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Presented to the Theological
Seminary, at Princeton,
New-Jersey, by The Reverend
Greville Ewing, D.D.
Glasgow, Scotland.

ADVICE

TO

RELIGIOUS INQUIRERS,

RESPECTING SOME OF

THE DIFFICULTIES

ARISING FROM

THE PRESENT STATE OF SOCIETY.

BY JAMES MATHESON,

MINISTER OF THE GOSPEL, DURHAM.

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PREFACE.

MANY excellent and useful volumes have been written, to instruct the ignorant and to direct the inquiring. The Author of the following pages has, notwithstanding this, often found it impossible to procure for religious inquirers, a book fitted to explain the principal difficulties, arising from the present state of society and of the Christian church.

He is aware that in the works already published, this is done incidentally and partially. It appeared, however, to him, that a publication was required, which would bring together the principal external obstacles in the way of a religious inquirer, show their influence on his mind, and the best method of escaping their evil effects. A work which, while it did not present doctrines and precepts in a systematic form, would yet contain a full statement of divine truth, bearing practically on the peculiar circumstances of religious inquirers.

This has been attempted in the following pages. It has been the wish of the Author to encourage the inquirer to persevere in the pursuit of divine truth; and to show the suitableness of the Gospel, in explaining and removing those difficulties which distract and distress the mind. He has also constantly urged upon the reader, the duty and privilege of trying every sentiment and advice presented in these pages, by an appeal to the word of God.

Keeping in view the class of readers for which this book was written, the Author has avoided as much as possible the use of certain modes of expression in explaining religious truth, phrases which are easily understood by Christians, but which present no definite meaning to those who are only commencing religious inquiries. This has obliged him in some instances, to employ a greater number of words than to some might appear necessary; but he trusts the advantage to the inquirer will be so much the greater.

It appears also proper to state, that the Author has avoided referring to the peculiarities of any denomination of Christians; not that he deems these to be of no importance, or that, for the sake of peace, any part of divine truth should be compromised; but, desiring to give advice to religious inquirers in general, in the great doctrines and duties of Christianity, he has kept aloof from points which

would lead to unnecessary distinctions. But, while he is not aware of a single expression on such points, which can justly offend any one who believes the Gospel, he has endeavoured to advocate those truths which all true Christians believe; and to enforce attention to those duties which every Christian will consider it a privilege to perform. He has tried to support the interests of the church of Christ in general, and not those of any section of that church in particular.

The author trusts he can say, without any affectation, that the design of this publication is an attempt to do good to a large and interesting class of the community. Some of these are so discouraged by difficulties on the right hand and on the left, that they hardly dare to move a step farther. While there are others more anxious to go forward, who yet eagerly look around for some one to guide their perplexed and doubtful minds. The Author has, in the sincerity of his heart, attempted to meet these different cases. How far he has succeeded, he must leave those readers to determine, who are in the circumstances described.

If the following pages should, by the blessing of God, extricate one sincere inquirer from error, and enable him sooner to obtain the peace and joys of true religion; or if they should do no more than

encourage one tried and troubled mind, to persevere in the pursuit of divine truth, the Author has not written in vain.

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER I.

	Page
THE NATURE OF RELIGIOUS INQUIRY, AND THE BEST MEANS OF PURSUING IT	1

CHAPTER II.

THE INFLUENCE OF ERRONEOUS PREACHING ON THE MINDS OF RELIGIOUS INQUIRERS	25
---	----

CHAPTER III.

THE INFLUENCE OF HUMAN WRITINGS ON THE MINDS OF RELIGIOUS INQUIRERS	60
--	----

CHAPTER IV.

THE INFLUENCE OF INTIMATE INTERCOURSE WITH OPEN TRANSGRESSORS OF THE DIVINE LAW	85
--	----

CHAPTER V.

THE INFLUENCE OF WORLDLY PROFESSORS ON THE MINDS OF RELIGIOUS INQUIRERS	110
--	-----

CHAPTER VI.

	Page
THE INFLUENCE OF RIDICULE ON THE MINDS OF RELIGIOUS INQUIRERS	137

CHAPTER VII.

THE DIFFICULTIES ARISING FROM THE CASE OF BACKSLIDERS	161
---	-----

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DIFFICULTIES ARISING FROM THE EXISTENCE OF SO MANY DIFFERENT DENOMINATIONS IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH	186
--	-----

CHAPTER IX.

THE DIFFICULTIES ARISING FROM THE IMPERFECTIONS OF REAL CHRISTIANS	204
CONCLUSION	229

ADVICE
TO
RELIGIOUS INQUIRERS, &c.

CHAPTER I.

THE NATURE OF RELIGIOUS INQUIRY, AND THE
BEST MEANS OF PURSUING IT.

THE importance of religious inquiry must be evident, when it is considered that it refers to God, and to his will—to man, and his lost condition—to salvation, and the way by which it can be obtained—to the duties of this life, and to the realities of the life that is to come.

In pursuing such an inquiry, it is of great consequence to ascertain the source from whence we should derive information on these topics. Reason cannot answer the innumerable questions that require to be answered in an inquiry like this. The schools of philosophy can only involve us in greater obscurity; and all the systems of ethics, formed by human wisdom, present only imperfection and inconsistency. Neither is it safe to be guided by the opinions of worldly men, on subjects respecting

which they are profoundly ignorant. Nay, even those systems of religion, framed by good men, professedly from the Bible, are not to be examined as authorities, till their statements are found to agree with the word of God. We need not go to the streams, which become impure as they recede from the source, when we can partake of the water of the fountain, which is always pure, and refreshing to the thirsty soul.

We are shut up to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. We must obtain our information from this sacred source, or remain in ignorance of all those truths, which are connected with the present and everlasting happiness of men. The many volumes which men have written, may convey much instruction in matters of religion, but all that is true in them, all that requires our credence, has been derived from the source we have just named. In matters of faith and practice, nothing is authoritative, but what is to be found in the pages of the sacred volume.

It is taken for granted that the Bible is true. If not true, we are stopped on the very threshold of inquiry, and must be content to remain in ignorance, in misery, and in despair. Till men can give us a better book than the Bible, or prove that it is untrue, we shall continue to consider it as the revelation of God, and as bestowed upon us for the very purpose of enlightening our darkness and removing our misery. To the man who really seeks information in the things of God, and whose mind is not perverted by unbelief and biassed by his love of sin, the Scrip-

tures will indeed manifest themselves to be the Word of Jehovah. He will see this from their majesty and purity, their light and power to convince, convert, and build up in faith and holiness. He will perceive this in the union and harmony of their various parts, though written in different countries and ages, and by numerous writers placed in different situations. He will discover that they keep in view one grand object, namely, the Divine glory ; and that this is done in the precepts of the divine law, in the work of the Holy Spirit, and in all the effects produced on the hearts and lives of men, by the belief of the truth.

In referring to the Scriptures for information on the important subjects of religious inquiry, we shall not find a systematic arrangement of the doctrines which are to be received, and the duties to be performed. These are to be found intermingled with the historical, biographical, and didactic parts of Scripture, and with the prophetic, evangelic, and apostolic writings. And it is of great moment, that the inquirer should always remember, in his meditations upon the Divine Word, that on every point necessary to a sinner's salvation, the information is full and conclusive ; so that no one who truly desires a knowledge of divine truth, can fail in obtaining it, if he seeks it in a proper spirit, and in the way of God's appointment.

The inquiry is important, *because it refers to God and to his will.*

To every mind capable of reflecting on the subjects of religion, it must appear of supreme import-

ance, to possess correct views of the Divine character and will. Without these, there can be no love, no reverence, no obedience, and no happiness. Worship or service paid to an *unknown* God, can never, though sincere, be acceptable to him who has so fully revealed his perfections in his word; and done so, that men might know him and be saved. The Saviour himself has said, "This is life eternal, to know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent." The revelation which God has given of himself is complete. He is made known as possessed of every attribute, which can command the reverence, and excite the best affections of every holy being. If these effects are not produced upon men, it is because they are in an alienated state of mind; because they are unholy. He is represented as the Creator, Preserver, Benefactor, and Governor of all his creatures, and therefore as justly claiming obedience and love. He is described as infinitely holy, just, and true, and as a God of love, seeking the present and everlasting happiness of his sinful creatures. It appears to be the chief design of revelation, to unfold all the perfections of Deity, by the gradual, and at length the complete development of the Divine compassion, in the redemption of guilty men. To make us intimately acquainted with attributes which we never could have known but through the wondrous scheme of salvation; to convince us, that while Jehovah pardoned and justified the sinner, it was not because he thought little of sin, but because Jesus died, and rose again, and lives for evermore.

It is, then, in the face of Jesus Christ that God's perfections are known, understood, and adored.

It is, however, to be deeply regretted, that too many are satisfied without that knowledge of God, which is conveyed to us through the incarnation, atonement, and ever enduring intercession of his beloved Son. They conclude, that it is enough to acknowledge his power, wisdom, and benevolence. They indeed profess to admire the descriptions given of his character in the sacred volume; they speak of the poetical and sublime language of the prophets with approbation, and readily admit the purity of the preceptive parts of revelation; but farther than that they are unwilling to go. Keep to general descriptions, and they will agree with you; but enter into detail, and give the knowledge of the divine perfections a practical direction, and they refuse to proceed. Thus they profess to acknowledge the universal government of the Supreme Being, but they refuse to submit to his authority. They admit that his laws are righteous, but they will not become his obedient subjects: and when he is described as a holy God, and of purer eyes than to behold iniquity, they are repelled, instead of being attracted by his purity. Tell them of his justice and his truth, and declare in the language of the Bible, that "the soul that sinneth shall die"—that his threatenings, as well as his promises, will all be executed; and immediately, harsh and rebellious thoughts are excited in their minds. Describe to them the divine mercy, as illustriously shown in the gift of God's Son, and tell them how they may par-

participate in its inestimable blessings, but they will not accept of it, in the only way it is appointed to be bestowed.

All their knowledge has no purifying effect on their hearts, and no practical influence on their conduct; and cannot therefore be that knowledge which the Saviour speaks of, as inseparably connected with eternal life. How necessary is it therefore, that we should seek to possess a right—saving knowledge of God, and of his Son Jesus Christ.

Correct views of God's majesty and purity will awe the mind; his truth, justice, and power, will lead to the exercise of faith in his Son: the proofs he has given of his mercy and love, will melt the heart: his omnipresence and omnipotence will show the vanity and wickedness of attempting to conceal any thing from him, and the necessity of possessing heart religion.

In concluding this part of the subject, it may be said, that the view which the Gospel of Christ gives of the character of Jehovah, is the only one that will be found influential, both as it regards love to the divine perfections, and joy and peace in contemplating them. It is through faith in Christ that the sinner may draw near to God, guilty though he be, without the fear of being destroyed by the sword of justice. He can, through him, behold the holiness and truth of God, without being filled with despair, or overwhelmed with confusion at the recollection of his own unworthiness. In the death of Christ, and in the blessings which flow to the guilty through his sacrifice, the sinner will discover the

union of the divine perfections, and see plainly that God deserves his love and obedience. These will be readily given, for to know God as he is revealed in his word, is the greatest security for the observance of all his commandments.

Again, the inquiry is important, *because it refers to man and his lost condition.*

“Man know thyself,” though a sentence written by a heathen, is applicable in the present case. The sacred volume gives all the information that is necessary, to convince us that man has sinned. The Bible was written, not to gratify an idle curiosity, or to encourage men in unprofitable speculations, but to describe facts in the simplest and shortest manner. Hence, the creation of man, and his fall from his original holiness and happiness, by disobeying God, are described in a few words. But the same events are again and again spoken of in other parts of the sacred Scripture; not only are the fatal consequences of the fall fully and plainly described; but the whole of divine revelation, and the entire scheme of redemption, would appear to be utterly unintelligible on any other supposition, than that men are *now* naturally ignorant of God—with hearts alienated from him—in love with sin, and unable by any efforts of their own, to change their hearts or save their souls. The following passages, out of many which might be mentioned, will serve to show what the representations of Scripture amount to. Rom. iii. 23. Psal. li. 8. Rom. vii. 8. Jer. xvii. 9. Rom. viii. 8. Ephes. ii. 1. Rom. iii. 10. &c.

If it be true then, that man is a sinner against

God, he must be under condemnation, or exposed to the fearful threatenings which God has denounced against every soul of man that violates one of the least of his commandments. In addition to this danger, there exists in man a natural unwillingness to forsake sin ; a disinclination to seek holiness ; a determination to do his own will, rather than the will of God. Such a state of mind renders the sinner utterly unfit to do any thing toward his own salvation. There is no natural goodness left, which will ever incline him, of his own accord, to seek the salvation of his own soul, or on which the divine Spirit can operate, and find a mind ready to welcome his teaching and constraining influence. Man, as a sinner, is thus separated from God, alienated from him in whom alone happiness is to be found ; preferring the things of time to those of eternity ; and desirous to pamper and adorn the body, rather than to save the soul ; he is living without God and without hope in the world, and when not restrained by a gracious and overruling providence, guilty of crimes injurious to himself and to society.

Had the inquiry, however, only referred to man's lost and ruined condition ; had it only included a full and humbling view of what man is, unpardoned and unsanctified ; and the prospect which is before him, of unchanging and never-ending misery ; it had been indeed an ungracious and an unprofitable inquiry. And it is really so to the man who, having proceeded only a little way in his pursuit of religious knowledge, stops and refuses to continue his search. He sees enough to convince him that there is some danger in sinning against God ; his con-

science has become so far enlightened, by an acquaintance with the word of God, that he is uneasy when he is guilty of plain violations of the divine law ; but the conviction of danger is not sufficiently strong to induce him earnestly and truly to seek deliverance from punishment. He knows just enough to make him unhappy. Whereas, if he knew or believed that he was hourly exposing himself to God's displeasure ; that every day's continuance in sin increased his danger, and that in a moment he might be hurried beyond the reach of safety ; if he believed these things, could he stop short in his inquiries ? would he not be constrained to ask the question, " What must I do to be saved ? " To a sinner, really awakened by the Spirit of God, to see his sinful, helpless, and hopeless condition, no inquiry can be more interesting, or more necessary to be answered. If a gleam of hope is to cheer his mind, he must be indebted for it to the assurance on the highest and the best authority, that there is a way of deliverance.

The present inquiry is then of importance, *because it refers to the way of salvation.*

The great design of God in giving us the Bible was, that we might be made acquainted with his divine plan of delivering sinners from misery. The glad tidings of mercy through a Redeemer, are as old as the first promise which God gave to fallen man. That promise contained the rough draught of the deed of mercy, and all the gracious declarations which succeeded it, were, not so much additions, as clearer exhibitions of the same glorious

truth, that the seed of the woman should bruise the serpent's head. The way of access to God was also made known by sacrifice from the days of Abel. All the sacrifices of the Mosaic dispensation were to exhibit by deeds, as well as by words, that without shedding of blood there could be no remission of sin. Every worshipper was to be reminded, that *his* blood deserved to be shed; and even then atonement would not have been made for the soul. If the blood of animals was accepted by the Divine Being, it could not be through any virtue or efficacy in them, but because the worshippers presented them in faith; believing that God, in his appointed time, would send the promised Messiah, who would by one offering give divine efficacy to every sacrifice that had through thousands of years been offered in faith.

This is plainly declared in the New Testament.* There also it will be found, that the obscurity and imperfections of the former dispensations are removed; the predictions and promises are fulfilled; the dignity of the Redeemer is declared; the completeness of his atonement is plainly set forth; the divine approval of the work of Christ is displayed in his resurrection, ascension, and exaltation to the mediatorial throne. The numerous and invaluable blessings of the great salvation are also described, and the way by which sinners may obtain them, without money and without price, is plainly pointed out. The answer to the important question respect-

* Heb. ix. and x. chapters.

ing salvation is, “ Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.” And that no one might plead ignorance as to the nature of this faith in the Son of God, the transforming effects of it on the first believers are *frequently* and *minutely* mentioned. Not merely are the outward results stated, with which men might be conversant, but those also which no eye could see but the eye of God. These are invariably spoken of as resulting from faith in Christ, and as constituting that distinction which has existed to the present day, between believers and unbelievers,—friends and enemies of God,—children of God and children of Satan.

The invitations which are addressed to sinners by the Divine Being; their freeness and their fulness; the inestimable blessings which are proposed for the acceptance of those who believe in Christ, and the certainty which accompanies every promise of the Divine Being, form so many encouragements to the awakened sinner to draw near to God. The question here is not, who are *worthy* to enjoy the divine favour, but who *need* it, and who are willing to accept of his mercy, as he has been pleased to make it known. No one is rejected because he is a greater sinner than other men, but because he himself rejects salvation. No individuals are singled out in the invitations of mercy, and told that they have claims upon it superior to others, because they possess certain natural or acquired excellencies. Neither are some pronounced too vile for the Divine compassion to reach, but the language is, “ Who-

soever will, may come and take of the water of life freely."

Again, the inquiry is important, *because it is connected with a proper performance of the duties of the present life.*

It is not too much to assert, that no duty towards God or towards man, can be performed aright, unless true religion is known and loved; unless, in short, there be the existence and exercise of those motives which constrain to a habitual and universal obedience to all the divine commands, and which never can be possessed without faith in the Son of God. There may be many worldly reasons which induce individuals to be outwardly moral, and in general attentive to domestic and social duties; but it is only love to God that can lead men to perform them, from a desire to honour the Divine Being. Nay, there are many duties which will be entirely overlooked, if this holy principle does not exist.

Whatever station in life the inquirer may occupy—whatever relationship he bears to those around him, it may be asserted, that his present inquiry is intimately connected with a proper discharge of the duties of life. As a father or a son, as a master or a servant, he can find directions in the word of God fitted for his guidance in the path of duty. It is true that directions are not given for every conceivable circumstance of human life; but there is the grand outline which every truly conscientious inquirer may readily fill up. The principles of action are not only stated, but are rendered operative; and in all cases the throne of grace can be approached,

and the teaching and assistance of God's Holy Spirit can be sought, and it will not be sought in vain.

Here the inquirer should be reminded of the greatness of the Christian's privilege, in being permitted and encouraged to seek divine aid in the time of doubt and uncertainty. He must already know that the advice of a kind and wise friend is valuable in seasons of difficulty. How invaluable then must be the guidance of that heavenly friend, whose word is indeed fitted to be "a lamp unto our feet, and a light unto our path;" who, though he gives no new directions while he answers prayer, yet enlightens the understanding to understand the rules already laid down in the Scriptures. By him alone can we be guided into all truth.

But lastly, *this inquiry refers to the realities of the life that is to come.*

Surely then, to every mind convinced in any degree of the need of salvation, the inquiry must appear to be of infinite moment. Every investigation connected with time, must sink into insignificance when compared with this. The results of this are connected with eternity itself. It is for the life of the soul, that it should be pursued. This consideration should produce intense interest, and excite to persevering diligence; and indeed, unless this be in some degree the state of mind of the inquirer, he has not viewed the subject in the light of eternity. Let the language of Christ produce its proper and intended effect, and no arguments will be required to convince the reader of the importance of this subject. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness." "For what shall it profit a

man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?"*

We have thus attempted to show, that the present inquiry is one of the greatest importance, because it has respect to him who made us, and to whom we are accountable; because it refers, not only to our lost and ruined condition as sinners, but also to the way of salvation which God has been pleased to make known. The Bible having been given to man for the purpose of assisting, directing, controlling, and answering these inquiries, a neglect of its sacred and authoritative statements will manifest a disregard for our own true welfare, and a contempt for that Being, who, in giving us his word, seeks to "make us wise unto salvation."

But it is taken for granted, that the reader is in an inquiring state of mind; that he is convinced of his great ignorance respecting those matters which concern his soul, and that his anxious wish is, not only to know the source of instruction, but also the manner in which he ought to pursue his inquiries.

We remark, then, that *this inquiry should be made with a deep conviction of the importance of the subject.* Till there is this, there can be no strong desire to pursue it. It must be viewed as intimately connected with our best and dearest hopes; or trifling difficulties will deter, and insignificant obstacles will frighten the inquirer. It is here we see the necessity of Divine illumination, in order to enlighten the understanding, and to awaken

* Matt. vi. 33. Mark viii. 36, 37.

the sinner to the supreme importance of inquiries connected with eternity. No arguments of men will effect this; no appeal even to their own interest will arouse them to attention. No power on earth is able to subdue their natural disinclination to such inquiries. A temporary conviction may be produced, and the judgment may admit, that to know God and to possess his favour must be desirable; but the conviction becomes weakened, till at last it disappears. The conviction of ignorance and danger, which first led to inquiry, must continue, nay, must be strengthened, if the pursuit after religious knowledge is wished to terminate in the possession of heavenly wisdom.

Let the inquirer, therefore, earnestly seek that deep interest in the matter of religion, which will induce him to view every other subject of inquiry, as comparatively unimportant. Let him ever desire to view religion as including in it the elements of true happiness, and as demanding, not merely the exercise of all the powers of his mind, but the willing subjection of those powers to the teaching of God's Holy Spirit. This leads me to notice,

That the inquiry should be pursued with *humility of spirit, and a willingness to receive instruction.*

We are not only naturally ignorant of the things that concern the welfare of our souls, but we are also so unwilling to receive information, that months and years are allowed to pass away in a criminal indifference to these important concerns. Divine teaching is promised to those who ask it; but it is not sought. There may be activity displayed in

the pursuit of human knowledge, and even a great readiness to receive instruction from fellow-creatures in temporal matters; but there is a strong dislike to be taught the first principles of the oracles of God. And even when the sinner is in some measure convinced of his ignorance and his guilt, there is a lingering unwillingness to be taught the humbling truths of the gospel. But this very state of mind should produce deep humility, for it is unsuitable, injurious to man, and displeasing to God. The conviction also that God alone is able to give the instruction that is necessary, should check every thing like pride. Nay more, the consideration that he who declares his readiness to communicate the most important information to his creatures has been insulted by them, should deeply affect the heart with a sense of his condescension and his love, and render the sinner ready to hear whatever God has to say to his soul. The fact also that the human mind never could have found out one of the truths necessary to salvation by its own efforts—that they are purely and entirely matters of Divine revelation, should render man teachable—ready to learn of him who condescends to human weakness, and who giveth wisdom without upbraiding, even though the learner is slow and dull. Another consideration should not be forgotten, namely, that the want of docility on the part of the learner will be fatal to every inquiry. If what God says does not produce attention nor receive credence, the mind is at once shut against the truth.

But we are supposing that there is a real desire

to learn; if so, the learner will cheerfully receive the instruction of God's holy word. There may be, indeed, parts of it which he cannot understand; yet he will not reject or cavil with it on that account, because he is convinced that he is but a babe in religious knowledge. He will readily admit, that it is to his ignorance of Divine things he must ascribe the difficulty, and not to the obscurity or mysteriousness of God's revelation. Docility is not *credulity*. The inquirer is bound, by every consideration, to investigate the subject of religion in all its parts. He is to receive no one truth, connected with the salvation of his soul, but what has been examined, and which he believes to be of God. In doing this reason is to be exercised; indeed all the powers of the mind must be employed in this inquiry. These are not to be elevated above revelation, though they are to consider its claims: and when this is done, with a real desire to find out the truth, the result will not only be favourable to the inquirer, but the distinct provinces of reason and revelation will be easily defined. Jehovah has declared, that "the meek he will guide in judgment, and the meek he will teach his way."

The inquiry should also be pursued with *diligence*.

Active as the human mind may be in worldly matters, it is wofully indolent in matters of religion. This natural apathy is increased by early prejudices against the truth, by a continuance in sin, and even by accessions of human knowledge, and attention to the lawful duties of life. To over-

come this lethargy—to rouse to the state of activity which is necessary in pursuing this great inquiry, a divine power is required. Judgments may excite to attention for a few hours or days; the fear of punishment may alarm, and diligence may seem to be exercised; but remove the fear, and the mind sinks into its former criminal indifference and dislike.

It will, however, be very different with the man who is in earnest about religion. He may indeed have to contend with indolence and prejudice, but it will be his sincere desire to overcome them. He will be ashamed to think, that in a matter so important, he can at any time be indifferent. Persuaded that in no valuable pursuit, can success attend the sluggard, he exercises diligence. He knows, that if a packet came to him, which contained information which deeply affected his worldly interest and happiness, every power of his mind would be employed in the examination of its contents. How then can he remain inactive, when God has sent him a book, which contains news of infinite moment, and which are specially addressed to him, and intended to promote his present and everlasting happiness. He finds that he cannot learn all its truths, so quickly as he once imagined that he could; and he has ascertained, that there are heights in religious knowledge to which he can have no hope of attaining, without the greatest diligence.

Under this impression, he not only seeks instruction from the preaching of the Gospel, but he improves every opportunity. He searches the Scrip-

tures daily. Every hour is now considered valuable, because a proper use of it adds to his knowledge and his happiness. Once, he thought that it was enough to attend a place of worship, and listen to the preacher; but now he feels persuaded, that there must be diligence in private as well as in public, and that in fact, all religious ordinances will be of little avail, unless they are followed up at home.

Again, this inquiry should be pursued with *perseverance*.

The inquirer must expect to meet with many obstacles in the pursuit of truth. This, however, instead of hindering, should rather stimulate him in his inquiry. He may not be able at first, to discover the harmony of divine truth, or the meaning and design of all the declarations of God. The language of Christian experience, as employed by the sacred writers, may be obscure for a season. He may be discouraged, because he is unable to apply it to himself. While he is willing, cheerfully to admit all that God has revealed, yet he wishes to understand, and be able to bring home to his own heart, the deep things of God. Let him, however persevere. He knows that worldly men, would not be prevented by trifling difficulties, from pursuing any object that promised them an adequate reward. They would rather be excited to fresh vigour, from the obstacles presented; and keeping in view the object of pursuit, would go forward.

Let the inquirer be as wise in his generation, as the children of the world are in theirs. Let him

persevere in his most important pursuit, and never rest satisfied, till he has attained to a *saving knowledge* of divine truth—that knowledge which humbles and purifies, which elevates and saves. Let him remember that it is for his life, for the interests of his immortal spirit, that he goes on in his inquiry. Even experienced Christians, must continue learners in the school of Christ, to the end of their days. Indeed the longest period of human life, will be found far too short, to acquire and to understand all the knowledge which is to be found in the book of God.

Lastly, the inquiry must, above all things, be pursued, *with earnest prayer to God for divine teaching.*

It is not too much to say, that if this great duty be neglected, all other means will be in vain, as they regard real spiritual knowledge. Nay, without this spirit of prayer, there can be no genuine humility, no real diligence, no perseverance in the pursuit of truth. True, a theoretical acquaintance with Christianity may be obtained, without the assistance of God's Holy Spirit. An individual whose opinions have been sceptical, respecting the truth of Scripture, may by an examination of the arguments in favour of Christianity, see sufficient cause to alter his opinions; some objections may be answered, and some difficulties may be removed, and he may be willing to admit that the Bible is true. But if this is all, the inquiry has alas stopt far short of the truth. Here there is no gratitude of heart to God, for bestowing a revelation on his creatures;

there is no yielding of the will to the requirements of that revelation ; there is no subduing, no purifying effect produced ; the glory, the excellency, and the adaptation of divine truth to the circumstances of men, are not perceived. All that has been accomplished, is merely the result of external evidence, which the judgment ~~was~~ constrained to admit upon examination, and which evidence, if produced in favour of any other book, would in every honest mind, have equally led to the admission of its genuineness and authenticity.

Humbling as it may be to the pride of human reason, yet it is a truth declared in the word of God, and confirmed by the history of man, that “ the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God ; for they are foolishness unto him ; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”* It is therefore of essential moment, for the well-being of the inquirer, that he should seek and obtain the assistance of the divine Spirit. Without his enlightening and humbling influences darkness will continue to cover the understanding, and pride to fortify the heart ; so that God cannot be known, nor the Saviour believed in, as the only deliverer “ from the wrath to come.” That this teaching is required, need not surprise us, when we consider the carnality, weakness, and darkness of the soul of man. The inquirer in some measure knows these things. He is ready to admit, that his own endeavours would be utterly in vain, in attain-

* 1 Cor. ii. 14.

ing to a full and satisfactory acquaintance with religious truth. Under this conviction, let every step in this inquiry be accompanied with prayer to God, for the teaching of the Holy Spirit.

Let no one say, that too much is required from the religious inquirer; oh no! those who are really in earnest about the salvation of their souls, will acknowledge that they would willingly make any exertion, could they only obtain a good hope, that their inquiries would be crowned with success.

That there is every encouragement to persevere in a course of religious inquiry, is the chief design of this work to show. That this is the case, not merely in the circumstances in which men are universally placed, but also amidst the difficulties occasioned by the present state of Society, to which only some are exposed. It appears, therefore, unnecessary to state in this place, the grounds of encouragement, as in the different sections of this book, these are presented to the reader, and made to bear on the peculiar difficulties with which the inquirer may have to contend.

To conclude, No individual can neglect religious inquiry, without being guilty of a high misdemeanor against God, and committing a fearful injury against his own soul. The Divine Being has declared it to be the first and great commandment, that he should be loved supremely. He has also enjoined us to know and believe in his Son Jesus Christ, and to seek the salvation which he has been pleased to reveal. He has again and again intimated, that his word was bestowed for the purpose

of instructing and saving men. If, then, those who have the Bible in their possession continue in ignorance, and in a state of indifference respecting these great concerns, it is an insult offered to him who inspired holy men to write the Sacred Volume, and is a daring refusal to become acquainted with his perfections, which are so fully revealed in that book.

While ignorant of these it is impossible to love God, to trust in his Son, or to attend properly to the duties of life. In such a state, the sinner continues exposed to the displeasure of God. He is thus acting unjustly towards his own soul, by depriving it of present peace, and insuring an eternal separation from the source of all happiness. He is preferring sin to holiness, death to life, and the world to God. He is rushing into ruin in the very face of invitations of mercy, promises of deliverance, and proofs of Jehovah's love. He is doing so without being able to assign one reason which can in the smallest degree justify such madness. All that can be said is, that he is preferring ignorance and present indulgence to all the knowledge which God can impart, and to all the blessings he is ready to bestow. Should not such persons lay to heart the solemn language of Jehovah, "Behold ye despisers, and wonder and perish?"*

To the inquirer we would offer the language of congratulation, and at the same time the voice of warning. It is well, if he really seeks instruction

* Acts xiii. 41.

in the knowledge of God ; and as he has been induced to do this by the power of the Most High, let him give the praise to God. At the same time let him remember, that his present state of mind is an additional reason for going forward in his pursuit of religious truth. His conscience, as well as his judgment, now tells him that he needs instruction. Let its monitions be attended to ; let inquiry be pursued in a right spirit, and success will be the result. Let no delays intervene ; it is of immediate, as well as of future and eternal moment, that he should *now*, with all his heart, seek divine knowledge. “ Wisdom is the principal thing, therefore get wisdom : and, with all thy getting, get understanding.”*

* Prov. iv. 7 ; ii. 1—6.

CHAPTER II.

THE INFLUENCE OF ERRONEOUS PREACHING ON
THE MINDS OF RELIGIOUS INQUIRERS.

THERE can be no question but that multitudes are deceived in matters of religion, and rendered indifferent, and even hostile to the doctrines of grace, by listening to preaching which may be characterised, in apostolic language, as “another gospel.”

In bringing before the reader some of the injurious effects resulting from unscriptural statements, the writer has no wish to expose the errors of men who call themselves ministers of the gospel, or to deal out invective, because their conduct is “not according to godliness,” but to execute a serious and important duty relative to others. Were the evils referred to confined to those who taught, there would be less necessity for exposure. We might leave them to God and their own consciences, and pray that they might become the subjects of deep and genuine repentance. But when we know that many of the young, and many of those who occupy situations in life, in which they influence others, are prejudiced and misled, and their everlasting happiness endangered; it becomes an imperative

duty, in a work of this kind, plainly and fully to state things as they are. The preaching of error is a public offence committed against the well-being of society, and fitted to injure the cause of truth and righteousness. Those who are guilty of it feel no shame, and those who suffer by it are not aware of the amount of injury that is done to their principles and their happiness.

In bringing forward some particulars respecting erroneous preaching, it is not intended to allude to any particular denomination. The guilt is equally the same, in whatever section of the Christian community it may be practised. Let the remarks be applied only to those to whom they are applicable, and then justice will be done.

No arguments need to be advanced, to show the influence which preaching must produce on the opinions of a people, and consequently the solemn responsibility of the preacher's office. The magnitude and duration of the consequences which must result to the preacher himself, and to every one of his hearers, from a proper or improper discharge of his duties, must be evident to those who believe the statements of the Bible respecting the soul and eternity. To such the subject before us will be important, and they will consider it their duty to counteract, as far as they can, the preaching of error.

There is a class of religious teachers to be found in this country who do not preach the Gospel, as made known by Christ and his apostles. They do not present to their hearers, according to the Scrip-

ture statements, the doctrines of human depravity and moral inability—of regeneration—of justification by faith—of the atonement, and the necessity of the Holy Spirit's influence to change the heart. Their preaching is defective on all these great points, and the consequences are fatal to themselves and their hearers. They may not speak openly against the doctrines referred to ; but by presenting erroneous views of human nature, they weaken, and indeed render unnecessary, all the great truths of the Gospel. Let us, however, descend to particulars.

