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TWO

S E R M O N S,

ON THE

Atrocity of Suicide,

AND ON THE CAUSES WHICH LEAD TO IT.

Preached at *Suffield*, on Lord's Day, Feb. 24, 1805.

*On occasion of a melancholy instance of Suicide, which
had recently occurred in that town.*

BY JOSEPH LATHROP, D. D.

Pastor of the First Church in West-Springfield.

SECOND EDITION,
With additions and alterations.

SPRINGFIELD, *Mas.*
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ACTS xvi. 26.

Do thyself no harm.



THIS was Paul's exclamation to the Jailor in Philippi, who, at that moment was about to destroy himself by thrusting a sword into his body. The occasion of his taking such a desperate resolution is related in this chapter.

While Paul and Silas were preaching in Philippi, they met with a young woman, who was a sorceress, and who, being assisted by a diabolical power, brought to her masters, the priests of the heathen temple, much gain by sooth-saying, or by telling people certain strange things. This girl followed the apostles, confessing them to be the servants of God, and the teachers of the way of salvation.— Paul, being grieved at the unhappy condition of the damsel, who, while she was convinced of the truth, was under the power of an evil spirit, commanded the spirit in the name of Jesus to come out of her. And he came out in the same hour. Her masters, perceiving that the hope of their gain was gone, caught Paul and Silas, carried them before the magistrates, and accused them of exciting tumults, and making dangerous innovations in the city.

And, by their influence among the people, they raised such a clamour against the apostles, that the magistrates, being overawed, gave sentence, that they should be beaten, and then closely imprisoned ; accordingly, after they had received their stripes, they were committed to the jay-

lor, who, being charged on his peril to keep them safely, thrust them into the inner prison, and made their feet fast in the stocks. In the night God miraculously interposed to set these prisoners at liberty. He sent an earthquake, which shook open the prison doors, and loosed from their bands all who were there in confinement. The jailor, awakened by the violent commotion, sees the doors open; and, concluding that the prisoners had escaped, and that, according to the Roman laws, he must suffer the punishment which should have been inflicted on them, he drew his sword and would have killed himself. Paul, perceiving the jailor's desperate resolution, cries out, "Do thyself no harm, for we are all here."

The particular occasion of this caution, you see, was the jailor's attempt to kill himself. It may therefore be considered, first, as a direct prohibition of *self murder*. But tho' the occasion was special, yet the caution is expressed in such general terms, as may fairly be applied to many other cases. We will therefore, secondly, improve the words, as a warning not to injure ourselves in any way.

I. The words, considered in reference to the particular occasion on which they were spoken, are an express prohibition of *self-murder*.

The two awful instances of this kind of death, which have occurred, both lately, and one recently, in this place, and in the same family, naturally direct my thoughts, and call your attention to the subject now proposed.

But I feel myself under some embarrassment. How shall I do justice to a subject of this nature, without wounding the sensibility, and harrowing up the anguish of the afflicted? Gladly would I console their hearts, assuage their griefs, and relieve their pains. But must I, for this

purpose, disguise the nature, and extonuate the heinousness of the act, which has caused their affliction?—This is what they do not desire. They wish, that, for the general good, the action may be stated truly, and exhibited justly. And if they should hear some sentiments expressed in a manner, which gives new pungency to their painful feelings, they will excuse the honest plainness of the speaker in regard to the common benefit; for it is their benevolent desire, that their affliction may be improved as the means of preventing the like affliction in others. The preacher will aim to find out acceptable words; but they shall be upright words, even words of truth. And may they be as goads, and as nails fastened by the masters of assemblies.

Relying on the goodness and candor of the afflicted part of my audience, I resume my subject; and observe, that the words of my text contain an express prohibition of *self murder*.

There may be cases, in which the defence of our country, or the vindication of our religion requires us to put life in hazard, or even to submit to certain death. As the best end will never justify the application of sinful means, so we can have no right to sacrifice our country, or our religion for the preservation of life. Thus to save life is to lose it. St. John says, “We ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.” Where the life and happiness of a number are depending on our exertions, we ought to interpose for their safety, tho’ it may be with peril to ourselves. On this principle of general benevolence, “Paul sought, not his own profit, but the profit of *many* that they might be *saved*.” “He rejoiced to be offered on the sacrifice and service of their faith.” In such a case “he reckoned not his own life dear to himself.” He commended some, who

in regard to the general interest of the church, “for his life laid down their necks;” or rescued his life, at the hazard of their own.

But tho’, on principles of piety or patriotism, a man may expose his own life to the violence of others, he can have no right to execute violence on himself. If he is bound to suffer death, rather than sacrifice the essential interests of other men; he is bound to live, while he can, that he may promote their interests; and to do good, while he lives, according to the ability which God gives him.

The strong love of life and dread of death, which are common to men, and indeed to all living creatures, we should think, must be a sufficient security against suicide, had there not been instances of those, who have violently broken over this natural and powerful barrier, and by their own rash hands have audaciously terminated their lives, and precipitated themselves into the eternal world.

In most instances, we are inclined to believe, that this violence is the unhappy, but guiltless effect of insanity. But there are cases, in which it cannot be imputed to this cause. The persons committing it, however irrational in this act, appear, in all other respects, to have their reason in its usual exercise. The business is conducted with too much deliberation and contrivance to be ascribed to mere delirium.

Some ancient philosophers taught, and some modern infidels have adopted the sentiment, that when the pain of existence exceeds its pleasure, every one has a right to withdraw himself from it; and that it is a weakness in man to complain of his burden, when it is always in his power to throw it off. Among the Greeks and Romans *self murder* was often committed, not merely from philosophy, or

impatience of life, but often from false notions of honor, liberty and magnanimity. Among the Britons and the Americans it frequently proceeds from gloominess and dejection of mind. With such causes the sentiments of infidelity usually concur: Hence we find, that since the notions of *fatalism*, *universalism* and *annihilation* have been avowed, and the doctrine of a future retribution discarded, instances of suicide have been multiplied beyond all former examples.

