

Exposition of the Book of Proverbs, Volume 2- George Lawson

EXPOSITION OF THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

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Volume 2

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Proverbs 19

Proverbs 19:1. Better is a poor man who walks in his integrity Than he who is perverse in speech and is a fool.

SO depraved are the understandings of men, that the rich are generally honoured for their wealth, although their conversation shews them to be destitute of any valuable quality; whilst the poor are despised, though they are adorned with the beauties of religion. To give an outward respect to the rich, according to the innocent fashions of the place where we live, is not a sin; for if providence make a distinction, we may do it likewise, between the rich and the poor; but it is a sign of great corruption in our minds, to value the rich as if they were worthier men, and more deserving of our esteem and affection than the poor, when grace hath made a plain difference in favour of the poor, of a kind infinitely more important than the outward gifts of providence ever made. The bad effects of this unjust preference are severely censured by James, in the first half of the second chapter of his epistle.

We ought undoubtedly to follow God, in the judgment which he gives of things and persons, as far as that judgment is revealed; and we find that he sets no value upon riches. He bestows them oftentimes on those whom he abhors, and denies them to his favourites. But the upright, however poor, are his delight. He glories in Job as a perfect and upright man, and he still bestows higher commendations on him, after he was stripped of all his substance, because he had given additional proof of his stedfast integrity*.

When Christ was on earth, he was a poor man that walked in his integrity, and surely the lovers of Christ will never value a man the less, because he is as Christ also was in the world. In short, the upright man, however poor and mean, is not only a man of better dispositions and behaviour than the rich sinner, but he is also incomparably happier and richer, and shall be rich as long as God himself is rich.

Be satisfied and thankful, ye that are taught by the Spirit of God, to walk in your integrity. You are rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom; and in this world you have and shall have every thing that infinite wisdom and love sees fit for you†.

Here the poor may see a certain method of being rich, or of obtaining what is far better than riches. Labour not to be rich in gold and silver, but seek after that which Christ calls the true riches, and which he will dispense unto those that seek them in his appointed way‡.

Let not the rich man glory in his wealth: if he is perverse in his lips, he is poor and miserable, and blind, and naked; and the esteem of men will not counterbalance the abhorrence of God || . Go to Christ under deep impressions of your poverty, and buy of him gold tried in the fire, and you shall be truly rich.

Proverbs 19:2. Also it is not good for a person to be without knowledge, And he who makes haste with his feet errs.

The want of that knowledge which we need for our direction through life, is very pernicious; for we are in a dangerous world, full of pits and snares; and the man that has not eyes in his head, must fall, sooner or later, into destruction. When the blind are led by the blind, they cannot well avoid falling into the ditch. But blind sinners are led by a quick-sighted and crafty devil, who will certainly land them in perdition*.

Although we have knowledge in our heads, it will not profit us, unless we have it also in our hearts. Knowledge, when it is not loved and reduced into practice, will serve only to bear testimony for God against the abuser of light, and to heighten his condemnation. A man of much knowledge, and a bad practice, carries about him, like Uriah, that which will prove his own death.

To want knowledge, is not good: to have knowledge, and not to use it as the directory of our life, cannot be one jot better; and he that hasteth with his feet, and takes no heed to his way, sinneth.

It is no sin, but a duty, to run in the way of God's commandments; and it was an evidence of David's wisdom, that he made haste, and delayed not to run out of the paths of sin, when he considered whither they would lead him; but to run on, without consideration, whithersoever our fancy or our passions lead us, exposes us to much sin and danger; and therefore we are commanded to walk circumspectly, keeping our eye upon the ground we tread, that it may not be slippery, and observing the rule of duty, that we may not transgress it. Even in those businesses that are lawful, we will be drawn into sin, without circumspection; for the devil has snares spread for us everywhere in this evil world, and he that makes haste to be rich, shall not be innocent.

Although we ought to run in the ways of the Lord, and not faint, yet rashness in our religious course will be attended with much sin. We must carry the lamp of truth with us, otherwise, by running in the dark, we will certainly stumble*.

As rashness and inconsideration are sinful, so they are the causes of a great deal of the sin that is in the world. Men would not choose, or at least they would not so resolutely keep the ways of iniquity, were it not that they want knowledge and thought, as Isaiah clearly shews in the case of idolaters†.

Proverbs 19:3. The foolishness of man subverts his way, And his heart rages against the LORD.

Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted by God: God tempts no man, but every man is tempted when he is seduced into evil by the blindness of his own mind, and the perverseness of his own heart. The world and the devil may indeed persuade us to sin, but none of them can force us. When a man sins, he does more mischief to himself than all the legions of hell can do to him; and therefore, whenever our way is perverted, we must chiefly blame ourselves. It would be blasphemy to charge the most holy God with our sins, and it is folly to transfer the fault unto our seducers; for if our enemy should persuade us to stab ourselves to the heart, it is our own madness to comply.

