and it has pierced us. We lean not on ourselves, for we have long known our own weakness. We lean not on our virtues, for they can do nothing for us. If we had no better refuge in death, we feel that our sun would set in darkness and our love close in despair.

But we know in whom we have trusted. We look upward with holy but humble confidence to that Great Shepherd, who having long since led us into green pastures, having corrected us by His rod, and by His staff supported us, will, we humbly trust, guide us through the dark valley of the shadow of death, and safely land us on the peaceful shores of everlasting rest.