The object of these preachers seems to be, not to alarm their hearers by the descriptions of the Bible respecting human depravity. The statements of the Scriptures on that topic are either altogether avoided, or, if at any time introduced, they are spoken of as confined to the periods in which they were written, and to the characters *there* described. They speak of the human heart as possessing many good qualities in the sight of God ; and if men should occasionally be incorrect in some outward action, they tell their hearers of human frailty—of the power of temptation, and the infirmities of man. They speak of God as making allowances for peculiar circumstances, and if men will only on the *whole* do right, he will not be very strict to mark their failings. There is, in short, throughout all their preaching a concealment of the real seat of the disorder—the source of all evil. The Saviour did not do so. He openly and publicly declared, that “ out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adul-

teries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies."*

The name of Christ is indeed employed, and he is sometimes spoken of as *our* Saviour; but his atonement is not made known as the *only* foundation of a sinner's hope before God. God's mercy is mentioned, but it is generally confined in its meaning to temporal good; the mercy displayed in giving his beloved Son to die for the guilty, to save rebels, enemies, from the wrath to come, is hardly ever noticed; and, even when alluded to, it is done in such a way as if it were the *least* of the displays of the divine goodness. Justification by faith may be in the creed they profess to believe; but it is not ventured to be preached without connecting with it justification by works! Indeed, good works are insisted on as able to procure the divine favour, or at least preparing the way for acceptance in God's sight. Hence the frequent exhortations to partake of the sacrament, to perform deeds of charity, to show compassion to the poor and destitute, and to act honestly before men. Attention to these things is again and again described as the sum and substance of true religion, as forming the character of a truly good man. The deformity of vice, and the beauty of virtue, are enlarged upon, and their hearers are addressed as naturally loving the latter, and of course willing to perform all that is right towards God and man. Indeed, to judge from the preacher's address, one would at once conclude, that

* Matt. xv. 19.

the whole congregation consisted of real Christians, —that it would be truly presumptuous to suppose, that in general the hearers disliked the Gospel, cherished enmity in their hearts against God, and would not come to the Saviour that they might have life, and that consequently they were exposed to the everlasting displeasure of God. Oh no! they are taught to believe that such evils and dangers can only refer to the outwardly gross and immoral. Thus it is that men willingly deceive their own souls.

What are some of the effects resulting from such unscriptural preaching? We answer, that many have their prejudices strengthened against spiritual religion. The doctrines of grace are reprobated as dishonourable to God, and insulting to man in a Christian country. They utterly dislike evangelical preaching; so that if at any time a good man should preach in their *own place* of worship the doctrines of the New Testament, in a faithful and earnest manner, they cannot conceal their disgust. Even respect for their own denomination will not restrain them from protesting against such vulgar, enthusiastic preaching—such false and degrading views of human nature—such partial and restricted misrepresentations of the divine being. The result in such cases is, that these persons become more attached than ever to error.

Another effect is, an increased indifference to spiritual religion, and a continued ignorance of it even in theory. Heart religion remains altogether unknown, and the mere outward service of the body is

considered as all that God himself can require. They have been taught to view amiable dispositions, parental affection, filial obedience, and kindness to the poor, as superior to the renewal of the heart, love to God, and to his Christ. We can therefore easily suppose, that deep humility of spirit, on account of innumerable sins, is never considered necessary, and the powerful and delightful emotion of lively gratitude is never felt to be a duty or a privilege. The necessity of the teaching of God's Holy Spirit is not acknowledged, and the aids of heavenly grace are never sought. The pleasures of the world are pursued with eagerness, and an *occasional* strictness in attending to outward ceremonies is considered as an apology for more devoted attachment to the vain amusements of the world. With them religion is a sort of necessary evil; it *must* be attended to, but the less it interferes with their worldly pleasures and enjoyments the better. And there is every thing in the preaching they are accustomed to hear to encourage this state of mind. There is nothing to arouse them, and lead to inquiry. No tempest howls—no clouds threaten a storm—no breeze agitates the stream along which they smoothly glide. If at any time a sound should meet their ear, it is “peace, peace;” and thus they continue lulled in a state of fancied and dangerous security.

A question, however, of a grave and momentous nature, may be well addressed to such persons. It might be said, how far can they be justified, in receiving *that as truth* which is *not* truth, and in

cherishing hopes which are in no degree sanctioned by the word of God, when they possess means of information able to remove all mistakes. The day has passed by, when the word of God was closed from the mass of the people. The Bible *is*, or *ought* to be, in every family; and surely, in *religious matters*, it should ever be appealed to, as the highest and safest source of information. There is, however, even among nominal protestants, a readiness to receive the instructions of men in religion, without exercising their own judgments, or comparing what they hear, with the law and the testimony of God. There is still lingering about such protestants, some of that spirit of antichrist, which leads them to trust their souls altogether to the care of their teachers, and to throw *all* the blame upon them, if they should be misled: and there does seem a willingness, on the part of some religious instructors, to receive on their heads the solemn and fearful responsibility, and to view it as light indeed.

But this can never be any excuse for the neglect of personal, individual investigation. Those professing religious teachers, who mislead their people, in matters of infinite moment; who preach another gospel than that which the Bible reveals, are indeed awfully guilty. If they should live and die in their present state, it had been better for them that they had never been born. But while their criminality and danger are so great, it should be remembered, that every individual to whom they have preached, stands responsible to God for his

own belief and conduct. The guilt of the false teacher will be aggravated, but the guilt of the hearers will not be lessened. On the day of judgment, there will be no removal of personal guilt to others of their fellow creatures. The rule of the Divine procedure is this, "unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required."* "Every man shall bear his own burden;"† and it is declared, that "every one of us shall give account of himself to God."‡

And can those persons who neglect religion, complain of injustice in requirements like these. Their ignorance and indifference are voluntary, are wilful. God has put into their hands his own divine word. He has given it to men, for the very purpose of discovering error and obtaining the knowledge of the truth. It is that they may try the doctrines they hear from time to time, not indeed in the spirit of self-sufficiency, or of cavilling, but with a real desire to be found right at last. Hence the frequent admonitions of Scripture, to attend to this important duty. "Prove all things: hold fast that which is good." "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world." "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them."§ The Bereans were commended, not only for receiving the word with all readiness of mind, but also, because they "search-

* Luke xii. 48. † Gal. vi. 5. ‡ Rom. xiv. 12.

§ 1 Thess. v. 21. 1 John iv. 1. Isa viii. 20.

ed the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so.* The Saviour, in addressing the church of Ephesus, commends them for having attended to this duty. "Thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not; and hast found them liars."† Now, if after all these statements of revelation, men will not try the spirits, whether they be of God, will not appeal to the law and to the testimony, it must arise either from amazing credulity of mind, or from a criminal indifference to the highest concerns that can belong to human and sinful beings. And may it not, at the same time, be safely asserted, that the preacher who manifests an unwillingness to have his statements tried by the divine word; who seeks to restrain a spirit of earnest inquiry among his hearers, justly excites suspicion respecting his fidelity, or at least forgets his own responsibility, and that of his hearers? But the consequences to both are fearful in the extreme. The highest authority has said, "If the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch."

While such are some of the melancholy effects produced by unscriptural preaching; yet there are some cases, in which the hearers begin to inquire for themselves, and in some small degree to be dissatisfied with the sentiments of their teachers. This state of things has not resulted from the preaching they are accustomed to hear. Alas! the pastor and the people are alike in a torpid state. Seldom indeed is it, that in such a congregation, any inquiry

* Acts xvii. 11.

† Rev. ii. 2.

is made about the things of the soul ; such a state of mind would at once be pronounced enthusiastic. To some, however, the providence of God gives other means of religious instruction, than what they possess in public. They have perhaps read their Bibles, or they have met with human writings, which plainly pointed out the truths of the Gospel : or perhaps they have heard in their own place of worship, a sermon from some faithful minister of Christ ; or some religious friend has conversed with them on the subject of salvation. Whatever may have been the means employed, their attention has been arrested, a concern about religion has been produced, and they appear desirous of more information. They still attend the same preacher, but they are not quite satisfied. By degrees, they perceive a great difference between his statements and the word of God ; and prejudice against certain doctrines, begins to give way to a conviction of their truth. But what are they to do ? there is no other place near them where they can hear purer doctrine, without exposing themselves to the charge of fickleness and presumption, for venturing to be displeased with their religious instructor, and to examine for themselves the truths of the Bible.

Such cases do sometimes present much difficulty. In those places, where the Gospel is not preached by any individual, there can hardly be found any one to sympathize with, or to direct the inquirer. It is something so new and strange, to hear a desire expressed for more sound instruction, that there is a greater probability of meeting with opposition

than with countenance and assistance. To such inquirers, we would earnestly recommend a close and persevering examination of the holy Scriptures, with earnest prayer to God for the teaching of his divine Spirit. To those who have an opportunity of hearing the Gospel elsewhere than in their own place of worship, the duty is plain. A partial illumination of the mind and an acquaintance with the Bible, should indeed be sufficient to enable men to distinguish between truth and error: but still more will those individuals see the difference, who are really desirous to know the way of life; who are close students of the Scriptures, and view the subject as connected with their true happiness. Surrounded, as they have been with the clouds of error, and nurtured up in strong prejudices against the doctrines of grace, they may have much to struggle with. But if they are indeed convinced that they have not hitherto received "the sincere milk of the word, that they might grow thereby," they are bound to seek it wherever it can be obtained.

A religious inquirer should not be deterred from the discharge of a most important duty, by the clamours of interested, or the persuasions of well meaning individuals. They may try to frighten him from seeking religious instruction except in his own denomination. They will tell him to make the best of his present advantages, though they may be few; and to hope and pray for better times. They will even entreat him not to leave the worship of his fathers, or change his religion for any fancied good he expects to receive among others. But can lan-

guage like this, succeed with a person truly aroused to the importance of the question "what is truth?" Can he be prevented from obtaining an answer, by opinions like these? He may not, but still, such a mode of address; may, for a time, distress and discourage his mind; especially when he finds religious people venturing to speak so unscripturally, and inconsistently with their professed regard for the Gospel of Christ.

For is it not inconsistent to sanction what may be called, with the utmost propriety, "another Gospel?" A woe is indeed pronounced, against man or angel, who would be so presumptuous as to make it known. To go, therefore, and hear a man who preaches unfaithfully, is to sanction what is displeasing to God, and injurious to men. It is making no distinction between truth and error, and encouraging others to do the same. We are commanded to "cease to hear the instruction that causeth to err from the words of knowledge."* The blessing of God cannot rest on the preacher; and however good the intentions of the hearers may be, it seems presumptuous to expect it to rest upon them.

The inquirer is reminded, that the preaching of the Gospel is the instituted ordinance of God, for the spiritual benefit of men; and far transcends in importance any difference of opinion that may exist respecting church government or discipline. A full and plain statement of its truths should be first sought, and these should be diligently compared

* Proverbs xix. 27.

with the word of God; every inquiry that has a reference to religious duties, spiritual blessings, and the divine glory, can be answered there. In that sacred volume, the Gospel is declared to be the power and the wisdom of God, to the salvation of men. Its message conveys the very tidings that the soul requires, and without which there can be no real happiness. No external forms can supply the lack of these tidings to a mind in earnest search after truth; no medicine but the balm of Gilead, can heal a wounded spirit: and yet it sometimes happens, that the inquirer refuses to receive comfort from the glorious truths of salvation.

When an individual, who has been accustomed to hear erroneous doctrine, but who is now acting according to conscience and to the word of God, goes to hear the Gospel faithfully proclaimed, the difference is so very striking, that his mind may for a time be startled. The statements will sometimes be in such direct opposition to those things which he had once heard with approbation, that there will be at first a reluctance to acquiesce in what is said. The unqualified way in which the doctrines of the Gospel are stated; the frequent appeals made to the conscience, and the solemn warnings addressed to those who do not believe in Jesus Christ, lead him to think, that all this is the reverse of the sentiments he had been accustomed to hear, and that such statements do indeed require rigid investigation. Could the enemies of free inquiry only know the operations of such a mind, they would find that there was no

fickleness, no easy credulity, in receiving new notions on religious subjects; but rather a repelling of the humbling doctrines of divine grace; an unwillingness to give up altogether their former cherished opinions, and a lingering desire not to leave every refuge of lies. These difficulties, however, will be removed wherever there is the teaching of the Spirit of God. In such cases, there will be such a conviction of the truth as it is in Jesus, that it will be heard and received with joy. The Gospel will be prized, because it discovers the love of God to men, and communicates those blessings which are able to save and to purify the soul.

But there is another kind of preaching, which, though different from that which we have attempted to describe, is yet very injurious; as it tends to bewilder, to deceive, and to keep well-meaning individuals and inquirers after truth, in a state of mental distress for months and years. The preacher may be professedly orthodox; he may openly state his belief in many important doctrines of Christianity; such as, the doctrines of the trinity, the atonement, and the necessity of divine influence to renew the mind. But his own mind is not fully awakened to the importance of spiritual religion, and his own heart has not been changed by the Spirit of God. He is unable, therefore, to make the distinction between a mere professional belief in Christianity, as a system of theology, and that belief of the Gospel which humbles, purifies, and saves the soul. At the same time, he may feel convinced, that as a minister of religion he has many duties to perform,

and he may be active and *sincere* in attending to some of these, as far as he knows. Believing that Christianity is the best system of religion in the world, he may frequently preach in defence of it, and do so with considerable acumen and success. His style of composition may be chaste and perspicuous, and his delivery may be earnest and impressive; and yet, after all, he fails in giving a scriptural view of the doctrines of the Gospel: nay, he so mingles error with truth, that its great peculiarities are lost sight of, and his hearers remain uninstructed in the way of salvation.

There is indeed in his sermons a reference to the doctrines of grace; but, at the same time, a fear to make them too prominent, lest they should be abused, and do injury to morals. There is throughout, a wish to take a more favourable view of what is evil in human nature than the word of God warrants him to take, and to estimate too highly what is benevolent and amiable in man. He acknowledges that men are sinners, but at the same time declares, that there is not *naturally* an *entire unwillingness* on their part to seek forgiveness or to do God's holy will. He allows that man's obedience is defective—is imperfect, but holds that if it is *sincere*, God will not refuse it. He teaches, that if the sinner will only do the best that he can, the mercy of God will not be withheld. Let man only cultivate the good that still exists in his heart, and he will be happy at last.

And even when the preacher approaches nearer to the truth, still the defects of his teaching are

many. He may distinctly speak of the divine mercy, and Christ may be often named as the Saviour of sinners ; but with all this, there is a lamentable deficiency in pointing out the way of acceptance with God. The manner in which the divine mercy is spoken of is calculated to make his hearers suppose, that it may be obtained without faith in Christ ; that it is a perfection of deity, the manifestation of which all may enjoy, if they only repent of their sins. They are exhorted to seek for mercy, to trust in the mercy of God, and to be thankful for it. But seldom is the necessity of a mediator plainly stated ; hardly is Christ ever made known as the *only* way to the Father, and the *only* medium through which the divine mercy can reach guilty men. His atonement is named, but so vaguely, that to minds unacquainted with the plan of salvation, it is never seen as that great and perfect work which procures mercy for sinners consistently with divine justice. The *mercy* of God is chiefly insisted on, and the truth, justice, and righteousness of God are seldom alluded to, at least in connection with the salvation of the soul. Thus he loses sight of one of the chief designs of God, in revealing the mercy of the Gospel. This glorious design is plainly and fully stated by the Apostle Paul, “ Being justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God hath set forth or fore-ordained to be a propitiation, through faith in his blood, *to declare his righteousness* for the remission (or passing over) of sins that are past through the forbearance of God ; to declare, I say, at this time his right-

eousness, that he might be just, and the justifier of him who believeth in Jesus.”*

The defective preaching to which we have referred, must be productive of much injury to the hearers. It has a tendency to give erroneous views of the real condition of man, as a sinner in the sight of God, and thus to keep him from the cross of Christ. It conceals the nature of the obedience which God requires,—it gives a false view of the divine mercy, and forms in the mind indistinct notions of the great doctrines of the Gospel, which are able to give peace to the conscience, and to save the soul. And though true inquirers after truth may come at last to the knowledge of it, in spite of all those difficulties in their way, yet they are detained a long time in a labyrinth of error, and remain in a state of anxiety, which a clearer statement of the Gospel would have prevented. Let us notice, however, the evil results of the preaching referred to more at length.

When men are accustomed to hear of ways of acceptance with God, flattering to the pride and unbelief of the heart, it is no wonder if there is an attempt on their part to seek happiness in them, and at the same time to neglect the true and only way of salvation. They have heard that God’s law should be obeyed, but they have also been led to view the Gospel as a scheme for lessening the strictness of its requirements, and filling up what may be lacking in their obedience; so that, if they

* Rom. iii. 24, 25, and 26.

are only *sincere* in what they do, God will pass by their shortcomings, and save their souls. They do not examine and believe the Scripture statements, or they would recollect that Christ declared, "Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets: I am not come to destroy but to fulfil."* They forget also the unalterable nature of its demands, and that *perfect* obedience is required under every dispensation and in all circumstances where this law is known.

This erroneous view of the requirements of the law of God becomes a snare to the soul. While the mind is in ignorance respecting the Gospel, and yet a conviction exists that something should be done for their salvation, there will be an attempt to substitute *sincere* for perfect obedience. There is indeed no part of Scripture which in the smallest degree sanctions the delusion; but with such persons there is no inquiry "what saith the Lord?" But even if the Bible had declared that God required *no more*, no man whose heart is unrenewed by the Holy Spirit can render even this sincere obedience to the divine law. He may be indeed *sincere* in his profession, and in what he says and does, but this sincerity has no reference to the will of God, neither has it been produced by love to Him. "True sincerity," one says, "must imply honesty of mind, a faithful use of the means of knowledge and improvement, a desire of being in-

* Mat. v. 17.

structed, humble inquiry, impartial consideration, and unprejudiced judgment.”

Now *all* these qualities are wanting in the minds of those who willingly cherish the delusion referred to. Could they only see for one moment the extent of God's law, they would be convinced that in their present condition it would be as difficult to render *sincere* as perfect obedience. They would also see, that it is dishonouring to God to imagine, that he is daily and hourly violating declarations which he himself has made in his word; which he would be doing, if sincerity were all he now required. Has he not said, “Whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all?”* “The soul that sinneth it shall die?”† “Cursed is every one that continueth not in *all* things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.”‡

In these passages there is no intimation that Jehovah lays aside the smallest claim of his law on account of human infirmities, or weakens in the least degree his awful threatenings, because a sinner may venture to say, that he is sincere in his obedience. It should be noticed here, that *sincerity* is essential to the Christian character. It is not that, however, which *justifies* or saves the believer. But he knows that where it does not exist, whatever an individual's profession may be, he is not a Christian. “Behold an Israelite indeed, in

* James ii. 10.

† Ezek. xviii. 4.

‡ Gal. iii. 10.

whom is no guile," must be said in a greater or less degree of all believers in Christ. Hence the admonition to be "*sincere* and without offence till the day of Christ."* The Christian considers sincerity as an evidence of a change of heart, not as a natural or acquired disposition of his own, but like other spiritual blessings, the gift of God. As such it never can be *meritorious*, never can deserve heaven; it is only one proof that he is preparing for it.

Again, when men are taught to believe, that if *they do the best they can*, God will be merciful unto them, and bless them for ever, what conduct can we expect from them under the influence of such a notion? Dangerous as the result may be, we greatly fear that this is a *favourite* error with multitudes.

But it will not bear investigation. Where is the individual to be found, who does the best he can? Defective as the views of such persons must be, respecting the extent of the divine law, yet even when the standard of morals is brought down as low as this, and the claims of Jehovah are made to bend to the imperfections of his creatures, and men are tried on their own principles, no one can be found guiltless. Where is the individual who has at *all times* acted according to his convictions of duty? who has never, in any instance, yielded to an evil bias, and to the indulgence of self-love, or some animal passion, though he knew that in doing so,

* Phil. i. 10.

he was doing wrong? A very slight examination of the case before us, will show the fallacy of cherishing such delusive hopes. It will be found, that even on the very low ground taken by men themselves, the sinner must be condemned. He has not for one day of his life, done the best that he could. He has not avoided sin as he might have done; he has not outwardly obeyed God's commandments as he might have done. He could have shown more regard for the Bible, for the preaching of the Gospel, and for the Sabbath-day, than he has done. He might have listened more to the voice of conscience, and had he done so, it would have told him, that he needed mercy, and ought to have sought it.

All these things have been neglected. He has not performed even these duties, which, if done, would have left him still equally exposed to the wrath of God. But there has been on his part unwillingness, a disinclination to attend to these things, and an unfaithfulness in acting according to the knowledge he possessed, which ought to convince him of the criminality and folly of expecting to secure the divine favour, by doing the best that he can.

And yet, how many are doomed, from Sabbath to Sabbath, to hear these false foundations proposed, as the ground of a sinner's hope before God? It cannot therefore be surprising that sentiments which are flattering to the pride of the human heart, should not only be welcomed, but also retained with a degree of pertinacity, proportioned to their imaginary value, even when clearer views of the truth

are obtained. When their minds are in some degree awakened, and their former expectations begin to be shaken, they hardly know what to do. They have tried to derive comfort from their fancied sincerity, and their own endeavours; but they have found out their insincerity in God's sight, and that in all things they offend, and come short of the glory of God. It is true, they hear from time to time of the atonement of Christ, but they are not told clearly how they are to be put in possession of its invaluable blessings; nor do they understand the connection that it has with their salvation. The fear of punishment is but ill allayed, by the declaration that God is merciful. They feel themselves so guilty and unworthy, that they sometimes question the possibility of his mercy reaching them, unless they become better. Thus, they will attempt to lessen their unworthiness, by a more strict attention to religious and other duties; and so confused are their ideas, respecting the method of salvation, that they sometimes fancy, that in some such way, they will present a claim on the divine compassion, and render God more propitious. But every attempt to derive real peace and hope, from delusions like these, fails, and they remain distressed and anxious, for they sometimes more than suspect, that it is unsafe to risk the salvation of their souls on such foundations.

Had the riches of divine mercy, as displayed in the all-sufficient atonement of the Son of God, been brought fully and frequently before these religious inquirers; had the numerous and gracious invita-

tions of mercy been addressed to them, in all their simplicity and freeness; had the scheme of mercy been clearly explained, as securing a perfect obedience to the divine law, as well as the fullest satisfaction to its every claim, they would not have sought to work out a righteousness of their own. They would have seen, that it is not because we are better than others, that God forgives us, but because we are sinners, believing the testimony He has given of his Son; and made willing in the day of his power, to trust our salvation with Him, who is appointed by the Father to be the Saviour of men.

How necessary is it, for the individuals referred to, again and again to be assured, that God is love; that He is ready to forgive all who come to Him, in the name of his Son; that he demands no previous worthiness, no deeds of righteousness, no plea of merit, but promises to every one who believes in Christ, the remission of sins, and an inheritance among the sanctified ones, whatever may have been his previous character or sins; to declare, that in his sight all *equally* need forgiveness, and must receive mercy as an act of free, unmerited grace.

Such an exhibition of the truth is necessary, to satisfy the mind of the inquirer, who sees that he cannot yield sincere obedience; that he has failed in ten thousand instances, in his duty to God and man; that he has too often slighted the divine mercy, to be able to claim it as a right; and that he has broken the divine law too frequently, to expect justification by it. He has found much evil within his heart. He sees no remedy in himself

for this corruption ; for though he struggles against it, he feels as if it increased in strength. His many resolutions of amendment have been broken, and his attention to religious duties has been the result of fear, and not of love. In short, the justice, holiness, and truth of God, appear to place such limits to his mercy, and he finds himself so utterly incapable of yielding perfect obedience to his holy law, that he almost despairs of obtaining salvation.

No faint, no inadequate statement of the truth, will meet these difficulties. He is in such a state of mind, as to require the full and perfect remedy which God has provided. A meagre system containing a part of the Gospel, or occasionally approaching *near* its whole declaration, only tantalizes and keeps from the cross of Christ. He needs a full development of the mercy of God, as displaying his righteousness, equally with his mercy ; as proving his hatred to sin, as well as his love to the sinner ; and as securing for his law, perfect obedience, though the sinner has sinned and come short of the glory of God.

The inquirer formerly cherished a false peace of mind, but it has passed away, and left anxiety and uneasiness. The peace that passeth understanding, has not yet taken possession of the heart, and neither can it, till there is a clear and scriptural acquaintance with the plan of saving sinners ; till the soul believes, that in the blood of Christ, all guilt can be washed away ; and till there is an individual, a personal reliance, on the finished work of the Redeemer, as the only ground of hope for accept-

ance in the sight of God. Where there is this, then the blessings of salvation will be enjoyed. The full exhibition of the truth will be desired, and nothing but the doctrines of grace, without human paring and hedging, just as they are revealed in the Scriptures, can now satisfy the mind.

In thus stating the necessity of hearing and believing the Gospel, in order to salvation, there is not the smallest intention to lessen for a moment, the claims of Jehovah on the obedience of his people. Indeed, it may be safely asserted, that those who are most strenuous, in their defence and love of the doctrines of grace, are the best friends of morality. Throughout the Scriptures, the belief of these doctrines is ever spoken of as accompanied by self-denial, by love to God and man, and by the practice of holiness. It is declared, that till there is this belief of the truth, there can be no motive sufficiently powerful to constrain to universal obedience. It might indeed be expected, that the morality of the true Christian, would be far superior to the strictest morality of the man of the world; and an appeal to facts will prove, that the expectation is well founded.

How inconsistent a creature is man! How frequently do we find, that the very individuals who are loudest in their outcry, against the preaching of the doctrines of grace, as likely to weaken the grounds of moral obligation, and as opening the door to licentiousness, are the very first to exclaim against the persons who embrace these doctrines, as too strict and precise, as being righteous over much, and so on. How the same doctrines can

produce such opposite effects, is a difficulty which perhaps the enemies of the Gospel *can* explain, though it has never yet been done by them. Christians, however, do understand why these contradictory charges are brought against themselves, and the truths they love. They know that the same reasons which lead ungodly men to speak against the doctrines of grace, induce them to speak against the practice of holiness. The pride and enmity of their hearts rise against the humbling doctrines of the Gospel, and constrain them to oppose its pure and self-denying principles. There is in such men an unwillingness to be considered *wrong*, and they will *indirectly* try to defend their dislike to the spiritual religion of the Bible, by attacking *unjustly* the principles, motives, and lives of genuine Christians.

The inquirer will find this to be the case as he becomes better acquainted with himself, and obtains more distinct views of the nature of the Gospel. He will more clearly understand why he so long welcomed statements from the pulpit which he now sees to be dangerous; and as he continues to acquire fresh discoveries of his own unworthiness and of the divine holiness and love, the pride of his heart will be humbled, and the enmity of his heart will be slain. He will need no arguments to convince him that he must become as a little child, or he cannot see the kingdom of heaven. He once indeed thought that all the difficulty of a religious life lay in the performance of certain outward duties; now, when his mind is truly awakened, he perceives the

difficulty of believing, simply believing what God tells him in his word. This tends to humble him still more, because it is an additional proof of the perverseness and unbelief of his heart.

But it is safe for the inquirer thus to become convinced of his true character, especially when this humbling view of himself is accompanied with clearer and more enlarged views of the Redeemer's fitness and glory. It is then that he begins to realize the value of spiritual blessings, and to receive the fulfilment of the divine promises. "He that humbleth himself shall be exalted."* "The meek will he guide in judgment, and the meek will he teach his way."† "I will instruct thee, and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go."‡

The preaching he now desires, and without which he cannot be satisfied, is the full and simple exhibition of the Gospel of Christ, as divinely adapted to the spiritual wants of men, and as infinitely fitted, when believed, to remove misery, to wash away guilt, to strengthen weakness, and to raise degraded man to moral worth, and reconcile him to God; as able to impart peace to the heart, and to give that hope which maketh not ashamed; as powerful in constraining to every good word and work; and finally, as intended to prepare him for that perfect state of existence which the mercy of God in Christ Jesus, has led him to expect that he will at last enjoy.

Nothing now grieves him more than to hear man

* Luke xiv. 11. † Psa. xxv. 9. ‡ Psa. xxxii. 8.

in his natural state unduly exalted, and the Saviour debased by the concealment of his glories, and by the preaching of other ways of salvation. He cannot, he *dare* not wish such unscriptural preaching God-speed. He has himself experienced its injurious influence, and therefore rejoices when ministers of all denominations adopt in their practice the decision of the apostle Paul, "For I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified."*

But are all those saved who have the privilege of hearing the Gospel faithfully stated every Sabbath? or do they even entertain correct notions respecting divine truth? Alas! it must at once be admitted, that multitudes have perished who were favoured all their days with the Gospel; and that many now, who every Sabbath listen to the truth, continue ignorant of it. It ought, however, to be stated, that in the former case of erroneous preaching, the errors imbibed and the difficulties placed in the way of inquirers, were the necessary results of defective statements of the Gospel; but in the latter case the mistakes that are made, are in the face of correct statements of the truth, and seem to be the result of inattention or dislike, rather than believing too readily the instructions of their teachers.

In many cases persons are to be found who have for many years heard faithful, earnest, and affectionate preaching; every sermon containing much that was fitted to arouse, instruct, and save the soul, and

* 1 Cor. ii. 2.

yet they remain ignorant of the first principles of the oracles of God. It is indeed very distressing to meet with persons who have been thus favoured with simple and sound instruction, who yet manifest nearly as much ignorance of the true way of salvation as if they had never been informed of it. It may sometimes be difficult to account for a fact like this, especially when the same persons are shrewd and knowing in the affairs of the present life ; unless we explain it on the ground of complete indifference to every thing connected with the soul, and an eager and supreme attention to worldly things. The most unaccountable part of the matter, however, is the continued attendance of such persons on preaching which condemns them. For though there must be a great deal said which they cannot comprehend, (not because it is in itself incomprehensible, but because they have never considered for one moment the meaning of religious words and phrases,) yet they must also hear frequent appeals to the conscience, as well as to the judgment ; the danger of indifference will be pointed out, and the guilt of unbelief presented before them time after time ; the threatenings of the divine word must also be listened to, so that the final destiny of the wicked cannot be altogether unknown.

It is not with this class of hearers we have now to do. If an earnest, simple, affectionate, and faithful ministry will not arouse them to attention, as far as human instrumentality is concerned, an appeal in this place to their judgments and understandings can be of little avail. Perhaps the soul of man can

be placed in no situation of greater danger than that which has just been described. Every Sabbath hearing the truth, and yet willing to remain in error ; listening to instruction of the most valuable kind, and yet preferring ignorance ; informed of the importance of religion, and yet viewing it as the most unimportant thing in the world ; told of the love of God to guilty men, and yet continuing to hate God ; acquainted with the invitations of mercy, and yet acting as if they knew them not ; warned of the fatal consequence of impenitence, and yet never allowing one feeling of alarm to distress them, or a sense of unworthiness in the sight of God to trouble them for a single moment.

While such is the distressing condition of many who hear the truth preached ; there is another class, neither so indifferent nor so ignorant, who yet derive comparatively little benefit from the means of religious instruction. They also hear the Gospel ; nay, they pride themselves on being quite orthodox in their sentiments. They are able to define the limits between truth and error. Their knowledge of the *theory* of religion may not only be correct, but extensive. At the same time, their acquaintance with theology has no practical effect upon their conduct, and has no influence on their temper or their hearts. They are hearers, but not doers of the word. They speak in favour of the Gospel, when they speak at all on the subject of religion ; and on no account would they attend the preaching of any minister who did not declare it.

Examine the real situation of an individual be-

longing to the class in question, and it will be found that he remains unhumbled and unsanctified, even under the sound of that Gospel, which is fitted to abase the pride of man, and to purify his depraved affections. He hears much on the Sabbath, which he does not cordially receive, and some things which he will not believe. Accustomed as he is, to think himself a friend to the doctrines of the Gospel, he begins to claim a *right* to withhold his assent from some of the statements made respecting the effects of those doctrines upon the heart and life. He hears frequently of the necessity of a change of heart, in what this change consists, and how it displays itself in the conduct. He hears of the peace obtained when sin is forgiven and reconciliation is made with God. The sanctifying influence of the truth is described. Love to Christ is spoken of as supreme, constant, and universal; displaying itself in the exercise of holy affections and in holy actions; and in fact, as the constraining principle to active and persevering obedience. He hears the preacher describe the joys of religion, and the happiness experienced in communion with God. He is reminded of the promises of the Gospel, their number, value, and adaptation to the varied circumstances of the Christian life. The hopes of the Christian are unfolded; their purifying, animating, and comforting effects are described. He hears the preacher trace all these invaluable blessings to the sovereign grace of God, and point them out as convincing proofs that “*God is love.*”

But, alas! these are topics which this hearer of the Gospel cannot enter into, even though he may profess to acknowledge them as true. This acknowledgment is only the result of habit, acquiescing in statements familiar to the ear, again and again heard without contradiction, and now received as matters of course. If there is not this ready acquiescence, but rather a mental conviction, that the statements of the speaker do not describe any thing he ever felt or experienced; it is got rid of, either by attributing them to the peculiar phraseology of the preacher, or by supposing that they contain descriptions of emotions, not indeed obtained as yet, but by and by to be experienced.

