

22
col. 8 11 f.
50
1/260

A Sermon,

PREACHED IN THE

CHAPEL OF NASSAU HALL,

AUGUST 13, 1826.

BY ARCHIBALD ALEXANDER.

PUBLISHED AT THE REQUEST OF THE STUDENTS OF
THE COLLEGE.

PRINCETON PRESS;
PRINTED BY D. A. BORRENSTEIN.
1826.

A SERMON,

&c.

PSALM CXIX. 9.

**“WHEREWITHAL SHALL A YOUNG MAN CLEANSE HIS WAY?
BY TAKING HEED THERETO ACCORDING TO THY WORD.”**

BETWEEN a nursery of trees and a seminary of learning, there is a striking resemblance. In such a nursery you behold a number of plants growing in close, regular order, until the proper time for transplanting them shall arrive. Among them, some are much more vigorous and flourishing than others ; but, from their present appearance, you cannot foretell their future prosperity : for, owing to unfavourable circumstances, some, as soon as they are transplanted, will wither and die before they have begun to take root. Others, on account of some disease contracted in the nursery, or because they meet with an unfavourable soil, will never thrive and be fruitful. They will prove mere cumberers of the ground, occupying the place of good trees, and casting a noxious shade over other plants. But a third class, although they

may flourish, appear vigorous, and so expand as to fill a large space, yet through some mistake or neglect, having never been inoculated with a right bud, or ingrafted with a scion from a good tree, they produce no good fruit ; for however abundant it may be, it will be found bitter and unwholesome. But while some of the most promising disappoint the husbandman's hopes, others, which, while confined to the nursery, gave no indications of vigour, when transplanted to a congenial soil, spring up and flourish, and far exceed the hopes which were entertained of their future excellence.

Thus it is in a seminary of learning. Here we survey a number of youth subject to that discipline which is intended to prepare them for future usefulness ; but from their present appearance or attainments, we cannot predict with any certainty, what will be the destiny of each, when transplanted into the world. We may, indeed, from having observed the course of events in relation to many others similarly situated, form a probable judgment, what the result will be, in regard to the collective body ; but we cannot conjecture, on any certain grounds, the course of individuals. Some, who now form a part of this assembly, will probably survive their entrance into the world, but a short time. The occurrences of every year emphatically teach this solemn lesson. You have only to look into your College Catalogue, to be assured of the truth of this remark. In how many instances do the indications of death stand affixed to the names of persons, whom we lately

saw here, in all the bloom and gayety of health and spirits!

Others, probably, will be mere cumberers of the ground. As here, they are idle, licentious, insincere, proud, vindictive, or malignant; so, when they take their place in society, they will not only be useless members, but will send forth a baleful influence on all around. Some, indeed, who are not now very promising, may disappoint the fears of their friends and teachers, and may rapidly advance in the acquisition of that knowledge and those habits, which ennoble the character of man, and render him useful to society, far beyond any expectation which is at present entertained of them. Such instances, however, are rare. They are not occurrences in the ordinary course of events. Generally, the tree will be found answering to the character of the plant when extracted from the nursery. What youth are in College, they usually continue to be through life; except in those cases where the grace of God interposes and changes the course of nature.

It is then a matter of great importance that young men should commence life, with a stock of good principles. For want of these, many possessed of respectable talents, are worse than useless to society;—they are a nuisance. On this subject, however, the ideas of many persons are obscure, partial, and inadequate. All will agree that it is important that young men should enter the world with good principles; but ask them what are good principles, and you will find that, in most instances, their ideas are vague; or, that they are radically erroneous. And as

to the proper method of acquiring good moral principles, they labour under still greater confusion of mind. Indeed, most parents, although they wish their children to do well in the world, know not how to advise them, except in a very general way. It never enters into their mind, that true religion is essential to the existence of moral excellence. They may, indeed, feel some kind of reverence towards religion, but they often dread, rather than desire, that their sons should fall under its influence. Now, believing as I do, that the only effectual method of preserving young men from the contamination of vice, and from the gulf of perdition, is to imbue them with the spirit of Scriptural piety, I will avail myself of the present opportunity of addressing this youthful assembly, to direct their attention to the instructions which an inspired pen has left us, on this point; and which are found in the words of our text.

Here we have the important question asked, *Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way?* to which the answer is returned, *By taking heed thereto according to thy word.* On the import of this question, and this answer, I purpose now to make some observations.

I. The question here proposed implies two things; first, that moral purity is a desirable and excellent thing; and secondly, that it is an acquisition attended with difficulty.

It is a very desirable thing that a young man should know how to cleanse his way, or should attain and preserve moral purity. Of all acquisitions

and possessions, of which man is capable, moral excellence is the most valuable. In this there is an intrinsic worth, which cannot be too highly appreciated. It constitutes the dignity and glory of every rational being. Many things which are sought by men with intense desire, add nothing to their real worth, and but little to their happiness. But true virtue enters essentially into the character of man, and is the only thing which can render him a proper object of esteem. Other acquisitions are only estimable so far as they are consecrated and enriched by moral excellence. Without this, the most splendid gifts are mere tinsel. No advantages of birth, fortune, or learning, can at all compensate for the want of this precious jewel. An angel and a devil are only distinguished from one another, by the circumstance, that the one possesses, and the other wants, moral worth. It is to the soul what health is to the body. It is, in fact, the life of the soul, without which nothing is left but the corruption of death, by which it is rendered odious in the sight of all good beings. This is a subject, however, which neither needs, nor admits of much illustration. Every man who attends to the perceptions of his own mind, must believe, that moral excellence is the most valuable thing in nature. Its possession in an infinite degree, by the Great First Cause, is that which renders him so ineffably glorious. But by what comparison can we exhibit its value and lustre? There is nothing in the universe which will bear a comparison with it: its excellence is peculiar, and has nothing in common with other possessions. In