Self-murder is an act so full of horror and so contrary to the feelings of nature, that, in our calm hours, we think ourselves in little danger of it. In our contemplations on death, this kind of death seldom comes into mind. We wish to put far from us the evil day; and we have no apprehension, that we shall hasten it with our own guilty hands. But since many have perpetrated this unnatural act, and since we know not what temptations may assail us, it is our wisdom to guard against harm from ourselves, as well as from others.

The divine law has not so explicitly and particularly forbidden this, as it has most other crimes. And the reason is obvious. For before one can bring himself to perpetrate this act, he must have prostrated all consideration of law and penalty. If the law of nature within him will not restrain him, no external law will have much influence.—When God, as a lawgiver, prohibits any crime, he affixes to the commission of it such a penalty, as may reasonably be supposed sufficient to deter men from it. But in the case of self murder, there is no room for penalty in this world, because the criminal *dies* by his crime, and is dead before cognizance can be taken of it. Cognizance can be taken only in the other world. But whatever may be the cause, which induces a man to this dreadful act, it first ex-

tinguishes the belief, or at least suspends the apprehension of future punishment. So that penal laws, human or divine, against this sin, will rarely have an effect on men's minds, after they have once formed the desperate resolution. The effect must usually be in an earlier stage of the evil.

With a view to prevent this crime, some communities have fixed upon it a mark of infamy, by denying to those who have perpetrated it, a decent interment, except in cases of insanity. But the wisdom of this usage may be doubted ; for it is rather a mean of increasing and continuing the anguish of surviving friends, than of preventing the evil in others. The consideration, how the lifeless body will be disposed of, can have no great influence on those, who are driven to so unnatural a purpose. In the divine law given to the Jews, no such order was instituted, and among that people no such usage was adopted. Ahitophel, who hanged himself for chagrin, because his counsel to Absalom was rejected, was buried in the sepulchre of his fathers.

In pagan history cases are mentioned, in which a prevailing passion for suicide was restrained by laws threatening an infamous distinction to the bodies of such as destroyed themselves. Admitting the truth of the fact, which probably we may admit, yet I am not sure, that it can be a precedent for *christian* nations.

It is natural to the mind of man to look forward. Heathens, who had but faint and doubtful apprehensions, and many of them no apprehensions, of the eternal world, seldom extended their views farther beyond death, than to the treatment which their bodies and their names would meet with among survivors. And these views probably

made deeper impressions on them, than they can make on such as by the light of revelation can look into an eternal futurity. If they, to whom the grand and awful scenes of the everlasting world are opened, so utterly disregard *these*, as to resolve on suicide, it can hardly be supposed, that so small a circumstance, as the treatment of the body after death, will divert them from the resolution. Among an enlightened people the surest means to prevent suicide is to represent its guilt and madness by bringing to view the rational and religious arguments against it.

To some of these arguments we will now attend.

1. Suicide is a manifest opposition to the will of God.

Tho' the divine law has given no distinct and particular prohibition of the sin under consideration, yet there is an *implied* prohibition of it in the general laws against murder. The command which says, "Thou shalt not kill," may as well be understood to forbid killing ourselves, as killing another. The reason of the law, "that man is made in the image of God," equally extends to both cases. If I may not shed my neighbor's blood, because he is made in God's image, I may not shed my own; for I am made in that image, as well as he.

That principle of self preservation, that desire of life and dread of death, which the Creator has implanted in us, demonstrate, as clearly as any express law could do, that self destruction is contrary to his will. A law written on stone cannot be more solemn and binding, than this law inscribed on the heart and wrought into our nature. The will of God, that we should use all lawful means to avert death and prolong life, is expressed in our very constitution, and could not have been expressed in more plain and indelible characters on tables of adamant.

2. Any act of sin is more criminal in proportion as it is more contrary to nature. Murder of any kind is criminal, as on other accounts, so particularly on this, that it is contrary to that natural principle of philanthropy and compassion, which is common to mankind, and which is intended as a guard against mutual injuries. To murder a friend and benefactor is still more criminal, because to him we are under the peculiar obligations of gratitude and relationship. To murder a parent or child, a husband or wife, is yet more atrocious, because these relatives come much nearer to ourselves. Now if the nearness of relation and the strength of natural affection aggravate the guilt of murder, no other species of murder can be so criminal as self murder, because there is none so near to us, and none for whom we so naturally care, as ourselves.

3. The violation of a trust is, in any case, a crime. And the crime is greater in proportion to the magnitude of the trust which is violated. For a parent to destroy his child, or a guardian his ward, or a preceptor his pupil, is a crime highly aggravated by the protection which he owed to, and the confidence which he claimed from the person whom he destroys. But God has, in a most peculiar sense, committed to us the care of ourselves. No other possesses equal ability, or is under equal obligation, to consult our safety, as we to consult our own. The man therefore, who destroys his own life, violates the most sacred trust, that can be committed to mortals.

4. This act is one of the greatest injuries, which a man can do to his friends; for he not only deprives them of the comforts of his presence, and the benefits of his assistance in life, but by the awful manner of his death pierces them thro' and thro' with the keenest anguish, and opens in their hearts a rankling wound, which time cannot close.

He leaves them under inconsolable distress arising from many considerations, and particularly from this, that his rash and criminal exit gives cause to fear the worst with regard to his condition in the other world.