When an individual, who has for years been thus situated; honest, as far as he knows, in preferring the doctrines of the Gospel in theory, and yet practically and experimentally remaining in ignorance of them; when such an one begins, under the teaching of the Holy Spirit, to see that there must be some deficiency in his knowledge respecting religion, he becomes anxious and uneasy. He begins to hear the preacher with greater attention, and many things are *now* stated, which he does not understand, and which are yet spoken of as the experience of every one who believes the Gospel. He prefers the Gospel, and of course he thought he believed it; but he now feels constrained to ask himself, why is it that he never felt joy and peace,—never experienced the pleasures of religion,—never knew what it was to have communion with God. Can it be possible

that he has lived so long, and heard and read so much about religion, and yet after all is destitute of its blessings.

We know that such is the state of mind of some hearers of the Gospel when first brought to serious consideration about their souls. Such persons are not accused of hypocrisy. They made no pretensions to religious character, or strictness, as the world calls it. They fancied it was enough to acknowledge their preference of orthodoxy, by hearing the doctrines of the Gospel. They have had no wish to deceive themselves, far less would they wish to deceive others. They saw, that certain doctrines were recorded in the Bible, or were to be found in the religion of the country, and they accordingly went to hear them preached. It is therefore well when such persons are brought into an inquiring state, and begin to detect their deficiencies, and apply to themselves what they had formerly allowed to pass by without observation. To suspect that they have been wrong, is the first step in getting right. The peace they had formerly cherished they find to have been false, for it did not spring from an interest in the blood of Christ, or from confidence in the divine being. They now see, that if they have abstained from outward sins, and attended to outward religious duties, they were never induced to do so from love to Christ; that if there are pleasures in religion like those described in the Bible, flowing from communion with God, they are conscious they never tasted those pleasures, for they know not what communion with God means. They

are persuaded that there are promises in the Bible, but they have no community of feeling with those who speak of the support and comfort derived from them, for they cannot trace any of their joys or comforts to such a source. They are also constrained to admit, that the hopes of the Christian, which are described as so cheering and animating in the journey of life, are unknown to them, and that they have never ventured to think even of death without a feeling of gloom pervading their minds; far less to look to the unseen world with composure and satisfaction.

What is an individual, in such a state of mind, to do in his new and peculiar circumstances? The path of duty seems plain. He has often heard that he is a sinner; he is now to believe the humbling truth, and be abased before God; he has heard of the glorious news of salvation; he is now to believe the testimony of God concerning his Son, Jesus Christ, and to flee to him as the hope set before him in the Gospel.

Surely such an one *cannot* now remain indifferent to those things which he is convinced he has already too much neglected. The preference to the Gospel must not now be confined to respect for it as a system, but be shown in renouncing every false confidence, in giving up the love of sin and of the world, and esteeming spiritual blessings as the best gifts of Jehovah's hands. Religion must not be restricted to a mere attendance on the public worship of God, but it must enter into all the business of life, and regulate every affection of the mind.

When this individual becomes a true believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, what a revolution takes place in his thoughts, and desires, and knowledge. He now hears the Gospel with a most intense interest, which he never in the smallest degree felt before; he understands it now, and applies it to his own circumstances; he perceives the truth of descriptions respecting human nature, that he never fully admitted before; and he beholds such a value and an importance in the Gospel, that he listens to the message of salvation as tidings in which he is deeply concerned. Having believed, he obtains the remission of his sins. He now hates sin, and loves holiness. The promises of the Bible appear exceedingly great and precious. He goes to the house of prayer with devout and grateful feelings. He mingles in the services of the sanctuary with emotions of joy and sacred pleasure. Were he called on to describe the change in his state, his character, and feelings, he would do so in the language of the Apostle, "Old things are passed away; behold, *all* things are become new."*

* 2 Cor. v. 17.

CHAPTER III.

THE INFLUENCE OF HUMAN WRITINGS ON THE
MINDS OF RELIGIOUS INQUIRERS.*

THE belief of the Gospel is not only connected with the acquirement of Divine knowledge, but also with the unlearning of human error. The latter duty is found by many to be severe and tedious. This is especially the case with those who in early life have been exposed to the injurious influence of writings which deny the inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, and thus seek to deprive men of a Divine revelation altogether. These individuals have impressed deeply on their memories the sneers and scoffs of the enemies of the Bible, and regret, when too late, the effect on their principles and comfort. For even after they are convinced of the justice and importance of the claims of Revelation, and have found the Sacred Volume to contain the truth of God, they frequently find that their minds are unhinged, by the sophistry of its opponents. They cannot altogether forget the bold assertions and the many objections brought against Christianity, though there may exist in their minds a habitual and firm conviction that they have believed only that which is true.

* A very few sentences in this chapter are taken from a series of Essays "On the Character and Influence of the Literature of the Day," written by the author and inserted in the Congregational Magazine for 1827.

They find, in their painful experience, that the suggestions of unbelief, aided by the suggestions of others, occasion much distress ; and that it is not till they are enabled to recal, and present to their minds, the powerful arguments in favour of the truths of revelation, and their personal interest in those truths, that peace is obtained.

We are now referring to the effects produced by the writings of those individuals, who never ventured on fair and equal ground to oppose Christianity. As if aware of the weakness of their cause, they employed bold unqualified assertions, and the shafts of ridicule ; and thus tried to destroy the claims of revelation altogether. Instead of openly meeting the evidences which prove the truth of Christianity, they boldly assaulted a corrupt system, alike disowned of God and of every holy being. The religion which those writers opposed, was the religion of *men*, of *forms*, and *corruptions*. If the first preachers of the Gospel had risen from the dead, they could not have discovered in Popery that pure, and simple, and spiritual system, which they were commissioned to make known to all nations. If any thing of essential truth was left in the system referred to, it was employed to give sanction to the most destructive errors ; to blind instead of enlightening the human mind. It was not honest, then, to hold up that *thing* as the Christianity of the New Testament. The writings of such men, however, produced a baneful effect. If indeed the minds of those exposed to their influence, had been sufficiently enlightened to separate sophistry from sound argu-

ment, and to distinguish *names* from *things*; to discover fraud, and rancour, and a spirit of malevolence, when solemn and honest means should have been employed, there would have been comparatively little danger. But when, alas! the vast majority of the readers of such works, are *eagerly* seeking something to justify themselves in their rejection of the truth, or from indifference and dislike to spiritual things, are willing to receive *all* that is said *against* Christianity, we need not wonder at the effects produced. And even in the cases of individuals, who have no desire to read such works, yet when they are placed in their hands, and perused with no fixed principles regarding religion; never having indeed attended to the subject, and with a predisposition to receive error rather than truth, we could expect no other result than a prejudice against Christianity.

Could it be possible to find a human mind, unbiassed in the great matter of religion;—with no natural tendency to love evil or good,—and with the mind placed in a sort of equipoise; yet it is plain that if that individual reads a book, professedly or covertly written against revelation, and does not also read a volume written in favour of the oracles of truth, his mind will receive a bias against the Gospel, the equilibrium will be lost, and there will be a powerful leaning to the side of error. If the enemies of Christianity wished then to act honourably, even on their own principles, they should give along with an infidel or deistical writer, a volume written in defence of divine truth. But when we know from

experience, as well as from the Scriptures, that the human heart is alienated from God; that it is in league with error, and has made a covenant with delusion, we cannot but view such writings, as tending to strengthen all that is evil in man, and injurious to society. We have no doubt whatever, that truth will overthrow error, and that the arm of the law is not necessary for its protection; at the same time, error is most ruinous to those who imbibe it, as well as dishonouring to God. The best opposing influence that man can employ is the truth itself; and the friends of religion act most wisely and most scripturally, when they employ *only* the weapons which God has given them. But these are to be *actively* employed; the mere *existence* of truth will not counteract error; it must be used, and brought to bear upon the mind, not only like a mighty torrent, but in numerous and fertilizing streams. In every prudent way, means should be employed to enable all to *read* or *hear* the truth, and see its influence in the lives of Christians; and when these are accompanied with earnest prayer, and left with Him whose word will not return unto him void, the most timorous mind need not fear the result. Error will fall before truth, like Dagon before the ark of God, and every attempt to establish the dominion of error, will only prove that men are fighting against God. We cannot believe that infidel writings, though increased tenfold, could ever produce in this country the effects produced in other nations. Till the Bible, the source of all religious knowledge, be withheld from the people; till the

great mass of the teachers of religion become as sceptical, superstitious, and immoral, as they are in Roman Catholic countries ; till the authority of Anti-christ is enforced instead of the authority of Jesus Christ ; till the efforts of Christians for doing good at home, and for evangelizing the world cease, no fear need be cherished that infidel principles can prevail, and destroy the foundations of social order and true religion. What is required, is the co-operation and zeal of real Christians of every denomination, in using the weapons of truth and peace. These means God will bless to the furtherance of his own cause, and the destruction of every error, injurious to the human race.

But while we speak thus confidently, respecting the progress of truth in general, we are fully aware of the evil effects produced on individuals, by writings opposed to the interest of truth and righteousness. To these effects, we are now called on more particularly to allude. It may be remarked, that if these are injurious even to established Christians ; to those whose minds are only seeking information on religious subjects, they must greatly increase the difficulty of receiving it. Step by step must be gained ; error after error rooted out ; objections must be answered, and prejudices must be overcome. Hence, in such cases, the *unlearning* of error is more difficult than the acquirement of truth. It is not the enmity of one heart, but the united enmity of many alienated minds, that must be overcome, in the reception of truth, and in the unlearning of error. And even after much is both as it were lost,

and much acquired, the erasure is not complete, for you may still *read* some of the old writing, and know that it is not of God. Hence, the many struggles of unbelief respecting essential truths, and the tedious process through which they pass before they arrive at complete satisfaction and real peace of mind. In this state of mind, how necessary is divine assistance: it is indeed by the Spirit of truth alone, that men can be enabled to receive into the heart the truth of the Gospel; and after His teaching all should seek. If this is not sought and gained, the truth will produce no sanctifying effects, and without these a mere conviction of the strength of Christian evidence will profit the soul nothing. At the same time, it is especially necessary for such individuals, to collect and arrange in their minds the external and internal evidences in support of Christianity; for they will need all these in the warfare of life, in the attacks made upon their hearts and principles.

After all, however, there is no argument so impelling in favour of Christianity, as a deep conviction that the soul is separated from God by sin. The awakenings of the conscience, and the persuasion that God is offended, will be the best preparation for listening with attention to the evidence of divine truth. This has humbled to the dust the proudest enemy of the Cross, and stamped weakness on the boldest opposers of the Gospel. What no mere evidence could do, what no arguments could succeed in effecting, has been done as it were in a moment by the Spirit of God when he convinced the

sinner of sin, righteousness, and judgment. It is then that speculative difficulties respecting the Gospel scheme will be removed, and the necessity of the divinity of Christ, to give efficacy to his atonement, will force itself upon the mind, without those arguments which, though Scriptural, will seldom convince a Socinian or sceptic, unless there is a persuasion that "the whole world lyeth in wickedness." Indeed it appears evident, from the history of men, as well as from the statements of revelation, that unless there is some conviction of sin, there can be no real desire to obtain the knowledge of divine truth, in opposition to human errors. It is in error that men naturally feel most secure and most at their ease; and unless they see that error is dangerous, how can they desire to flee from their refuge of lies? it appears to them their only place of safety, so that even the Gospel to such individuals has no welcome, no inviting voice.

To the man who, on looking back on his past life, discovers much in his principles and conduct that ought to humble him; who has imbibed the poison of infidelity, and revelled in sin, but who now sees its falsehood and wickedness, and that it can no longer be a shelter for him, and desires to know "a more excellent way:" to such an one the Gospel presents the remedy that is needed; it reveals truth unmixed with human error, and presents even to the despiser of revelation, who laments his folly, divine forgiveness. Even to him who questioned God's providential interference in human affairs, it makes known his love to human kind, by giving his Son to die for

the guilty, and entreats him to be reconciled to his offended Maker.

One of the best methods to overcome the influence of the class of reading we have just been deprecating, in the minds of those who have seen its folly and danger, is, to seek an increasing sense of the evil of sin—to see more plainly its hateful character in the sight of a holy God; that sin must be punished, that this is required alike by His holiness, justice, righteousness, and mercy—that to suppose the contrary would be to oppose those very perfections which even deists professedly ascribe to the Supreme Being. That on *these grounds* there can be no escape, no hope, and no deliverance. The Gospel should then be examined; and to the mind of the man who is truly awakened about his eternal interest, no investigation can be more interesting and more momentous in its consequences. It is for his everlasting happiness that the inquiry is made. This surely should arouse every energy, and excite every feeling of anxiety. How delightful ought it then to be to such an one, to learn the simple story of a Saviour's love; to discover the perfections of God, which had been arrayed against the sinner, all engaged in his salvation, when he believes in Jesus Christ; to see the union of all these in the atonement of God's Son, and to hear the gracious invitation of mercy addressed to all who listen to the Gospel. How consoling to find a cure for a diseased mind; peace instead of tumult; and in place of the heartless and hopeless system of infidelity, a faith which works by love, purifies the heart, and over-

comes the world. Many have found these blessings. This haven of rest has been reached by some who were nearly being wrecked on the rocks of despair; and to Christ, as to the place of rest, we would earnestly and affectionately direct the inquirer whose mind has been agitated by the doubts and assertions of infidelity.

There are, however, other writings which are not generally considered as injurious to religion and morality, but which, upon examination, will be found hurtful to both. The writers of the works referred to may professedly respect Christianity, and oppose infidel and deistical writings, and yet perhaps the religion of the Bible is more injured by such writers, than by the fierce attacks of the avowed enemies of revelation. The readers of sceptical works are few in number, compared with the multitudes who peruse with the highest zest the writings referred to; and of course it may be expected, that when read with such pleasure, the impressions upon the imagination and memory will be more durable, and the consequent effects more injurious. The errors which these works contain are so insidiously presented, and are so congenial to human nature, that at once they find admittance into the mind.

The publications referred to, consist not only of many of the novels and romances of the present generation, but also those of the past; not only works of imagination, but some also of history and biography, and indeed of literature in general. Among the real friends of morality, there can be but one opinion respecting one class of writings, namely the

favourite novels of the eighteenth century. That they must be injurious to the young, no one can deny who is at all acquainted with the natural corruption of the human heart. They may still be lauded as presenting correct descriptions of life and manners ; but *classical* as they may be in this respect, many of their scenes are so openly gross, that no Christian parent ought to allow them a place in his family library. There can be no doubt but that they have corrupted many youthful minds, and prepared them for scenes of vice in actual life, which they might have happily escaped, had there been no previous pollution of the memory and the imagination.

But passing these by, reference may be made to works, the writers of which profess to speak respectfully of religion, and to be friendly to morality. And here we cannot but express the language of unfeigned regret, that in some of those writings which are justly esteemed as valuable specimens of the literature of the eighteenth century, erroneous sentiments are inculcated. Names distinguished for their love of learning and a regard for the instruction of men, have sanctioned the most incorrect views of religion. No real Christian can have read the professedly religious papers in the *Spectator* and *Rambler* with attention, without being convinced of this. Here I need only refer to the 27, 201, and 349, papers of the former, and to the 30, 32, 54, and 110, papers of the latter, as not only presenting defective views of divine truth, but as inculcating positive error.

But injurious as these works may be, to minds uninstructed in the great subjects of religion, we cannot consider them as productive of such extensive injury, as many modern publications. To the disgrace of the literature of our days, it is polluted and deformed by statements, utterly subversive of the principles of true morality, and directly opposed to the doctrines of Scripture.

It cannot be denied, that in works of imagination which profess to give a picture of fashionable life, and to describe the varied classes of the community, there is to be found much that is impure, directly and indirectly stated. Though professedly written only for amusement, the minds of the readers cannot but be tainted with moral defilement. They soon, alas! become accustomed to think without fear of the violation of divine and human laws; and to read without disgust, descriptions of scenes, which, in a purer state of society, would exclude the writers from intercourse with every virtuous individual. Such is now the rage to know the *vices* of the great, and even of the dregs of the people; and such the readiness on the part of writers and publishers to gratify a taste which they have helped to form, that even female readers can now peruse without shrinking, descriptions of crimes, which, if stated without the adorning and qualifying of modern morality, would excite unmingled disgust. The pretence may be, that all is written to warn against the commission of such crimes; but surely it is not necessary to take poison to know how dangerous it is. No moral, however justly and

plausibly drawn from a tale of vice, can atone for the injury previously produced on the passions; the poison enters into the system and injures it, while the antidote is refused as unnecessary for the reader.

But this is not all the evil, which can be found in these works. They contain not only much that is impure in morals, but a great deal that is dangerous in religious sentiment. And this is not confined to works of imagination. It is asserted, and with a deep conviction of its truth, that the current literature of the day (with some splendid exceptions) whether presented to the public in the form of volumes, reviews or smaller periodicals, is decidedly opposed to the spiritual religion of the Bible. There may be a profession of respect for the Christian religion, and as a *whole* the writers may give it their support, but its essential doctrines, and its pure and self-denying precepts, are rejected in detail. Again, when real religion is seen embodied in the lives of true Christians, it will be found that they are generally spoken against. Their strict profession is accused of hypocrisy; their attention to religious duty is called fanaticism; their zeal in the cause of religion is pronounced enthusiasm, and their attachment to the doctrines of grace, is declared to be injurious to the best interests of society. The love which Christians show to the company of good men, in preference to that of worldly men, is viewed as the result of pride and all uncharitableness; and their abstinence from the vain amusements and pleasures of the world, is denounced as misanthro-

py. They are stigmatized by various appellations. Absurdities which some weak and ignorant minds may have been guilty of, are eagerly caught at, and a railing accusation is brought against all consistent believers. The improper conduct of some who professed to be Christians, is charged on all, whose whole behaviour discovers that they are Christians indeed, forgetting, that even on mere worldly principles, this is mean and dishonest.

Thus, even in publications which *profess* the utmost liberality of sentiment in religious matters, this opposition to spiritual religion is plainly manifested. Again and again we have their avowals of the importance of freedom in religious inquiries, and the necessity of a calm dispassionate examination of conflicting opinions. But we find, that when efforts are made to direct inquirers, to instruct the ignorant, or arouse the careless; when the great doctrines of the reformation are presented in opposition to the errors of the Romish Church, immediately a hue and cry is raised against such exertions; Christians are accused of bigotry, and all unrighteousness, for carrying into effect the principle of true liberality, and trying to persuade men to exercise the right of private judgment. Indeed, all serious attention to the subject is deprecated, and there is too great a tendency to view the various systems of religion, as so many modifications of the same universal *superstition*. Pope's universal prayer is the text, but its loose principles are exceeded in the comment, and we are invited to manifest the same indifference to the Christian religion,

as if God had never given a revelation of his will to men at all. Indeed the sentiments openly avowed by such writers, are destructive of all true religion; and, carried to their legitimate length, would lead to the gloom and wretchedness of infidelity. They are, however, very imposing, by being clothed in the profession of liberality. When all this is mingled, with much that is interesting and correct on other subjects connected with the present life, we cannot but the more regret the unnatural alliance.

Again, let Christian or moral writers venture to speak of the depravity of human nature, and try to trace the evils that exist in the world, to the Scripture account of the introduction of sin; let there be a distinct recognition of the great doctrine of the atonement, and of the necessity of divine influence, to illumine and to sanctify the heart; let them speak of the delight which Christians experience in the ways of religion, and their confidence in the promises of God; let a reference be made to their future and eternal hopes, and the foundation on which they are built; and whenever there is an opportunity of reviewing or animadverting upon such productions, the writers will be accused of drivelling, of imposture, and of presumption. They will in short, be accused of giving unjust views of the Divine Being, by making him a tyrant instead of the father of his creatures.

And what is the religion which these writers wish to substitute for the Christianity of the Bible? What is the standard of morals which they would

erect in the stead of the holy law of God? Every one acquainted with modern publications, knows that the doctrines are very few; that the standard of morals is placed very low, so as hardly to come up to the writings of Plato or Seneca; the views given of the divine character are most defective, and the descriptions given of human nature are opposed both to Scripture and to fact. The doctrines of human corruption, of justification by faith, and the necessity of divine influence to renew the heart, are rejected with scorn from their system of religion. Good hearts, good works, and the sufficiency of reason are substituted for them. The pleasures of religion are made to consist in a complacent view of these outward works of charity, and the happiness of a future state is viewed, more as a deliverance from suffering than as a participation in pure and unending joys. And if at any time the reward of heaven is desired or expected, it is claimed as the reward of human merit—as the certain result of a virtuous life, and not as the reward of grace. The divine wrath is deprecated by attention to external observances, and the divine favour is expected, *not* through the appointed mediator, but by deeds of charity and imagined repentance. These they substitute for the doctrines of the Gospel, and the scriptural way of acceptance with God. They declare the compatibility of supreme love to the world with love to the Divine Being, and they fancy that they honour God when they utter eulogiums on his benevolence and the extent of his mercy, *irrespective* of his holiness, justice, and truth.

Were all this done by writers alike destitute of moral and literary character—men whose productions were the offspring of imbecility or open infidelity, we might have less fear respecting the consequences; but when the great majority of the cleverest writers of the day—men of unquestionable talent in literary pursuits, and able to guide the human mind in matters of taste and science—exert their powers in clothing scenes of vice with the language of palliation, and in misdirecting the judgments and feelings of their readers in religious matters, we are compelled to regret it as one of the unfavourable signs of the times.

And what is the amount of good proposed by these writers? The mere entertainment of their readers, a little information about fashionable life, and some assistance in *killing* time in a pleasant way. If the story has a *moral*, the reader must wade through scenes of *immorality* to reach it. Amusement is all that is aimed at, and propriety, purity, *religion*, must be sacrificed, on this altar of Moloch. The question with the writers and publishers of such works, is not what will improve, but what will pay!

It may be said, that people do not go to the publications we have been referring to for moral or religious information. This may be so far true. The readers do not *profess* to go to such writings; but in reality they are the chief writings that many peruse; and their leading ideas respecting morals and religion are derived from them. Professedly religious works they will not read; and the religion of

Sterne or the Vicar of Wakefield will be triumphantly appealed to, as all that is excellent, and all that is necessary to be believed by men.

All this can do no injury to those who are well acquainted with divine truth. To such it will only be a matter of regret, that many works, otherwise useful, should mingle much that is erroneous, and therefore become injurious to many readers. Christians can easily detect the shallowness of the reasoning, and the profound ignorance of such writers respecting the religion of the Bible. The boldness of their assertions will not convince them, nor will their attacks on vital godliness lessen its value and importance in their estimation.

There are very many however to be found, whose circumstances have prevented them from reading religious works, or whose disinclination has kept them from improving opportunities of becoming acquainted with the truth of Scripture. Forming their ideas of religion from modern irreligious publications, and drawing information respecting real Christians and the Christian life from such a source, what might be reasonably expected as the result? We apprehend that the evil is by no means exaggerated in the following remarks.

It is not too much to assert, that the publications referred to, will increase the natural disinclination of the human heart to the plan of the Gospel,—lower the standard of morals,—give a distaste to the study of divine truth,—and impart views of human nature contrary to fact.

That such are some of the effects, will appear

still more evident, when we consider that the great majority of the readers of such works have never received a religious education, or read any religious books which could give correct information on such topics: their minds are uninstructed in the great truths of our common salvation: they cannot therefore detect error; they are in love with evil, and they therefore imbibe with avidity those sentiments regarding morals and religion which are to be found in the writings with which they are most conversant. Opinions the most opposite to the Scriptures are received as true; and the standard of right and wrong which is placed before them, and to which they make their appeals, is most injurious to their present and eternal welfare.

It may also be stated, that the writings referred to will greatly tend to confirm great numbers in their prejudices against Bible Christians, whose lives are regulated by the divine word. They will be viewed as righteous overmuch, and as unnecessarily strict and rigid; as ascetic, and as presenting religion in a most disagreeable light, suitable it may be for a desert, but not for society and the world. This prejudice may keep many from seeking information from Christians, even where there may exist a desire after truth. Having been accustomed to associate hypocrisy and austerity with the very name of evangelical or Bible Christian, there is a strong dislike to come into contact with those who bear the hated names. And seldom is it that this prejudice is removed, unless there be a very strong desire to receive religious information from every source where

it is likely to be obtained. In some cases indeed it has happened, that inquirers have had an opportunity of becoming acquainted with real Christians, and find that they have cherished unfounded prejudices respecting their principles, spirit, and behaviour. This has been candidly acknowledged by some, when they ascertained their mistake. They have declared that they had no idea that so much religion could be combined with so much cheerfulness ;—that they never imagined that so strict an attention to the divine commands could be compatible with a real enjoyment of the things of this world. They have found refinement and blandness of feeling, instead of churlishness ; and active kindness, instead of its loud but empty profession. They have discovered an acquaintance with men and things, when they only expected to find the dogmas of a sect ; and real liberality of sentiment, when they only looked for the zeal of a partizan.

The removal of these mistakes is, however, confined to very few of the numerous readers of modern publications. The far greater part of them remain willingly ignorant of the principles of good men, and too readily imbibe the erroneous opinions of the world respecting them. But how very different should it be with the individual who, in a *single* instance, has found himself mistaken or deceived. If he truly desires to find out the truth, let him seek to become better acquainted with the word of God. He should at the same time be desirous to know more of these good men, whose chief crime in the estimation of the world is, that they copy too

closely in their lives the fair example of the Son of God. A sincere inquirer should examine and compare. The world's estimate will with him be held more lightly than before, for he has already found out that it is in many respects false and unsatisfactory. This throws suspicion on its estimate of every thing connected with the soul, and prevents him from receiving it till he has thoroughly sifted it, and found it to correspond with the volume of inspiration.

A comparison of the sentiments of popular modern works with the word of God, will prove their mischievous and anti-christian tendency. They will be found directly opposed to every essential truth in the Bible, so that the inquirer after divine truth cannot safely venture to receive one opinion in religion from such improper sources. He will find upon examination, that a phraseology is employed unknown to Christianity. They speak of the weaknesses and frailties of erring humanity; of the native excellency of the human heart; of the meritorious nature of repentance and good works; of the benevolence of the Deity, and of his mercy in not marking strictly the infirmities of his creatures. Sin will be found stript of all its offensiveness, as an awful crime committed against the God of the universe, by being viewed as deserving of pity rather than blame.

Surely literature is not necessarily connected with false views of religion, or with sentiments and scenes which pollute the mind. The field is wide and inviting, without going beyond the boundaries of truth

and propriety. The powers of the mind may be improved—the understanding may be enlightened—the imagination may be delightfully exercised, and the memory may be strengthened—without imbibing the poison of infidelity, or the no less injurious poison of pollution. There is surely enough of evil in the human heart and in society, without receiving accessions from men of talent, whose time and powers should be employed in purifying and elevating the human mind. Who can think of individuals exerting all their abilities in merely seeking the *amusement* of their fellow-creatures, and careless about the consequences likely to result to the present and to a future generation, without being convinced that their guilt is great in the sight of God, and ought to be considered as great in the sight of men?

The comparison which has been recommended should be instantly made by the inquirer; the process of conviction may be slow, and some prejudices and mistakes may linger in the mind, but they too will be removed by increasing knowledge. The chief concern of such an one should be respecting himself. If he has found out that he has received from human writings false views of his own character and the perfections of God, as well as the way of a sinner's acceptance with him, then he has been deceived in matters of the highest moment. It is *now* his duty to seek instruction from some other quarter. Let him cease to read works which have already deeply injured him. Much of his time has been already lost.

Years have passed by, and he has not thought and lived as an immortal being should have done. He has followed a multitude to do evil, and has willingly yielded to the delusions of his own heart; he has imbibed, with a criminal credulity, the religion of worldly men. He has been learning those things which must be unlearnt, if he wishes to possess the peace and hope of the Gospel. That law which he has been taught to lower in its sacred requirements, should now appear as holy, just, and good; and that plan of mercy which he has been accustomed to despise as a human system unworthy of God, must now be recognised as from above, and as the development of the divine wisdom and love. A close examination of the Scriptures and of his past life, and a belief of the divine statements, will show him that he has fearfully violated the commands of Jehovah. By the divine teaching, he will soon be convinced that men, instead of being *too righteous*, have in all things sinned, and come short of God's glory. This view of himself and of his obligations to God, will tend more than any thing else to the overthrow of his unscriptural opinions, and render him more willing to receive instruction in the things of God. One powerful reason why many persons, *professedly* desirous of receiving information on matters of religion, remain satisfied at the very threshold of inquiry, is, that they are not yet sufficiently convinced of their ignorance, guilt, and danger; and of course the necessity does not appear great enough, to induce them to employ persevering exertions for ar-

living at the knowledge of divine truth. They may proceed a little way; but they will soon meet with things to disappoint and disgust them, and will give up the pursuit as altogether unavailing. And in future days, when conscience may whisper something about the importance of knowing the things of God, the monition will be met by a reference to the unsatisfactory inquiries of former days; and thus their own indifference will be pleaded as a sufficient excuse for continued neglect. In the affairs of common life, in the pursuit of learning, or in the investigation of science, no such excuse would be deemed sufficient.

But the individuals now particularly addressed, are supposed to be in a very different state of mind. Obstacles and difficulties will rather stimulate such persons to inquiry; and keeping in view the need of divine teaching, and the promise of heavenly wisdom, they will make advances in the paths of scriptural knowledge. The plan of the Gospel may not at once appear in its glory; but as the malignity of sin, and the holiness of God, and his love to sinners open on the mind, the message of salvation will be considered as worthy of all acceptance. The criminality of their former sentiments will be felt, and the danger of cherishing impure thoughts will be perceived; and casting themselves on the mercy of God as revealed in Christ Jesus, they will implore the blotting out of all their iniquity. To such individuals it will be a matter of astonishment, that the simple scheme of mercy was never seen before, and that

they should have remained for so long a time indifferent to such interesting and delightful topics, and suffered their minds to be deluded by sophistries which might so easily have been detected. Error, however, has now lost its attraction. Truth has been found, and it has set them free from the maxims and opinions of the world.

But is this too favourable a result? Is it not what might be desired rather than what is often realized? That these effects are produced, in some instances, we know; but that it is too flattering a view of consequences in general, we are ready to confess. It may, however, be said, that all inquiry after divine truth will be unprofitable to the soul, if it does not bring the sinner to the Saviour—if it does not cast down every imagination, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ. Pardon of sin—justification in the sight of God—the peace that passeth all understanding—can never be obtained till the sinner believes “the record that God has given concerning his Son;” till there is an entire acquiescence in the scheme of deliverance revealed in the word of God.

It is to this great result that we feel anxious to lead every inquirer. The way to Zion is not only to be sought, it must be found; not only found, it must be walked in, or the sinner can never arrive at the celestial country. And how necessary is it, in pursuing the journey of life, that the heart should be established in the great truths of Christianity; that the mind should be well furnished with the nu-

merous and powerful arguments which are sufficient to convince every candid mind that the Gospel is divine; and above all, that the inquirer should feel himself to be interested in the blessings of salvation, and daily experience the purifying and constraining influence of divine truth. He should seek to possess an abiding conviction of the value of the soul, and a deep and habitual sense of the holiness and omniscience of God. In this way a strong barrier will be raised against the inroads of infidelity, and a ready and satisfactory reply to *his own mind* will be at hand when tempted to question any part of essential truth. He will also be better preserved against the ensnaring maxims and spirit of the world, inculcated in modern works of literature. The Christian's weapons of defence are numerous and valuable; let them be always bright and fit for service, and thus having resisted successfully every effort to shake or overturn his faith and hope, he will at length receive a crown of glory which fadeth not away.

CHAPTER IV.

INFLUENCE OF INTIMATE INTERCOURSE WITH
OPEN TRANSGRESSORS OF THE DIVINE LAW.

THERE are multitudes to be found, who, though not guilty of those gross sins, which in the world's estimation injure the character, are yet decided enemies of true religion, and neglect even the outward forms and duties of Christianity. They may be persons of amiable dispositions, of considerable talents, and of cultivated minds. Their knowledge of men and things may be extensive, and their love of literature, and of the arts and sciences, may be great. In all their dealings with their fellow men, they may act honourably, and their deeds of benevolence may be numerous. In the judgment of men, they are respectable, and as members of the community, useful. They may sustain a high character, for attention to the relative duties of life. They may be affectionate parents, and obedient children, and faithful friends. They may profess a respect for the Supreme Being, and say that they admire his Power, Benevolence, and Wisdom; but this is all the length they will go, and they imagine it is enough. We are here taking the highest

ground for irreligious characters ; for it is seldom indeed, that all the qualities referred to, centre in one individual. When found in any one person, however much we may admire and esteem such an one, we cannot but lament that he should remain destitute of still higher qualities of mind, and greater purity of life.

At the same time, it must be evident, that the influence resulting from intercourse with, and relationship to such persons, will be injurious to those who readily receive the opinions of the world ; and lead them to conclude that the religion of the Bible is altogether unnecessary. Nay, even on minds which do not so easily receive such impressions, and who, from some circumstance or other, had been led to think about religion, the effects, though not so injurious, are yet calculated to retard their progress in the pursuit of scriptural knowledge. It is to such persons, and the effects produced on their minds, that the remarks of this section will chiefly apply.