When our way is perverted, we soon feel the miserable consequences of our folly; for wretchedness, in one form or other, follows sin, as the shadow follows the body: but we are so loath to blame ourselves for the consequences of our own folly, that our hearts will rather fret against the Lord, as if he were the cause of our ruin. Adam laid the blame of his fall upon the woman, whom God gave to be with him, indirectly transferring his own folly to his Maker; and it is natural and common for men to follow the example of their common parent. This corrupt disposition is not entirely rooted out of the saints themselves. It was David's fault that he did not cause the ark to be carried in the proper manner from the house of Obededom; and yet when God made a breach upon the people on that account, David was displeased.

Men are oftener guilty of this sin than they imagine. Our hearts fret against the Lord, by fretting at the ministers and instruments of his providence; and therefore, when the people murmured against Moses in the wilderness, he tells them that their murmuring was not against him and his brother Aaron, but against the Lord. David would not fret against Shimei, because he looked upon him as an instrument employed by God for his correction.

Instead of fretting, it is our duty to accept of the punishment of our iniquity, and to bless God that matters are not so bad with us as we deserve; for wherefore should a living man complain, when the damned have no just reason to do it? If our troubles come upon us without any particular reason from our own conduct, yet reflections upon God would be very unjust. Job's troubles were extremely grievous, and they came upon him without cause in himself, as God testifies, Job 2 yet he was made humbly to acknowledge his great folly in reflecting upon God for his distresses, before his captivity was turned back.

Proverbs 19:4. Wealth adds many friends, But a poor man is separated from his friend.

God commands us to love our neighbours as ourselves, whether rich or poor, and to shew a peculiar tenderness to the poor on account of their destitute circumstances; but such is the depraved disposition of men, that the rich have many friends, but the poor man is not known by him that lives at the next door.

The rich have many temptations to high-mindedness, and this is one of them: that they meet with a great deal of respect, and every person professes friendship to them, and they naturally think that they are possessed of many good qualities, which draw to them the esteem of mankind; but they ought to consider, that money answers all things, and is one of the chief attractives of esteem in the world. Let them throw away their money, and those that once made their court to them will leave them, as quickly as the eagles leave a field of battle when the carcasses are all devoured. Job was the most respected man in the east, when he was the richest; but when he was spoiled of his wealth, he that had been as the tabret of the people, became their byword. Jerusalem, in her prosperity, was the princess among the provinces, but in the day of her calamity all her friends dealt treacherously with her, and became her enemies. A very ordinary virtue in an ordinary man, is a shining virtue in a man of fortune; but if he should become poor, all the lustre of his great qualities is entirely gone.

When the poor man is separated from his neighbour, let him remember and imitate the apostle of the Gentiles, who was often reduced to poverty and hunger. Paul laid very little stress on good report or bad report, for he knew that none of these things, nor any thing else, could separate him from the love of Christ*.

Proverbs 19:5. A false witness does one of the greatest injuries to his neighbour, and one of the greatest possible dishonours to God. He breaks at once the two great commandments, of loving God, and loving his brother, and therefore deserves severe punishment*. But if he escape punishment from the magistrate, he shall be punished by God with the loss of credit, and other miseries, in this life, or at least, with an eternal punishment hereafter; for those that bear false witness against their neighbours are an abomination to the Lord, and how is it possible for them to escape†?

Liars are here classed with them that bear false witness, for they are so much-alike, that the ninth commandment, which directly forbids the bearing of false witness, does also, by good interpretation, forbid whatsoever is prejudicial to truth; and those that can allow themselves to tell lies in common conversation, will, in all probability, bear false witness, and confirm it by an appeal to heaven, when they have a sufficient temptation. Some liars may expect to be safe, because their lies are not of a mischievous kind, but when they do evil that good may come, they expose themselves to just condemnation. All liars, says our great judge, shall have their part in the infernal lake‡.

Proverbs 19:6. It is, no doubt, a right thing to honour princes, and to seek their favour when we need it, if God is not neglected, from whom every man's judgment comes. The Lord is the king of kings, and it is a plain evidence that we forget God, when we are less anxious about his favour, than men are about the favour of our fellow worms.

Princes need not pride themselves in the homage that is paid to them, for their favour is sought by men, not so much out of regard to their persons, as from a regard to their power. Kindness and liberality have a greater influence for gaining the hearts of men, than dignity of station. There are many that seek the ruler's favour, but every man loved him that is generous. When power and generosity meet in the same person, he becomes an object of universal esteem, like Marcus Antoninus, who was lamented by every man when he was dead, as if the glory of the Roman empire had died with him.

How inexcusable are we, if we do not love God with all our hearts. His gifts to us are past number, and all the gifts of men to us are the fruits of his bounty, conveyed by the ministry of those whose hearts are disposed by his providence to kindness. "I have seen thy face," said Jacob to Esau, "as the face of God." His brother's favour he knew to be a fruit of the mercy of him with whom he spake and prevailed at Bethel.

In our love to the rich and liberal, we exceed the bounds of duty, if we reserve not a proper share of our regard for the poor, who cannot give us any thing, but have a title to receive from us. But the greatest part of men are of a different mind from Christ Jesus, and think it more blessed to receive than to give.

Proverbs 19:7. All the brothers of a poor man hate him; How much more do his friends go far from him! He pursues them with words, but they are gone.