this respect, it is like the light of day, which is only known by the perception of its beauty and glory ; but there is no other material substance with which you can compare it, or by which you can illustrate it. So it is with moral virtue ; it shines by its own light, exhibits an unparalleled lustre, borrows nothing from any thing else, but sheds a glory on every thing with which it is connected. It ought then to be the first object of human pursuit. It should engage our most constant and intense desires. It should be valued above all price, and preferred to all the riches, pleasures, and splendours of the world. He who, in any instance, sacrifices virtue for any thing else, even if it were for a crown, makes a losing bargain ; for neither crowns nor kingdoms can compensate for the loss of the smallest particle of moral excellence. And however common it may be, to seek for riches and honours at the expense of a good conscience, it never can be approved by unperverted reason. Every man who pursues such a course must stand condemned in his own sober judgment, whenever he will allow himself to reflect seriously on the subject.

But while this possession is important to all, it may be said to be peculiarly so to the young ; or, if really not more important to them than to others, it is yet more necessary to urge them, without delay, to make the acquisition, because youth is the season for forming the character ; it is the seed-time of life. The learning obtained and the habits contracted in the morning of life, continue to exert their influence

even to old age. The most disgusting vices of the hoary headed sinner, may commonly be traced to some defect of good principles in early life. The character afterwards exhibited, is but the expansion of the germ which existed in youth. We cannot therefore be engaged in a more benevolent work, than in endeavouring to implant sound principles of virtue and moral rectitude, in the susceptible minds of the young.

The question which we are considering, also implies difficulty. *Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way?* is a question which seems to be made with solicitude, as though it was an object not easy to be accomplished. Indeed, this has been matter of common observation and complaint, from the beginning of the world, that the path of virtue is arduous; that the ways of vice, however painful in the progress, and ruinous in the end, are easily entered; yea, such is the nature of man, that he has only to follow the current of his own desires, to fall completely into a course of iniquity. To preserve youth from the contamination of vice, has always been considered difficult. With such a nature, and in the midst of such temptations, how can they escape the moral evils by which they are surrounded? It may not be unprofitable to bring distinctly before you, some of the causes of the difficulty of virtuous living, in relation to the young.

The first and greatest difficulty in the way of living virtuously, arises from the strength and impetuosity of the passions, in this age. The ardour of youth, in

all their affections and pursuits, is too well known to admit of a y doubt. By this internal impulse, many are driven along with as much violence, as a ship impelled by fierce winds; and, as many give themselves up to the government of their passions with very little regard to the consequences which may ensue, they may be fitly compared to a vessel at sea, without rudder or compass. But most men feel the necessity of laying some restraint on their natural inclinations. The prudential motives which urge them to exercise some degree of self-control, are too strong to be utterly neglected; therefore, they often form resolutions to repress the impetuosity of their passions, and to regulate their indulgence according to the rules of temperance and moderation. How often such resolutions are ineffectual, it is unnecessary to declare: most men have the evidence of the fact deeply recorded in their own experience. Often, the ingenuous youth makes a great effort to recover himself from the bondage of degrading passions, by which he has been hurried away into the devious paths of vice; he binds his soul by solemn purposes, and perhaps adds vows to his resolutions: but, alas! how weak are the best resolutions, in the hour when the passions, unaccustomed to control, violently agitate and impel the youthful bosom, and importunately urge him to a course of licentious indulgence! The perturbation produced by the passions is a temporary madness. After they subside, and reflection returns, the stings of remorse are almost insufferable, while the conscience retains its susceptibility. When a young man reflects, that he has committed an act

which is a departure from virtue, which degrades him in his own eyes, and dishonours him, as far as it is known, in the eyes of others, and that he has violated his own solemn and repeated resolutions, he feels as if he could inflict the vengeance due to his folly, with his own hands;—he feels, that if it were possible, he would extinguish his own existence. But it is a law of nature, that the sensibility of any part is diminished by continual excitement. The acute feelings of the body by the repeated application of hot iron become callous; so also, moral sensibility grows weaker and weaker, until the *conscience is seared as with a hot iron*. Besides, when the hope of successful resistance to vicious propensities is relinquished, relief is sought from the agonies of shame and remorse, in those errors which have a tendency to blind the mind and harden the heart. Guilty men endeavour to persuade themselves, that as these passions were implanted in our constitution by our Creator, there can be nothing criminal in their indulgence; especially, if thereby we injure no one. Such reasoning, however, rather serves for an apology when we wish to justify ourselves before men, than an effectual means of quieting our own consciences; for we are not more intimately conscious of any thing, than that we are guilty of a fault when we indulge irregular passions. And such are never indulged without injury, if not to others, yet certainly to ourselves. It is folly to reason, or to listen to reasoning, in contradiction to our intuitive perceptions of truth and duty. But this reasoning in favour of the indulgence of the passions,

is founded on a false principle. It takes it for granted, that the inordinate cravings of the appetites and excess of the passions, is a part of the original constitution of man ; whereas, it is the consequence of the corruption of human nature, for which we are accountable. *God made man upright, but they have sought out many inventions.* The constituent powers and faculties of man are the same as when he came from the forming hand of God, but *the image of God* in which he was created, has been lost. It is for this reason, that there exists such disorder in the principles of our nature. A complicated machine which has lost its regulator, may still operate as vigorously as ever, but its motions being now directed to no certain end, can tend to no useful purpose, but to the destruction of the machine itself.