Unaccustomed to compare the principles and maxims of men, with the doctrines and precepts of the word of God ; and having constantly before them conduct, which, though really wicked, is not in the estimation of worldly men immoral, but, on the contrary, praiseworthy, they know not what to think. When they see men of talent, of learning, and of good sense in other things, rejecting Christianity, or at least decidedly and systematically refusing to conform to its outward ordinances, or even to profess it, they are induced to ask, “ Can it be

supposed, that such individuals would reject the claims of Christianity, if they were just? Can persons of such soundness and discrimination of mind, object to the doctrines of the Bible, if they are really of great importance; and can it be possible, that such excellent and amiable people, are exposed to the wrath of God?"

That these thoughts should pass through the minds of those who have been brought up in such society, and accustomed to admire what was excellent in their worldly characters, need not surprise us. But we should indeed deem it unreasonable, if they refused to view the matter, in the only light which can discover it in all its bearings. On attempting to guide them in this inquiry, it seems desirable to enter more particularly into a statement of the effects produced by the intercourse alluded to, and to point out some things, which may tend to counteract the evils that have resulted.

In general, it may be said, that the seeing persons who make no profession of religion, possessed of talent and of amiable dispositions, useful and respectable in society, will tend to give erroneous views of the standard of morality, and to weaken their impressions of the claims, which the Divine Being has upon the affections of His creatures. They will be in danger of supposing, that He requires no more than what their friends and acquaintances render to him; and they will also conclude, that the language of Scripture is unnecessarily strict and severe, in declaring that those moral, kind, and excellent individuals, if destitute of faith in Jesus

Christ, are “in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity.”

If it be indeed true, that evil results from the example of mere acquaintances who are amiable, but destitute of religious principles; we may readily conclude, that when religious inquirers are exposed to the influence of relations, or dear and intimate friends who are irreligious, the injurious effects will be much greater than in the former case. It may be that they are parents, or at least those whose opinions have been adopted as wise, and whose example has powerfully influenced their formation of character. The very supposition, that these persons, so beloved, and so venerated, are exposed to the displeasure of God—that they are living constantly in a state of the greatest danger, is painful in the extreme. “What,” they feel constrained to ask themselves, “are those individuals, whom they have loved and honoured, the enemies of God? Can those who have been so useful in the spheres of life they occupy, be notwithstanding this, among the number who are described as ‘having no hope and without God in the world?’” Their minds revolt at the statement.

Here we perceive that not only has the natural unbelief of the heart been strengthened against the Bible by an evil example; but even filial affection, and the claims of friendship unite to oppose its unbending statements. All the endearments of domestic life, all the pleasures of the social circle, seem to be blighted; and the very idea of receiving tenets which so intimately and fearfully affect a Fa-

ther's or Mother's welfare, appears little less than parricide. There is a rising up of the spirit against the fearful declarations of Scripture; and the suggestion of the "evil one" may lead them to fancy, that after all, as far as it regards their present peace, they should take their *chance* with their friends.

But such a state of mind cannot long continue. These persons cannot proceed far in their search after truth, without discovering that their friends are really in the state of danger represented in the word of God. Still, however, the doubt comes across their minds, and they feel inclined sometimes to welcome it—that all this cannot be; and that in some way or other their friends may yet escape, though destitute of even the form of religion.

Why are their minds thus agitated and distressed? Why do they for a moment cherish thoughts which bear the stamp of infidelity? Because they are not yet sufficiently acquainted with the character of God, the extent of his law, and the nature of sin; and consequently they do not know the fearful transgressions of which their friends have been, and are still guilty, while rejecting religion. They cling to the idea, that God will not be *strict* to mark iniquity; while they forget, that if God were to mark iniquity at all, the holiest must perish.

While a better acquaintance with divine truth will rectify the above and other mistakes, one or two difficulties which disturbed their minds at first may still linger. They may still ask, "how can we account for the fact, that persons possessed of sound judgment, and who are conscientious, respected,

and useful in the world, should yet in the matter of religion be so careless and opposed to God? Or how is it that there is so much in their conduct that is excellent and amiable, even while they make no profession of Christianity, and refuse to be called religious people?"

They will find these questions also answered, as they proceed in their inquiries after truth. They will soon ascertain, that no natural or acquired talents—no amiability of disposition, will of themselves have any influence in leading men to seek the knowledge of God. Alas! how frequently is a contrary effect produced. These individuals have never seriously examined Christianity, or considered its high and paramount claims: their powers of mind, and their desires after knowledge, have been directed to other pursuits, and exercised on very different objects. They have willingly allowed the love of error and indifference to keep them from the investigation of divine truth. Conscientious in worldly matters between man and his fellows, they have not been so between God and their own souls. They have been earnest and sincere in the pursuit of knowledge, as far as it was connected with natural and physical truth; but they have shrunk from the investigation of the moral and spiritual truths of Jehovah. The external evidences of Christianity they have indeed glanced at; but they have no wish to find them true. And why is this? Because the heart is diseased, and they dislike God. Because the very character they sustain among men induces them the more readily to reject true reli-

gion. They cannot endure a system which seeks to overthrow all their fondest hopes, and bring them down from the fancied elevation on which their pride of heart had placed them, to the level of the guiltiest in the sight of God. Possessing the esteem of men, they try to persuade themselves that they can do well enough without the favour of God: or that if the latter is really needed, their good qualities of heart and life will secure it. All that is respectable, and amiable, and benevolent, they attribute to themselves, and claim boldly the *merit* of a useful life. Can we wonder, then, that with such inadequate views of God—with such high thoughts of themselves—with so much in the heart that is opposed to spiritual religion, they should altogether reject the Gospel of Christ?

Nor need we be surprised, that in the conduct of such persons before their fellow-creatures, there should be many things to commend. Much of this may be accounted for from the circumstances of life in which they have been placed. They may from early life have associated with those who sustained a high character for kindness and integrity. The principles of honesty and benevolence may have been early instilled into their minds; and being also placed in affluence or comfort, there has been no temptation to do any thing mean or dishonourable. Besides, they have heard benevolent actions extolled as the very essence of virtue, and being naturally of a kind disposition, they have the more readily performed those actions. The grosser vices (at least their display before men) have been

described to them as injurious to health, property, and reputation, and they have abstained from many of these.

There is, however, another way, by which we may account for the conduct of such persons, even while they reject true religion; and perhaps what is about to be mentioned, has the most powerful effect upon some minds. Thus it may safely be affirmed, that the very religion which they will not acknowledge to be true,—that very system, which they declare to be unable, beneficially to influence the morals of men, even when believed, has yet produced a good effect upon them. They may not be willing to admit the fact, but it is nevertheless true. A brief reference to this view of the subject, may therefore be useful.

Had these individuals been born in a country where Christianity is unknown, they might have been amiable, as it regarded their natural disposition, but they would not have had the same opportunities of displaying their benevolence. Mere science and philosophy, or civilization, will not of themselves produce kindly dispositions, or incline to their exercise if they already exist. We look in vain, during the brightest days of Greece and Rome, for institutions like those which adorn our country. The purest of their ethical systems never produced the thousandth part of the tender and benevolent effects which Christianity has directly and indirectly produced. These individuals, therefore, from the existence of philanthropic institutions around them, and the example of others, are inclined to

assist them with their property and their influence. And how often is all this ascribed to the exercise of reason, or to the native goodness of their own hearts !

Again, it may be said that on account of the general diffusion of knowledge respecting the divine precepts, and their influence on society, they become acquainted with many duties which have a reference to their families and to society, of which they would otherwise have remained in ignorance. We may mention conjugal, parental, and filial duties ; honesty or integrity in worldly transactions, and the claims of the poor and the afflicted. It is not asserting too much, to say that Christianity has raised the tone of morals, and produced many deeds of kindness, even in those who systematically reject the Revelation of God, and deny its practical influence on society. We know that multitudes in this country are awfully depraved ; but if they are so wicked, notwithstanding the knowledge of good morals, and the influence of a better example, shown by so many thousands, what would be the condition of the whole nation, if the restraints of religion were unknown, and the *indirect* influence of Christian morals never felt ? This influence reaches many, even while the cause is concealed, or at least disallowed.

It may also be observed, that many irreligious characters, without being charged with hypocrisy, do act with greater caution and propriety in many things, on account of witnessing the effects of Christian principle in the conduct of others. They

are, of course, desirous to be thought right in their opinions, and to justify their excellency before their fellow creatures. They will do this by an outward attention to many duties they would have neglected, had there been no exhibition of Christian morality on the part of others. There is a sort of competition; they see at once that even in the estimation of worldly men, their principles will be pronounced bad if moral duties are not performed; if there is not, in some things at least, an approximation to the benevolence and rectitude of Christian precepts. They know that their own principles are condemned as injurious to morals; and they sometimes hear of Christianity producing a beneficial effect on all who truly believe it. While they cannot altogether deny this, they are desirous to prove the former charge to be incorrect. Hence society is indebted for much that is benevolent in the conduct of worldly men, to that spirit of pride, or whatever it may be called, which renders such persons unwilling to have their opinions considered as inefficient in producing good morals. And yet all the while the religion of the Bible is despised; reason is elevated above revelation, and human nature is viewed as all that is virtuous and excellent. These persons are unwilling to admit the fact, that true religion has had an indirect influence upon them, in making them better by restraining some of their passions, by elevating the tone of morals, by producing greater amenity of manners, and by constraining to a more general exhibition of philanthropy.

When the inquirer after divine things considers

the above remarks, perhaps he may see, that the conduct of such persons should be no argument against true religion, or any hinderance to his inquiries respecting it. On the contrary, if true religion can produce beneficial influence even on those who refuse to acknowledge its truth, and who oppose its spirit, what must be the effects produced on those who receive all its statements, and who willingly obey all its precepts; who view the Christian system as a divine invention, and its great design as being to purify and to save the soul?

But it may farther be desirable to point out the defects of the principles of these irreligious men, and show that, amiable, benevolent, and respectable though they may be in the sight of men, they come far short of God's requirements. While we by no means wish to charge such persons with sins which they abhor, yet serious charges can be brought against them, sufficient to show the danger of following their example. They are not accused of attempting to deceive others, but they deceive themselves; they are not guilty of outward immorality, but of great and numerous misdemeanours in the sight of God.

It will be at once granted, that the Divine Being has claims upon the affections, hearts, and obedience of all his intelligent creatures. That if men possess talents, property, time, learning, influence, and benevolent dispositions, or any thing beyond their fellow-men, this can never lessen the claims of Jehovah, but, on the contrary, will greatly increase them. When we perceive, then, that instead of

loving God with all the heart and mind, and receiving the Gospel as worthy of all acceptance, they love the world, their talents, or their families ; when we discover a bold and open disavowal of their belief in a divine revelation, when time is spent in the pursuit of objects entirely confined to the present life ; when the ordinances of religion are neglected, and the Sabbath-day spent in usual worldly occupations, or dedicated to pleasure, we cannot but discover the basest ingratitude to their gracious benefactor. When, in addition to all this, the plainest requisitions of the moral law are violated without compunction, and the divine word is never consulted for direction, nor its promises appealed to for consolation ; when its doctrines are accused of mysticism, and its penal sanctions condemned on account of their severity ; when the solemnities of the judgment-day, with its ultimate decisions, are declared to be the inventions of men, well suited to awe the vulgar, and bring them into subjection to the priests ; when all this is said and done, what is the estimate we are obliged to form of such individuals ? Are we to view their philanthropy as a substitute for love to God ? Are we to consider their attention to a few relative or social duties as fulfilling the command to love their neighbour as themselves ? Is talent to be exchanged for piety ? Is human knowledge to be viewed as a proper substitute for heavenly wisdom ? and is an amiable disposition to be considered equal to that devotional spirit, that purity of heart, and that supreme love to holiness

which are always to be found in the bosom of a real Christian ?

In seeking direction from the Sacred Volume, we are compelled to form an estimate of character very different from that of the world, and one which to some may seem uncharitable. There, we find only two classes of individuals who divide the world between them—the righteous and the wicked. The righteous are described as loving God supremely, as believing in his Son Jesus Christ, as delighting in his commandments, as loving holiness, as fleeing from all sin, as crucifying the flesh with its affections and lusts, as seeking the assistance of God's Holy Spirit, as receiving it and being guided into all truth ; as attending to every social and relative duty, as practising every virtue and Christian grace, as desiring the salvation of their own souls, as seeking to promote the glory of God and the happiness of men, as living in unity and peace with all men, and as looking forward to everlasting happiness in the presence of God and of the Lamb. On the other hand, the wicked are described as guilty of unbelief, as alienated in heart from God, as dead in trespasses and sins, as loving sin, as hating holiness, as calling God a liar, as *now* under the wrath of God, and as doomed to everlasting misery, if they live and die in their present state.

There is no third, no neutral class of human beings,—all the modifications of human society, and all the numerous shades of character, varied by circumstances, must merge into two great divisions. Now, is it difficult to say to which class those be-

long, who have not even a form of godliness. We must either believe that such individuals are among the wicked, or renounce at once the statements and authority of the word of God. No sincere inquirer of the truth can do the latter.

But when the matter is farther investigated, it will appear that those persons whose knowledge is extensive, whose minds are highly cultivated, whose influence is great, whose talents are commanding, and whose natural dispositions are amiable, are also pre-eminently criminal in rejecting true religion. How many thousands are to be found, sunk into a state of ignorance, and placed in circumstances where they can obtain no moral or mental culture; their natural love of sin has led them greedily to imitate the evil example of others, and they have become fearfully debased in their principles and their conduct. But guilty as these worthless beings are, the class formerly mentioned seems to have incurred more aggravated blame. The declaration of the Saviour is to this effect: "And that servant who knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of few stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required; and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more."* Here, the mere *omission* of duties which men owe to God, by those who know or ought to know the divine law, is declared to be deserving

* Luke xii. 47 and 48.

of heavy punishment; while the *commission* of what is evil, the practice of what is openly wicked, by those who do not know his will, shall be punished more lightly. This must appear, even on worldly principles, the strictest justice. Jehovah has bestowed on the individuals referred to many favours; but he gave them to be employed in his own service, in imparting good to their souls, and in seeking the happiness of others. But if, instead of this, every blessing is prostituted to some selfish or worldly object; nay, employed in opposing the righteous authority of that God who gave the blessings, we cannot but conclude, that they are manifesting injustice and ingratitude. There is an evil example presented to children, to friends, and to servants, as well as to the world at large. It must greatly tend to encourage multitudes in sin, when they behold those who are possessed of influence and learning, talents and respectability, despising the very profession of religion, and living without the fear or love of God. They may indeed pretend, that they are setting a good example to the vulgar, by occasionally visiting the sanctuary of God; but it is only a mockery, and the means employed are hypocritical and base. It is an attempt to gull the people, and induce them to attend to a religion which they have themselves rejected as false, or at least as unnecessary. Every mind that wishes to be thought honourable should keep from such deceit, for it can only lessen their own character for integrity. Let them go to the house of God; but let it be with a desire to worship the true God, and to

receive spiritual good. It will be then that their influence and example will do good, and not till then.

Let not the mind of the inquirer be startled when we speak of the dangerous circumstances in which those whom they once admired, and still esteem, have placed themselves by the rejection of the Gospel. In wishing them to judge correctly of this matter, we would refer them to the plain, unequivocal declarations of Scripture. The various distinctions which men have made between each other, and the estimation in which they hold one another, are too frequently opposed to the revealed will of God. They call evil good, and good evil. The Bible, however, always declares the truth. It says respecting sinners in general, “The soul that sinneth it shall die.”* “The wicked shall not be unpunished;” † “for the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness.” ‡ To remove the error of many who fancy, that if *in general* they obey God, he will not punish them, the Apostle James declares, “For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.”||

But the declarations of Scripture become more numerous and solemn, when uttered against those who commit the greatest of all crimes, in refusing to believe in the Son of God. “If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be anathema

* Ezek. xviii. 4.

‡ Rom. i. 8.

† Pro. xi. 21.

|| James ii. 10.

maranatha.”* “ He that believeth on him is not condemned ; but he that believeth not is condemned already : because he hath not believed in the name of the only-begotten Son of God.”† “ He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life ; and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life ; but the wrath of God abideth on him.”‡ “ He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself ; he that believeth not God hath made him a liar : because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son.”§

From all these passages it is evident, that though individuals may be possessed of all those qualities which excite the admiration and secure the respect of their fellow-men ; yet, if this be all ; if they remain destitute of faith in the Son of God, they are exposed to his displeasure ; they are *now* under his curse, and dying in a state of unbelief and impenitence, must endure his wrath for ever.

And let it be remembered, that this is not the harsh and illiberal language of gloomy fanatics, or the gratuitous assertions of those who wish to represent the Divine Being as cruel and vindictive. It is the language of that Being himself, who has surely a right to warn his intelligent creatures of the danger of provoking him. He employs it that sinners may be left without excuse, as well as to induce them to flee from the wrath to come. Had there not been a sufficient reason for it, the Spirit

* 1 Cor. xvi. 22.

† John iii 18.

‡ John iii. 36.

§ 1 John v. 10.

of God would not have dictated such strong and solemn language. Had not unbelief been a tremendous evil beyond human calculation, Jehovah would not have said, "He that believeth *not* shall be condemned." Had there not been an intention to carry into full effect the threatenings of his own word, they had never been uttered by the God of truth. Had there not been power to execute his awful denunciations, never had our ears listened to their sound. He never uses undeservedly the language of reproof; for he is a God of love. He never employs the language of impotence; for his word is omnipotent. He never utters the terrors of his law, without entreating men to be reconciled to himself. Had he desired the death of the sinner, the eternal misery of the wicked, he would never have given any warning—he had never revealed the promise of a Saviour. The beloved Son of God had never visited a world inhabited by rebels, and polluted by sin. The humiliation of the stable, the tears and agonies of the garden, the groans of Calvary, would have been unknown. Had God sought the ruin of his creatures, the services of prophets and apostles would never have been permitted; Christian churches would never have been formed; the Christian ministry would not have been instituted, and the gladdening accents of mercy had never been heard by the present generation; Jehovah would never have sworn by himself, and said, "As I live, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way

and live ; turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways ; for why will you die, O house of Israel ?”*

To those who are acquainted with the plan of salvation, and who have already participated in its invaluable blessings, it may seem unnecessary to state such things as these ; but they must know, that the objection alluded to, is very often made to the statements of God’s threatenings, namely, that it is representing the Divine Being as delighting in the misery of his creatures ; whereas it is a proof of mercy to warn the ungodly ; to point out the folly and danger of disobedience and unbelief, and to tell sinners, that if they will not receive the testimony which God has given concerning his Son Jesus Christ, and forsake all iniquity, they will *justly and for ever*, suffer the displeasure of God.

Neither can it be said with truth, when Christian ministers repeat, explain, or enforce, the threatenings and warnings of the Bible against sin or unbelief, that they experience a degree of pleasure in doing so ; and anticipate, with something like savage delight, the miseries of the condemned. Oh, no ! we are aware that such charges are brought against Christians if they venture to speak plainly on this painful subject ; but they are unjust. The exertions of Christian ministers ; the labours of private Christians ; their prayers on behalf of the careless ; their grief in seeing men violate God’s commandments ; and their unmingled joy when a sinner is converted to God are some of the many proofs

* Ezek. xxxiii. 11.

that might be produced to show that they would rather that men should turn to God and live. Indeed, it is an essential part of the Christian character, to mourn over the wickedness of men, and to use means to lessen it. To rejoice when sinners are turned from their former ways; not from one set of opinions to another, but when that mighty change is effected, which leads to a total reformation of character, and is exhibited in the holiness and consistency of the whole conduct. Neither is it a feeling of congratulation, because the individual is added to a particular section of the Christian church, but because he is added to the church of God; united to Christ by a living faith, and made an heir of the promised inheritance.

Surely enough has been said to convince the inquirer, that his amiable but irreligious friends, notwithstanding all their good qualities, are exposed to the displeasure of God; and that there is a great danger in continuing to admire them, or in being deterred from the examination of divine truth, by his desire to think favourably of their character and state. This view of the subject will be urged no farther; but it seems of importance, just to remark, that if those unbelieving friends were to receive the Gospel, it would present their disposition and conduct in a still more attractive form. True religion does much in smoothing the most rugged temper, and in rendering the most unamiable disposition bearable; but when it produces all its hallowed effects, upon a mind naturally amiable; though the power exercised in producing the change may not be

greater, yet its influence will appear more lovely to the eyes of men. The word of God would then be substituted for the opinion of the world, which is now the standard to which they appeal, for the correctness of their doings. The purity of the divine precepts would regulate the conduct instead of the principles of expediency. Instead of being influenced in their intercourse with their fellow men, by the conviction that human eyes were upon them, "*thou God seest me,*" would be their motto. The Bible, instead of being viewed as a cunningly devised fable, would be honoured as the book of God; and the Gospel, instead of appearing foolishness, would appear the power and the wisdom of God, to the salvation of men. The sanctuary of God would be visited as the place where Jehovah condescends to dwell, and where he dispenses spiritual blessings. Every domestic, relative, and social duty, would be attended to, not for the purpose of procuring a good name, but from a regard to the authority of the Divine Being. In the hour of affliction there would not be alarm and despondency, the language of fretfulness, or a *forced* submission to their fate; nor would they attempt to draw comfort from the miserable and superficial consolations of worldly men; but there would be an acquiescence in the divine arrangements, a child-like submission to his fatherly will, and a belief in, and application of the promises of Him who is emphatically called the "God of all comfort." No longer would they boast of the dignity of human nature in its lapsed condition, or cherish pride, on account of what they supposed to

be excellent in themselves ; but there would be a humble confession of individual guilt, and the petition of the publican would be theirs, “ God be merciful to me a sinner.” No unnecessary strictness would be considered as attached to the precepts of God ; on the contrary, they would be viewed as proofs of the divinity of the religion which enjoined them, and as tending to promote the real happiness of all who loved to obey them. The prospects for the future, instead of being gloomy and indefinite, or unfounded as they once were, would now be cheering, certain, and well founded. In short, the whole character would be more lovely. Benevolent kindly feelings, would be excited from higher motives. Their deeds of sympathy would not be the offspring of impulse, and therefore uncertain and partial, but they would be the result of Christian principles, and therefore steady, persevering, and considerate. If worldly men would only examine the effects of true religion, and seek to appreciate them aright, they would soon be convinced that a real Christian is far superior to the man who may be possessed of all mere human and acquired excellencies, but who remains destitute of love to God and to his Christ.

The reader is reminded, that this high character *may be* his. The inquirer after truth is affectionately intreated to remember, that nothing less should satisfy his mind, than the possession of Christian principles, and of the Christian character. Let him no longer keep before his mind, the imperfect outline of character presented by respectable

and amiable men of the world, as deserving of his imitation ; nor should he even confine his attention to the far superior example of a real Christian, but let him place constantly before him the perfect example of the Son of God. Let him never forget, that his present comfort, and his eternal happiness, are intimately connected with the correctness of the standard to which he appeals, and the character of the example which he follows.

But the reader is perhaps convinced of this. He is well aware of some of the defects of irreligious men, but he may be ignorant of the result, if he should be unwilling to copy their example. Accustomed to associate all that is candid and liberal, with those whom he has hitherto admired, he may not anticipate the alienation of their friendship, or think it possible that they can be hostile to inquirers after truth. But, alas ! he will soon find, that while men will bear with much difference of opinion, in worldly things, and hear with courtesy, sentiments opposed to their own, in matters of science and philosophy, they cannot endure to be reminded of their mistakes in religion, either by word, or in a decided charge of conduct in their relations or friends. They may not *openly* oppose the religious inquirer, but they will discountenance, in every possible way without being absolutely rude, attention to the subject of religion. It will, indeed, soon be found, that a naturally amiable disposition is utterly insufficient to check the dislike of the heart to the things of God, and to those who wish to become acquainted with them.

But all this should convince the inquirer, that he can meet with no sympathy, in his present pursuit, from irreligious persons. It should impress more deeply on his mind, the truth of Scripture, respecting the natural disinclination of human hearts to pure and undefiled religion. Indeed, a calm and faithful examination of the condition of worldly men, will show him the importance and value of the blessings of the Gospel, and the necessity of believing in the Son of God. Animated, as the reader is supposed to be, by a sincere desire to find the truth, he will ere long discover, that peace and safety are to be found in Christ alone, and that it is love to Him, which is the most constraining principle that can operate in the human mind. He will see, that the sacred writers trace all sincere, holy, and acceptable obedience to this hallowed source.* The faith of Christ in the heart elevates all the mental, as well as the moral powers; leading to the cultivation of the mind, as well as to the purifying of the affections. There are to be found in the Gospel, all the blessings which are needed for the pilgrimage of life, guidance, protection, and the supply of every spiritual grace. Its pleasures are not like those of the world, unsatisfactory, short lived, and, in general corrupting; but satisfying, permanent, and purifying. Its prospects are not like those of unbelievers, gloomy, uncertain, or presumptuous, but animating, and sure, and presented to the view by the blessed God. And when the termination of all is looked at, what a

* 2 Cor. v. 14, 15.

contrast is there between the situation of the unbeliever and the Christian !

These are subjects which all minds should contemplate, and which no mind should cease to consider, till their importance is seen, and their influence felt. When this is done, there will be no cessation of religious inquiry. On the contrary, the inquirer will seek, through the teaching of the Holy Spirit, still higher attainments in divine knowledge, and as these are acquired, ignorance will be more felt and disliked, till there is an arrival at the full stature of a perfect man in Christ Jesus. This is the high result which every one should earnestly desire, and perseveringly pursue.

CHAPTER V.

THE INFLUENCE OF WORLDLY PROFESSORS ON THE
MINDS OF RELIGIOUS INQUIRERS.

THOSE who are acquainted with the state of religious society in this country, are perfectly aware, that there are many professors of Christianity, who are destitute of the love of it in their hearts. Such individuals are described in the word of God, as “having a name to live, while they are dead,” and as “having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof.”

Various reasons may be assigned for the existence of this state of things. There is in every human heart, a tendency to substitute forms and outward observances for the reality and power of religion. There is a desire to make the love of the world compatible with love to God; and in a country where Christianity is said to be the religion of the state, there are abundant facilities for the indulgence of such desires. The influence of education and of custom may induce many to assume the Christian name, who have no correct views of religion. Trained up in attention to certain forms, and accustomed to consider these as constituting religion, they have

never sought for more than the mere *profession* of Christianity. It also sometimes happens, that the conscience may be partially disturbed ; and in order to quiet its clamours, the name of Christian is assumed, and some of its outward duties are performed. Again, there may be *professional* forms of religion, on the part of some who call themselves ministers of the Gospel ; men who have undertaken to teach, what they do not themselves understand or feel. In addition to all this, it may be remarked, that a *profession* of religion is rather respectable than otherwise in the present day ; interested motives may also operate on the minds of some, and induce them to attend a particular place of worship, for the purpose of promoting their success in worldly business.

But it is impossible, and if it were possible, it is unnecessary, to enumerate all the reasons which induce men to assume, and to be satisfied with a profession of Christianity. It will be sufficient for our present purpose to state, that the following remarks will apply to no one class of professors in particular, but may be viewed as including all the shades of a religious profession ; from those who, with the exception of the name, have not even the form of religion, to those who are outwardly strict in their attention to religious observances, but whose hearts are still unchanged. Between these two classes many shades of character may be found, modified by the circumstances in which they have been placed, but all uniting in their rejection of the Gospel of Christ.

Many are exposed to the influence of the princi-

ples and example of such men. That it is frequently injurious no one can deny, who has ever considered the subject in the light of revelation. To those who have been injured, and who have in some degree been convinced that a mere profession of religion is not enough, our future remarks will more especially apply. Many, alas ! have reason to confess, that their long-continued neglect of spiritual religion may be traced to the blighting and deceiving influence of a worldly professor.

Our present object, then, will be to attempt to point out more particularly the principles and conduct of worldly professors, and some of the effects produced by their influence ; and we shall close the subject with some hints to those who are sincerely seeking the possession of true religion.

Among the majority of worldly professors, *the love of the world will be prominent*. There will be no restraint placed upon the passions and desires, but that which arises from a wish to save appearances before men, and a regard for their own temporal security. The word of God will never be consulted, in order to receive information respecting the best mode of spending time, or the way in which intercourse with the world should be carried on. Its admonitions on this subject are either unknown or totally disregarded. The pursuit of temporal objects,—of honour, of riches, or of pleasure, will occupy their whole thoughts and their whole time. They have imagined that religion is compatible with these things, and that they may love God and love the world too. Hence, such professors of religion

are seen at the theatre and in the ball-room ; and many an hour that would otherwise hang heavy on their hands is spent at the card-table ; not, they will say, in gambling, but in mere amusement. It is also to be regretted, that there are some ministers of religion who give their countenance to such vain amusements. They can be present at the assembly, and frequent the race-course, and appear to forget that they should be devoted to the service of God. No excuse can avail them, on scriptural grounds. No rank in society, no pretence of mixing with the higher classes, and *beneficially* influencing them, by repressing the exhibition of evil, can be sufficient here. They may act on principles of expediency and of worldly policy, but this will not do for eternity or even for time. They are manifestly acting in the spirit of the world, and sanctioning practices which have always been found most injurious to the real happiness of men ; because they lead to forgetfulness of God, and the encouragement of vice. They profess to be ministers of that holy religion, the author of which thus speaks to those who preach his word : “ In all things, showing thyself a pattern of good works.” “ Be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity.”

The example above alluded to, has a very pernicious effect. It rivets the fetters of infidelity around the sceptic, and leads multitudes to be satisfied with themselves, when they find that they are no worse than their ministers ; while the inquirer

after truth is filled with anxiety and wonder. It is indeed affecting to think that *any* man, who professes to be guiding his fellow-creatures in the way of *holiness*, of *self-denial*, and of *consistency*, in all things, can yet manifest such conduct. It is as if his preaching were only the *acting* of the Sunday, and the place of performance the temple of the living God. The character is assumed, and sustained for a little time; but when their part is done, the disguise is thrown off, and there is an immediate return to the realities of common life, and to the spirit and conduct of the world. Such men are *not* blessings to society. What they are, will best be shown when the destinies of mankind are developed, Luke xvii. 1.

Worldly professors also *frequently manifest their dislike to spiritual religion*. Satisfied with the name, they are displeased if any thing more should be spoken of, as necessary to constitute the Christian character. In conversation, every allusion to what is spiritual, is received with a frown; and even from the pulpit, the subject of experimental religion is listened to with a marked dislike. If they should meet with these topics in the publications of the day, they receive their decided reprobation; and they can hardly find epithets strong enough to express their disgust at those who can venture to speak plainly of the religion of the heart, of the spiritual worship which God requires, and of the evil of conformity to the world. The doctrines of the new birth, of salvation by grace, of the work of the Holy Spirit on the soul of man; to be convinced of the

importance of faith in Christ, and of self-denial in his service ;—these things are rejected as indications of enthusiasm or imbecility of mind. They have decided with themselves, that they may be religious, without thinking or speaking about religion ; and that they may possess love to God, even while they do not retain him in their thoughts, and systematically oppose his will. They consider themselves good Christians, while Christ is unknown to them except by name. His atonement, his love, his condescension, and his intercession on behalf of sinners, present nothing interesting to them, and consequently are all despised as unworthy of their attention.

Hence, when they read expressions which have been employed by Christians, indicating a deep sense of unworthiness and self-abasement in the sight of God, even while they were doing the will of God ; they suspect either that they are guilty of some secret sins, though they pretend so much sanctity in the outward conduct, or, that it is the language of unnecessary humility, of spiritual pride, even while affecting to be very humble. They have no feelings in common with those who sincerely say, “ If thou, Lord, shouldst mark iniquity, O Lord, who could stand ? ” “ We are unprofitable servants.” “ In all things we offend, and come short of thy glory.” “ By grace ye are saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.” The language of contrition does not suit those who have never seen their sinfulness, or the claims of the Divine law. They never feel hum-

bled on account of their numerous violations of the commands of God ; for they vainly think that their religious profession, and their attention to outward duties constitute them Christians, and that God cannot require more. To such persons the language of Scripture must indeed be inexplicable, and the atonement of Christ must appear altogether unnecessary.

When such are the principles of many professors, we might expect that the ordinances of religion would be but slightly observed. It is indeed the principal part of their religion to go once on the Sabbath day to a place of worship, but a very trifling reason will keep them away. The Sabbath brings no pleasure to them on its return; it is rather a period of time tedious and insipid. The *real* design of the day of rest is unknown and unfelt. If one part of it is spent in public worship, the rest of the day is considered as their own. Their consciences are satisfied with one service, and all the remaining hours, are spent “ in thinking their own thoughts, and in finding their own pleasure.” Instruction in divine things, an opportunity of having the soul benefited, communion with God and with his Son Jesus Christ, are never considered as the great objects to be attained in the duties of the Sabbath day. All is attended to as a form ; bodily service is given, but the soul is withheld. The mind is as much secularized as on other days of the week ; and to view the arrangements of the family, and the way in which their time is spent, it seems as if it were not a day of sacred rest, but one of worldly

bustle and sensual indulgence. Retirement to the closet, for the purpose of self-examination, is unknown; the reading of the Scriptures is in general neglected, and religious conversation is carefully avoided. It may be that some favourite preacher is spoken of with approbation—but this is all.