It also does an injury to society by removing a member, who might have contributed to the general happiness. As God has endued us with a capacity for usefulness, we are bound faithfully to serve the interests of mankind according to this capacity, until we shall be regularly dismissed from our places. The great Lord of nature has assigned us our post, and here we must stand. We have no right to quit our station, before he calls us away, and gives us our discharge. Wilful desertion will certainly incur his highest displeasure.

5. "To God the issues of death belong." In his hands is our breath, and his are all our ways. He has given us life, and to terminate it is his prerogative. Suicide is therefore a bold and impious assumption of that authority, which he has not committed to mortals, but reserves in his own hands.

But if to terminate life is God's prerogative, it will be asked, What right has civil government in any case to inflict capital punishments on offenders? I answer, No right, but that which results from the will of God declared by the voice of revelation, or the voice of nature.

If we are bound to preserve our own life, we have a natural right to defend it against unjust violence, and to take away the life of the assailant when we cannot otherwise preserve our own. Society has the same right of self defence, as the individual. There are certain crimes, which, if permitted, would destroy society. These crimes must be restrained. If capital punishment appears to be a ne-

ecessary mean of restraining them ; then on the principle of self defence, society has the same right to ordain and execute this kind of punishment, as it has to take arms for repelling an unprovoked invasion, or as the individual has, in a case of extreme necessity, to apply force against the murderous attempt of a truculent ruffian. To neglect the necessary means of self preservation would be a kind of suicide in society, as well as in the individual. But as the individual may not use violence, when by milder means he can secure or deliver himself from danger, so neither may society annex death to the commission of crimes, which may as well be prevented by more moderate punishments. For it is not the atrocity of crimes in a moral estimate, but the necessity of a case in a social view, which is to determine the degree and proportion of punishments.

To proceed with our arguments.

6. Suicide is an act full of ingratitude. Life is a favour, unless we, by our own folly and vice, render it otherwise. God daily loads us with benefits. He bestows upon us the riches of his goodness. Evils, indeed, there are in every man's condition : but good things preponderate. Our afflictions may be severe ; but compared with our blessings, they are short. Our troubles may seem many ; but they are really few, compared with our enjoyments ; yea, much the greater part of our troubles arise from our own perverse tempers, from pride, impatience, avarice and ambition. Let us deduct from the list of our adversities all those, which we create to ourselves, and the rest will be brought within a small compass. Under our real and unavoidable afflictions, religion brings us solid support and refreshing consolation. Under the troubles, which spring from our guilty passions, religion ministers no direct con-

solution : It first teaches us to subdue our passions, rectify our mistakes and correct our tempers ; then its consolations come spontaneously, and the heart can feel and apply them. Now since life is a favour, or may be such, unless we pervert it, to shorten it is to spurn the divine mercy and goodness.

7. The present life is our probation for future and eternal happiness ; and it is the only probation that will be allowed us. “ There is no work nor device in the grave.” A guilty life and impenitent death will be followed with misery eternal and extreme. A great salvation is now offered, and may be obtained ; but if we finally neglect it, there is no escape. Death terminates our only probation, and fixes our future condition. “ As falls the tree, so it lies.” What rashness and presumption must it then be to contract this already contracted term of life—to shorten this short space of trial, on the improvement of which depends our escape from endless misery, and our enjoyment of everlasting felicity ? What madness and insatiation to cut ourselves off from all remaining opportunity of securing our final salvation, and to run the dreadful hazard of falling into intolerable and interminable woe ? However severe present sufferings may be, they cannot justify an impatience of mind, which urges to so awful a step. No man knows, in what ways, nor how soon, God may send him deliverance from his troubles : No man knows, what strong consolations may be imparted to soften his adversities and cheer his desponding mind : No man knows, what blessings may result from the things, which seem to be against him. And, which is more, no man knows, what a wretched exchange he shall make, when, to throw off his present burdens, he plunges himself into the eternal world.

They, who in the exercise of reason, (if reason, in such

a case, can be said to be in exercise,) have taken this tremendous step, have generally been urged to it by worldly disappointments, by the distresses of poverty, by blasted ambition, by the apprehension of disgrace, by the fear of punishment for some infamous crime, or by the horrors of a guilty despairing conscience. The motives prompting them to it are criminal in their nature, or in their cause; for they have their existence in the vices and corruptions of the mind; in pride, impatience, avarice, or some previous wickedness. Saul, in the haughtiness of his spirit, fell on his own sword, lest he should become the sport and mockery of his insolent and victorious enemies. Ahitophel, by disappointed ambition, was urged to hang himself, when he found, that the counsel of another was preferred to his own, and that his political scheme would be utterly frustrated. To the like fatal act was Judas driven by the horror of guilt and the phrenzy of despair, when he reflected, that he had betrayed innocent blood, and perceived that the cruel and perfidious action could not be recalled. The fear of punishment for the supposed escape of his prisoners hurried the jaylor to draw his sword on himself.

But 8. The greatest aggravation of this sin is, that it leaves no opportunity for repentance; and, therefore, while it destroys the body, it ruins the soul. According to the tenor of the gospel, no wilful deliberate sin can be forgiven without a distinct and particular repentance; and repentance must be a work of the present life. They who, urged by pride, ambition, impatience and worldly disappointment, wilfully destroy their lives, die under all the guilt of a depraved and vicious character; and to this they add the dreadful guilt of finishing their probationary space with one of the most horrible crimes in their power. As, therefore, there is no opportunity for repentance, there is no scriptur-

al hope of their obtaining mercy, except in those cases, in which death lingers after the fatal stroke is given, or the deadly dose is received. In such cases it would be rash to conclude that repentance is never exercised, and mercy never obtained. But they, who from the mere impulse of a vicious temper, close life by an act of *sudden* violence, leave us no positive hope of their pardon in this world or their happiness in the next.—We commit them to a sovereign God.