But although it is difficult for a man to justify his irregular conduct before the tribunal of his own conscience, yet every practical error has an unhappy influence in relaxing the moral restraints under which he was held. And the strong excitement of passion creates an illusory medium, through which every object is seen clothed with false colours. A person agitated with strong emotions, is in a state of temporary insanity. As long as the paroxysm lasts, there is a real infatuation. Over such, reason, and the dictates of wisdom, and the lessons of experience, have no influence. This class of errors is of the most dangerous kind. They are the aberrations of the heart and the imagination, which always mis-

guide the conduct. And to these feverish excitements, young men are peculiarly liable. Hence, under the government of passion, they often commit acts, and take steps, which, in a moment, obscure all their bright prospects, and lead them on to inevitable ruin; for, although the entrance into the paths of dissipation is easy, the return is extremely difficult; as when a man begins to go down a steep descent, every step gives a fresh *momentum* to his motion, so that soon he cannot return, nor stop, but rushes headlong over the precipice beneath. There is no hope in the universe more deceptive, than that by which a man persuades himself that he will proceed to a certain limited point in vicious indulgence, and then return to the paths of virtue. Such a hope was never realized since the foundation of the world, unless some other power, besides his own resolutions, interposed to recover him from ruin. You perceive then, that young men experience a real difficulty in living virtuously, on account of the passions which are seated in their own bosoms.

Another difficulty arises from their want of experience, and their disinclination to profit by the counsels and experience of those that have preceded them. To the young, the sage maxims of the aged, which they have gathered up in the course of a long life, appear antiquated and unnecessary. Often too, they ascribe them to the austerity and peevishness which they suppose belong to old age, after the capacity and relish for sensal pleasure are extinguished. The rules which experience suggests, appear to the

ardent minds of youth, too rigid, and calculated for the destruction of their happiness. Like Rehoboam, they choose rather to follow the counsel of their giddy companions, than to be guided by the advice of hoary wisdom. The bold and spirited suggestions of inexperienced comrades, have often an influence superior to the judicious and affectionate counsel of a kind and solicitous parent. The reason is, that the former better accords with the sanguine temperament of this dangerous period of life. That advice is ever welcome, which coincides with inclination. How many young men, at college, would be saved from disgrace and ruin, if they would only pursue the course prescribed and urged by those, who above all others, feel the deepest interest in their welfare, and in whom they should place the highest confidence. All parents, indeed, are not judicious in their counsels, but all are anxious to promote the happiness of their children; and, whatever errors they have fallen into themselves, they wish to preserve their sons from evil courses.

The difficulty of attaining to moral excellence, is increased, in youth, by that giddiness and levity of temper, which is usually a characteristic of this age. The want of a habit of serious reflection and sober consideration, is followed by rashness of purpose, and precipitation in action. No man can so conduct himself in this world as to avoid the contamination of vice, who does not ponder his path, and consider his ways. And the constitution and circumstances of the young, especially, and above

all, of young men, environ them with temptations so numerous and ensnaring, that when we survey the slippery path on which they tread, and the danger which attends every false step, we may well exclaim with solicitude, *How shall a young man cleanse his way?* Certainly, while he goes heedlessly along, he cannot do it; and yet how little are youth disposed to be soberminded, or to take heed to their ways! Serious consideration would, in innumerable instances, preserve them from the evils to which they are exposed: it would enable them to detect the turpitude of vice, notwithstanding the meretricious decorations with which it is invested, and would break the infatuation, which so often proves fatal. Dangers would be foreseen where none are apprehended by the inconsiderate, and important consequences would be taken into the calculation, which are too often utterly disregarded. Whatever, therefore, has a tendency to produce in youth a habit of serious reflection, cannot but be beneficial: On this account, solitude, and even sickness, have proved eminently serviceable to young persons. Too much and too constant intercourse with gay companions, is often injurious, by banishing from the mind all serious consideration. It is usual, by a variety of arts and amusements, to keep up an excessive elevation of the spirits, which is attended with a transient and fluttering enjoyment, but its tendency is to produce oblivion of the past, and inattention to the future, and to conceal from our view our real situation, as immortal beings.

Again, the maxims, fashions, spirit, and general current of opinion and practice, in the world, are unfavourable to the pure principles of virtue. There is current among men a flexible morality, which easily accommodates itself to the interest and pleasure of its possessor. It is in fact, nothing more than selfishness, a little refined and disguised; and yet, by the multitude, it is deemed sufficient. By them, high attainments in moral excellence, are no object of desire or pursuit; and if they come up, or seem to come up, to the standard which is in vogue, however relaxed it may be, they are satisfied. If a young man appears to aim at something more pure or exalted, or if he hesitates to run to the extent of indulgence, which this system permits, he will be considered as scrupulous, and unacquainted with the world; and his conscientious regard to principles and duty will become a subject of raillery. This is a weapon which few young men can withstand. Many who would remain unmoved by the fires of persecution, yield to the misplaced ridicule of thoughtless companions.

There is, moreover, in the fashionable world, a spurious kind of honor, which gains over the minds of youth, an influence which predominates over every virtuous principle. True honour and virtue can never be adverse to each other; indeed, honour, when genuine, is virtue of the most refined character. It is a sure and high sense of the obligations of morality, extending even to those things, which, by persons of little refinement and sensibility, are

overlooked. It is an integrity, which disdains not only every thing base, but shrinks from the least touch or even appearance of corruption. A man of genuine honour would sooner lose his life, than speak a falsehood, or do the least injustice to any one. In his hand you may safely confide your property, your reputation, your dearest relatives, your life; for he will never betray his trust. But this spurious honour, is a compound of pride and revenge. It contravenes, in the most palpable cases, the undoubted principles of morality. It sacrifices every thing to the gratification of a morbid, selfish sensibility. In the midst of civilized society, it has erected a cruel and barbarous system of unrelenting retaliation. For a hasty word, it dissolves all the sacred bonds of friendship, and bids its devotee sacrifice his own life, or not be satisfied, until he has shed the vital blood of one whom he does not and cannot hate. It is deaf to the remonstrances of authority, and with a ruthless hand, tears asunder the tenderest ties of affection and kindred. The widow's tears and the orphan's cries, have no effect on the heart steeped with this principle. The cruel code which this false honour has established, has its laws written in blood. The man who once submits to its dominion, must habitually cherish the purpose of murdering his best friend, for a real or imaginary insult. A practice, introduced in the darkest ages of superstition, has been adopted as the only proper mode of deciding *an affair of honour*;—a practice, as unreasonable as it is cruel; a practice, which puts the injur-