Worldly professors will also neglect a most important duty—the *religious instruction of their families*. That this should be the case will only appear consistent with their personal neglect of spiritual religion. The same individuals will use every means to procure for their children useful knowledge, as it regards the present life. Much expense may be incurred in giving to their offspring “a good education,” but not one thought is devoted to the instruction of their family in the principles of true religion. They grow up as ignorant of scriptural morality, and of the doctrines of the Gospel, as if the Bible had never been bestowed on them. Such parents may indeed take their children with them to a place of religious worship on the Sabbath, and they will tell you that this is quite enough of religion for children. They forget, or perhaps never knew, that if, in human learning, the rudiments, the first principles, must be acquired before there can be any proper understanding of the language or science that is taught; in religion it is even more necessary that the first principles should be communicated, and that children, from step to step, should be led in the way of Christian knowledge.

It is granted that there are professors of religion, who do use means at home to instruct their children

in the theory of religion. They teach them a catechism, and they may even go so far as to make them commit passages of Scripture to memory ; but it is done in a formal way. The heart is not interested in the performance of the duty. There is no affectionate admonition, no attempt to impress upon their minds the supreme importance of divine truth. The pleasures of religion are never mentioned, and the claims of Jehovah are never urged. It is to both parties an irksome task. By the one, it is performed with dislike and aversion ; by the other, it is got over superficially and hastily, as a bribe to conscience. No good result is produced, either upon the minds of the children or the feelings of the parents.

There is also a great difference between mere professors and real Christians, *as it respects the temper they exhibit*. There is nothing that more powerfully discovers the influence of Christianity than in the effect produced by it upon the spirit and the temper. When it represses the ebullitions of hasty passion, and keeps anger (perhaps justly caused) from reaching the length of resentment and revenge, to which evils the individuals were formerly prone, we are compelled to see the correctness of the scriptural declarations respecting the doctrines of the cross.

It is well fitted to show the reality of true religion. But how different is it with the mere formalist. He is not affected in this way by the religion which he professes. All his passions are unsubdued ; his irritable temper receives no check,

and he yields to its full and injurious influence in his own family, and sometimes even in his intercourse with the world. The spirit of malevolence is exercised against his fellow-creatures, the same as if Jehovah had never said, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." A very trivial offence will produce anger, and this will be cherished till resentment is formed against the real or supposed offender. The spirit of the world will be so completely imbibed, that the maxim will be readily adopted, "*Revenge is sweet.*" No bridle will restrain the tongue; bitterness will not "be put away;" the name of Christian is retained, but alas! the Spirit of Christ does not dwell in the heart.

It is indeed astonishing to see persons deceive themselves by supposing that they are Christians, while their spirit and temper are so opposed to the plain declarations of the Holy Scriptures: such as "Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice; and be ye kind, one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake, hath forgiven you."

The principles of the worldly professor are also discovered to be *miserably defective in the hour of affliction*. He too must encounter the troubles of life, but religion has no softening, no subduing effect upon his mind. He murmurs and frets; he judges harshly of the divine arrangements; he thinks he does "well to be angry." He derives no comfort from the word of God, neither does he seek it there. The promises of the Gospel yield no con-

solation, because he does not understand or believe them. He is indeed compelled to submit; but it is to his fate—to stern necessity—to the law of nature. His submission is not that of a child, saying “thy will be done.”

There is another view of the conduct of worldly professors, which justice, and not inclination compels me to take. We have already seen, that they dislike spiritual, experimental religion. This, however, is not confined to the doctrines of the Gospel, and its more spiritual and devotional duties, but extends to those who love and practise these things. It may appear illiberal to assert, but the truth of the assertion could be borne out by an appeal to facts, that there is too great a readiness to listen to, and to believe any calumny that may be uttered against the true Christian,—a readiness to circulate the slander, and to strengthen it by their own prejudices and additions. How harshly and uncharitably do they think and speak against serious people, accusing them of hypocrisy and pride; and without at all seeing their inconsistency, they will, in the same breath, say that they are righteous overmuch, unnecessarily strict, too precise, and unsociable. This dislike of true religion, (for that is the secret spring of all this evil speaking against the people of God,) makes those who are naturally amiable, the very opposite when religion is in question; and excites emotions unfavourable to their own peace of mind, and which sadly proves the enmity of the human heart against the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

All this worldly mindedness—this love of pleasure—this yielding to the passions—this dislike to spiritual religion—this inattention to many religious duties, and the heartless way in which others are performed, will only serve to confirm the believer in the truth of Scripture statements, and will constrain him to adore that goodness which has led him to worship God in spirit and in truth. But to those who have not yet been able to discriminate between a worldly professor and a real Christian, the injury produced may be very great. Let us examine this view of the subject for a few moments.

The conduct of worldly professors, gives to the persons above referred to, a *very false estimate of true religion*. They are led to consider it as confined to a mere profession, with some attention to religious observances. But it is not viewed as calling upon men for the homage and service of the heart. It is also thought to be compatible with this form of religion, to be worldly minded, ambitious, selfish, sensual, and “lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God.” It is considered, as by no means interfering with any pursuit that is not actually gross or immoral, according to the standard of the world. It appears to sanction the spending of the whole time in the pursuit of the objects of this life, and the giving up of the whole affections to earthly things. In short, the religion which is presented to them in the conduct of worldly professors, leads them to suppose that man may easily serve two masters, God and Mammon, though the Saviour has declared that it is impossible

In connection with this, a *most erroneous view is given of worldly things*. The love or pursuit of them does not appear to endanger the happiness of men. On the contrary, they are valued as capable of themselves to yield the chief enjoyment of life. They are not considered as things that should be avoided, or at least the love of them kept from the heart ; but sought after, as the chief objects of human desires. The company of worldly men is preferred to the fellowship of saints. And conversation on *any* subject, no matter how trifling, is loved better than the smallest allusion to divine truth.

The influence of worldly professors, produces also *an indifference to the subject of spiritual, personal religion*. This indeed might result from the natural disinclination of the heart to the things of God. But it is confirmed, and greatly strengthened, when multitudes who profess to respect religion, act in opposition to its plainest statements. An empty profession receives the sanction of the majority. *Numbers*, instead of *truth* regulate the judgment of many in their estimate of religion. They will not seek their religion from the Bible ; so that the book, which is the only sure guide to the knowledge and service of God, is laid aside as unnecessary and inapplicable, and the form of religion which their fellow creatures present before them, is adopted and preferred. The soul is as much neglected in this worldly system, as if it did not form a part of man, and needed no salvation ; and the things of eternity excite as little interest in the mind, as if there existed no life beyond the grave. All that is neces-

sary for man's spiritual welfare—all that leads to a devotional spirit, and supreme love to the Divine Being, is omitted, while every error and delusion is cherished, which can encourage to a life of formality, and keep from the conviction “of sin, righteousness, and judgment to come.”

Baneful, however, as the example of worldly professors is to many persons, and calculated as we have seen it to be, to strengthen delusion, and to keep from the knowledge and love of God, there are those, who, from various circumstances, have in some degree escaped from its influence.

Perhaps they have been accustomed to read with attention the sacred Scriptures, and sojourning with those who made a religious profession, but whose spirit and conduct were completely of a worldly kind, they have been struck with the inconsistency presented to their view; or, they may have read some accounts of the lives of real Christians, and have there seen how different their conduct was from that of their friends. Or they may see the difference in the deportment and spirit of *living* Christians, notwithstanding all the prejudices which their minds had previously imbibed against the people of God. They may, in short, have come to this conclusion respecting the matter; that if obedience to the requirements of Scripture be necessary to constitute the Christian character; and, if the life of holiness, displayed by those who are called “righteous over much,” be really the service which God requires, then, their friends are wrong. A mere *profession* of religion is not enough.

Such a conviction may exist in the minds of individuals who are not taught by the Spirit of God. Hence it is, that though some may feel and speak to themselves in this way, they yet continue to be satisfied with “a form of godliness, while they deny the power thereof.” Or at least there is no desire to become partakers of spiritual religion. They may have at different times, and from peculiar circumstances, convictions that all is not right. But a form of religion, without the heart or affections being interested, is so congenial to human nature, that they go on from day to day, self-condemned, and occasionally constrained to be more strict than usual, in certain outward religious duties.

But when the Spirit of God has enlightened the understanding, and shown in some degree the nature of true religion, and that God requires purity of heart and life; then, it does appear more evident that worldly professors are altogether wrong, in fancying a form of godliness to be enough. There will now be a continual comparison going on in the mind of the inquirer, between the principles and conduct of the formalists, and the principles and conduct enforced in the word of God. Still indeed, the influence of a worldly profession, will be partially felt, and there will be an unwillingness to pronounce an outward respect for religion, and attention to some of its ordinances, altogether worthless in the sight of God. There may be an idea cherished in the mind, that it is rather uncharitable to conclude, that such persons are mocking God, that Jehovah rejects their persons and services with ab-

horrence ; and that on that day, when the destinies of unnumbered millions are determined for ever, they will be found among the number, who have said, “ Lord, Lord,” and did not the things which he commanded : and on whom the tremendous sentence, of everlasting banishment from the Divine presence will be passed.

And yet how necessary is it, that individuals partially convinced of the inadequacy of a mere profession, should be shown from the Scriptures how utterly unavailing it is, and that there is no violation of Christian charity, in speaking of such professors, as exposed to the displeasure of God. Nay, that they themselves will be placed in the same condemnation, if they have “ a name to live, while they are dead :” that their own peace of mind and eternal happiness are connected with scriptural views of this important matter. It is supposed, that such persons are desirous of information. Any farther remarks that may now be made, will be to assist their inquiries. In doing so, we must appeal to the Scriptures, and try to ascertain the mind of the Spirit of God, on this momentous subject.

There, we can discover without any difficulty, that God requires more from his intelligent creatures than a mere profession of religion, and an attention to external services.

If we direct our attention to the Old Testament, we shall there discover the claims of Jehovah, and the necessity of consecrating the heart and the affections to Him. How comprehensive are his words ! “ Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, with

all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.”* The promise which God gives to the truly penitent, includes this blessing: “And the Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live.”† Jehovah announced to his servant Samuel the following important truth: “The Lord seeth not as man seeth, for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.”‡ David declares his conviction that God required the homage of the heart. “Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts.”§ “If I regard iniquity in mine heart the Lord will not hear me.”|| “I know also, my God, that thou triest the heart, and hast pleasure in uprightness.”¶ When we turn to the New Testament, every page presents the extensive, spiritual claims of Jehovah. They are confirmed and enforced by new and powerful reasons. Faith in Christ is required as necessary to salvation; and this faith is described as producing holy effects in the hearts and lives of all who possess it. Thus, it is said, “These are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, and the Son of God, and that believing ye might have life through his name.”** “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.”†† “If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath

* Deut. vi. 5.

† Deut. xxx. 6.

‡ 1 Sam. xvi. 7.

§ Ps. li. 6.

|| Ps. lxxvi. 18.

¶ 1 Chron. xxix. 17.

** John xx. 31.

†† Acts xvi. 31.

raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.”*

“For the grace of God, that bringeth salvation, hath appeared to all men; teaching us, that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world.”† His true people are described and distinguished by various epithets and qualities, which cannot possibly apply to mere professors of religion. They are called “Children of God.” Rom. viii. 15—17. Gal. iv. 6. The salt of the earth and the light of the world. Mat. v. 13, 14. Peacemakers. Mat. v. 9. Sons of God. Phil. ii. 14, 15. Partakers of a divine nature. 2 Peter, i. 4. A new creation. 2 Cor. v. 17. As washed, and sanctified, and justified. 1 Cor. vi. 10, 11. 1 Thess. v. 23. And when we also examine the exhortations, admonitions, warnings, and promises, addressed to professors of religion, it is plain that they can only apply to *saints*—to those separated from the love of the world, and whose hearts have been renewed by the Spirit of God. Here it can only be necessary to refer to those Christian graces which adorn the Christian character, mentioned by the apostle Paul in his Epistle. Rom. xii. 9, to the end of the chapter. Let the reader examine that portion of God’s word, and he will see what a professor of religion is required to be.

Besides these passages of Scripture, if we examine the biography of the sacred volume, we shall

* Rom. x. 9.

† Tit. ii. 11, 12.

find that the individuals who are spoken of with approbation, embodied in their faith and practice the doctrines and commandments of God. Neither can it be justly said, that the precepts, and admonitions, and examples of the New Testament, were only adapted to a rude and imperfect state of society, or to those who from infancy had been ignorant of the true God. On the contrary, the sayings of Christ were addressed to a people who were strict professors of religion, and it formed a great part of their guilt that they had *only* a profession. He reprov'd them in words like these; "How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only." John v. 44. "In vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men." "Woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you pay tithe of mint, and anise, and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith; these ought you to have done, and not to leave the other undone." The solemn expression, "Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God," was addressed to a teacher of the Jews. The declaration, "God is a spirit, and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth," was made to a Samaritan woman. The apostolic epistles were addressed not only to Gentiles, but also to Jews,—to all, of every tribe and nation, that could be found in the Roman empire, who were members of Christian churches. No spread of Christian profession

through a whole nation—no refinement of manners—no improvement in science or philosophy—could change the features of the Christian character, or lessen the necessity of spiritual heart-service being offered to the Most High God, by every one that named the name of Jesus. In all ages, and in all countries, the Gospel has produced the same effects wherever it has been received. The doctrines of Christianity are adapted and intended for universal reception. The precepts of the Bible are moral, spiritual, and eternal laws, which demand obedience in every circumstance of human life, and in every state of society. And it will come to pass, when these have produced their intended effects upon the children of men, that incense and a *pure offering* will be presented to Jehovah from the rising to the setting sun.

The Christian character is thus plainly marked. At the same time, the vanity, wickedness, and danger of a mere profession, are plainly made known. Love of the world, or a preference given to earthly things, is at once declared to be a proof that God is *not* loved. 1 John ii. 15, 16. James iv. 4. Disregard to the divine law is thus spoken of; “He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be abomination.” Prov. xxviii. 9. The worthlessness of lip service is described by the prophet Isaiah xxix. 13, 14. Isaiah lix. 1, 2. The Saviour himself states the following truth: “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in

heaven." Mat. vii. 21. The Apostle Paul speaks in the language of prophecy, and foretels what will happen to mere worldly professors. "The Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven, with his mighty angels, in flaming fire, taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power."

No sophistry of men, no love of error and delusion, can fairly give another meaning to those passages than what they plainly present. It is language, expressing not the danger of the gross and abandoned transgressor merely, but the danger of those also who may possess a fair name among their fellows, and who may have professed for many years the Christian faith. They may have regularly attended some place of religious worship, and, (when they thought upon the subject,) they may have considered themselves very good Christians. They were, however, deceiving themselves, for all the time they were destitute of faith, love, and obedience to Jesus Christ. The dawnings of a spiritual existence were not visible, for their hearts had never been changed by the Spirit of God, and they were still in love with sin. No evil passion was subdued—no grateful emotion towards God was ever cherished; "they had a name to live, while they were dead." It needeth not the breach of human laws to constitute a sinner. It requires no practice of gross immorality to expose the soul to the divine displeasure. He knows nothing aright

of the character of God's law, who does not know, that a refusal to yield the heart to him—to love him better than any other object in the universe, constitutes a crime of the deepest die, and deserves his fiercest anger. Indeed, all that is sinful and imperfect in the conduct of men may be traced to this want of love to God. Now, a worldly professor has no love to God, or he could not be satisfied with the things of the world, and an empty form of godliness.

Let those especially, who have been injured by the example of professors, and have formed incorrect notions respecting God, themselves, and the way of salvation, receive the faithful sayings of the Bible, respecting the character of Jehovah—the perfection of his law—the danger arising from the love of the world—the necessity and duty of believing the Gospel, and the purity and consistency of the Christian character, and it will be impossible any longer to be satisfied with the form of religion, either in themselves or in others. It is because the declarations of God's word respecting these things, are not believed, that men go on from day to day deceiving themselves in the great matters of salvation; that religion, which ought to be attended to as the great business of life, is shut up in a corner of time; and even then, is cheated of its claims upon the affections and the heart. Men do not like to believe any charges against themselves—especially when these refer to the subject of religion, which they may have professed for a number of years. Hence their obstinate rejection of the humbling

truths of the Gospel, and their willingness to live and die in their present state.

But above all, those whose darkness has in some measure been dispelled—whose prejudices are in some degree removed—who *have* seen that a worldly *professor* is *not* a Christian; ought to persevere in their inquiries, till they themselves partake of the true Christian character. It is not a matter of option, whether they ought to go forward, or be contented with their present imperfect views. They are bound by the highest considerations, to continue the pursuit. Grant that they have been disgusted and stumbled, by the discoveries they have made of the antichristian conduct of professors. They have also found out, that their whole behaviour is condemned by the word of God. They must acknowledge, that as far as they have proceeded in the examination of the Scriptures, there is not the smallest countenance given to a *profession of religion*, without corresponding holy effects. That, on the contrary, there are plain and frequent declarations against such will worship—such bodily service, which can profit men nothing. They must also know, that no part of the hypocrisy and worldly mindedness of professors, can justly be charged upon Christianity, but on the deceitfulness and wickedness of the human heart. What is then their duty? It is to seek with all their hearts, the *power* as well as the form of godliness. To be *warned* by the evil example of professors, instead of being *seduced* into evil by it. The subject is of infinite moment, and they *cannot* now return into the state

of death-like formality, without a guilty and an uneasy conscience.

But may we not hope, that there is on the part of the reader, a sincere desire to do what is right in this matter—a wish to possess that Christian character, which is so fully described in the word of God, and without which there can be no salvation. With joy we would assist him in his earnest desires.

Let it be his first object, to obtain correct views of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. To believe the testimony of God concerning his Son, and to renounce for ever all his false and delusive hopes, produced by an outward attention to religious duties. Let him not, however, be too easily satisfied with the change of his views respecting religion. He should see that the conviction of his former errors and wickedness, is so strong as to lead him to deep humility of spirit, and to a grateful acquiescence in the plan of human redemption. Let it at the same time be kept in view, that there can be no change for the better, if he is not taught to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts—to restrain his passions and temper, and indeed to abstain from every thing that would give an unfavourable view of the Gospel of Christ.

It is not too much to say, that if there is faith in Christ, the inquirer will experience real joy and peace. He will be able to show, to his relations and friends who may still be cherishing dangerous delusions, that real religion does not produce gloomy effects. That, on the contrary, it imparts real happiness to every possessor of it, and enables him to

enjoy the things of this life far better, than when he was a mere formalist like themselves. For never till taught the value of the Gospel, did he view every temporal and spiritual blessing, as coming from the hand of a Father in heaven. Again, if there is the operation of religious principles in his heart and life, he will refuse to join in those vain amusements which he once eagerly pursued, and which may be described as the amusements of *the world*. This will not be done in the spirit of moroseness, or in the language of contempt; but in the spirit of meekness and of firmness. It is well also, when the Christian can give good reasons for his conduct. Indeed, it appears to be his duty to give a reason for his practice, as well as of his hope. A calm, judicious statement of reasons may be required by those friends or relations, whose authority may have weight, and whose affection may be unquestionable. Even though the inquiry may be made in an angry tone, and from a wish to perplex, yet it is a noble triumph for Christian principle, when the answer is affectionate, scriptural, and decided. Those friends who are still pursuing the gay, and corrupting, and corroding pleasures of the world; some of whom are perhaps approaching the last stage of human life, should be told that time is too valuable to be spent in mere amusements—that a regard for their own peace of mind should keep them from such vanities, even if time were of no value. It may with truth be stated, that Christians ought not to do any thing, which would unfit the mind for the service of God, and that would induce

others to pursue the world, and neglect the concerns of the immortal spirit. That there can be no happiness—no enjoyment,—even if there was no sin, in the pursuits and worldly conversation of the irreligious. And it could also be said, that it was a mark of folly, for any one wilfully to place himself in a situation, which would render him unprepared to obey the summons that calls him into eternity. The inquirer, whose mind became established in the truth, could likewise show, that there is *no necessity* for seeking worldly pleasures—that God has given those powers of mind, which are capable of almost unlimited improvement—that, from the streams of human knowledge, he can draw many valuable supplies, and which can enable him to judge better and so decide more correctly, respecting the visible works of God, and to scan more easily the movements of the human mind. He can thus show, that many hours of rational enjoyment may be obtained without exciting his passions, or rendering him discontented, by pursuing objects which multitudes admire. He too could tell (perhaps to incredulous ears) of the pleasure to be derived from the study of the word of God—of the stores of heavenly wisdom to be found there—of the refreshing streams of living water flowing from that fountain of divine love, and which are so well fitted to cheer him amidst the difficulties of his earthly pilgrimage. And he can add to all the rest, that no man can live merely for himself, or luxuriate in his own indulgences, without a great crime. There are works of benevolence, which huma-

nity and Christianity alike call on him to perform ; he has the ignorant to instruct—the afflicted to relieve—the mourner to comfort, and the dying to pity and assist. He has his family to bring up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord ; many duties as a master, as a citizen, and as a neighbour to perform. The man who conscientiously attends to these, will frequently find his time too brief, his mind too much occupied, though he seeks not the amusements of the day, or the addition of anxiety and worldly disappointment. Indeed, no man who really knows the purpose for which time was given, will find it necessary, in order to spend it, to commit sin, or rush into the way of temptation.

Let this conviction be shown in your improvement of the hours of life, in attending to every relative duty, in enduring trials without repining, and in suffering affliction without murmuring. Let the power of religion not only be felt, but also shown in constraining you to seek the happiness of all around you. “ For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be idle nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” 2 Pet. i. 8.

CHAPTER VI.

THE INFLUENCE OF RIDICULE ON THE MINDS OF
RELIGIOUS INQUIRERS.

THE Saviour, who knew the end from the beginning, warned the children of men against the influence of a false shame arising from ridicule, as well as against the fear which results from a more violent opposition to divine truth. "Whosoever, therefore, shall be ashamed of me and of my words, in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." He knew what was in man, and therefore applied his monitory language in such a way, that we should fear his displeasure more than the laugh of the scorner. He was well acquainted with the variety of ways in which men would oppose his cause, and he prepared the mind by his warnings and promises.

There are cases (which, alas! too frequently occur), in which the constant and persevering petty opposition of some relation or friend, may be more injurious than one or two instances of violent persecution on the part of an avowed enemy. Against the latter you can be better armed, as the very boldness of the attack will arouse every energy in repell-

ing it; but in the former case, how can you be on your guard, in the midst of domestic or friendly intercourse? And yet you may see in the countenance, or hear from the lips of some professing friend, enough to excite painful emotions.

Constituted as the human mind is, it derives many of its pleasures, and depends for much of its comfort on the opinions of fellow-creatures. It follows, then, that their approbation or disapprobation—their esteem or contempt—their respect or mockery—will materially influence a person's mind. And this influence will be greater or less, according to the degree of intimacy that exists, the talent that is possessed, or the influence that has been acquired. This holds good, even when religious matters are concerned.

The man, indeed, who has counted the cost in becoming a Christian,—who has contended, and contended successfully against many opposing difficulties in his Christian course, may not be exposed to injury from the influence of derision or contempt. His character and principles are known, and he will be less frequently annoyed. And when he is assailed by the shafts of ridicule, his conviction of the infinite importance of eternal things will blunt them. He knows the reason of the world's contempt, and can therefore view it in its proper light.

Though strength of mind, or rather strength of principle enables a Christian, not only to repel ridicule, but to derive good from it, yet even *he* must feel it disagreeable to be exposed to it. We may therefore readily suppose, that to an individual who

is naturally sensitive and timid, whose religious principles are not formed, and who does not understand or know the true reason of the scorner's laugh, mockery and contempt must be exceedingly painful, and sometimes injurious.

Indeed, so successful has this method of opposing truth been found, especially when directed against the young, that it appears desirable to enter farther into this view of the subject than might have been otherwise done.

When an individual has commenced a course of inquiry regarding divine truth; when he appears to be in earnest on the subject, and frequents a place of worship oftener than he used to do; when he associates less with his former companions, and seeks to form acquaintances among serious people; to read books once neglected, and seems to have about him an air of greater steadiness and seriousness;—when such is the case, or even when appearances are less decided, his old companions, and sometimes his nearest relations, begin to suspect that he is infected with religious mania, and they act accordingly.

In some cases, arguments may be used to dissuade from unnecessary strictness. In others, the danger of losing the favour of friends, or injuring his worldly prospects may be urged. Even parental authority is sometimes exerted, beyond its natural limit, to prevent the wildness of fanaticism; or, in other words, to repress all earnest inquiry respecting the soul and eternal things.

In many instances, however, another, and sometimes a more effectual course, is adopted. When

the language of contempt can safely be uttered against religion itself, it will be done; but, in most cases, the *professors* of religion, or some part of their conduct which can be represented in a ludicrous point of view, will be the subject of ridicule. The various names of saints, enthusiasts, and fanatics, will be uttered in great profusion, and they will endeavour to turn into mockery what they call the language of cant; which is sometimes (though unknown to them) the language of Scripture. Nay, they do not confine their ridicule to religion, and decidedly religious characters; but if an inquirer should let slip any word which may indicate reflection, or do any thing which they judge to be closely allied to seriousness of deportment; jokes without number, sarcasms are again and again repeated, till they become, even to people of the world, hacknied and disgusting. But this is not all: So unkind and illiberal is this spirit of opposition to what is good, that those who possess it will bring against serious people the vile charges of hypocrisy and deceit. These are thought allowable weapons in this warfare, if they can but succeed in stopping their inquiring friend in his Quixotic pursuit.

It is indeed to be lamented, that individuals, otherwise amiable and respectable, occasionally join in this hue and cry against attention to true religion. They may not do this from any malicious intention, but influenced by a bad example, and fancying they may materially serve one, who is in imminent danger of falling into a state of mental delusion.

A very slight acquaintance with human nature

will convince us, that the effects resulting from such opposition is often injurious to inquirers. For instance, if the mind of an individual is timid, and accustomed to pay deference to the judgments of others, every desire after truth will be damped by a sneer, and all his ardour in the pursuit of religious knowledge cooled by a laugh. The importance of eternal things will seem to be lessened by the mockery of some foolish acquaintances, who perhaps are skilled in the art of rendering every subject ridiculous. However contemptible their expressions may be, yet they may have the effect of lowering in his estimation the apparent solemnity of Divine revelation.

Let it not be said, "Oh if his religion is worth any thing, he can bear a laugh against it." True, if his desire after heavenly wisdom be real, he will succeed in finding it in spite of all opposition. But *is there, can there* be a single justifiable reason why any one should be compelled to run the gauntlet of ridicule, merely because he is attending to a matter which ought to be most interesting to every human being? Would it be considered kind or just, to attempt to impose a task on *babes*, which those only could perform who had arrived at full maturity of mind and body? Alas! there is enough in human nature to keep from the study of religion, without the additional opposing influence of the "world's dread laugh." The human heart is fertile in excuses for neglecting *that* subject, which no one should neglect.

But the evil is rendered greater, when we consi-

der that in a person whose mind is just opening to the importance of eternal things, there is that degree of excitement which greatly increases its natural sensibility and timidity. The feelings are keenly alive to every thing at all relating to the new and momentous object of pursuit. That which would have been *once* unnoticed is *now* deeply felt. And as the inquirer does not yet possess decided views respecting Divine truth, and is perhaps more inclined than ever to distrust his own judgment, the laugh of the scorner produces an unhappy effect. Anxiety and shame are only some of the evils resulting from it. This is more particularly the case, when the opposition is met with from those who ought to encourage every inquiry after truth, rather than to repress it.

How pitiful, as well as wicked, is it for those who are themselves destitute of the first principles of morality and religion, to try to prevent others from obtaining possession of them. They laugh at things of which they know nothing, and ridicule those who are only acting the part that every rational being should imitate. Indeed, it often happens that individuals, whose intellects are defective, succeed best in this species of warfare, and if they were the only persons who employed it, we could not be surprised. But it is astonishing that men of learning and general knowledge should imitate their example. And when this is done for the purpose of hunting down some individual they still call their *friend*, because he begins to do right, it is unworthy and base indeed. It would be more consistent to laugh at

their own follies, and be ashamed of their own delusions.

An excuse is sometimes ventured upon by such persons. "Oh," say they, "argument is out of the question with those who are under the influence of enthusiasm; their understandings are confused; their judgments are bewildered, and argument would only make them worse. Such a mode of proceeding is now unavailing, for they have got beyond the power of logic; nothing will now do but ridicule." But even on the principles of worldly men, the remedy does not seem suitable. Ridicule is not *now* the test of truth; so that if they should succeed in stopping some unhappy individual in his way to the temple of truth, and again compel him to cast in his lot among the foolish and the wicked, it no more proves truth to be error than error to be truth. It does indeed prove the wickedness of the tempters, and the weakness of the tempted, but *truth* has nothing to do with it. If any one of their friends should direct his attention to an examination of Divine truth—should he hesitate in following a multitude to do evil—should he be manifesting a desire to receive instruction in those matters which he had once altogether neglected—should he now seek information from sources which were formerly unvisited and unknown—the better way would be, to see wherein he was wrong, and try to correct him. The very desire after instruction—the very state of mind implied in these inquiries is favourable, rather than otherwise, for reasoning and argument. The inquirer has surely not yet reached the supposed alarming

state of enthusiasm. He is only seeking information. A *prudent*, a *kind*, and a *rational* mode of procedure, on the part of friends, *might* stop him before he arrived at fanaticism. As yet he is far from it; for surely there is no such evil in inquiring about the subject of religion—there is no enthusiasm in seeking to examine the word of God—in thinking about the concerns of the soul—in having some *little* desire to be right in the sight of God. Nay, we may go farther. It cannot be enthusiasm to wish to be happy, to love God, and to desire to obey his commandments—to value the soul more than the body, and to believe God sooner than man. But if careless, worldly-minded individuals, still object to even a trifling inquiry in religious matters, let them try to prove, to the conviction of an awakened and an inquiring mind, that the pleasures of sense constitute the chief good—that to neglect God and the soul is the first and great commandment—that the religion of the Bible is unworthy the attention of intelligent beings—that human knowledge is better than Divine—that the God who made him has no claim upon his affection or obedience, and that there is no hereafter—no judgment-day—no heaven or hell. This would be more honest and fair on the part of the enemies of the Gospel, than to raise a senseless laugh, which may occasion unnecessary distress to a sensitive and amiable mind, but which can produce conviction in none.

There may be indeed some master minds beyond the influence of a sneer, and to whom contempt is

seldom if ever shown by his associates. Before he ever thought of religion, his mind had influence over the minds of others. He was the boldest in sin, as well as the strongest in intellect. He knew the guage of the mental powers of his companions. He could turn them with a powerful hand, and his authority durst not be disputed. When such an one begins to inquire respecting God and eternal things,—when there is a change in his pursuits and in his general conduct, and that change verges towards religion, it cannot but be seen, and consequently be disliked by his companions. They may wish to mutiny; they would, if they durst, throw off the yoke imposed upon their minds, but for a time they cannot. Wonder may for a while take possession of them, when they see one, who in every thing connected with judgment and knowledge was so superior, yet condescending to seek information on topics against which he once directed all his energies. Laugh at him they must not; to taunt him they are afraid.

Such an individual has of course many advantages over one of a timid or inferior mind. He goes on in his pursuit of knowledge unfettered, except by the pride of intellect. He may perceive some tendency in his companions to dissolve all connection with him, but he is not affected by any thing they may say or do on such a subject. Even if they venture to raise a laugh against him, the look of scorn with which he repelled their attempt would discourage them from making a second. If he is a sincere inquirer after truth, he will, however, of

his own accord, *cease* to be the companion of the thoughtless and the wicked. But even this necessary step should not be taken without an attempt to do them good. He has been, from his circumstances, exempt from much uneasiness to which others have been exposed; this, however, should furnish a reason sufficient to lead him to exert his influence in directing the attention of his companions to the great subject of religion. The good that may be done in this way is incalculable. It is a talent which he has abused to the injury of others, but which by a better direction may now be productive of the best effects.

In a great majority of instances, however, the situation of inquirers of the truth is very different. It is for such that these pages are chiefly written. And surely it should be viewed as an act of kindness to state some things which may be useful to persons exposed to the evil influence under review. The best way to do this seems to be to point out the causes of this conduct on the part of their relations and friends, and direct them to some considerations which may tend to alleviate the distress occasioned by such rude and persevering attacks upon their feelings.

It may be safely asserted in general, that there exists in the minds of those who oppose religious inquirers by ridicule, *gross ignorance on the subject of true religion*. In some degree they are conscious of this, even while affecting the contrary. Hence it will be found, that they invariably confine their remarks to companies where at least the majority are as ignorant as themselves. They know

that if they were to act otherwise, an exposure might soon take place, and perchance the laugh might be raised against themselves. And it would not be difficult to do so. Thus if they were asked boldly about their duty to God and man—about the doctrines of the Gospel—about the way of salvation—about the pleasures of religion—they could answer you nothing, except by a sneer. Were their minds at all acquainted with the subject they despise, they would use arguments, they would show their acquaintance with it, and defend themselves. When they do not act in this way, it is a plain indication that “they understand, neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm.” And yet these are the individuals who throw obstacles in the way of knowledge, and seek to repress the energies of a mind awakened to a sense of its solemn responsibility. Really it seems as if it would be acting as foolishly and ignorantly as these individuals, to pay any regard to what they say or do.