We ought, however, to entertain more favorable thoughts of those, who are urged to this violence by a dis-tempered body and a distracted mind. To these maladies good men are liable, as well as others; and for miscarriages, which proceed wholly from causes of this kind, we cannot think them answerable. As they are not themselves, so their conduct is not their own, considered as rational beings and moral agents. It is rather the effect of a disease operating mechanically. If people, under the power of a wild delirium, which wholly deranges the thoughts, or under the darkness of a fixed and settled melancholy, which totally absorbs the reason, commit violence on themselves, they are probably no more accountable for their own death, than if it had been the effect of lightening or an apoplexy.

It is difficult to say, what are the delusions of imagination in a delirium. They, who emerge from such a state, can seldom distinctly recollect and relate the thoughts, which then possessed their brains and urged their actions. Some, however, after reason has resumed its dominion, have said, that they fancied themselves to be a species of beings different from the human, or in a situation different from what was real; and that the fatal actions which they attempted, were thought to be necessary means of preservation from some danger which seemed to pursue them.

A charitable opinion, founded in a person's good life, ought not to be altered by the unhappy manner of his death, when this appears to be the probable effect of a dis-

ordered mind. But whatever hope we may have for such a person, the case of those, who, thro' pride, impatience, discontent, or any criminal passion, violently force their passage into the other world by their own rash hands, and madly rush before the tribunal of God, to disburden themselves of the troubles of life, leaves no room for this charitable hope.

We have said, that insanity exempts men from accountability for their actions: But then, it must be remembered, that some may be accountable for their insanity. If this be the effect of their own vices, of intemperance, idleness, prodigality, or any criminal passion harboured and indulged, however it may excuse subsequent conduct, it admits no excuse for itself. The vices, which produced it, stand chargeable with this effect and all its horrible consequences.

We have considered the words of the text, as they respect the case of the jaylor. In this application, they are a prohibition of violent self murder.

But the words admit a more extensive application. "Do thyself *no* harm." The expression is so general, that it may be applied as a caution against *every* kind and degree of self injury. If it be criminal to harm ourselves at all; if it be unlawful to terminate life by a sudden act; for the same reason it is unlawful to destroy our health, and bring on death by slow and moderate means. He who designedly takes a fatal dose of poison is guilty of self murder, whether the poison be intended to operate hastily or gradually. The apostle may therefore be understood as warning us against every thing, in our temper and conduct, which tends to shorten our life, or to render it unhappy while it lasts.

This part of our subject we shall distinctly illustrate in another discourse.

guide him in all his sensitive gratifications. When gratification is his great object, and when this is carried beyond what nature requires for its comfort, or can bear without oppression, then imaginary pleasure turns to real pain. Customary excess in animal indulgence debilitates the frame, impairs the understanding, distempers the body, and hastens a dissolution. It creates dangers and casualties, banishes prudence and caution, proves the occasion of violent injuries and sometimes of sudden death. "Who hath wo? who hath sorrow? who hath wounds without cause? They who tarry long at the wine.—Look not on the wine, when it is red, when it giveth its color in the cup. At the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder. Thou shalt be as one that lieth down in the midst of the sea, or as one that lieth on the top of a mast."

But if intemperance should not cause death suddenly, yet it tends to that issue gradually. It works in the frame like a slow poison, and its deadly effects, tho' moderate, are not the less certain. Besides its baneful influence on the body, it consumes the substance, inflames the passions, stupifies the conscience, blasts the reputation and puts an end to usefulness. Yea, it often transforms a man of hopeful abilities and amiable manners into a vexatious companion, a fractious parent, a quarrelsome neighbor, a mischievous member of society. It destroys every thing, which belongs to him, as a man; as a *rational, moral, social* being. It leaves to him only the *animal* part, and this sunk lower than it is in the *natural* brute. And say, Is not this creature, as really a self murderer, as if he had plunged a sword in his bosom, or swallowed a dose of poison?

The drunkard may, in a sober hour, be shocked at the sight of one, who has done violence to himself. But his own guilt is, in many respects, far more aggravated. The

felon perhaps destroyed himself by a single and sudden act, and under the force of a strong temptation. The drunkard destroys himself deliberately, by repeated acts, and in cool blood. The former may perhaps wish, when it is too late, to recal his rash and has.y deed. This some, who have been rescued and restored, have confessed. And such have rarely made a second attempt. The latter persists in his injurious treatment of himself, even after he has begun to experience its ruinous and fatal effects. He finds his substance wasting, his health declining, his constitution tottering, and his infirmities increasing; but still he goes on adding drunkenness to thirst. “Though the fool is brayed in a mortar, yet his folly departs not from him.” What is all this, but deliberate self-murder? He does not, indeed, aim at his own destruction. But he pursues a course, which reason, observation and experience shew him, must tend to his destruction. The ruffian, who in robbing a man, gives him a fatal wound, cannot exculpate himself from murder by pleading, that his intention was, not to kill the man, but to get his money. No more can the drunkard excuse himself by alledging, that his intention was only to gratify his appetite; not to injure his life. He, who voluntarily does an unlawful action, is by the law of reason, as well as by the law of man, responsible for the natural and obvious consequences of that action.

2. *Idleness* is a pernicious and often a fatal vice.

The man who pursues no regular course of business, or neglects the business, which he pretends to pursue, brings ruin on himself, and involves others with him. He is assailed by temptations, which his debilitated mind has no fortitude to resist. He is drawn into vices, against which sober industry would have secured him. A derangement of his affairs ensues, and he resorts to gambling and swind-

ling as expedients to retrieve them—to deceitful promises and ostentatious parade, as means to defer his misfortune and disgrace—to company and drinking, as the diversions of his gloomy thoughts, and the sedatives of his anxious foreboding fears. He seduces the simple and unwary to associate with him, that he may abuse their unsuspecting confidence, and take advantage of their inexperience. If he has some address and much conceit, he will talk aloud about matters of state, will affect vast wisdom and patriotism, and will slander worthy men, that he may be put into some office, by which he can riot at the public expense. But the time comes, when his ambition is blasted, his fraud detected, and his plans disconcerted. Then ruin bursts upon him with irresistible force; and he sinks into inactive despondence, or quits his country by flight, or perhaps the world by suicide; and he departs loaded with the execrations of those whom he has undone. This is no imaginary description. It is often realized.