ed and the injurer, into the same jeopardy of life; which, terminate as it may, has no tendency to decide any dispute on rational principles;—which involves the dearest interests of those who have had no part in the quarrel; and which, in defiance of all law, of all virtue, of all religion, of all the feelings of nature and friendship, robs society of valuable citizens, amiable families of their head and father, and parents of their beloved sons. And does a civilized, a Christian nation, tolerate such a practice as this, which, circumstanced as it is, has no parallel among the most barbarous and savage tribes? Does the strong arm of the law pursue with vengeance, the poor wretch who, in his want, is guilty of a petty larceny, and yet connive at the horrid crime of deliberate, premeditated, complicated murder? What unsophisticated mind does not burn with just indignation, at beholding grave senators, learned civilians, and distinguished officers of the government, basely submitting to such preposterous principles; and, by their pestiferous example, encouraging, and almost constraining the youth of our country, to become the slaves of this cruel system. Posterity will not believe the fact; of they will believe, that we were a set of semi-barbarians. But it is a truth, strange and disgraceful as it may appear, that the very men who are appointed by the people to make salutary laws and to administer the government and defend the country; are often the first to trample on the most sacred principles of all law, human and divine, and unblushingly, and in

open day, to be guilty of a crime far more atrocious than that, which, in nine instances out of ten, brings felons to the halter, or to the solitary dungeon. And yet these men hold up their heads, as if their hands were not stained with blood, and maintain their usual standing in fashionable society! Yes, to the disgrace of our country, and in defiance of every correct principle, the man who sheds the blood of a better man, has no occasion to seek refuge from public odium and indignation, in flight. He returns to the hall of legislation, to make laws to punish petty thieves, or smugglers; or resumes his exalted seat of magistracy; or walks about with unruffled front, as though nothing out of the common course had occurred! Young men, how will you be able to keep your hands clean from the blood of your fellow men?

Now, in the midst of such a state of society, and when by a large number, who pretend to give law to the fashionable world, that young man is pursued with obloquy, whose fuses to adopt this code of false honour and act upon it, how difficult will it be for him to maintain his integrity! To be wanting in honour and in spirit, is a reproach the most intolerable, to the aspiring, generous, and youthful mind. But I rejoice in believing, that the time is not far remote, when this absurd, unjust, and cruel practice of duelling, shall be viewed with the utmost-abhorrence, by all enlightened men; and even now, the sentiments of ninety-nine out of a hundred are opposed to it. And if it were not so, that young man displays far more true courage, who renounces the principle and meets the odium, than he, who from

fear of contempt, perpetrates a crime, for which his own conscience must for ever condemn him.

But there are many other dangers to young men, from the spirit, principles, and customs of the world. Its dissipation,—its flattery,—its false estimation of wealth, power, and distinctions, form a vortex, which strongly attracts incautious youth; and when once encircled in its giddy whirl, they are soon precipitated to perdition. Some are overcome by intemperance, and some by lust, while others become the slaves of sordid avarice, or of tormenting ambition.

II. The answer given in the text to the interesting question which we have been considering, now calls for our attention.

How shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto, according to thy word.

But before we proceed directly to the discussion of this point, it may not be without its use, to inquire, whether there is no other method by which this object can be attained. Several plans for forming and improving the moral character, are held in esteem, and some of them, to say the least, have a specious appearance.

Among these, education holds the first rank. By means of a good education, it is supposed, that such moral habits may be formed as will effectually secure the young from vice, and will lead them to walk steadily in the paths of virtue. Especially these effects may be expected, when a proper system of education is commenced early, and persevered in uniformly. Far be it from me to say a single word

which would tend to detract from the importance of a good education. Its efficacy on the human character is undeniable, and its utility in promoting the good order and happiness of civil society, cannot be too highly appreciated. But when the system of education which is pursued, is founded on the truths of the Bible, it cannot be considered as distinct from the method prescribed in the text. It is a patient and persevering method of teaching youth to cleanse their ways, by taking heed thereto according to the word of God. Thus, *train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.*

There is, however, a system which aims at forming youth to a good moral character, without any aid from religious truth. Many who are no friends to religion, nevertheless profess to be the sincere advocates of good morals: and it is well known, that many parents who would esteem it a misfortune for their sons to become pious, are desirous that they should grow up with good moral habits. And, doubtless it is possible, by carefully guarding youth from the contagion of bad example, and habituating them to a certain regular course of action, to succeed pretty generally, in producing a character externally moral and apparently virtuous; but however valuable such effects may be to the welfare of society, there is after all, no more, in all such cases, than the mere shadow of moral excellence. Under a specious aspect, there will be found a want of real active principles of virtue; a narrow selfish temper, and not unfrequently sordid avarice, envy, jea-

lousy, and low cunning. Such characters are completely hollow; or rather, they resemble a cup or dish, the outside of which is made clean, while the inward part is exceedingly defiled.