But while ignorance of even the theory of religion leads many to use unfair means to repress inquiry, they at the same time know, that ridicule would affect their own minds *more* than opposition of a severer kind. With their present views of religion, they value supremely the world’s approbation; and their fear of being accused of weakness or enthusiasm keeps them as far as possible from attention to the Gospel. Hence they imagine, that what *they* so much dread will also produce fear on the minds of others, and they employ the weapons accordingly. They forget, that while it may be

quite consistent for those who seek only the good opinion of men, and whose happiness is connected with a due regard for the maxims and principles of the world, to dread the sneer of a fellow mortal, it would be inconsistent in those who had seen the vanity and wickedness of such things, and are seeking the honour that cometh from God, to be acted upon by those fears which distress the worldling. Indeed, it will be found, that just in proportion as we prize the principles of true religion, and love the precepts of infinite purity, shall we be able to estimate the contempt which the men of the world manifest, and be unaffected by all the ridicule they cast on the great doctrines of the Gospel.

How strange is it, that individuals who act like the veriest cowards, in shrinking from an attack of ridicule themselves, and yet assail others on every opportunity, should have *any* influence over persons far superior in mind to themselves;—persons who, in every thing *except* religion, would treat their scorn and ridicule with the pity and contempt which they deserved. In the acquisition of knowledge in general, or in the pursuit of any particular science, the very same individuals meet objections boldly, and are not deterred by the sneers of the ignorant and the foolish. But they would imagine their characters injured, and their possession of knowledge and good sense called in question, if their friends or companions could once raise the laugh against them on account of their religious predilections. So true is it, that while some glory in their

shame, others are ashamed of that subject which should constitute their glory.

But there is another reason which strengthens the desire of worldly men to mock religious inquirers. Such a method of proceeding *is an excuse for their own neglect*. Conscious that they are completely indifferent to religion—that they know little about it, and wish to remain in ignorance,—the attention which others pay to the subject is a reproof to them, because there lingers in their minds an acknowledged fear, that after all, they themselves may be in the wrong. When they can therefore succeed in fixing on religious inquirers the charges of absurdity and weakness, and in inducing others to imitate their example, they fancy that they have gained a victory, and try to persuade themselves that true religion is really beneath their notice.

But the main spring of all this opposition and petty persecution *is the enmity of the heart against God and his holy word*. And it displays itself towards those who appear desirous to love God and keep his commandments. It is true, worldly men boast of their liberality, and pretend to rejoice that they are free from the fetters of bigotry and superstition which bind the *saints*, and they may disguise their heartless proceedings against inquirers under the garb of merriment. When they are deeply wounding their spirits, they may call it amusement; and while trying to blast all their rising hopes, by a persevering system of ridicule, they may call the desolation they make peace. But what

is the fact? It is this : that, throughout the whole proceeding, there is the exercise of a bitter enmity against God and spiritual things. There is the bigotry of *practical* infidelity ; there is a superstitious regard for the good opinion of the world ; there is, in short, the grossest illiberality ; and, if the *majority* happened to be persecutors, they would *willingly* join them rather than be singular. We often hear from these men of the *cant* of religious people. But, grant that in some cases it is called by its right name, it is not half so disgusting as the *cant* of worldly men, who, at the very moment they boast of *liberality in general*, are actively employed, in particular cases, in opposing freedom of inquiry in religious matters.

These men may not at all times be aware of the secret workings of their own minds, and they may be ready to deny that they are malicious or illiberal. They may repel the accusation as unjust ; and yet to what else can we attribute such persevering attempts to keep men from God, and from the consideration of spiritual and eternal things? Has it not been found, that all the refinement of civilization, the cultivation of the mental powers, the exercise of naturally amiable and kindly dispositions, is unable to conceal the dislike of the heart to the things of God? It requires not the authority of revelation, (though that is full and conclusive) to convince us that the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”—Every mind which has not been renewed by the

Spirit of God, is opposed to His holy and righteous law, or rather to His own glorious perfections. Jehovah is indeed beyond the influence of ungodly men ; but they manifest their dislike, by opposing his people, and in trying to keep others from becoming his servants.

It may appear to some, as if too much were made of this petty warfare against the well-being of men. But if it is viewed as an indication of a mind contrary to every thing truly good, it is any thing but trifling. For if it be true, that whoever ridicules Christianity, or those who profess it, proves his own mind to be unsanctified, at enmity with God, and under the influence of Satan, then a powerful motive to perseverance is presented to him who is searching after divine truth. He must not expect any sympathy from carnal, ungodly men, in pursuits alike opposed to their opinions and their conduct. If he finds that a determined opposition is made, he should view it as the natural result of certain principles, which, though restrained and modified by circumstances in their outward manifestation, dwell in the heart of all the children of Adam. The very existence of a desire after spiritual knowledge, places him beyond the range of thought and of ideas of worldly men. There can be no community of feeling, no oneness of pursuit. It is true, that if this difference of opinion existed only in worldly matters, there would be no interruption to the harmony of social intercourse, and no desire to distress others, because of their peculiar views. But it is very different in the matter of religion. It calls into exer-

cise passions which become injurious to the possessor, as well as to him who for the time is exposed to their influence.

An attempt has thus been made to show why it is, that so many use the weapons of folly, in trying to turn inquirers from the paths of wisdom. This has been done to lessen, if possible, the irritation and uneasiness produced by the conduct of the enemies of divine truth. But this is not enough. The species of persecution, now under consideration, wounds deeper than might at first be supposed. It is desirable, therefore, to place before religious inquirers, some farther observations, which by the divine blessing, may be found useful in encouraging them to go forward in their search after truth, irrespective of all opposition, whatever form it may assume.

When men are convinced of the importance of any object, and of its essential connection with their own happiness, they will endure and surmount many difficulties in the acquisition of it. This is daily exemplified in the acquisition of human science, the accumulation of riches, and the pursuit of pleasure. The same conviction respecting divine knowledge, and the true riches, will be a powerful stimulant in inquiring after them. And surely such a conviction is well founded. The inquiry is connected with the safety of the immortal spirit. It respects matters of the highest moment to accountable and sinful beings. It has a reference, not only to time, but also to eternity,—not only to

man, but to that God in whom he lives, and moves, and has his being.

When an individual, therefore, proceeds on the principle that he is ignorant of those things which belong to his everlasting peace, and that in the Holy Scriptures he can obtain all the information he needs, there is much to encourage him. In God's word he can become acquainted with his own character, and the evil of sin. There he can discover the love of God to a guilty world. There he can read predictions of the prophets, respecting the Messiah, and behold them all accomplished in the history of Jesus of Nazareth. He can become acquainted with the sayings of him who spake as man never yet spake. There, he can discover the divinity of His nature, by the miracles he wrought in his own name; the language he employed respecting himself, and that in which he was addressed by others. He can find out how the first preachers of Christianity proclaimed the Gospel; read of its wonderful effects, and be told of its blessings. The free offers of mercy will appear suited to his poverty; and its efficacy as able to reach the extent of his sinfulness. He will find the joys of religion described, and the hopes of the Gospel unfolded. His views will be directed beyond the present state of trial and imperfection, to that land where happiness reigns, and where the contemplations of those very things which excite the ridicule of the world, will produce everlasting joy.

If it be true that an inquiry after divine knowledge is so intimately connected with what has just

been stated; that it has to do with the very subject which the Saviour has pronounced to be of infinite moment, when he says, "This is life eternal to know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent." If the soul, and the divine favour reaching to eternity, be put into one scale, and the laughs and sneers of the careless into the other, which *will*, which *ought* to preponderate with him who knows and feels that he is a sinner?

Important as human knowledge is, universal as the desire of wealth and pleasure may be, all sinks into insignificance compared with this inquiry,—*"What must I do to be saved?"* Listen not to worldly men, who would limit research, and discourage such a question as this. The wish to discover truth has not been genuine, if it has not prompted this inquiry. And not only should such a question be proposed, but the answer given should sink deep into the heart: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved."

Were you indeed engaged in some pursuit that was trifling or foolish,—some human scheme,—the execution of which could only involve you in difficulty and distress, friendly persuasion, or even an exposure of the folly of your conduct, might be useful. But this ought to be done by those who themselves know the nature of your scheme, and on good grounds are convinced of its folly and danger. But how different is it, if seeking heavenly wisdom, and earnestly pursuing a better acquaintance with spiritual things. No one can prove such a pursuit to be trifling or foolish—no one that ever engaged in

it sincerely ever experienced it to be so. Whatever opposition then you meet with, must be from those who are altogether ignorant of the subject. Yet even the most senseless and groundless opposition must be distressing to a serious inquirer, because at first he may see many difficulties retarding his progress even in the examination of truth itself. We can hardly conceive a situation more painful, than that of one whose mind is awakened to the most intense anxiety respecting things unseen and eternal, but who has as yet derived no relief for that anxiety from the contemplation of them; teased and irritated by the mockery of fools without, while he has no solid confidence or settled conviction of the truth within.

Great, however, as the difficulties may appear, which present themselves in the way of attaining these, yet there is every encouragement to persevere. Whoever humbly and seriously begins the investigation of Divine truth will certainly succeed; he will gradually perceive the meaning of the Scriptures. Their history and biography, their doctrines and precepts, will become more interesting, and appear more instructive. He will begin to perceive the harmony of their statements, and the importance of their claims. The clouds that darkened his understanding will by degrees be dispelled, and the light of truth will not only enlighten, but console the heart and purify the affections: the promise of Jehovah will be fulfilled,—“Then shall ye know, if ye follow on to know the Lord.” The Gospel will appear as worthy of all acceptance, and the

love of Christ will indeed seem to pass all understanding. Thus the peace of God will rule in the heart by faith; that hope will be laid hold of, which is as an anchor to the soul, both sure and stedfast; and then the wildest storms from without will be met with serenity and composure.

Such a result as this may well serve as a counterpoise to any opposition to be met with from fellow-creatures; and when this increased acquaintance with Divine things is obtained, all that men can say and do will appear trifling. There will now be a personal—an impressive conviction of the importance of truth. Success has crowned the first efforts in the study of it, and there will be a stretching forth to higher attainments in Divine knowledge. A successful inquirer should consider every clearer view he obtains, and every moment of real joy which he experiences in the pursuit of good, as an encouragement to resist evil, and to overcome it in the spirit of meekness. He has now found that, which should animate him in all his future inquiries, and which may impart a hope that he is beginning to think and act as an immortal being should do.

It must not, however, for a moment be supposed, that all this follows without Divine teaching and assistance. When success attends the inquirer, it is plain that he has proceeded, at least some part of the way, under the influence of a real desire to obtain religious knowledge—with a teachable disposition—ready to receive it, though opposed to his former opinions and practice, and with earnest

prayer to the Father of his spirit for his Divine illumination; and these are the effects of Divine influence on the soul. In connection with this, there have been diligence and perseverance; the exercise of all the powers of the mind, and the avoiding of those things that would interfere with his anxious inquiry after salvation. To such persons the aid of heavenly grace is not only promised, but given. "If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not, and it shall be given him."

Here it may be proper to allude for a moment to those who profess to be inquiring after truth, but who never obtain the knowledge of it. They seem to begin well, and yet in a short time give up the pursuit, and allow themselves to be drawn aside by the remarks of ignorant men. Such persons have never been really in earnest; they have not been truly sincere in their inquiries. They have either trusted to their own abilities, or been unwilling to go all the length to which a belief of the truth would lead them. They have not sought the assistance of God's Holy Spirit, and would not receive the humbling and purifying doctrines of grace. They were unwilling to give up their false notions, and they still sought to secure the good opinion of the world. No wonder if they have failed in their proposed object, and that even a laugh has overcome their resolution, and they have stopped short on the very threshold of inquiry. Such persons are much to be pitied. They have had some of the trouble and anxiety of religious inquirers, but they

have never participated in their joys. They have experienced some of the disadvantages of ignorance, but they have reaped none of the advantages of religious knowledge. They have yielded to indifference, and they have done it willingly, because they were afraid to lose the world's favour. They have never, in short, sought the honour that cometh from God. The Saviour reproves *them* when he says, "Ye will not come to me that ye might have life."

But to return to him who has profited by his inquiries. Though his situation is favourable and desirable, yet it is proper to remind him, that great circumspection is necessary to his peace and comfort. While called upon to contend with human beings, whose conduct is not only likely to grieve, but also to irritate by exciting angry feelings, how necessary is it to be watchful over his own temper and spirit. The manifestation of petulance or resentment will be matter of triumph to scorners. The company of such persons ought indeed, as much as possible, to be avoided; but where this is impossible, show them by your firm demeanour that no effort will succeed in deterring you from attending to true religion; but at the same time take care to do so in the spirit of meekness. When bantered about your new views and practices, receive it with good humour; for even this will tend to deprive it of its venom and its point. Besides, there may be occasional opportunities of doing good to your opposers by a hint, and sometimes by a look.

While there is, however, an earnest desire to ac-

quire knowledge—while there is an eagerness of pursuit somewhat proportioned to the importance of the subject—care should be taken that there is no neglect of other duties—no inattention to matters which have a just claim on your time and thoughts. Imprudence here will strengthen prejudice against religion, and give the enemies of the truth more to say against it. It will be their wish to prevent farther inquiry, by trying to show that it is incompatible with a due regard for the proprieties of life.

Be it your concern, by carefully attending to every domestic, relative, and social duty, to prove that this is a great mistake. Let there be no encroachment on the time properly allotted to secular objects, but let the time once spent in sinful or trifling pursuits or in unnecessary indulgence be devoted to your new and nobler pursuits. A conscientious regard should be paid to every thing which in your situation of life demands attention, and thus you may show the compatibility of real religion with the pursuit of worldly business. This will not only serve to silence the objections of the ignorant against religion, but, which is of still greater moment, it will show a proper regard for that supreme authority which says, “Not slothful in business, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord.”

At the same time, how necessary is it, in all your intercourse with society, in all the various and conflicting engagements of human life, while meeting with opposition, contempt, and ridicule when conscientiously obeying God’s commandments, and seeking an increasing acquaintance with his will—how

necessary to look beyond the present scene, from what your fellow-creatures may think and say, to that solemn day, when Jehovah himself will call you to his bar, and decide respecting your destiny. When the approbation or disapprobation of your fellow-mortals will be all forgotten as a dream, and only *His* approbation be of any value, whose favour is life. Thus the maxims and opinions of the world will have lost all their influence and be divested of their plausibility. Then it will be found that there is only one standard of truth, by which the nations shall be judged. However severe and strict that standard may appear to men *now*, and though opposed by them in heart and life, it must *then* be pronounced, even by its bitterest enemies, holy, just, and good.

And is the consideration of these things suitable only in moments of sickness, or in seasons of adversity? No, in the time of health and prosperity it seems even more necessary, for we are then so much in danger of forgetting our latter end. These are subjects which, sooner or later, *must* be attended to, and it is well when they receive that attention while the powers of the mind are in full vigour, and while the body is free from languor and pain. Happy is the inquirer who has attended to these things in time. He will now be prepared by divine aid to “endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.” He will exercise confidence in his goodness, and depend upon his promises, and thus be enabled to surmount all difficulties and finish his course with joy.

CHAPTER VII.

THE DIFFICULTIES ARISING FROM THE CASE OF
BACKSLIDERS.

WERE there no backsliders from a religious profession, we should be tempted to question the truth of some parts of revelation. The scriptural statements of the evils of the human heart would seem to be too highly coloured, and the dangers to which all were exposed in the journey of life made too prominent. The solemn warnings and admonitions addressed to professors of religion, relative to the necessity of watchfulness and prayer during their Christian course, would appear to be unnecessary, and the examples of backsliding and apostacy, recorded in the sacred volume, would seem to refer to another race, and to belong only to times that will never return.

When we hear then of those who once made a profession of religion, and who for a time appeared zealous and active in the cause of truth, renouncing their Christian name, or at least committing sins which render them undeserving of it, we see strong confirmation given to the declarations of Scripture. The necessity appears great, not only for the ad-

monitions of the Bible, but also for Christians seeking that help which God is ever ready to impart. Thus the case of backsliders, when properly considered, ought to stimulate instead of repressing religious inquiry. Yet there is reason to regret that the latter is too frequently the effect produced.

It is not the design of the present paper to state the causes or point out the symptoms of backsliding, or even to mention particularly the way by which backsliders may return to God, though these things will of course be noticed incidentally. The chief object is to mention the effects produced in many minds by the conduct of backsliders; to state some reasons why none should stumble at the backsliding or inconsistencies of others; to describe the conduct which inquirers ought to pursue, while exposed to the influence of such things; and close with a few remarks to the backslider himself.

The term backslider may include both real Christians and those who have only had a Christian profession. In employing the term, however, we wish to be understood as referring chiefly to the latter individuals, because they are not only more numerous, but also in general go to greater lengths in sin and open hostility to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The backsliding of real Christians is more confined to the heart, or at least does not so frequently manifest itself in gross sins. But there is another reason. When the conduct is evidently contrary to the precepts of Scripture, we cannot make any distinction between a backsliding Christian and a mere professor. That is the work and the prerogative of Je-

hovah. When there is actual sin, the one is so identified with the other, that no person in this situation, whatever may have been his past experience, his frames, or feelings, can have any scriptural ground for supposing that he ever possessed more than the name of Christian. And can we, who are lookers on, consider him as a child of God *now*, though once we viewed him as such? No! deep regret, and other most painful feelings, may be produced in our minds, and we may use means to raise him from his fallen and degraded condition. But a regard for His authority, who has said, “have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them,” will prevent us from treating him as a Christian brother.

Did our limits permit, it might be desirable to ascertain the reason why so many make a profession of religion while their hearts remain unchanged and destitute of faith in the Son of God. It may be sufficient for our present purpose to refer to one or two cases, concerning which we may conclude that the profession of religion which is made resembles the corn that grew on the stony ground, having no root, and so enduring but for a while.

Here we may observe, that many young persons in particular, of ardent passions and pliable tempers, have been hurried into a religious profession, by the injudicious conduct of pious friends. Having been brought by circumstances into contact with religious people; having also had opportunities of reading religious books, and of hearing faithful and earnest preaching, they have been partially

aroused from their former indifference, and startled by the solemn warnings addressed to the consciences. With passions naturally strong, impressions have been easily made, and alarm produced. Viewing their past conduct differently from what they usually did, and unable to control their feelings, they have manifested a degree of interest in the subject of religion, altogether new and unexpected. This has encouraged their friends to hope, that they were really converted to God, and induced them to urge upon them the duty of making an open profession of religion. This has been done without using proper means to instruct them in Christianity, or without cautioning them against the danger of fancying a mere excitement of the feelings, a proof of being born again. They have not sufficiently advised them to examine their principles, prevailing motives, and desires. Thus, even while the Christian name was assumed, they had no distinct conception of the doctrines and precepts of the Bible, nor had they obtained those correct and humbling views of their own characters, which are necessary to induce men to desire with their whole hearts the blessings of salvation.

Such being the case, it need excite no surprise, that these individuals, losing the impressions that had been made upon their minds by the faithful preaching of the Gospel and by other means; when again placed in circumstances of temptation, should yield, after a few ineffectual struggles, to the influence of evil. In fact, no principle sufficiently powerful existed, to curb the passions which they once freely indulged. There has only been a tem-

porary restraint, and this very often makes the current of vice run stronger, when the barrier is removed. They never received the truth in the love of it. It never truly humbled them; its influence was never felt, and its calls to self-denial were never obeyed from the heart. Real peace of mind was unknown, though perhaps for a time a certain degree of pleasure was felt from the very excitement and novelty of their circumstances. Fear, however, would for the time, influence them more than any other passion. Not that hallowed fear, which leads to a hatred of sin; but the dread of those who looked forward to punishment with alarm, and wished to escape, no matter in what way. If a profession of religion would deliver them from their fears, they would readily make that; especially as they were urged to do so by religious friends.

Others again, without these exciting causes, have professed the Christian name. They have been educated among Christians, and accustomed to attend the outward ordinances of religion, and instructed in its language. Growing up in the religious circle, and influenced in their daily conduct by witnessing a consistent example, they have imbibed feelings of respect for religion, which have induced them, as a matter of course, to profess that they were Christians. Their situation has indeed happily saved them from many of the dangers to which other young persons are exposed, in less favourable circumstances. But all the time, they have remained ignorant of the real state of their own hearts, and they have not therefore seen the need of the

salvation of the Gospel. Their knowledge of religion was merely theoretical. They had no practical, no experimental acquaintance with its blessings. There never existed for one moment that supreme love to divine truth, which influences the Christian, and leads him to delight in God, and to meditate on his perfections. The evil passions of their hearts did not perhaps openly discover themselves, but they were not controlled or mortified by religious principle. They existed in the mind, and were quiescent, only because no external temptation had excited them, and led to their indulgence.

When the individuals referred to, enter into the business of life, and are compelled from circumstances to mingle in society very different from that to which they had been accustomed: when they hear language, and witness conduct, utterly opposed to all that they had been taught to venerate and love, they may, for a time be greatly shocked. But by degrees, their sensibility will be blunted, they will learn to listen, and learn to look, without feelings of disgust. Familiarity with such things will soon produce love, and it may not be very long before they thoroughly imbibe the principles, and imitate the example of their ungodly companions. Their evil passions, which had only remained in a dormant state, will now be roused, gratification will succeed, and every feeling of abhorrence, which they had been taught to cherish against gross immorality, will be entirely obliterated. If one who had known them in their former state were to look at their present character, he could hardly know them to be

the same persons. *Then*, they were sober, steady, and attentive to outward religious duties. They made a profession of religion, and nothing could be seen by men to belie this profession. They were respected and beloved by their friends ; and if their future prospects were at any time thought of, hope, the inspiring hope, that they were prepared for encountering all the ills of life, sustained the minds of their best friends. But *now*, what a contrast ! Their religious profession is given up, and their early prejudices, as they have been taught to call them, are all dispelled. They altogether neglect the public worship of God ; they are not steady, and sometimes they are *not* sober. The same dependence cannot now be placed upon them, and instead of respect and love, they have, alas ! only the heartless and noisy friendship of irreligious or profligate companions. It is all they now seek, and “ they have their reward.” It also frequently happens, that these individuals become the most determined opposers of the truth. This they *appear* to do, in the spirit of recklessness ; but often, it is done because they feel it necessary in helping them to harden their hearts, to stifle conviction, and to forget their former knowledge of good and evil. They wish to believe that religion is a lie, and in order to arrive at such a state of mind, no plan seems to them to be better than to act as if it was.

These are only two cases, out of many that might be presented, of individuals who backslide from the profession of religion. To the Christian they present no difficulty, and can do no real injury ; but to

those who have not been much accustomed to think on religious subjects, these, and similar instances, are often productive of injurious effects. What some of these are, we are now to inquire.

Some persons are led to conclude that there is no reality in religion. This is at least the conclusion to which careless and irreligious persons often come ; and they the more readily do so, because they find it useful as an excuse for neglecting religion altogether. They will even make a boast of their unbelief, and say, “ How much better are we than those who pretended to be saints, and now show themselves to be greater sinners than ourselves.” Such persons, however, cheat their own souls if they really imagine that this is an excuse for neglecting true religion. If it were even true, (and we do not say that it is untrue), that backsliders are really worse than those who never made any religious profession, this can never lessen in any degree the guilt of others, who continue in unbelief. Jehovah addresses all in the language of warning : “ Be not deceived ; God is not mocked ; for whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh, shall of the flesh reap corruption ; but he that soweth to the Spirit, shall of the spirit reap life everlasting.*

The effect produced by the conduct of backsliders will be somewhat different on the inquirer's mind. It may not excite suspicion respecting the reality of religion itself, but it may produce painful

* Gal. vi. 7, 8.

emotion and anxious feelings respecting the truth of those statements, in the word of God, which speak of the believer's safety. Nay, disgust may be excited at a religious profession altogether. He may, in short, conclude, that as there appears to be no stability in such a profession, it may be better to attempt to be religious without making one at all. Individuals naturally of ingenuous minds are unwilling to be exposed to the probability of openly renouncing their principles or changing their conduct; and they think it may be better to love God in secret, without letting the world know that they are Christians. They forget, while in this state of mind, that such a decision is contrary to the word of God, and, in fact, injurious to their own souls; that such a determination is the result of pride rather than humility; that it arises, not so much from a fear of dishonouring God, as from a dread of being considered changeable by their fellow creatures. In appealing to the word of God, we find that those who truly love God, are described as "the light of the world." The language of exhortation is thus addressed to them: "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven."* Again, the Apostle Paul, in his epistle to the Romans, when describing those who gave an open proof of their faith in the Son of God, says, "For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness, and with the

* Matt. v. 16.

mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the Scripture saith, whosoever believeth on him, shall not be ashamed.”*

But it cannot surely be necessary to continue these remarks ; for nothing is more plainly revealed in the Scriptures than this great truth, that there must ever exist *a marked line of separation* between Christians and the men of the world. Hence it will be found, that believers are distinguished by their regard for the divine authority, their love to holiness, and by the production of the fruits of righteousness, which are to the praise and to the glory of God. The Saviour has himself declared, that they are to be known in this way ; “ by their fruits ye shall know them.” They are spoken of “ as a city set on a hill, which cannot be hid.” Every thing in the Christian’s character and profession is opposed to concealment and secrecy ; but there is at the same time, no encouragement given to a boasting, ostentatious religious profession. While Christians are not to be ashamed of the name of Jesus, they are exhorted “ to learn of Him who is meek and lowly in heart,” and to be “ clothed with humility.”

Let those who have been led to think lightly of a religious profession, because some professors have dishonoured the name of Christ, candidly consider the following remarks.

If the truth of Christianity is in any way affect-

* Rom. x. 10, 11.

ed by the conduct of backsliders, it is to confirm it rather than otherwise. In the word of God, such characters are spoken of as certainly to arise in the church of Christ. “Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving head to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils.”* Their principles and conduct are minutely described, and the effects that they produce are also stated.† Provision was also made in the church of God for excluding such persons from the fellowship of saints.‡

Again, God has given in his word many admonitions to those who professed to be Christians, lest they should backslide from his ways. “Be not high minded, but fear.”|| “Let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall.” He has again and again warned his people against unwatchfulness. “Watch unto prayer.” “Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation.” He has described the misery of backsliders. “Thine own wickedness shall correct thee, and thy backslidings shall reprove thee; know, therefore, and see, that it is an evil thing and bitter, that thou hast forsaken the Lord thy God, and that my fear is not in thee, saith the Lord God of hosts.”§ The Saviour has also declared the danger of such individuals. “No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of

* 1 Tim. iv. 1. † 2 Tim. iii. 1—7. 2 Pet. iii. 3, 4.

‡ Tit. iii. 10.

|| Rom. xi. 20. 1 Cor. x. 12. Phil. ii. 12. 1 Pet. i. 17.

§ Jerem. ii. 19.

God.”* Besides, the Scriptures reveal the characters of some who had backslidden from the profession of religion, and they are pointed out as beacons, that we may escape the rocks and quicksands on which they were destroyed. King Saul, Judas, and probably Demas, are instances on record, that we may be convinced, not only of the wickedness of forsaking God, but of the misery to which it exposes the soul.

But again, God has graciously promised the assistance of his Holy Spirit, to those who truly seek it. If men backslide, it is not because God is unwilling to assist them, in walking in his ways. It is a wilful yielding to sin, and a neglect of the proper means which he has enjoined. He promises guidance, protection from enemies, support in the time of trouble, and grace to help in every time of need. If these divine blessings are sought in sincerity of heart, they shall be obtained. If not sought, there is not only the loss of all these spiritual favours, but the guilt of disobedience. If the means which God himself has appointed, for the benefit of the soul, be despised; it should excite no surprise to see the individual backslide into the ways of transgression, and become an open enemy of the cross of Christ.

But let no inquirer after divine truth for a moment blame the religion of the Bible, because there are some who leave the profession of it, and show in their conduct the influence of unbelief. Let no

* Luke ix. 62.

feeling of disgust be produced against professors of religion in general, or a shade of doubt thrown around the truth of the gospel. Nothing can, in the smallest degree, lessen the paramount claims of the divine law over every affection and every part of the life of man. Very different indeed, *ought* to be the effects produced upon the mind of an inquirer. They are such as would be well fitted to produce caution and watchfulness, as well as right views of human guilt and weakness. They should lead him to ascribe all that is evil in backsliding to man, and not to religion. He should consider, that no inconsistency on the part of others, can for a moment lessen his duty to turn to God, and to walk in his ways.

Dangerous as the state of the backslider is, that man is in equal danger who is so far stumbled by it as to reject the Gospel of Christ, cease his inquiries after truth, and think lightly of the Christian profession. The backslider is not condemned at last, because of his leaving his religious profession; but because he never possessed faith in the Son of God, and though he had named the name of Jesus, had not departed from iniquity. Thus we are informed by him who is to take the chief part in the solemnities of the judgment-day, that *many* will be condemned on that day who had gone a great length in religious profession; and the reason assigned will not be that they had departed from it, but his language will be, “*I never knew you; depart from me, ye that work iniquity.*”*

* Matt. vii. 23.

one be condemned, however much he may plead excuses from the conduct of others, who refuses to submit to the divine authority, and to believe the testimony of God concerning Christ. Indeed, it would appear plain to the common sense of men, if they would only exercise it, that it is the greatest folly to endanger the happiness of their souls because others do so. This folly is however committed, when there is a neglect of religion, or a cessation from inquiry, in consequence of the sinful behaviour of some who once bore the Christian name. It ought rather to convince them of the suitableness of the divine promises, and the value of the admonitions of Scripture, while men are in a world of snares, and in the possession of hearts "deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked." It should show the necessity of seeking help from a divine source, and of constantly leaning on that arm which is almighty. Backsliding in general may be traced to mistaken views on these subjects. Backsliders have not been properly convinced of their personal guilt, weakness, and danger. They have never really believed or *felt* the statements of the word of God, respecting human depravity, and man's inability to do any thing spiritually good. Hence they have never seen the necessity of believing the Gospel: they see no sufficient reason for an entire change of heart, or that they should question the strength of their own good resolutions, and seek help from God. With such views of themselves, they attempt to go forward in their own strength, and it is soon discovered to be perfect weakness. They

are guided by their own wisdom, and it is shown to be folly. Prayer, watchfulness, and self-examination, are duties altogether unknown to them, so that yielding to temptation is only the natural and fatal result. The wonder is, that they should have so long assumed the name of Christ, while his laws and his salvation were in their hearts disliked.

Let the reader be affectionately reminded, that he never can be safe while he retains imperfect views of his own character, as a sinner in the sight of God. This will affect his other views of religion. If he shrinks from receiving the full and humbling statements of revelation respecting the inherent depravity of human nature, he cannot so much as enter the temple of truth. If he does not believe in the corruption of the affections, the judgment, the understanding, and the will, and in short all the powers of the mind, he will not seek a change of heart. If he is not convinced of his moral inability or disinclination to receive the things of the Spirit of God, he will not desire the assistance of God's holy Spirit. If there is not a deep and humbling conviction that he *deserves* nothing at the hand of God, but indignation and wrath; and that his best services, while ignorant of God, were *only* sinful in God's sight,—he cannot, he will not relish, he will not believe the Gospel of Christ.

This is more particularly stated here, because, if any one is to be preserved from backsliding, the knowledge of his character, as it is described in the word of God, is the first step into the path of safety. The anxious inquirer, in looking at the conduct of

the backslider, is tempted to ask, "Are all alike insecure? is every one equally exposed to ruin and disgrace?" We answer, No. In taking the word of God for our guide in this matter, we learn that all those who believe in Christ Jesus have the promise of salvation, or eternal life. But before there can be that reliance on the Saviour, which secures for us the guidance and protection of the "Captain of Salvation," there must necessarily be that conviction of demerit in God's sight, and that humbling and correct view of our own character, which will lead us to trust in Jesus Christ, and "to have no confidence in the flesh." It is while in such a state of mind, that the admonitions of Scripture will be understood, duly appreciated, and obeyed.

Indeed, there can be no security for any professor of religion but in Christ Jesus. To such as are united to him by faith the promises are addressed, and they are well fitted to comfort their hearts and animate them in the performance of every duty. While the real Christian can thus derive consolation from the divine word, he ever bears in mind that it is daring presumption to cherish the hope of present or future happiness, except in so far as he is living a life of faith on the Son of God, and bringing forth the fruits of holiness. He firmly believes that the love or practice of known sin, backsliding from the ways of God, and continuing in that state, will deprive him of every scriptural warrant for concluding that he is a Christian. He believes that the Christian is not only ordained to eternal life, but to holiness of heart and conduct. He has no

ground to suppose that a real change has taken place upon his heart, unless he delights and perseveres in doing the will of God. This performance of good works, he views only as a proof of his love, and an evidence of his faith in Christ, and not as the ground of his justification in the sight of God.