3. Men do themselves harm by the habitual indulgence of a *melancholy spirit*. This is one cause of self murder.

Gloomy apprehensions of God and religion, and dismal conclusions concerning ones self, render life a burden, and embitter all its comforts. A severer distress cannot be imagined, than that which arises from this source. Every other distress will admit of some consolation. It may be allayed with the hope of good to come, either in this world or the next. But the anguish of a settled melancholy is inconsolable, because it shuts out hope, that faithful attendant in ordinary afflictions. “The spirit of a man will sustain his infirmity, but a wounded spirit who can bear?” This is the reason why it has so often urged men to put a speedy end to life. Viewing themselves as abandoned to misfortune here, and doomed to misery hereafter, they

found nothing to invite their stay, or forbid their exit. Imagining, that they already knew, and had begun to feel the worst that could befall them, they seemed to themselves to run no risk by plunging headlong into another world, or whatever might be the consequence there, at least they were sure of getting rid of what they suffered here. They therefore chose strangling and death, rather than life.

Since these gloomy and desperate apprehensions are so painful in themselves, and so dangerous in their tendency, we ought carefully to guard our souls against them ; to rebuke them when they begin to arise, and to banish them before they get full possession.

The primary cause of settled melancholy is usually, no doubt, some nervous affection, which distempers the imagination, and beclouds the mind. People thus affected complain of wicked, and often, of blasphemous suggestions ; and of great incoherence and confusion in their thoughts, whenever they attempt closely to fix them on any subject. And if they are of a serious disposition, this confusion will be most observable in religious duties ; altho', if they did but notice it, it is probably as real in many other cases.— In this gloomy state of mind, they draw dark conclusions respecting every thing which seems important ; and especially with respect to their final salvation, which they regard as an object of the highest importance. From the evil thoughts which haunt them, and from the versatility and unfixedness of their minds in holy duties, they conclude that there is nothing of the temper of religion in them. They look to former times—they reflect on that refreshing light and spiritual sensibility—that cheerful hope and lively comfort, which they have once known ; and hence they make out a new argument against themselves. Comparing their present darkness and perturbation with

the clear light and calm joy of better days, they imagine, that they have committed the unpardonable sin, or at least some great, tho' perhaps unknown transgression, which has provoked God to withdraw his spirit from them; and that now their case scarcely admits of hope. Brooding over these melancholy thoughts, they hatch them into the viper despair, the poison of which drinks up their spirits. When they have come to this stage in the progress of religious melancholy, their case is extremely unhappy, because they refuse to be comforted, and reject every consideration, which might give them relief. It is easy for every one, but themselves, to see that bodily disorders lie at the bottom of their complaints—that their dark conclusions are unreasonable and unfounded, that their case bears no resemblance to the case of those who are forsaken of God. It is easy to tell them, that their strong sense of the importance of religion discriminates them from the hardened wretches, who have sinned away their hopes—that as the mercy of God is infinite, no man has cause for despair, but he who has cast off the care of his soul—that their evil thoughts, being a grief and burden to them, cannot be supposed to arise from settled impiety and a love of sin—that their unfixedness and confusion in religious duty are no evidence of a wicked temper, as long as the same infirmity appears in every other case, in which they labour to command their attention. But these arguments take little hold on them, because their state is such, that they will turn every thing against themselves. The blackness of their minds absorbs all the rays of light. In these circumstances they are much exposed to temptations, and poorly able to make their defence; their adversary is busy, and he readily gets an advantage against them. It is easy to give them good advice; but hard for them to apply it. For this reason it is more necessary to guard against

the first invasion of melancholy, when it is more in one's power to resist it.

That we may prevent this danger, we must form just and consistent ideas of God's character and of the gospel scheme ; we must contemplate his mercy and grace, as well as his justice and holiness, and the promises and invitations of the gospel, as well as its warnings and threatenings ; we must attend to those things which are clearly and plainly revealed, and which are the ground of our faith and hope, and not perplex ourselves about the secret mysteries which are not revealed, and which we could not understand, if they were ; we must apply ourselves to present duty, and not curiously pry into the unknown events of futurity ; we must readily obey the plain commands of God, and trust his faithfulness and power to fulfill his promises ; we must daily walk with God, keep up an intercourse with him, and commit ourselves in well-doing to the keeping of his providence and grace.

4. Men do themselves harm, when they indulge *immoderate passions* ; such as impatience, avarice, ambition, grief, envy and wrath.

“ The sorrow of the world breaketh the spirit, and worketh death.” “ Envy is the rottenness of the bones.” “ Wrath killeth the foolish man.” These passions, like scorpions, sting and torment the soul, and spread a malignant poison thro' the whole frame. They embitter life's dearest enjoyments, aggravate all its pains, and exclude the consolations of religion. In many cases they have proved excitements to self murder. The *pride* of Ahitophel, chagrined, that the counsel of another was preferred to his own, drove him to hang himself. The *avarice* of Ahab, disappointed in an attempt to annex Naboth's garden to his

own field, deprived him of the joys of life, and confined him to his bed, sick with discontent, and unable to eat bread. His passion, tho' it did not prompt him to do violence to himself, yet instigated him to destroy honest Naboth, and thus brought on him the wrath of God, which doomed him to a premature death. Haman, in the *haughtiness* of his spirit, deemed all his riches and honors of no value, while he saw Mordecai sitting in the king's gate : and refusing him the homage which he claimed. Jonah, when the predicted catastrophe of Nineveh was suspended, thought it better to die, than to live ! And when exposed to the intense beams of the sun, he was deprived of a friendly shade, he was very angry, and said, " I do well to be angry, even unto death." The Jews, impatient of their troubles in the wilderness, wished to God, that they had died in the land of Egypt. Some worried with this peevish, discontented spirit, have not only wished for death, but executed their wish ; and because the world did not gratify their restless humour, they would stay in it no longer. This uneasy temper, if it does not destroy life itself, destroys all that is good in life, and banishes every real enjoyment.