Some, indeed, seem to believe, that nothing else is necessary to youth but the polish and urbanity which good breeding produces. But while I feel no disposition to disparage the value of politeness, which smooths and sweetens, if it does not purify and elevate the intercourse of people of fashion, I would remark, that it is well understood to be a mere covering, and a very transparent one too, of the real feelings of the heart. It is true, the rules of politeness are founded on the principles of Christian morality, which require us to esteem others better than ourselves, to take the lowest seat, to condescend to men of low estate, to be courteous and gentle. But while the excellence of virtue is thus recognized, the essence of it is no where more wanting, than in courts, and among the higher classes of society, where these rules of politeness are most particularly observed. The fact is so notorious, that it would be superfluous to insist upon it, that a man may possess highly polished manners, and yet be a debauchee, or an unprincipled villain.

Another method of attaining to moral excellence, nearly allied to the former, is the possession of various and extensive knowledge. The diligent cultivation of the intellectual powers is deemed by many, to be all that is necessary to secure moral worth. Doubtless, the acquisition of solid learning is highly

valuable, and deserves to be preferred to wealth, power, or fame; but I venture to assert, that mere science, however profound, has no tendency to produce moral excellence: the most extensive learning may be united with the destitution of every degree of moral worth. It may indeed be made a most effectual instrument in the hands of virtue, for doing good; but in its own nature it is neutral, and through the depravity of man, often furnishes fuel to pride and arrogance. While some of the greatest scholars have been eminent for their virtues, others, have been equally distinguished in vice.

Among the ancients, philosophy was greatly celebrated as a means of rendering men good and virtuous. This professed to teach men how to regulate their passions and order their conduct, so as to secure their truest happiness. Now as far as philosophy teaches the principles of truth and duty, and derives its lessons from experience and careful observation, it should not be slighted or rejected. But what sinner was ever reformed by the precepts of philosophy? It may, indeed, to a certain extent, designate the path of virtue, yet it possesses no power by which it can win the heart to the love and practice of that which is good. Much has been said, indeed, of the beauty of virtue, and of its attractive influence; and too much cannot be said in praise of a thing so excellent; but what is beauty to him who is blind? What influence will all the attractions of moral excellence have, on a heart which is dead to all these things? The barrier which the best philo-

sophy opposes to the passions of man is no better than a mound of straw, to restrain the raging torrent, or the impetuous whirlwind. Philosophy may teach us to speculate correctly, but cannot purify our hearts from the pollution of sin.

Others, again, have depended altogether on the observance of the rules of an ascetic life, for the extirpation of vice, and for the implantation of the seeds of virtue. They assume it as a principle, that vice has its seat in the body, and that the proper method of assailing and destroying it, is to keep the body under, by rigorous abstinence, by denying all gratification to the appetites, and by enduring voluntarily, severe and long continued penances. It is wonderful how far men have proceeded in the mortification of the body by various cruel devices, which they have invented for the punishment of themselves. But the whole system is founded in mistake. The body is not the principal seat of our moral disease. It is indeed affected, in common with its partner, the soul, and all its propensities and appetites, are in a state of insubordination; but if the soul, without regeneration, should be separated from the body altogether, it would not, by this means, become pure from sin; otherwise, all that would be necessary to cleanse the soul from moral pollution, would be the death of the body. But they who are unholy, remain unholy for ever: and fallen angels, who have no bodies, are the subjects of complete depravity. No man ever made himself virtuous by a system of fasting, of coarse clothing, of flagella-

tion, of uneasy positions, and exposure to the inclemency of the weather; or, by long and painful pilgrimages. These medicines do not reach the seat of the malady, which lies deep in the heart. There is, indeed, in living a virtuous life, a necessary discipline and subjugation of, the body, for otherwise its lusts will become a snare and temptation; but we must look to some other source than the eradication of the passions of our nature, for the generation of the principle of true virtue.

Let us therefore, now attend to the method of acquiring and preserving moral purity, which is recommended in our text. It is simple and intelligible. A young man may cleanse his way by taking heed thereto according to the word of the Lord. If the young man really desires to obtain moral excellence (and where there is no such desire all directions will be useless) let him learn to ponder his ways with great seriousness, and that he may be guided into correct opinions respecting his character and his duty, let him attentively study the Holy Scriptures, and compare his heart and life with the law of God which is there revealed; and let him also diligently use the means of reformation there prescribed, and embrace cordially the overtures of divine mercy which God freely makes to us, in the invitations and promises of his word. And as our success in all our enterprises, and more especially in what relates to the conversion and salvation of the soul, depends on the blessing of Almighty God, the young man should begin and prosecute this study with fervent prayer

for a divine influence to enlighten, guide, and sanctify his efforts. If any of you, however, should unhappily, by a defective education, by a course of improper reading, or by a natural tendency to scepticism, be labouring under doubts, in regard to the truth and divine authority of the Sacred Scriptures, I would still recommend to you a diligent attention to this course of reading and prayer. There is no more effectual method of removing such doubts, than a serious perusal of the Bible; for, in the revelation of God, there is a light and power which will affect the conscience and correct the errors of the reader, if there be any degree of honest impartiality existing in the mind. While we read we can scarcely avoid the conclusion, that a holy and omniscient God is speaking to us, in his word. And nothing can be more reasonable, or more likely to extricate us from the mazes of error, than devoutly and earnestly to ask of God for light and direction. Surely, that Great Being who formed our intellect has not excluded himself from all control over its thoughts and reasonings; and surely, he will not disdain the sincere petition of an ingenuous youth, when under a sense of the imbecility of his own mind, and the danger of being misled, he cries unto him for needful instruction.