Perhaps it may be proper, in this part of the subject, to glance at an objection which has been made against believing the promises of God, respecting the preservation of his people in faith and holiness, even to the end of life. The objection is a very stale one, and has been frequently rebutted by the most powerful of all arguments,—a holy life. Yet, as we are chiefly writing for those who have not considered the subject very closely, it may be desirable to mention it. It is said by some, that such a sentiment will lessen watchfulness, and in fact encourage Christians to sin, seeing they cannot be lost. But we may safely affirm, that no real Christian will be affected in this way. He abhors the idea of sinning that grace may abound, as one dishonouring to God and ruinous to the soul. While he does firmly believe that God will be faithful to his promises, and will keep his people by “his power, through faith, unto salvation;” he at the same time as firmly, and as conscientiously believes, that this is *always* done in the way of holiness. He remembers, that “without holiness, no man shall see the Lord;” that Christians are “created in Christ Jesus, unto good works, which God hath before ordained that they should walk in them;”*

* Eph. ii. 10.

that “the righteous also shall hold on his way, and he that hath clean hands, shall be stronger and stronger.”* He considers, that the man who would restrain prayer before God—begin to be unwatchful—refrain from divine ordinances—rush into temptation, or think little of sin,—because he fancies he is chosen of God to everlasting life, is already in an awful state of backsliding, or rather has never been converted to God. One in such a condition, can have no evidence that he is a child of God. No past experience, no former joys, no extent of scriptural knowledge, no facility in prayer, or in religious conversation, can avail here as evidence that he is safe. The only thing proved is, that his heart is opposed to holiness, and if so, it must be opposed to God.

The abuse of a scriptural truth by ungodly men, can never lessen its importance, or make it cease to be true. Though this remark may appear unnecessary to some, yet, in the present state of religious opinions, it is not so. The believer rejoices that his salvation is secured in Christ; but part of his joy arises from the fact, that this very security is intimately connected with the purifying of his affections, and a diligent use of the varied means of grace. He delights in purity, and in the exercise of every holy and spiritual affection. Salvation itself he would not value, unless it were a salvation from the love and dominion of sin, as well as from its punishment. He also experiences pleasure in

* Job xvii. 9.

those sacred ordinances, or means of grace, which are appointed by Christ in his church for the spiritual improvement of all its members. He watches over his desires, his affections, and his very thoughts, lest they should lead him to the commission of evil. He not only *prays* that he may not enter into temptation, but he “abstains from all appearance of evil.” He flees not from the presence of his God; he is not even satisfied with the conviction, that God is not angry with him; he seeks intimate communion with God; to enjoy the light of his countenance, is his chief desire, and his most delightful and sanctifying privilege.

We have stated these things, to show the inquirer where alone real security is to be found. We have pointed to the possession of right principles, and the manifestation of holy conduct, as evidences of real conversion to God. What is then the duty of the religious inquirer? It is to come, without delay, to Christ. This is the first and most important step in the Christian life. To believe *all* that God has testified concerning his Son, is honouring God, and it brings inestimable blessings to him who believes. It is indeed placing the soul under the protection of the Almighty,—procuring for it pardon and peace, and the Spirit’s enlightening and sanctifying influences. It will also be found, that no one who truly believes the Gospel, can be satisfied with first attainments. He not only believes in Christ, but also seeks an increasing acquaintance with him. He will earnestly desire supreme love to holiness, and an entire consecration

of all his powers of body and mind, to the service of God. He will not in short be satisfied, till he has realized the truth of the Scripture declaration, "Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away, behold all things are become new."*

There will also be (when the inquiry has been successfully pursued) a deep impression of the necessity, value, and efficacy of humble, earnest, believing, and persevering prayer. The inquirer will likewise see the duty of watching over the thoughts, temper, words, and actions: the importance of a regular, spiritual, and conscientious regard for the instituted ordinances of religious worship. A conviction of the dangers to which the soul is exposed in a world of temptations; and a proper sense of human weakness and insufficiency will lead him to trust in the divine strength, and to rejoice in the promised aids of the Holy Spirit. He will see the beauty and importance of the sacred exhortation; "And besides this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, and to virtue knowledge, and to knowledge temperance, and to temperance patience, and to patience godliness, and to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness charity." "For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."†

This chapter would seem to be incomplete, if something was not said to the backslider himself.

* 2 Cor. v. 17.

† 2 Pet. i. 5, 8.

It is possible that an individual may read these lines who once made a profession of religion, and who experienced joy and pleasure in doing so, but who is now truly wretched because he has forsaken Jehovah. Destitute of the hopes and consolations of the Gospel, he can take no pleasure in the things that formerly delighted him. Sin has not those strong attractions which it once had, and his religious recollections present only the visions of joys that have passed away, never to return. There is connected with this retrospection much that is painful. If the backslider is not in a state of fearful apostacy, or has not succeeded in searing his conscience, he must know some of the oppressive evils brought upon his own soul by sin, and his utter inability to derive any real peace and comfort from true religion. There will also be a consciousness of the injury done to his family, to the church of God, and to the world by his unhallowed example. He cannot but know that he has awfully offended God, and grieved his Holy Spirit. His ingratitude is as that of a child to a parent, or that of one who has been loaded with favours, to a liberal benefactor.

It is indeed a case of peculiar aggravation. That the mere professor of religion, who had never experienced satisfaction, and peace, and joy resulting from a belief of the truth, should leave his Christian profession, and become a greater enemy to the cause of religion than he had ever been before, is no wonder. But that *you*, sensible of the evil of sin, of your immense obligations to God, of the pleasures of true religion, and the enjoyment to be found

in the path of obedience, should yield to temptation, deprive yourself of the manifestations of the divine favour, and cast a stumbling block before inquirers and the careless, is fearful indeed. Your guilt is great, inasmuch as it has been committed against convictions, professions, love, and knowledge. Your sin is manifested against a *father* who has given innumerable proofs of love. No enemy could possibly be so guilty and ungrateful as you have been.

Painful and degraded as this situation is, yet God has not entirely cast off such backsliders. He still invites them to return. His language is, "O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God, for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity." Here there is no expression which palliates, in any degree, their awful guilt. Even while the compassion of Jehovah is displayed in all its tenderness, the backslider is to be ashamed and humbled in the sight of God. He is to acknowledge and *feel* that he has fallen, not by accident or misfortune, but by his own iniquity. The return to God is to be accompanied by that deep sorrow which will lead him to the throne of mercy, confessing his guilt, and crying "take away all iniquity, and receive me graciously." When such persons are invited to return, it is not to a mere outward profession, but to an actual participation in the blessings of salvation, and especially to the enjoyment of a sense of the divine favour, without which there can be no spiritual and purifying joy. These things will be desired by the backslider who has seen his guilt and wretchedness. This state of mind should be hailed as the return of better days,

and which, though not a proof that the individual is safe from danger, yet encourages a hope that it will not be long before he accepts the divine invitation.

And how consolatory is it for the returning backslider to know that the same blood that washed away his guilt at first can still cleanse from all sin ! He has already found that it is an evil and a bitter thing to sin against the Lord. That it is the very essence of misery to be separated from the light of God's countenance. But even *his* iniquities can be forgiven. How necessary, however, is an immediate application to the blood of atonement. He may well be addressed in words like these, " Do not come to the foot-stool of mercy as a *good man*, who has wandered from God, but come as a *sinner*. All evidences of your conversion to God may be obscured or lost. Your approach must of necessity be as that of one defiled by sin, and deserving of the everlasting displeasure of God."*

There is, however, a state of mind very different from this, and which presents a striking proof of the hardening and deceiving nature of sin. When the backslider, instead of being ashamed and grieved on account of his own guilt; excuses himself by laying the blame on others, as first tempting him to stray from God : when instead of being excited to thankfulness when a kind and faithful friend warns him of his danger ; his angry feelings are roused, and he counts him as an enemy. Again, when the backslider can think of his sins with complacency, or at

* Fuller on Backsliding.

least without any feeling of contrition, proof is given that he is not in a state of mind to return. To such an one the gracious invitations of mercy convey no feelings of delight, and present no inducement to forsake sin. If any emotion is produced, it is rather that of dislike than of pleasure.

How difficult is it to speak or write to such individuals in a proper manner. We can, however, warn them of their danger; nay more, we may entreat them to consider their criminality and infatuation, and before judicial blindness of understanding and hardness of heart seal their everlasting doom, to flee to the refuge of the Gospel. The gate is not yet closed against the sinner, the remedy is yet proposed. How long it may be so we cannot tell. This very uncertainty should be a powerful argument to constrain to immediate inquiry and application.

In closing our remarks, it may be proper for a moment to address Christians, especially those who have recently commenced their Christian course. Let them beware of the crime and misery of backsliding; let there be a habitual, watchful jealousy exercised over the very thoughts and desires of the mind. It has often been remarked that backsliding begins in the closet;—it begins sooner. Before that, there has been an admission and cherishing of evil in the imagination or in the affections, and this will undoubtedly lead to the neglect of spiritual and fervent prayer. Oh! could the bitterness of a backslider's tears be known, the anguish and distress occasioned by a departure, even in heart, from God, be presented in all their wretchedness to the minds

of the young, they would shun the very appearance of a temptation to backslide from God, as the greatest of all evils; and as that which should be avoided as the bitterest enemy of their peace and safety.

Even the experienced Christian requires the constant exercise of holy vigilance. His motto has been, and it must remain the same to the end of his days, “ *Watch and pray.*” This great duty is what every reader should understand and practise, for it is connected with his present and everlasting happiness. “ Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.”

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DIFFICULTIES ARISING FROM THE EXISTENCE
OF SO MANY DIFFERENT DENOMINATIONS IN THE
CHRISTIAN CHURCH.

THE right of private judgment in matters of religion is one of the leading principles of Protestantism. Against this principle, it has again and again been urged, that the exercise of it has produced a multitude of sects, all opposed to each other, and each supposing the other doomed to destruction. It has even been stated, by some *nominal* Protestants, that a complete uniformity should exist; not only as to the great leading doctrines of Christianity, but in its outward forms and ceremonies; and that coercive measures, mildly, though authoritatively applied, might be useful in producing such a state of things. It is not the object of this paper to show how utterly opposed to the principles of *real* Protestants, any such measure would be; and that a triumph would be given to the enemies of religious liberty. They might well say, "Protestants themselves are now convinced, that the liberty they possess is injurious to their cause."—But every sound Protestant will disown such false brethren, and tell them they should, with sentiments like these, return to the bosom of the church of Rome. There, their

fears of the evils resulting from freedom of religious inquiry, will all be removed. There, under the iron despotism of a forced and heartless uniformity, they may, if *they can*, breathe freely.

Protestants at once admit, that the outward shades of profession and conduct existing among Christians, result from the principle which caused and justified the reformation; and yet, it is to the right of private judgment that we must look for the extension and establishment of the doctrines of the Bible among all the nations of the world. Nay, while they wish to object to every measure that would in the smallest degree interfere with that liberty, which every human being ought to possess, to examine, and decide for himself, in those matters connected with God and his conscience; they will at the same time readily acknowledge, that the variety of sects in the Christian church, presents a considerable difficulty, and frequently occasions anxiety and distress to inquiring minds. Here, we do not refer to a certain class of individuals, who excuse their total indifference to all religion, by an appeal to the multitude of sects among professing Christians. They ask, in the most triumphant manner, “How shall we know which is right among all parties of these religionists? We think it better not to be troubled about any of them.”

With such persons no arguments would avail; else it might be shown, that the existence of this variety is an additional reason for the closest investigation, and the most unwearied attention in the pursuit of truth.

There are others to whom the following observations will chiefly apply, who have no wish to take advantage of this state of things in the religious world as an excuse for neglecting the salvation of their own souls; but who, at the same time, are troubled in mind, and hardly know to which side to turn. They are convinced, that it is their duty to know and love true religion, to embrace the doctrines of Christianity, obey its holy precepts, and attend to all its ordinances; and yet they are stumbled, when they look around them, and find so many sects, each one zealous for its own peculiar views of religion, and all appealing to the Scriptures for the truth of their opinions. Questions such as these will naturally present themselves to their minds. “Are all these various sects among Christians in the right? And, if so, is this consistent with the unity of Christianity? Or, are we to suppose that there is only one class of them correct, and all the others wrong? If so, which of the many denominations is that one? Or, if all are right, is it a matter of indifference to which denomination we belong?”

There is no wish to underrate the obstacles that may thus be presented to the mind of inquirers; and the difficulty of answering questions like these to the satisfaction of every mind. The subject deserves examination, and the chief difficulty seems to be, to escape the danger of either undervaluing non-essential things, or elevating them too highly; of being too lax, as it respects outward ceremonies; or too strict, in seeking to enforce them. It is as-

surely of great consequence to keep the happy medium, especially when so great a difference of opinion exists on these subjects among real Christians.

While it is the object of this chapter to show that there is no solid objection to be grounded on this variety of denominations existing in the Christian church; there is not the smallest intention to represent this difference of opinion as of no importance, or that uniformity of sentiment and practice would not be useful and honourable to religion. There is no wish to consider the existence of so many sects as something good in itself, or that Christians should not desire a greater degree of outward union than what exists at present. The ground to be occupied is this. To show, that though many names are employed to designate the Christians of this country, and though there exists a variety of opinions respecting many matters in religion; yet, that with *very few exceptions*, there is also to be found a striking uniformity of sentiment on all those Christian doctrines and duties, which in every age have been viewed as essential to the salvation of the soul. Also, that though a diversity of sentiment, respecting non-essentials, may be evil in itself, yet, as far as we are able to judge, the Head of the Church has overruled it for good. And, finally, that though it could be shown, that only *one* of the numerous sects now in existence could possibly be right or safe; instead of lessening or destroying, it would materially increase the obligation to attend more closely to the statements of that sacred volume, which after all is the ultimate appeal.

It is asserted, that among the various denominations of Christians in Britain, there is a striking uniformity of sentiment, regarding all those doctrines, which have always been considered as necessary to salvation; however widely they may differ from each other in matters of church government and discipline. A reference to the creeds and confessions, to the preaching and writings, of all the leading denominations, will confirm the truth of the above remark. Thus, in the articles of the English endowed church, in the confession of faith of the Scottish church, in the ordination services, and in the preaching, as well as in the printed works, of the Dissenters from the national churches, in both parts of the Island; there will be found upon examination, an agreement of a most gratifying kind in all the great and peculiar doctrines of Christianity. And be it observed, an agreement which from the very nature of the case, cannot result from combination. Here, it may be only necessary to mention some of those important truths referred to. They unite in believing the doctrines of the trinity of the fall of man, the atonement, justification by faith; the necessity of the Holy Spirit's operation to convert the sinner; the resurrection, and a future state of rewards and punishments.

We have alluded to exceptions, but they are so few that it does not appear necessary to say much respecting them. They are chiefly confined to those who deny the divinity of Christ, the atonement, justification by faith, and in short all that is essential to a sinner's forgiveness, and restoration to th

favour and image of Jehovah. With these exceptions, it may again be asserted, that the doctrines of Christianity are professedly believed in by all the various sects in this country.

It may indeed be justly said, that multitudes belonging to the various denominations, though they may profess these doctrines, yet act in opposition to them, and in short do not believe them. Nay, many who boast of an orthodox creed, actually remain in ignorance of what it contains. But a uniformity of opinion, even in matters of church government and discipline, and on every other point, could not remedy this evil. A uniformity of profession, however strict, and however authoritatively enforced, could never secure the heart, or lead to a cordial reception of those truths necessary to salvation.

But we may go a step farther in our proof, and show that there is not only an agreement in outward profession, but that in whatever denomination you find Christians, it will soon be found, that they, from the heart, believe the same great truths, possess the same joys and hopes, and are all careful to maintain good works. Bring a pious Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Congregationalist together, and let the conversation be religious. In a short time, it will be seen, that, as it regards Christian doctrine, duty, and experience, they speak the same language, they possess the same feelings. Their sorrows, their joys and their hopes, are the same. They equally rejoice in the Gospel of Christ, and desire the glory of their divine Master. They have evidently been instructed by the same Teacher,

and through the instrumentality of the same word, in all that essentially pertains to the salvation of their souls. Let them, however, begin to speak about names, and church government, and similar things, and they will differ ; and each may be warm in his own cause. But will they, on account of this difference, excommunicate each other from the pale of Christianity ? Will they venture to predict ruin to each other, because they do not see eye to eye, in every outward matter ? No ; they will view each other as Christian brethren, differing in some minor points, but yet holding the head, even Christ ; bought with the same blood, enlightened and sanctified by the same spirit, and preparing for the same country, where all outward distinctions will cease ; and where there will be a union of service, as well as of heart, to exist for ever.

Here we can also refer to another branch of evidence, in support of the assertion, that there does exist among Christians, a uniformity of religious sentiment in the most important truths of Scripture. When we examine the biography and obituaries continually issuing from the press ; and which describe the opinions, lives, and deaths of Christians belonging to all the various sections of the Christian church, we find the unity for which we are contending. Making allowance for an occasional peculiarity of phraseology, it will be seen that their faith was the same. The same doctrines were believed, the same promises supported their minds, and the same hopes cheered and animated their souls. The duties of the Christian life

appeared equally important to them all, and they uniformly aimed at the same object, the promotion of the Divine glory. This exact agreement has often been noticed, and presented to the view of men, as a proof of the divinity of Christianity. As a proof also, that no real danger can ever result from the fullest exercise of the right of private judgment, when pursued in a proper spirit.

Even in controversial writings respecting outward forms and particular names, written by real Christians, though there may sometimes be reason to lament, that human passions should mingle too much with the arguments employed, and excite in the breasts of the opponents, unseemly feelings: yet it will almost universally be found, that there is no anathema pronounced against those who differ from them in non-essential points. They will, indeed, be viewed as brethren in error, as having imperfect views of the nature of Christ's kingdom, and as yielding too much to prejudice and early associations; but the right hand of fellowship would readily be given to them, and they are loved "for the truth's sake, which dwelleth in them."

The conclusion is this, that though there is a variety of sects, (and once for all we would remark, that the term is used in no invidious or evil sense,) yet no inquirer after truth should view this as a stumbling block, or as a reason for continuing indifferent to the subject of religion. Because it has been shown, by an appeal to facts, that in all the truths connected with a sinner's salvation, there is, among Christians of every sect and party, an exact

agreement. Not one moment then should be lost in the pursuit of knowledge. Although among the soldiers there may be different banners and different names inscribed upon them, they compose but one mighty army; the captain of salvation is their leader, and he has promised to make them more than conquerors.

It has been already stated, that there is no wish to undervalue the minor differences that may exist among professing Christians. Nothing that can be shown to be the will of Christ can be unimportant; and it should never be viewed as a trifling matter to do any thing inconsistent with that will. Besides, many sentiments and practices, which do not affect the salvation of the soul, may yet be closely connected with the improvement of the Christian character, and the usefulness and prosperity of the Christian life. These things are said to prevent any one from supposing, that it is a matter of no moment to what denomination he belongs, or that he may altogether neglect the duty of joining the visible church. Every one should examine the matter for himself. Let him endeavour to ascertain which denomination appears to act most in accordance with the laws of Christ's kingdom. In this examination let him seek the assistance of God's Holy Spirit; and when he has found out what he conscientiously believes to be the right way, let him act accordingly.

We also proposed to show, that though a diversity of sentiment respecting non-essentials may be

evil in itself, yet that it has been overruled for good by the Divine Being.

In proof of this we might refer to the useful jealousy exercised by different religious denominations towards each other. Had there been a uniformity existing in the Christian world, produced by human laws, and not by a regard for the Divine authority, this would not have existed. Deprived of this watchful eye of jealousy, corruption would probably have soon entered, and deeply injured true religion, even while the profession of faith was universally the same. There would have been an undue estimation of the importance of uniformity in outward things, while the unity of the spirit, which is the bond of peace, would have become almost unknown. The history of the church, since the apostles' days, will confirm the correctness of this remark.

Besides, it may be said, that the present subdivisions of the Christian world present greater facilities for extending the kingdom of Christ among the nations of the earth, than if only one denomination had existed, and absorbed all the rest. Unless there had been an extraordinary outpouring of the Spirit of God, it would have done little for the spread of true religion in the world. Less pecuniary aid would have been given; fewer spheres of labour in heathen countries would have been occupied, and a smaller number of Bibles would have been circulated. The various Missionary Institutions belonging to the principal denominations of professing Christians are more active and more suc-

cessful, than if only one great Missionary Society had existed, which sought the spread of uniformity in outward things, as well as the propagation of Christianity. Even at home, God has overruled the opposition of one sect towards another, for the furtherance of the Gospel. The competition excited has been productive of great good, and many more of our countrymen now hear the Gospel, than would likely have done so, had only *one* denomination existed in this country.

We cannot say what outward differences may exist among Christians when religion becomes better known, and its influence is more generally felt throughout the ramifications of society. We can, however, have little doubt, from the representation of the Sacred Scriptures, that all those differences and errors which retard the progress of truth, and separate Christians from each other, will be removed. If, after all, a difference of opinion respecting some points exists, yet there will be a more perfect and lovely exhibition of Christian charity. Sectarian prejudices will almost be unknown,—for one strong desire will pervade all denominations to seek the spread of the knowledge of Christ, and the glory of God, rather than the influence and increase of any one denomination. There will be an approximation to uniformity in all things, but it will be the gradual and legitimate result of Christian principle, and not the production of human enactments and earthly power. Religion will be divested of those things which are mere human inventions; and the

laws of Christ, revealed in the New Testament, will be viewed as those which ought to be obeyed.

We have already seen, that no one should allow these divisions in the Christian church to retard for a moment his search after truth, or disgust him in any degree with religion itself; because all true Christians believe and love the same great truths of the Gospel, though they are called by different names. But even if it could be shown, that these differences extended to the great doctrines of Christianity, and only *one* of the many denominations was really orthodox, it must be obvious, that instead of rendering investigation unnecessary or fruitless, it would increase the importance of the duty, and show more clearly the necessity of proceeding in the inquiry with seriousness, zeal, and perseverance.

There is a great probability, that individuals may be found who may have very favourable wishes towards religion, and yet are deterred from attending to the subject by the fear of the many difficulties in the way, occasioned by the state of things in the Christian church. They have imagined, that they are sure to be teased and bewildered by the claims of the various sects of Christians, each one claiming for itself the preference. Besides, when they look at the volumes of controversy—at the pertinacity with which some hold fast their peculiarities—at the illiberal spirit sometimes manifested by one body towards another,—they are tempted to despair of being able to find out the right way.

But how has this state of mind been produced?

It may be safely affirmed, that there are some other reasons than the mere existence of a variety of sects. There has been too ready a credence given to the calumnies of the world. Too many irreligious persons are chargeable with uttering these. They are so illiberal, as to charge all Christians with bigotry, simply because they may differ in some minor matters. They boldly charge Christians with things they abhor, and try to persuade all around them that the best way is to despise religion altogether. All this has its effect on some minds, for they too easily take it for granted that the statements are true. Nay, even in cases where the mind is more favourably disposed to religious matters, considerable injury is done. The persons now referred to, are those who have never calmly and candidly considered the subject. They have not ventured to speak about it with any one who might have been able to give them information. They look before them, and nothing is presented but mountains of difficulties, which are either the productions of their own imaginations, or the result of false and prejudiced testimony. The consequence is, that these persons stand on the very threshold of inquiry, unwilling to venture farther.

And has the Divine Being left any one, likely to read this, to find out the truth, without giving him a proper guide? No! whatever diversity of outward forms and names may exist among religious people, God has not compelled any one to receive information *solely* or even *chiefly* from them. In this country at least, no individual who can read

the Bible, or hear it read, is obliged to depend on the judgment of any fellow creature, or body of men. He has received that book from his Maker for a specific purpose. It is to guide him amidst the mazes and errors of human beings, to that celestial country, where error is unknown. Whatever darkness may be found around the ways of men, no clouds, no darkness, can be around the sacred volume. Every doctrine of Christianity, the belief of which is essential to the salvation of the soul, is fully and plainly revealed in the sacred Scriptures. Every individual, possessed of a common understanding, and a real wish to be instructed in the truth of God, apart from all the inventions of men, will find in the Bible all that is needful for his eternal welfare. It is a truth indeed which should never be forgotten in every inquiry after divine knowledge, that it is the Holy Spirit who gives a spiritual and saving perception of the meaning of the Scriptures. That divine agent not only removes obscurity from the mind, but shows the excellency and importance of the truths of revelation. He also inclines the heart cordially to acquiesce in its statements of doctrine and practice, however much opposed to previous misconceptions of the truth. All this, however, instead of discouraging inquiry, should operate as one of the greatest encouragements to a mind truly desirous to be guided in the right way. Such an one would infallibly go wrong, if he was left to circumstances, to the opinions of men, or to the exercise of his own powers. But when Jehovah has declared, that “ He giveth his Holy Spirit

to them that ask him," how earnestly should every sincere inquirer implore His divine influence.

We believe that the great duty of individual inquiry and of personal conviction, arising from a knowledge and belief of the truth, would be the same; though there existed at this moment throughout Britain an exact uniformity of doctrine and practice in every religious matter. The Divine Being has made every individual responsible for his own belief and actions; and in order to leave men without excuse, he has given to them His holy word, which contains all the doctrines necessary to be believed, and the precepts which ought to be obeyed. In the present case then, amidst all the diversity of name and form, they are not required to do more, than if in the whole Christian church, there existed only *one* denomination.

Success in this inquiry is intimately connected with the spirit in which it is pursued. Credulity in believing the world's representations,—prejudice against religion, because of the differences existing among its professors,—the pride of human wisdom or learning, leading to the supposition that their own powers of mind will be able to guide them through the labyrinth of error, will be the chief difficulties in the way. If such a state of mind should be cherished, it need excite no surprise if disappointment should follow attempts to discover truth.

But there is one danger which chiefly arises from the state of things we have been considering, which requires to be particularly noticed. It is this, that amidst the difficulties presented to the mind by the

diversity of opinion in outward matters, the attention be unduly directed to those differences, rather than to the great doctrines, in the truth of which all Christians agree. There is a tendency, even in the best of men, to substitute forms for the realities of religion. The danger is greater with those who are not yet aware of the real state of their own hearts, or the nature of divine truth. This tendency is frequently very powerful and injurious. Besides, the natural disinclination of the heart to certain doctrines of the Bible, will lead some gladly to substitute an orthodox creed, and connection with the denomination that professes it, for the actual reception into the heart of the doctrines themselves. The inquiry may therefore stop far short of the truth.

That many have thus deceived themselves, we greatly fear. And they have been encouraged to think and act in this way, by witnessing the zeal of some, to prosylytize them to their peculiar views, and the readiness with which they admitted them into their communion, without requiring any of those evidences of conversion, which were considered necessary in the primitive church. Mere sectarianism, that is, only a desire to increase the number of a sect, to add names, and influence, and wealth, to a particular body, without caring so much about the conversion of the soul to God, is most injurious to the interests of true religion. It throws a scandal on the Christian profession, and leads the men of the world to conclude that, after

all, there is only a struggle for influence and power, under the pretence of seeking God's glory.

How necessary is it, therefore, amidst all these difficulties, that those who are seeking the right way, should keep this in view, that the first of all concerns is, their own personal salvation. That this should be sought, and should be obtained, before they allow their minds to be disturbed, by matters of inferior moment. It will profit them nothing to find out the denomination which most harmonizes in doctrine and practice, with the word of God, while they remain ignorant of Christ as their Saviour. Faith in the testimony of God concerning his Son, should be the first step in this important journey. There should be a dependance on him, as the foundation God has laid in Zion, before the time or the mind be occupied, with the peculiarities of religious parties, or with the shibboleths of sects. No outward union to any religious body, however scriptural their notions and practices may be, can save the soul. This remark may appear to some, a mere truism; but, obvious as it is, it is a truth too frequently forgotten.

When the heart, however, has been renewed by the Spirit of God, and the Gospel is producing its peaceful and hallowed effects upon the life, the individual may then safely pursue his inquiries, regarding the whole of divine truth. Proceeding under the influence of the Holy Spirit, and with a desire to be taught by him, he may expect the fulfilment of the divine promise, respecting all points

of lesser moment, “ then shall ye know, if ye follow on to know the Lord.”

In closing this chapter, it may be proper again to say, that there is no condition, in which the Christian church can be placed, that can justify neglect in religious matters. Even though there should be as many sects, as there are individual Christians ; or though only *one* denomination should exist in the whole world, men are bound by obligations, which no circumstances like these can weaken or alter, to think and examine for themselves, in every matter connected with the safety of the soul. If they will not, however, attend to these things, but, on the contrary, treat with criminal levity, subjects which should engage their solemn consideration ; if they point the finger of scorn, at the various sections of the Christian world, as a reason for despising religion itself ; let them know, that it is not the number of sects which keeps them in unbelief ; not the bigotry shown by each party towards its fellow ; but a deep-rooted dislike to true religion, a love to sin, and a wilful rejection of every truth, which seeks to curb their passions or to humble their pride. No sincere inquirer can be in such a state of mind, but some who *fancy* they love truth, may be among the unhappy number.

CHAP. IX.

THE DIFFICULTIES ARISING FROM THE IMPERFECTIONS OF REAL CHRISTIANS.

IT is at once admitted, that many imperfections are to be found in the characters of Christians upon earth, and none can be surprised at this who are acquainted with the Scriptures. Such evils may have an injurious influence on some minds, though there is reason to believe that the result is often magnified. Unbelievers try to throw discredit on religion, by charging inconsistencies on those who profess it; but the same enmity would probably lead them to find fault with the followers of Christ, even if they were altogether perfect. It was so in the days of Christ; for even he "who was holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners," was accused falsely, and his miracles of mercy ascribed to Satanic agency.

At the same time, it may be useful to notice some of the more popular and plausible charges brought against Christians, to examine them, and show that, even if all true, they should not for a moment stop the inquirer in his pursuit of religious truth; the circumstance should rather make him anxious to un-

derstand these anomalies, and to know the reason why Christianity does not at all times produce its holy and consistent effects. He should be desirous of fully ascertaining whether it is the religion of the Bible or man himself that is to blame, when such imperfections are discovered.

It may be stated that the men of the world view the imperfections of believers differently from the view taken by the word of God. Without hesitation, ungodly men accuse Christians of hypocrisy, and the tone of accusation and condemnation assumed by their enemies is any thing but proper. And it also frequently happens that they unjustly charge upon real Christians the sins and inconsistencies of mere nominal professors. They might indeed easily discriminate; but they know that they are unwilling to do so in cases in which their judgments and consciences could easily detect the truth. All this has its baneful effects upon some minds indisposed to reflect seriously on religion; and who are glad of any excuse for continuing in unbelief and in the love of the world.

It is not our present purpose, however, to advert to these direct calumnies; as inquirers after truth are able to see that in such cases, they can have no excuse for neglecting the investigation they have begun. We wish rather to enter into an explanation respecting charges which are in part true, though the reasons and motives assigned by the men of the world are not correct.

How frequently are religious people accused of being melancholy, and religion spoken of as produc-

ing this state of mind. Hacknied as the charge is, and difficult as it may be exactly to understand what irreligious persons mean by it, some notice should be taken of it.

Let it be observed, then, that the individuals who make the assertions referred to are in general ignorant of the nature of Christian principles, and know nothing aright of Christian practice. Hence we find that those who are active in the pursuit of earthly pleasures, and who seek all their happiness in the gratifications of sense, are the loudest in their charges against real Christians. Because the man, who knows the vanity of such pursuits will not join in their rude or boisterous mirth; or because he takes no delight in the vain amusements and fashionable follies of the day, he is at once pronounced a melancholy and antisocial being, and his religion is accused of producing misanthropic feelings. He is declared to be an enemy of all innocent pleasure, and more fit to reside in a desert than in a community of civilized and intelligent individuals. It is asserted that his gloomy views repel people from religion, and that, to "be righteous overmuch," is worse than even to be irreligious.

It is affecting to hear individuals, who fancy themselves very good Christians; speaking in such a way, and deciding so dogmatically respecting the Christian character, without ever appealing to the word of God; as if *it* were too old-fashioned a book to give directions in the matters they discuss; and as if the maxims of the world, and the inclinations of men, were not only guides, but admitted authori-

ties on the part of the Divine Being, in all things connected with the present life and that life which is to come. That, in short, *man* and not God is to draw the line, and say, thus far you are to go in your religion, and no farther; as if it were more necessary to warn men against being too religious than to warn them against unbelief and indifference. No Christian can admit this, and no one who professes to believe the Bible to be true can consistently acknowledge it.

Worldly persons are, from the very state of their minds, totally unfit to understand or decide correctly respecting the Christian's melancholy. For what they call *gloom* and *unsociableness* may be that sobriety of mind which is required, and that supreme regard for the divine authority which, when in exercise, will deter from the trifling of the gay and the merriment of the thoughtless. The Christian, as an accountable being, dare not waste his hours nor spend his energies of body and mind in pursuits alike useless to himself and his fellow-creatures, but with all this he may be neither gloomy nor unsociable. That man only can decide aright in this matter whose mind has been instructed in religion by the Word and Spirit of God; he only can follow in imagination the Christian into the closet, into the domestic circle, and into the house of God. The Christian would be found actively engaged in attending to all the charities of life; and that his religion, instead of drying up the sources of benevolence, had opened new springs of affection and good will to men; not only making them more abundant, but also giving

them a more beneficial direction. And if at any time an air of sadness is discernible on the countenance of the Christian, it may be explained without concluding that he is unhappy.