Envy, malice and revenge are still more dangerous passions. Under their malignant influence, a petty affront, a trifling injury has hurried men to such desperate actions, as have caused the death of others, and terminated in their own. When men harbour and indulge such pernicious and baneful passions, they know not what harm they incur, nor what danger may await them.

5. Men, who admit and entertain *irreligious and licentious principles*, do themselves infinite harm, and if they avow and diffuse such principles, they do immense injury to others.

Religion is the only solid foundation of comfort in this world, and of happiness in the next. This, embraced in the heart, banishes envy and malice, impatience and discontent, anxiety and fear; inspires with benevolent affections, calm resignation and cheerful hope; and gives a sure title to glory and immortality. The man, who renounces religion, abandons all his rational comforts and future prospects. He makes himself a prey to temptation, vice and fear. He becomes a creature exposed, defenceless and forlorn. If he should see his condition, he would be a terror to himself. If others should see his heart, he would be a terror to all about him. If all men were like him, he would have no security from the violence of his neighbors. He has now no security from the violence of his own hands; nor have others any security from this violence, but the laws of society. There is in him no principle to restrain him from any outrage, which his passions may dictate, whether against himself or mankind.

There are some, who view this life as the only term of human existence. If in words they acknowledge a God, who made and sustains the universe, yet in reality they discard the idea of his moral government, and consequently of a future retribution. These, as they believe no existence, fear no punishment, after death, and consequently are under no moral restraint from vice while they live. And whenever their troubles make them weary of existence, they claim a right to terminate it. Many, on this principle, have been their own executioners; and some have, with themselves, destroyed their nearest friends. They consider men merely as a superior race of animals; and what evil will they see in killing a man, more than in killing any other animal? This sentiment directly tends to

extinguish those social affections and human feelings, which are our natural restraints from mutual injury, and our natural excitements to mutual beneficence. If we have a right to retire from existence, because we experience trouble, we shall claim as good a right to put another out of existence, because he gives us trouble.

There are some, who, tho' they profess to believe a future existence, yet deny all future punishment, and persuade themselves, that a God of infinite goodness will make all his creatures happy at last, and will inflict punishment on none, whatever may be their character. In this persuasion, they can fear nothing from vice, except some present inconvenience, and this, they imagine, may be over balanced by some solid advantage; and they can fear nothing from death, but the pain of dying; and this they must submit to sooner or later. If this world is become troublesome to them, and likely to continue so, why should they not quit it for the more speedy possession of a better? And if their dearest friend is in a state of suffering, and there is no good prospect of relief, why should they not, in pure humanity, hasten his transition to a more desirable condition? When other means fail, why should not death be applied as the last, and the only remedy? Such has been, in some instances, the dreadful consequence of this nefarious sentiment.

There are others, who imagine, that every man's destiny is eternally fixed, and every man's conduct immutably determined by an absolute fatality; and hence they conclude, that it is their true wisdom to cast off all concern about their own actions and the final issue of them, to follow their own inclinations without fear, and to meet with boldness the fate which is allotted for them, and which

they cannot divert or avoid. These, if urged to suicide, as a relief from pain and sorrow, embrace it as their destiny, and flatter themselves, that they are not accountable. If they should chance to fall into misery in another world, they say, it is their fate, not their fault. It is not what they have procured to themselves, but what the general system of nature has fixed for them. All these schemes come to the same issue, that no man's happiness depends on his moral conduct, and that it is indifferent with regard to his future condition, how he lives, and how he dies.

The awful tendency of such principles is manifest from their effects. Since they have prevailed, instances of murder and suicide, and of duelling, which involves in it both murder and suicide, have become much more frequent, than they were formerly. They have lamentably increased in our own land ; and in France, after the general prostration of religion, they were astonishingly multiplied. And, so far as my information enables me to judge, all those, who have destroyed themselves, except such as were insane, had professedly adopted sentiments subversive of religion, and had thrown off the restraints of a future retribution. And in some, who were partially insane, licentious principles co-operated with their mental disorders, and might probably first operate to the production of them.

It is not my intention to enter into a discussion of these principles. This would open too extensive a field for the time now allotted me. I shall, however, refer you to one summary argument, which must be sufficient to give conviction to every intelligent mind.

Only consider what is the natural tendency and the frequent operation of the principles, which have been mentioned. Enquire whether a man possessing and acting up-

on them, would be safe to himself...and whether his family, his friends, his neighbours would be safe in connection with him, if he was unrestrained by the laws of society. Enquire whether a society, actuated by such principles, could protect its members, or could itself subsist. Enquire whether any rational, free, and efficient government could ever be maintained on these principles.... Answer these enquiries, and you will have a full, practical demonstration, that the principles are absolutely false. No sentiments are true, which cannot safely be applied to practice. These, applied to practice, would dissolve families, disband societies, annihilate government, and destroy mankind.