But let us now consider more particularly, how it is that a serious attention to the word of God produces moral purity, or true virtue. The first effect experienced will be a conviction that much has been wrong in our past lives; much more than was before perceived. The

dust in a chamber which has been long in darkness is not seen, but when a light is introduced, immediately it is manifest ; so the heart of man, previously to the entrance of the word, is enveloped in thick darkness ; its moral defilement is, however, not perceived, but when this light shines upon it, a thousand evils, before unnoticed, are distinctly brought to view. More frequently, indeed, the conscience is first affected by the consideration of outward acts, and especially by such as are of the more enormous kind. These stand out prominently to the view of the considerate mind, and their turpitude is so manifest, that a conscience the least awakened, will quickly pass sentence of condemnation on the sinner. But these outward acts are soon perceived to be streams from a corrupt fountain, and the word of God has a wonderful power to penetrate and search the secret recesses of the soul, and to detect the innumerable evils which lurk within the heart of man : the motives, the affections, the half formed desires, are by this light, disclosed to our view. Thus, a new world is, as it were, revealed, and the man stands astonished at what he sees, and wonders how he could have remained ignorant of his true character until this time. No more can he think, that sin is a small evil, or that his transgressions are venial. Every excuse that he was wont to make for continuing in sin is swept away. He is convinced that the whole blame lies at his own door ; and that the law is holy, just, and good. He justifies God, and condemns himself. And now he

clearly sees, what he never saw before, that the chief malignity of sin, consists in its opposition to the holiness and goodness of God.

Under such views of our own depravity, connected with a just apprehension of the tremendous nature of the penalty incurred, it is the dictate of nature, to make an effort to effect our own deliverance. A full conviction of our total inability to do any thing to relieve ourselves, or to reform our own hearts, is a lesson learnt from experience. Not only does the convinced sinner find that he is unable to satisfy the demands of the law, which if he could perfectly obey for the time to come, would still condemn him for past transgressions; but he is unable to comply with the gracious terms of salvation, proposed in the gospel. A heart blind and dead can neither repent nor believe, and this inability, so far from furnishing him with an excuse, as it frequently does to the careless or half awakened sinner, is an aggravation of his guilt and condemnation; for he is convinced, that the only reason why he cannot believe is, *an evil heart of unbelief*; and the only reason why he cannot repent and love God, is the deep depravity into which he has fallen, and for which with all its actings, he is conscious that he is blameable. Therefore he knows, that unless God freely grant him his grace, he must perish, and that his condemnation would be most just. But still, out of the horrible pit he cries unto God for mercy and help. These are some of the first effects produced by a serious perusal of the word of God, when the spirit of God accompanies the

truth with convincing energy to the heart and conscience of the sinner.

But the same blessed volume which describes the disease, and lays open the festering wound, contains a healing prescription, and furnishes an effectual balm.

Not only is Sinai revealed covered with clouds and a tempest, and sending forth thunderings and lightnings which cause the stoutest heart to quake, but Zion also is here discovered—Zion the perfection of beauty, enlightened with rays of glory from the Sun of Righteousness,—encircled with the peaceful rainbow, and sprinkled with the precious blood of atonement;—whence issue sounds indicative of the kindest and the freest mercy—words full of grace, and containing the richest promises of salvation, and life everlasting.

When the shiptwrecked mariner, after toiling long in the boisterous deep, and almost despairing of deliverance, first comes in sight of land, how does he rejoice in the prospect, although he may fear, at the same time, that he will not be so fortunate as to reach the shore! Just such is the condition of the labouring soul, when the first ray of mercy dawns upon him;—when he is enabled to entertain some just apprehension of Christ the Mediator, and sees that *he is able to save to the uttermost, all them that come unto God by him.* He sees also, that he is a Saviour suited to his wretched case, but still he fears to cast himself unreservedly upon him. He feels that he is too unworthy, too vile, to be received into the affectionate embraces of such a Holy Being.

He, therefore, wishes by some means to prepare himself for union with Christ. But at length, these legal, unbelieving notions are also discarded; and it is perceived that Christ stands ready, with open arms, to receive the returning sinner, just as he is, and that the plan of redemption was formed for persons precisely in the same condition; therefore, with trembling, the act of faith is put forth—Christ is received, and with him all his commandments, and all his benefits.

In every act of true faith, Christ is received as an Almighty Saviour, a divine Redeemer—possessing infinite knowledge—infinite power—infinite merit, No mere man, nor exalted angel, can furnish to a soul oppressed with a sense of guilt, such a foundation of hope as will produce confidence and peace. No, you would but mock and drive to despair such a soul, by preaching to him pardon and salvation through any other, than a divine name.

Faith works by love, and purifies the heart. Now the soul enlightened by the spirit to behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, is captivated with his heavenly charms. His love flows out with varied emotions, of admiration, delight, and gratitude. Sin is seen to be exceedingly sinful, and in the recollection of past sins, the heart which terrors could not soften, now breaks, and even dissolves, at the foot of the cross. The look of faith at the pierced side of Jesus, instantly opens the fountain of godly sorrow, which works a repentance not to be repented of. But, indeed, words are incapable of describing the various mingled emotions of love, joy, confidence, admira-

tion, hope, grief, remorse, shame, and self-hatred, which agitate the soul, when first it is enabled clearly to apprehend, and cordially to embrace, the LORD JESUS CHRIST. But faith is now so easy, and the plan of salvation laid down in the gospel so intelligible, and so suitable to the case of a lost sinner, that the wonder is, why it was not always perceived with equal clearness; and the young convert naturally entertains the false confidence, that what is now so perspicuous to himself, he can render plain to others, until a little experience teaches him, that the blindness of sin resists all efforts to remove it, until the same power which caused light to shine out of darkness, shall shine into the mind to give it the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. When the person thus enlightened by the Spirit, turns to the word of God, it seems as if a new light had shone upon the book; every page appears to be illuminated. How sweetly does the soul, lately so troubled, now repose on the precious promises of God! How it delights to rove, in thought, over every part of the evangelical history—from Bethlehem to Calvary—from the manger to the cross and the sepulchre, every object and every scene, is replete with interest. And in the hope and prospect of future perfection, glory and bliss, there is a sublime pleasure, which has no parallel on earth. Now, that yoke which was once esteemed galling, is willingly submitted to, and is found to be easy; and that burden which to unbelief appeared heavy, to faith is light and pleasant. The language of the renewed heart is, *Lord what wouldst thou have me to do?* There is a prompt,

cordial disposition to obey all Christ's commandments, and also to suffer whatever he may appoint. The man, thus *born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever, delights in the law of the Lord, after the inner man.* It is his meat and drink to do the will of his heavenly Father. The course of life which before he felt an obligation to pursue, he now so cordially chooses, that he would wish to pursue it, if there were no obligation binding him to it.