If the inquirer would judge by comparison between the joy and happiness of the Christian, and the joy and happiness of the worldly man, he might perhaps have some of his mistakes removed. A worldly man's happiness should be estimated according to the habitual state of his mind and appearance, and so should that of the Christian. No one could justly pronounce that a happy man, who is so only in the midst of jovial companions, in the excess of intemperance, in the excitement of the ball-room, or in the willing delusions of the theatre. These are only the accidents of his life, only moments of his existence, mere adventitious circumstances; which seldom, if ever, produce joy in the reflection, nay, which very often in the re-action are productive of unhappiness. It is wiser to see him at *home*, in retirement, in moments of reflection, in seasons of suffering, in the hour of death, and then to decide. Neither should the Christian be pronounced melancholy, because his countenance may sometimes be sad; because he abstains from pleasures which worldly men pursue, and find necessary to their happiness; and because his joys and gratifications are not *all* drawn from earthly objects. He may have *just* cause for sadness, in seeing men rushing into destruction; he may, he *ought* to have melancholy feelings, when he beholds some who are dear to him, by the ties of nature and ear-

ly associations, endangering their everlasting happiness, by walking in the ways of transgression. To be cheerful while dwelling on themes like these, would indicate any thing but a right or desirable state of mind. But, let it be observed, that it is not so much on his own account that he is sad, as on account of others. An infidel philosopher once said, "he never knew a religious man who was not melancholy." A Christian bishop replied, "that the sight of him would make a devout person melancholy at any time."

In like manner, to decide correctly respecting the Christian's happiness, you must view him at home, in retirement, in the midst of his family, in moments of reflection, in seasons of suffering, or in the hour of death, and it will be found that he is happy. That melancholy feelings, if not unknown, are transient as the passing cloud, and that sadness of spirit, though sometimes felt, soon gives place to settled, solid joy.

Surely the inquirer ought to be cautious in receiving the estimate of ungodly men with reference to the Christian. Let him not be deceived by the *cant* of the world. Let him not pronounce the Christian unhappy, who, in moments when melancholy and gloom are the companions of wicked men, experiences the sunshine of joy, and the consoling influence of the Gospel. Let the inquirer remember the history of his own mind. His conscience can readily testify, that, though he had often the appearance of joy while walking in the ways of sin, yet he was not happy. He will thus be better able

to judge correctly respecting the comparative happiness of the Christian and the unbeliever.

But while thus referring to the false estimate which the world forms concerning the good man, there is no wish to conceal or to explain away the fact, that there are some real Christians who present an almost habitual appearance of melancholy and sadness to their fellow-creatures; that, in short, religion does not appear to make them cheerful and happy; so that, instead of attracting men to religion by its delightful effects, they repel them by their woe-begone countenances.

It is indeed matter for unfeigned regret, when any who are called by the name of Christ present such an appearance. There are many reasons, however, which may account for all this, without in the smallest degree blaming the religion of the Bible. Nay, we are bold to affirm, that the genuine and common effect resulting from the possession of real religion is the production of joy, the dispelling of those fears which distress the mind, and which mingle gall in the cup of earthly enjoyments.

We shall only mention two reasons which, in most cases, will account for the appearance of melancholy in religious persons.

The first is *the natural temperament of the mind, frequently accompanied with some bodily disease*. The individuals so afflicted, though Christians, are often subject to depression of spirits; gloomy thoughts take possession of their minds; they view every object through a distorted medium, and *fancy* the existence of evils which are only to be found in

their own imaginations, while the existence of real good in their earthly lot sometimes yields no joy. Even the bounties of Providence and the blessings of divine grace sometimes fail to impart satisfaction and peace to their minds. That on a superficial view of the subject, such persons give an unfavourable representation of the effects of true religion, we are ready to admit; but upon examination it will be found, that those who are readiest in blaming religion, are most unwilling to make allowances for physical disease operating on the mind. It would be more honourable for such individuals to acknowledge that in many cases the effects referred to existed before religion was either known or loved.

Suppose that the persons, naturally of a nervous and melancholy temperament of mind, had remained in ignorance of God, would they have shown less of gloom in their appearance? It is hardly possible to imagine this. It might have been that some of them, anxious to get rid of depression of mind, would have rushed into indulgences which would have yielded a momentary relief; but the re-action would have been terrible, and the gloom would have been fearfully deepened. It may indeed be safely asserted; and the Christians referred to will be ready to acknowledge the truth of the remark, that their gloom has been materially lessened since they became acquainted with divine truth; that to it they are indebted for the gleams of comfort they have enjoyed; and that if they had been destitute of their present religious views, they must, of all men, have been the most miserable.

It is too much to expect from religion the entire removal of a tendency to melancholy in the mind of men. It should not be forgotten that religion does not destroy the natural disposition; it indeed controls, directs, and purifies, but substantially the individual who believes in Christ retains his natural temperament of mind. Religion does not destroy the identity of the believer, but exhibits its influence in giving him a new and holy bias. It imparts principles and motives which habitually control the evil propensities of the heart. If there is indeed anything that can remove depression and heal the diseases of the mind, it is the knowledge and love of true religion; so that if these effects are not produced in a greater degree, the blame rests with the Christian. There is unquestionably in the cases of some good people too great a yielding to this mental weakness; there is not a sufficient activity, either in the exercise of their minds respecting religion, or in promoting the great objects of Christian benevolence. They are in danger of cherishing too much of the spirit of selfishness, and forgetting in their own personal feelings the *real* miseries and ignorance of multitudes around them. It is indeed one of the besetting sins of such persons, that they do not resist the evil as they should do, but rather seem willing to yield up their minds to thoughts of sadness and distress.

Such conduct has a tendency to injure true religion. It furnishes the men of the world with plausible assertions against it, and produces even on the minds of inquirers, anxiety and uncertainty

And yet we would not wish to speak too harshly respecting such individuals. Every heart knows its own bitterness; and to them it may often be a cause of deep humiliation, that they are not rendering justice to the claims and real effects of true religion. We would rather leave them with the Searcher of hearts. He alone can distinguish between positive disease, mental weakness, and moral guilt.

The second reason which may be mentioned, as accounting for the appearance of melancholy in religious persons is, *imperfect views of religion*.

There is no truth of greater importance in connection with Christian comfort than this; that in proportion to our clear conceptions of the Gospel, and to correct views of the whole system of divine truth, will be our real peace and joy of mind. Personal religion is founded on knowledge, the knowledge of God and of his Son Jesus Christ, and necessarily including within it some acquaintance with the entire system of revealed truth. The man therefore, who pretends to the possession of joy, while his mind is clouded with ignorance of some of the first principles of the oracles of God, must be under a great delusion. We are aware that joy may be real, and yet there may be much remaining ignorance, but in proportion as this exists, there will be a deprivation of real, satisfying joy. What we wish chiefly to deprecate, is the mere excitement of the passions, while the understanding is in darkness and the judgment is uninstructed. Hence it is, that while an individual is boasting of his happy frame

of mind, he is unable to give a reason of the hope that is in him with meekness and fear. He cannot tell from whence his joy springs. He is unable to fix on any principle that can account for its existence, or to mention any truth, the belief of which has brought gladness to his heart. That he feels a certain kind of joy there is no doubt; that it springs from true religion, we greatly question.

There are some indeed, whose religious character we feel less inclined to doubt, who yet deprive themselves of scriptural joy, by approaching too near to the persons above referred to. They attribute too much to certain frames of mind. They seem to live too much under the influence of passion, and too little under the influence of divine principles. They apparently judge of their state by what they feel, rather than by what they believe. They are in danger of looking more at the impressions on their own minds, than at the great object of faith. They expect that great joy or an excited state of mind, should *always* be possessed; and because they frequently lose this, they are filled with distress of mind and sadness of countenance. And yet these individuals may be relying on the Saviour alone for salvation, and may admit with all their hearts, the great and consoling truth that "God is love." How is it then, that notwithstanding this they feel melancholy. It is because they look so much at their frames and feelings, and so little at the foundation of their hope; it is because they place too much reliance on the state of their own minds, and too little on the finished work of

the Redeemer; that they live too much by sense, and too little by faith on the Son of God.

There can indeed be no real religion without feeling. The affections must be interested, or God cannot be loved and adored. There is a wide difference, however, between the mere excitement of the passions, and that holy, humbling, purifying and delightful emotion which results from correct views of the salvation of Christ, and a firm reliance on his great sacrifice; together with a child-like dependence on the faithfulness and love of God.

If the individuals referred to, would become acquainted with the breadth and length of divine truth; if they sought a more intimate acquaintance with the source of comfort, and taught and constrained their minds to dwell more on the infinite perfections and suitableness of the work of Christ; and were looking less to mere feeling, there would be less of mental gloom and apparent unhappiness. There might indeed be a smaller measure of excitement, but there would be a greater share of real calm and consoling peace of mind. There would be less dependence on the creature, but the power and faithfulness and love of God would more frequently be the objects of devout attention. Religion would then be honoured by the removal of unseemly gloom, as well as by the exhibition of a sober and purifying joy. Cheerfulness would take the place of sadness, and there would be holy, consistent, and persevering activity instead of fitful and imprudent zeal.

Let the inquirer be assured of one thing, that

while some Christians may, from the causes which have been named, be sometimes melancholy, they are exceptions to the general rule. The legitimate results of believing are peace and joy. To the belief of the truth may safely be attributed, all the real enjoyment of life; nay, conscience will sometimes tell the accusers of the brethren, that it would be well for them were they in the Christian's place.

But if it were even true, that melancholy was the necessary, the invariable consequence of attention to religion, the duty and importance of seeking the knowledge of it, would remain the same. The question is not, will it deprive me of present joy, but what is the will of God? Am I bound as a creature of Jehovah to submit to his authority? If so, whatever the consequences may be, I ought to obey. If even sadness during life should be the result, the sinner's obedience must be yielded. Taking this ground then, there can be no excuse for neglecting inquiry. We have, however, seen, that God has interwoven the enjoyment of real happiness with the possession of true religion, and that if in *any* instance this should not appear to be the case, the defect is in man, not in divine truth.

Besides, it should be remembered that the joy of the Christian does not arise from outward objects, but from sources unseen and unknown by "the children of this world." Hence their incredulity, and their unwillingness to allow that religion can make the man happy who possesses it. They cannot understand how this can be, for they are unable to see in the Christian's joy, any thing in common

with the boisterous or thoughtless mirth and joy they have experienced themselves. They know not the internal peace, the real comfort, and the sacred delight, which are enjoyed by the believer, and therefore they deny their existence; and from a few sad countenances of religious professors, pronounce all Christians unhappy.

Again, Christians are sometimes charged *with yielding too much to their natural tempers, with giving way to passion.*

This is a very great evil by whomsoever committed; it is especially so on the part of a Christian. Much injury has in this way been done to the cause of religion. It does sometimes happen that when persons of warm temperament are insulted or provoked, by the words or deeds of their fellow-men, the meekness and gentleness of Christ are too much forgotten. The anger that is produced is sometimes sinful, because it is excited by inadequate causes, or remains longer than is warranted by the spirit of Christian forgiveness. The sun not only goes down, but rises again upon their wrath. The greatest danger, however, to which such hasty tempers are exposed, is, the sudden ebullition of passion occasioned by some unexpected provocation. The remains of human depravity are then fearfully exhibited, and when witnessed by the men of the world, or even by those who wish to think highly of Christianity, it is fitted to lead them to form erroneous conclusions respecting it.

While excessive anger is sinful, it becomes especially so, when it continues till it assumes the name

and character of resentment, and is unworthy of the Christian. Yet while such a state of mind cannot for a moment be justified, it may be proper for the inquirer to consider the following things. He beholds not the grief of heart, which such a yielding to temptation occasions to the real Christian. Could he see him in his closet, bitterly lamenting his hastiness of temper, deeply humbled before God on account of the dishonour he had done to religion; imploring divine forgiveness, and seeking divine aid to enable him to resist the sin that so easily besets him; he might be convinced that religion had done much for that individual, especially when such real repentance does produce greater caution for the time to come. Consider also, how utterly unbearable the same individual would have been, had he not possessed the knowledge of true religion. There would not have existed at any time, the control of Christian principle, of a religious profession, of jealous watchfulness, and a sense of the divine presence. Even after the worst displays of wrath, there would have been no humiliation, no contrition, no genuine repentance. The worst consequences that such an individual would have feared, would have been those that proceeded from men; and we know that all these are forgotten in the midst of passion. Oh how many persons, with tempers naturally irritable and passionate, have cause to rejoice in the subduing and restraining influence of the Gospel.

But let the inquirer also remember, that the word of God unequivocally condemns the cherishing

or manifestation of evil passions, and that the admonitions addressed to Christians to avoid such things are numerous and impressive. What, for instance, can be plainer than the following words? “Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.” “But now ye also put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth.” “Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord.” “Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath. Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.”*

Again, Christians are sometimes charged *with being mean and griping in their worldly dealings; with a decided love to the world, and with too great a tendency to take advantage of their fellow-creatures.* These are indeed heavy charges, and, if true, would go a great way to demolish the fairest profession of Christianity. That there are some who bear the Christian name, that act so, we cannot deny. But they are men who have adopted it, *chiefly* for the purpose of more cunningly and securely gratifying their love of the world; men who

* James i. 19. Col. iii. 8. Rom. xii. 19. Eph. iv. 26, 31, 32.

can grind the faces of the poor, and cheat the widow and the orphan, under the cloak of a sanctimonious profession. These are individuals whose selfishness is proof against every thing but an open exposure of their nefarious practices ; nay, who, if in danger of being exposed to the reprobation of men, will try to avert the storm, by greater apparent zeal for the cause of Christ.

These persons are the vilest of the vile ; they are hypocrites ; and it does seem a duty, when such are discovered, to let them be known in their true characters, that religion may not be dishonoured.

True Christians cannot, dare not act unjustly. They forfeit every claim to Christian character, if they take a mean or dishonest advantage of their neighbour in the smallest matter. They know that the want of principle which would lead them to cheat any one in a farthing, would incline them to show dishonesty in greater matters, if they could do it with impunity. They are persuaded, that in God's sight such deeds are as wicked as open profligacy, and as such are condemned in his word.

That there is in some Christians too great a love to the things of this world may be true, and this may certainly lead them too near the confines of meanness and closeness in their dealings with their fellow-men. It is, indeed, lamentable, to see or hear of such instances, but they should be to us additional proofs of the truth of Scripture, which condemns all such conduct. " Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him."

“Take heed and beware of covetousness: for a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.” “They that will be rich, fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil; which, while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness.”*

At the same time, it should be stated, that the charges referred to are frequently brought against Christians without sufficient ground. It is enough for some enemies of Christianity to observe the economical and prudent conduct of a Christian—to see him avoiding every thing like speculation in his business, and extravagance in his domestic expenditure—to charge him with meanness and shabbiness, and the love of the world. And yet all the time, the Christian is acting up to the spirit of his profession, avoiding the appearance of injustice as well as its reality; he is seeking to clear his way with the world, “to provide things honest in the sight of all men,”—“to owe no man any thing,”—“and that he may have to give to him that needeth.” In attending to these duties, he is perhaps taking care that he is not imposed on by the very

* 1 John ii. 15. Luke xii. 15. 1 Tim. vi. 9—11

persons who are loudest in their cries against his cunning or meanness.

There ought to be the most sufficient evidence to prove the guilt of the parties, before the sweeping charges too often brought against them are believed. Justice requires this, and the individual who refuses to admit this claim, is totally unfit to judge of Christian principle or Christian practice; he is indeed the last person in the world who should accuse any one of wanting integrity. It is injurious to our own minds rashly to take up harsh opinions respecting our fellow men; and especially will it injure learners in religious matters, when this is done against true Christians.

Christians are also charged *with showing imprudent zeal, with manifesting an air of superciliousness, and with spiritual pride.* Others again are charged *with a deficiency of zeal, both as it regards the cause of religion in general, and the case of the serious inquirer in particular.* Such imperfections may exist among Christians. There may be zeal without knowledge, but this is condemned by the word of God. There may be an *appearance* of pride, and there *may be* spiritual pride in the heart, but these are also opposed to the word of God. It may be stated, however, that while Christianity teaches humility in every case where it is truly believed, it does not destroy the distinctions of rank which must ever exist in a well regulated state of society. While all Christians are brethren in Christ Jesus, bought with the same blood, and sanctified by the same Spirit, yet it would be too

much to expect that a person of rank should become familiar with or make companions of those whom providence had placed far beneath him in station. It is indeed the duty of the highest, on proper occasions, to condescend to men of low degree, and to show the spirit of kindness and Christian liberality, to esteem them and love them for the truth's sake ; but they should not be accused of pride, when they do not permit that familiarity, which pride on the part of their accusers may induce them to expect.

The charge, however, which is sometimes brought against Christians, of not showing proper attention to the young or to the inquiring, is in some cases too true. . It is a grievous imperfection—it is a great evil, when Christians are indifferent about the religious instruction and salvation of those around them. The spirit and conduct of their Divine Master should be more manifested in going about doing good, in watching the first dawns of religious interest and attention ; in assisting young Christians in their inquiries, in warning them against error, and in guiding them into the way of truth. The inquirer, anxious for instruction, has reason to complain when aged or experienced Christians altogether overlook his case ; or while exerting themselves in the more public religious institutions of the day, seem lukewarm about the more humble, but equally important duty of encouraging and assisting those who are “ asking the way to Zion with their faces thitherward.” There are indeed many who act this Christian and this friendly part ; and

if all true Christians were to consider the intimate connection between this duty and the real prosperity of the church of Christ, fewer complaints of this kind could *justly* be brought against them.

At the same time it should be acknowledged, that the inquirer may have been expecting too much from Christians around him. They cannot read his thoughts, they may not know his desires, they are unable to sympathize with the fears and anxieties of the awakened mind, when the state of that mind is unknown to them. They should in some way or other be informed of his desire for Christian advice, and it should be made apparent to them that such would be welcome. Let these means be employed before the Christian is blamed for inattention to the moral wants of the awakened spirit.

Having thus presented to the inquirer some of the defects of Christians, and advised him to examine carefully the sweeping charges brought against them, to discriminate and to decide justly respecting religion, it now seems necessary to point out to Christians themselves the duty of guarding against those evils which are apt to prove a stumbling block to the weak.

Christians are, indeed, called upon, by every consideration connected with the honour of religion, and with their own true happiness, to aim at perfection. Sensible of their numerous shortcomings, they are to be humbled before God; and convinced of their own insufficiency, they are to seek divine aid in doing the will of their Father in heaven. They are to remember their high calling,

their infinite obligations, and, consequently, their immense responsibility. If those who possess abundance of this world's goods will have a large account to give at last, how much more the individual who possesses the true riches; who has obtained the highest knowledge, in a spiritual perception of the law and character of God. The claims of Jehovah on all his intelligent creatures are numerous, but especially is this the case with those who are new creatures in Christ Jesus. The path of obedience is not only known, but their hearts have been inclined by a divine power to walk in it. The deliverance they have obtained, is not only a deliverance from punishment, but also from the love of sin. The hopes they have been taught to cherish, not only refer to the pure enjoyments of the eternal world, but are intended to be influential in producing purity in the present state of existence.

Hence we can easily see the force and propriety of the numerous admonitions of Scripture, addressed to Christians to seek after purity of heart, to cherish the spirit of love, "to watch unto prayer," "to rejoice always," to be just and of good report, and to restrain the passions, and to crucify the flesh with the affections and lusts. The names and epithets given to Christians, plainly intimate what they are expected to be, and to do. They are called, "the lights of the world," "the salt of the earth," trees of righteousness, the excellent of the earth, "the servants and children of God," and "the heirs of glory."

Oh! how important is it that the Christian should

live up to his privileges, obligations, and prospects; that he give no occasion to the enemy to blaspheme; nor act in such a way as to be a cause of stumbling to the serious inquirer. His own peace and comfort, the well being of his fellow-creatures, and the divine glory are all connected with a due discharge of his many and weighty duties. The Christian will, indeed, be conscious of many imperfections in the sight of men, but especially in the sight of God. While this ought to humble him in the dust, it should at the same time convince him more and more of the infinite value of the Saviour's blood. Against every sin, it is the Christian's duty and privilege to struggle; and it will at last be his happiness to come off more than conqueror, through Him that loved him.

In closing this chapter, a word is necessary to the inquirer. From the remarks already made, he may have seen that the object is not so much to deny the charges of imperfection brought against true Christians, as to caution him against receiving too hastily the judgment of the world. But when, upon investigation, he finds some of them true, he is to ascertain as far as he can, the reason of such inconsistencies. Not indeed for the purpose of excusing them, or of thinking lightly of them, but that religion may not be blamed unjustly. A wish has also been expressed, that the inquirer should not be discouraged by all the imperfections of professing Christians; that he should view such as the remains of that sin, which has so awfully corrupted the soul, and thrown around the fairest and the loveliest

scenes the mantle of gloom and woe. It is, that he might be convinced, that if the remains of sin can still produce so much evil, in those who have been delivered from its habitual love and power; nay, who hate it as their greatest enemy; the effects must be fearful indeed, in the cases of those who live and die under its influence.

He should, in short, seek to learn the most valuable lessons, from what may be at first a stumbling block. The imperfections of others should serve as beacons to him, especially when he knows that they are the result of sin. Let him also be reminded of the propriety and justice of looking at the excellencies of Christians, as well as at their defects. Let him mark with the eye of kindness their zeal, their self denial, and their habitual regard for the divine authority. A desire to imitate these will indicate a state of mind, which every inquirer should seek to possess, and without which no progress can be made in divine knowledge.

We feel anxious in bringing the subject to a close, to urge upon the inquirer the necessity of being personally interested in the salvation of Christ. Let him beware of the madness of stopping short in his pursuit after knowledge, in consequence of hearing of, or even meeting with instances of hypocrisy, and of inconsistency among professing Christians. He has his own salvation to secure, so that if all around him were not only imperfect, but altogether wicked, there would exist a still greater necessity for his immediate flight to the city of refuge. There alone can he be secure from the effects of an evil example,

and there alone can he escape from the wrath of an offended God. To him it should convey the highest joy to know, that the way is yet open, and that through faith in Jesus Christ, he can obtain those blessings which are able to make him happy, and without which no outward circumstances can ever produce real and lasting joy.

CONCLUSION.

THE reader who has perused the preceding pages, must have discovered that the leading object of the writer has been to show, that none of the difficulties particularly noticed in this work as arising from the state of society and of the Christian church, can form any argument against true religion, or furnish any excuse for neglecting inquiry respecting the affairs of the soul.

But formidable as these obstacles may be, they are not, even when united, so great as the difficulties to be found in every human heart. It is because there is so much opposition to God and to spiritual things in the soul of man naturally, that the circumstances of life present so much discouragement. Had the pride of the heart been humbled, had its enmity been slain, had the love of sin been subdued, and the infinite importance of eternal things fully perceived, advice would have been less required, and entreaty to persevere in the pursuit of truth would have been altogether unnecessary.

While the heart remains unchanged, we cannot wonder at outward difficulties discouraging the inquirer. There are other cases, however, which exhibit the evils of the human heart more strongly, and strikingly prove the truth of the Scripture declaration: "The carnal mind is enmity against

God ; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.”* Thus, even when the convinced sinner is placed in the most favourable circumstances for receiving religious instruction, and hardly exposed to one of the difficulties referred to, in the preceding pages ; though surrounded by friends, who have for years directed his mind to religion ; though encouraged by their approbation, and assisted in judging of true religion, by their holy and consistent example, yet it will be found, that his heart is powerfully opposed to religious truth. The pride of his heart, will rise against the humbling doctrines of the Gospel ; his self-righteous spirit will be opposed to the righteousness of God ; his natural unwillingness to submit to the divine authority, will be shown in refusing to obey the self-denying precepts of God’s word, and the doubts and fears of his mind, will form an excuse for not believing with all his heart, the record which God has given concerning Christ. In addition to all this, every effort will be made by Satan, working on the unbelief of the heart, to prevent attention to the concerns of the soul. His aim is, to discourage from inquiry altogether, by producing disappointment and disgust ; or to lull the conscience into a soft and dangerous security, by the suggestion that enough has been already done.

If then it be true that in circumstances outwardly favourable for religious inquiry, such difficulties are to be surmounted, we may fairly conclude that, when in addition to these, the world, friends, and

* Rom. viii. 7.

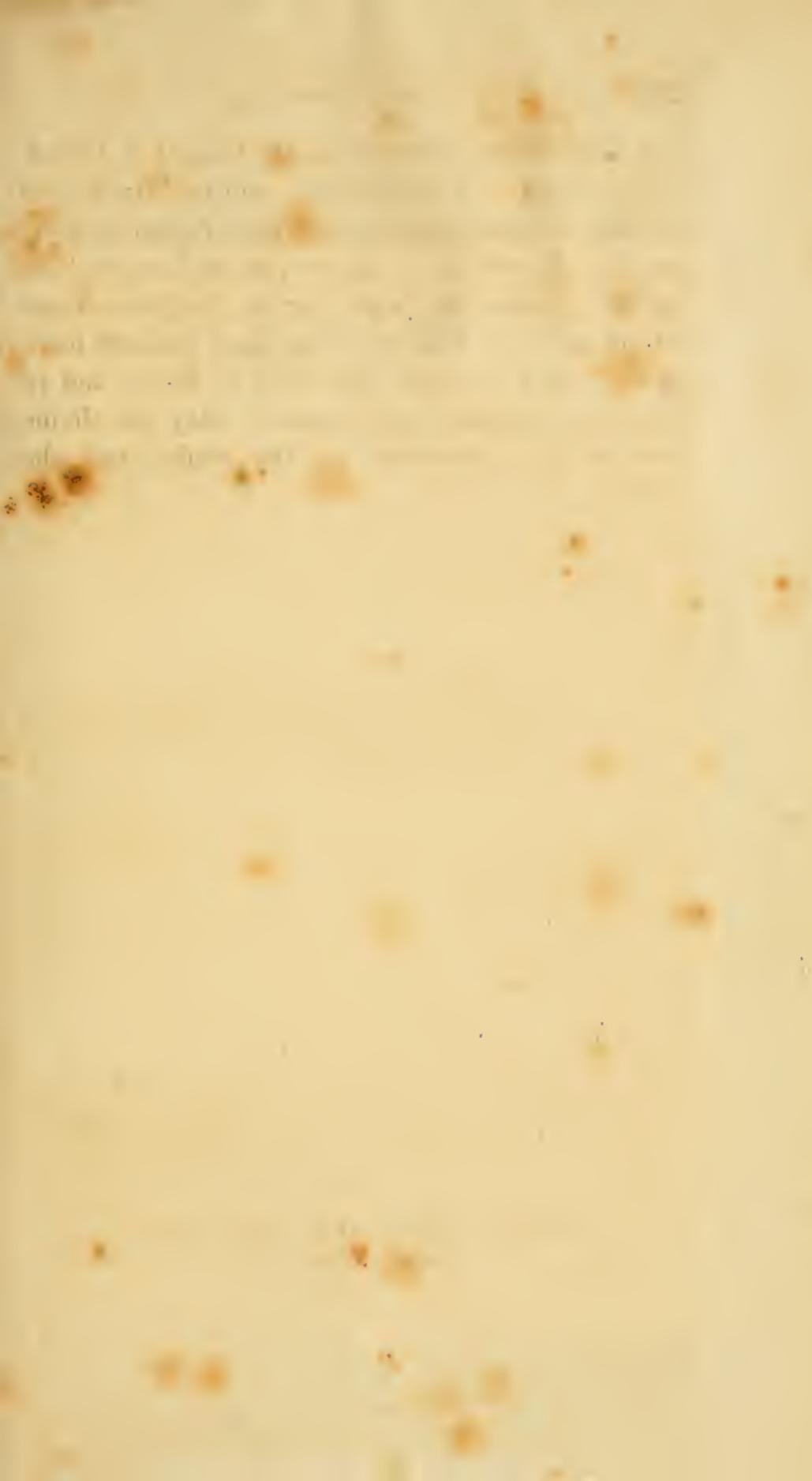
enemies, present obstacles ; the inquirer needs much assistance. Indeed every view that we can take of the present subject forces upon the mind a conviction of the necessity of divine help. Let this be instantly sought, for, in the possession of this, all difficulties can be overcome.

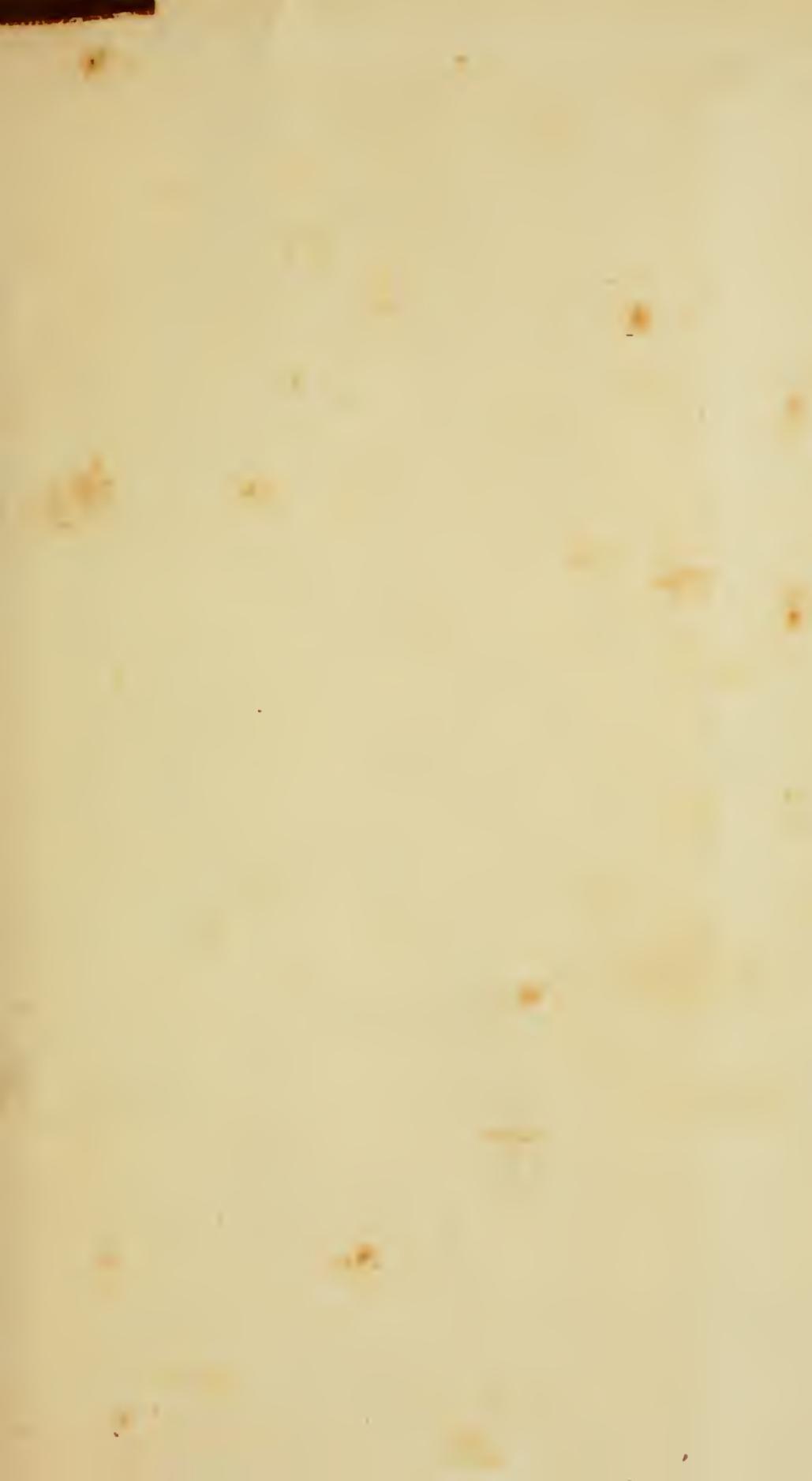
But it may be, that the reader is not greatly interested in these matters. Let him be earnestly and affectionately entreated to examine and consider the statements of the Bible respecting his real situation. Let him also consider what God has done for sinners, in giving his Son to die for them ; and in promising his Holy Spirit, to make his own gift accepted, and efficacious. Let him seriously reflect on the danger of a continued love of the world and of sin ; the utter hopelessness of escape, if he will not believe in Christ, and the awful aggravation of his guilt, in hearing of salvation and yet rejecting it.

Surely the pardon of sin is worth seeking ; peace of conscience is worth possessing ; the favour of God is of some value, and the soul would surely be happier saved than lost. And yet what is the man saying, who continues unwilling to attend to these things, or who allows the difficulties of life to prevent him from going forward in the pursuit of truth. He is practically declaring that forgiveness is not worth seeking ; that peace of conscience is of trifling importance ; that the divine favour is of no value ; and that the soul may as well be lost as saved. Let not this be the language of your conduct. Let a serious and heartfelt concern about your soul take possession of your mind, and never rest satisfied till

you have found salvation in the Gospel of Christ. He has said, " I am the way, and the truth, and the life, no man cometh unto the Father but by me." " Search the Scriptures, for in them ye think ye have eternal life, and they are they which testify of me." " Take my yoke upon you and learn of me ; for I am meek and lowly in heart, and ye shall find rest unto your souls." May this divine rest be the inheritance of the reader and the author.

FINIS.





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