One of the surest ways to prove whether opinions are true, is to bring them to the test of practice, and examine what would be their consequence. We may always act in conformity to truth. If we are all to be annihilated at death, we may act as if we were to be annihilated. If there is no Divine Moral Government, we may act, as if there was none, and may live as if we were not accountable. If we are under the power of an uncontrollable fate, we may give ourselves up to this fate: We need not consult our reason, but may implicitly follow every impulse of passion. And if *we* may act in this manner, so may our neighbors, and so may all mankind. And what would be the consequence? The world would be a Babel: It would be an Aceldama. Let the infidel bring forth his strong reasons, and this appeal to practice will at once confound them all.

6. Men do themselves harm by the commission of *presumptuous sins*.

There are some crimes, which by the laws of God and

men are capital. The man who ventures on these, adds to them the crime of self-murder. He forfeits life, puts himself out of the protection of society, and becomes a victim to justice, whenever it can arrest him. Burglary and arson, which by law are punishable with death, are in their nature horribly criminal. But their criminality is dreadfully aggravated by the consideration, that the hardened and desperate villain, for a paltry gain, or for the gratification of an infernal passion, gives up the security of his life. Presumptuous sins are often followed with a horror of conscience, which poisons every comfort, and which has sometimes sought relief in suicide. Judas, when he had betrayed his Lord, threw back in painful disgust the reward of his treason; and goaded with sharp reflections of guilt and pungent apprehensions of punishment, he plunged himself headlong into the very misery which he dreaded, and the anticipation of which was more than he could bear.

7. Men are continually doing themselves harm, while they live in a *course of sin*.

Some atrocious crimes are more immediately subversive of peace, comfort and security; but all sin is destructive of the soul. Thus wisdom instructs us: "He that sinneth against me, wrongeth his own soul; all they that hate me, love death." "Righteousness tendeth to life; but he that pursueth evil pursueth it to his death." He who endangers his soul for any worldly object, even for the preservation of life itself, purchases the latter at too great a price. "What shall a man be profitted, if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? and what shall he give in exchange for his soul?" Every thing should be regarded according to its worth. As the future is of more value than the present life, that always claims our first at-

sention and regard. If he who destroys his estate by im-
 prudence, his health by a debauch or his life by violence,
 does himself harm ; infinitely greater harm does he incur,
 who ruins his soul by a course of sin. Even selfmurder,
 were it only the destruction of the body, would be com-
 paratively a moderate crime : Its criminality chiefly ar-
 ses from other considerations. The wrong done to the
 soul is the great thing. But all other sin, persisted in,
 and not repented of, has ultimately the same effect. “ The
 wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodli-
 ness and unrighteousness of men.” If then we would live
 without doing ourselves harm, we must have nothing more
 to do with sin ; we must renounce it immediately, with-
 draw from its service without delay ; for the wages of sin
 is death. We must abstain from fleshly lusts which war
 against the soul, for lust, when it is conceived, bringeth
 forth sin, and sin when it is finished, bringeth forth death.
 We must mortify our earthly members, our worldly
 affections ; for led by these, we shall fall into tempt-
 ation and a snare, and many dangerous paths, which
 terminate in destruction, and perdition. We must lay
 hold on eternal life, which is now proposed ; for while we
 linger and delay, the offer may be withdrawn, and our
 neglect will be our destruction....In a word, it is only in a
 course of religion, that we shall proceed with safety, and
 without danger of doing harm to ourselves, or receiving
 damage from others. “ He that walketh uprightly, walk-
 eth surely ; but he that perverteth his ways shall fall. The
 path of the just is as the shining light ; but the way of the
 wicked is as darkness ; they know not at what they stum-
 ble.”

REFLECTIONS.

1. It is a great mercy to be protected from ourselves.—

We are afraid that others will harm us ; but our greatest danger is, that we shall do ourselves harm. Who is he that will harm us, if we be followers of that which is good ? But if we pursue that which is evil, who will protect us ? Men can but seldom secure us from a mischief, which we are working against ourselves ; we may effect it before they know our danger or may execute it in a manner, which they have not power to prevent. We are safe under the divine protection only ; and let us beware, that we forfeit not this. “The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous ; and his ears are open to their cry ; but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil, to cut off their remembrance from the earth.”

2. We have reason to pray for divine restraints. We have known some, who have done violence to their own lives. Such sad instances teach us, that our security is not in ourselves, but in the care of God's providence.—The way of a man is not in himself ; God keepeth him in all his ways. To his keeping we are therefore always to commit ourselves in well doing. The jaylor, left to the impetuosity of his own rash resolution, would in a moment have destroyed himself. What prevented the execution ? Not his own spontaneous reflection, but a special divine interposition. Paul was in the inner prison,—it was midnight—the jaylor was without. His design was made known to Paul by divine suggestion. The apostle exclaimed, and bade him forbear. This call prevented him from destroying both body and soul together. How important was this critical moment : His eternal salvation was depending. He was an unbeliever—such he would have died, if he had been left to himself. But in consequence of the apostle's call to him, his life was preserved—he became a believer, and salvation came to his house.

For this interposition the jailor, doubtless, blessed God all his days. Our preservation may often depend on interpositions as critical, tho' less obvious. Let us watch and pray, lest we fall into temptation.

3. We have great cause to be thankful, if we have been kept back from *presumptuous* sins. Many have ruined their substance, health and reputation, and involved themselves, and their friends with them, in calamity and distress, by bold and daring transgressions. Had we not been under the restraints of God's providence and grace, how do we know, to what lengths in wickedness we might have run, and what mischiefs we might have brought on ourselves? David prays, "Who can understand his errors? Cleanse me from secret faults; keep back thy servant from presumptuous sins. Let them not have dominion over me. Then shall I be upright, and I shall be innocent from the great transgression." The advice of the apostle we should all apply, "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." For as Solomon observes, "Happy is the man, who feareth always, but he that hardeneth himself shall fall into mischief."