Thus, by the operation of the word of God, attended with the secret, but almighty energy of the Spirit, a great change is effected. New views are entertained; new affections spontaneously arise. There is indeed a new creation. Old things have passed away and behold all things are become new. Love to God and man has become the governing principle. Henceforth the renewed man *walks by faith not by sight; looking not at the things which are seen, which are temporal, but at those which are unseen, which are eternal.*

The young man, thus regenerated, will no longer consent to be the slave of lust, avarice or ambition. Sin, though pardoned, is odious in his sight. He dreads, above all, the contamination of this abominable thing which God hates. It is now his habitual, his strongest desire, to be cleansed from all impurity of the flesh and spirit. His soul, touched by a heavenly influence, is directed heavenward; and nothing short of a portion in the inheritance of the saints in light, will any longer satisfy him. The

world as a portion is without reluctance resigned. Its boasted honours, wealth, and pleasures, appear contemptible, to a mind filled with the hopes of heavenly glory. He sees a beauty in holiness which enkindles within him a hungering and thirsting after righteousness. His heart is now fixed in the choice of a new life;—a life of purity, benevolence, and active obedience to the will of God: No service appears hard which God requires. Love makes every burthen light. No sacrifice which can testify his zeal for God's glory appears too great. Wittingly does he take up his cross and follow Christ, wherever he leads; yea, the very reproach of Christ he esteems to be greater riches than all the treasures of the world. Now the truths of God's word are the subject of his delightful meditations, by day and by night. He seeks no other standard of rectitude than the law of God; no other rule of life than its holy precepts. Henceforth his daily study is, to take heed to his ways according to the word of the Lord, and he finds it to be, in all circumstances, a light to his feet and a lamp to his paths. Under the direction of this unerring guide, the path of duty is made plain; or if through human frailty, he occasionally deviates from the right road, its monitory voice reclaims his wandering steps, and restores him to the path of life. From this word also he continually derives encouragement and consolation, amidst the darkness and trials of his pilgrimage through the world; and when he descends into the valley of the shadow of death, still its precious promises comfort his heart.

E

Blessed indeed, is that young man who by the truth is made free from the thralldom of iniquity, and is brought into the high road to eternal life. God is his sun and shield: He will give grace and glory, and no good thing will be withheld from them that walk uprightly.

In the close of this discourse, permit me, to direct your attention to some of those leading principles which the Bible teaches, and by attending to which the young man may escape the pollutions of the world, and direct his steps in the paths of peace.

1. Make the promotion of the glory of God, and the attainment of eternal life, from the commencement of your course, the highest objects of pursuit. Let your purpose in regard to these be fixed immovably. This will be as a polar star to guide your track through the whole voyage of life.

2. Remember that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Cherish a profound veneration for the divine Majesty, habitually; and let a pious dread of his displeasure, a conscientious regard to his will, and an unshaken confidence in his faithfulness and mercy, characterize the temper of your minds. The dispositions which I have just mentioned, are the true foundation of a spirit of genuine devotion.

Not only yield your assent to the truth of the things of the invisible and eternal world; but endeavour to acquire much of the exercise of that faith which presents them to the mind as realities in which you have a near and deep interest. Live as seeing

him that is invisible. Have continually respect to the recompense of reward. Set your affections, on things above and not on things on the earth. Be not anxious to lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust do corrupt, and where thieves do not break through and steal; for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

3. Cultivate humble penitence, and exercise daily self-denial. Nothing is more reasonable and becoming in a pardoned sinner, who is still in the body, and subject to many infirmities, than contrition and deep self-abasement. The whole tendency of the gospel, is to lay man low in the dust, in his own estimation. No sin is more offensive to God, or more certainly punished, even in this life, than pride; and no feeling is more unreasonable and odious, in such a creature as man. God always resisteth the proud but exalteth the humble. His favourite dwelling on earth, is not in lofty palaces or splendid temples, but with the contrite spirit. Humility has nothing mean in it, as many ancient and modern moralists have supposed. It is the very temper which best suits our character and condition. And while pride is a source of unceasing restlessness, humility composes the mind to peace, and renders it contented, in all circumstances.

Self-denial is a primary duty, according to the gospel system of morality; and although it seems a harsh precept to the flesh, which ever craves indul-

gence, yet it is a necessary step in the way of happiness, as well as duty. A soul under the government of appetite and passion, must of necessity, be in a state of perturbation, like the troubled sea, which cannot rest. Tranquillity of mind, and especially peace of conscience, which is the chief ingredient in the cup of human felicity, require a due government of the passions, and a temperate, moderate indulgence of all our desires. Religion does not aim at the extirpation of the passions, which would be to contend with the constitution of nature; but it requires, that they should be subjugated to reason;—that the indulgence of them should be restricted and regulated by a regard to the will of God, and to our own highest interests. The pain of self-denial is far more than compensated by the pleasure of victory over ourselves. At first, the denial of gratification to desires which are naturally strong, will cause sensible anguish, but after a while, that which was in the beginning difficult, will be performed with ease. He who denies himself most resolutely and faithfully will acquire the highest degree of self-control; and he who exercises the most self-control, will enjoy the most peace of mind. The greatest evil from unrestrained indulgence of the passions is the moral degradation which is the consequence. Let a man make a god of his appetite for food and drink, or let him obey the solicitations of licentious love, and he soon becomes vile; and even in his own eyes he is degraded, whenever he allows himself seriously to reflect on his true character. Cultivate purity of heart. Preserve your bodies free from the

contamination of lewdness, gluttony, and drunkenness. Let no false principles of philosophy persuade you that there is no vice in those indulgences which do not directly injure others. Listen to no apology for what your own conscience must condemn. O young man, avoid the occasions of these vices. Flee from the company, and avoid reading those books, or looking on those pictures or prints, which influence and corrupt the imagination. Be sober-minded—be temperate in all things.

4. Appear openly on the side of religion.

Be not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ; otherwise he will be ashamed of you when he shall come, attended with all his holy angels. He will have no secret disciples. They who follow him must come out from the world, and be separate. On this subject there is not, nor can be, any neutrality. If you are not with Christ, you are against him. If you are not willing to bear his reproof, and suffer for his sake, you will have no benefit from the shame and pain which he endured for our sins. The cross and the crown are indissolubly connected.

Dare to appear not only as the professors, but as the advocates of Christianity. Support and encourage the institutions of religion. Be constant in your attendance on public worship. Take pains, and be at expense, to get the gospel faithfully preached in your neighbourhood, by able ministers of whatever Christian denomination you most approve. Never be contented to live like heathen, without sabbaths, and without public worship. In whatever relates to religion, be governed not by custom or empire,

but by conviction and principle. If your conduct should appear singular, and be ascribed to improper motives, regard it not; the ridicule of fools should influence you no more than the empty prattling of little children. Have the courage to be singular in so good a cause, and in the end, those very persons who pretend to despise you for paying attention to religion, will venerate your character if it should be consistent, and will be more ready to put confidence in you, than in their own irreligious companions.

There is no greater weakness than for a man to be ashamed of his religion, because ignorant men despise it. Would you be ashamed of the light of the sun, because a company of blind men ridiculed the idea of light? Would you be ashamed of the noble faculty of reason because madmen denied its existence?

5. In your intercourse with your fellow men, be uniformly regulated by the strictest rules of truth and integrity. Never stoop to a mean or dishonourable action for the sake of any advantage, or to avoid any reproach. Reduce to daily practice the heavenly rule, of doing to others as you would have them do to you. No gain can ever compensate for the loss of a good conscience.

Cherish a spirit of enlarged benevolence towards all human kind. Accustom yourselves to take a lively interest in every thing which concerns the happiness of man. That person who lives merely for himself has a narrow soul, and leads a sordid life. The constant and predominant indulgence of selfish affections, never can produce exalted piety. It is

the exercise of genuine benevolence, and public spirit which elevates the soul, and fills it with the purest delight. God has connected our sublimest enjoyments, not with the gratification of self-love, but with the generous pursuit of the welfare of others. Be not afraid therefore to engage in benevolent enterprises, which have for their object the happiness of the world, of the churches of your country, or of any portion of your fellow beings. Remember that no selfish man can ever become a truly great man. He can never acquire and retain the esteem and confidence of the public.

And whatever be your pecuniary circumstances, resolve, that you will not lead a life of indolence. Some seem to think, that because Providence has blessed them with wealth, or competency, that they are at liberty to spend their time without occupation. Such men are contented to go through life, without having conceived, much less performed, one noble or benevolent action. They eat and drink, sleep and lounge, or read and travel, for their own gratification, and die, without leaving the least chasm in society; for the world is nothing the better for their having lived in it. And a life of this kind is not only useless, but miserable; at least, there is in it very little positive enjoyment, and what there is, is selfish. Indolence is a miserable state. The soul without an object, and without vigorous exercise, and lively interest, stagnates, and resembles the putrid, offensive, and unwholesome pool, from which emanates a deleterious effluvia, which poisons every thing near;

whereas, the man of active, useful, and benevolent exertion, is like the stream of living water, which refreshes and invigorates every thing in its course.

In the choice of a profession, in forming plans for future action, in the selection of a place of abode, and in entering into permanent connexions, and engagements of every kind, act not capriciously, nor merely consult present inclination, but wisely calculate in what profession, and in what situation, you can be most useful. Acquire an impartial opinion of your own talents—consult your friends—and under the influence of the highest and best motives, make all your important decisions, in regard to your future course.

6. Finally, as you are now shortly to retire from these halls of science, and to be far separated from each other; as most of you will soon be restored to the anxious bosoms of your parents and friends, and will become persons of some importance and influence in the places of your nativity, I would earnestly beseech you, not to exhibit a spirit and conduct which will redound to the discredit of the place of your education. Let it be seen by all, that your morals as well as your learning, have been improved by a course of liberal instruction.

Permit me then to take my leave of you by an affectionate exhortation, to pursue an upright and honourable course;—to promote religion, sound morals, and social order, by all the influence of your talents and your examples;—Encourage learning, and the diffusion of useful knowledge among the people. Be

kind and courteous to all men, however low their condition,—patronize the deserving,—extend relief to the suffering,—frown upon vice and dissipation,—be liberal to objects of real charity, and to those of public utility. If you enter into the service of your country, let genuine patriotism govern your conduct; if you should lead a private life, always use your influence and give your vote, to place in offices of power and trust, men of ability and unquestionable integrity. One man whose heart is filled with benevolence, can do much, in a thousand ways, which cannot now be named, to promote the happiness of his fellow creatures. My last exhortation shall be in the words of the apostle Paul: *Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.*