4. What numbers will at last be found guilty of self-murder? Some have done direct violence to their lives thro' pride, impatience and discontent. Some have brought destruction on themselves by capital crimes—Some have ruined their health and shortened their life by intemperance, and excess—and every sinner will be found to have destroyed his own soul. We condemn the man who is guilty of direct suicide; let all beware, lest they indirectly involve themselves in similar guilt.

Let us endeavor to secure to ourselves the constant protection of God's providence and grace, by devoting our-

selves to him, and walking humbly with him. God is with us while we are with him: but if we wickedly depart from him, we may justly fear, he will abandon us to our own choice, and cast us off forever.

While we apply to ourselves the admonitions suggested by the late awful events in this place, we wish to administer consolation to those, who by these events are peculiarly afflicted. We wish them abundant supplies of that grace, which alone can give adequate support in an affliction like theirs.

Your friends forsook you in the midst of their days and broke away from you in a manner, which must aggravate your distress. We are troubled for you. But what shall we say!.....Repair to God, spread your case before him, and in the multitude of your thoughts within you, let his comforts delight your souls.

Anxious thoughts concerning the condition of your departed friends naturally arise in your minds. But let not these thoughts operate to produce murmuring and impatience. Think not that God is unjust in withholding those restraints, which might have prevented so unhappy a termination of life. Suspect not any injustice in the disposal which he has made of your friends, who are gone from you. How far a derangement may have prevailed, it is difficult for men to determine. Secret things belong to God. The Judge of all the earth does right. Call not in question the rectitude of his proceedings. Be solicitous to secure your own acceptance with God. Admitted to his presence in heaven, you will certainly approve of the manner, in which he has disposed of those, whom you loved on earth. Anxiety about the dead is unavailing. A concern for the living is wise; for now is the day of salva-

tion. Live under a sense of the future world, and under the influence of religious principles, that you may have comfort in your afflictions, and peace in your death, and may leave to your surviving friends the same consolations, which you wish your departing friends may leave to you.

Let the solitary widow be advised to inculcate on her children the fear of God, the belief of a future state, and the obligations of piety and virtue, and thus secure them from the path, which leads down to the chambers of death.

It is ardently wished that the only surviving brother may deeply feel the warnings, which have been solemnly repeated to him. Should he harden himself against them, who knows, but in God's just judgments, he may be left without restraint, to terminate his life in the same awful manner. It is hoped that he will shun every step, which might tend to an issue like that which he has seen. It is hoped, that he will indulge no licentious principles, no indifferent thoughts of religion; no light opinions with respect to a future retribution—that he will harbour in his breast none of those passions, which vex the mind, and alienate the soul from God and virtue—that he will yield to none of the seductions of sensuality: but will restrain every unruly desire, expel every dangerous sentiment, and study to acquire the purest habits of piety, benevolence and sobriety. It is hoped, that by a humble, godly, virtuous and discreet conversation, he will console his afflicted friends, and secure his own comfort in this world, and his eternal happiness in the next.

My young friends; I have this day, set before you the malignant nature, and awful tendency of irreligious sentiments. I beseech you, pay an early attention to the religion of the gospel, and let the knowledge, belief and love of

It be deeply wrought into your souls. "Cease to hear the instructions, which cause to err from the words of knowledge." If you should ever happen to hear a sentiment uttered, which tends to shake your belief of a future judgment, and of the necessity of a holy heart and a godly life, repel such a sentiment with indignation and horror; for it is charged with death—with the second death. Say with the Psalmist, "Depart from me, ye evil doers, for I will keep the commandments of my God." Remember and follow his advice; "Hearken to me, O ye children, and I will teach you the fear of the Lord. What man is he who desireth many days, that he may see good? Let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips from speaking guile; let him eschew evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it; for the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and his ears are open to their cry: But the face of the Lord is against them that do evil, to cut off their remembrance from the earth."²

Ye, who are parents, look on your children. You wish them happy here, and forever. You wish they may survive you, and enjoy the fruits of your labour. Or if they die before you, you wish for comfort in their death.

Train them up, then, in the way in which they should go. Let them have some evidence, that you believe in God, and reverence his name. Maintain the worship of God in your houses, and require of them an orderly attendance. Communicate to them salutary instructions; instill into their tender minds virtuous principles; and guard them against those loose and licentious opinions, which might corrupt their morals and destroy their souls. They are coming forward in a dangerous period. The days are evil. There are many vain talkers and deceivers, whose mouths ought to be stopped. If this cannot be done, at

least let the ears of your children be stopped against them. If you neglect them, there is great danger, that the errors of the wicked will lead them astray. But if you should set before their eyes corrupt examples, and often drop into their ears irreligious sentiments, you will probably fix them in wickedness and hasten their destruction. And say, in what respect will your guilt be lighter, than the guilt of those idolaters of whom God complains. "Thy sons and thy daughters, whom thou hast borne unto me, thou hast sacrificed to be devoured: Thou hast slain my children. And is this a small matter?"

My friends in general, let me entreat you, under the impression made on your minds by the late awful events, to unite your influence in promoting the great interest of religion. Let not any matters, which relate to this world, whether private or public, so engross your thoughts, agitate your passions, or disturb your harmony, as to divert your attention from the one thing needful...needful for yourselves, your children, and your brethren. Consider, that there is one grand interest, in which you are all concerned, the advancement of religion in your hearts, in your houses, and in society, and the transmission of it to those, who are coming after you. Let every one, in profession and practice, stand forth as an open friend to the gospel, and declare to all men, that he is not ashamed of it. Strengthen one another's hands in the work of family education and government. Strive together in your prayers for the unity and growth of the Church, and for the increase of Religion in it. Be fellow helpers to the truth, and fellow workers to the kingdom of God....And may the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Jesus Christ.



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