The brethren of the poor hate him: This is very hard: He might have expected that though all men had forsaken him, yet his brethren would have shewed compassion in the time of distress. A brother is born for adversity, and he ought chiefly at such a season to shew that he is a brother, and if he does not, he greatly aggravates the distress of such a near friend by his unkindness*, and gives a fair pretence to those that are not connected with the poor by such endearing ties, to forsake them. We make ourselves guilty of other men's sins, when we tempt them to sin by our example, especially when our obligations to the opposite duty are much stronger.

This sin is very general, and almost universal among men, although nature, as well as scripture, testifies against it. The best of men have often complained in the time of their afflictions, that they were forsaken and abhorred by those whom they most loved, and those from whom they had reason to expect the greatest kindness*.

But how do they discover their hatred? by behaving like aliens, and turning a deaf ear to their entreaties. This is a sufficient evidence of hatred in the wise man's view, and therefore we may justly conclude, that there is more of this abominable sin in the world than those that are chargeable with it will be willing to acknowledge. The want of love is hatred, though in a lesser degree than malice or spite, and therefore the apostle John distinguishes the righteous from the wicked, by this mark of loving or hating their brethren†. By extending this observation into its native consequences, we might convict all wicked men of enmity against God himself‡, for they do not love him, but despise his laws, and have a reigning aversion to every mean of fellowship with him.

When poor men are real Christians, it is a double iniquity to despise them for their poverty, for they have a double claim to our regard, and their Redeemer is a severe avenger of their wrongs || .

To disregard the importunity of the poor when we are able to help them, is a sign of a very hard heart, and provokes God to disregard the prayers of such unmerciful creatures, in the day of their own distress, and to punish them without mercy§.

When the poor are overlooked, let them remember his text to their comfort. When God testifies against this conduct of their friends, it is a clear evidence that his ways are not as men's ways, nor his thoughts as their thoughts. When Job's friends scorned him, his

eyes poured out tears unto God. Christ was left in his distress by all his disciples, but he was not alone, for the Father was with him. But it is an encouragement to our faith, that he had, in the days of his flesh, so large experience of the sorrows of poverty, for in that he himself hath suffered, being tempted, he is able also to succour them that are tempted*.

Proverbs 19:8. He who gets wisdom loves his own soul; He who keeps understanding will find good.

Spiritual wisdom is not natural to men, and the best scholars, and greatest philosophers, live and die fools, unless they get into their possession that wisdom which cometh from above, and is taught in the holy Scriptures.

The way of getting this wisdom is to be sensible of our need of it, to trust in him to whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge belong, for the communication of it, and to be diligent in the use of the means which he hath appointed, and will bless, for conveying it to us.

We must not only get, but keep this precious treasure, retaining it in our hearts, shewing it forth in all our behaviour, and refusing to part with it on any account†.

Many think that those men who are so careful to seek and retain wisdom, are great losers, buying it at too high a price, and refusing to part with it at the risk of every thing that is valuable in the eyes of men. But the Spirit of God assures us in this place, that they are great gainers, and never can be losers. They may hate their wealth and ease, their friends and life, for the sake of wisdom, but when they do so, they are lovers of their souls, and millions of lives are not to be put in competition with an immortal soul. They may meet with loss and disgrace, with persecution and death, but still they find good, for they not only find those eternal advantages which infinitely outweigh every temporal loss*, but even these losses themselves are good to them that find wisdom, which, like the pretended philosopher's stone, turns every thing into gold. That is truly good to us, which does us good, and that does us good which makes us good, or brings us nearer to the possession of the chief good. The keeper of wisdom does not always find that which appears good to a carnal eye, but he always finds that which appears good in the eyes of God, and consequently in his own eyes. Paul found much good in the things that appear the most frightful objects in nature to the greatest part of men.

Proverbs 19:9. A false witness will not go unpunished, And he who tells lies will perish.

These sins are very pernicious, and yet Solomon knew and found them so common, that he publishes a double warning against them, almost in the same breath, Pr 19:5.

Proverbs 19:10. Luxury is not fitting for a fool; Much less for a slave to rule over princes.

Wisdom turns every thing to a man's advantage and honour, but folly turns gain into loss, and makes a man ridiculous and contemptible, when he is surrounded with every thing that might make him happy, and procure him respect. Delight is a thing that all men wish to enjoy, but when a fool is furnished with every mean of pleasure, his folly is heightened into madness, and he is found to be severentimes more a fool than he appeared to be when he was in other circumstances. A whip is proper for an ass, and a rod for the fool's back, but delight and the means of procuring it are the same thing to a fool, as a golden bridle to that lazy animal†.

It is still more unseemly for servants to have rule over princes, for although servants have as good blood in their veins as princes, and are born with the same rational powers, yet their education and habits of life, make them quite unfit for the arts of government. And pride, that universal vice, has never a greater opportunity of gaining full dominion in a man, than when he is unexpectedly raised from the lowest to the highest stations. But this proverb, like many others, is true only in general, and not in every particular instance; for Joseph was very justly raised, from slavery and imprisonment, to reign over princes, and Solomon himself assures us, that a wise and poor child is worthy of much more respect than an old and foolish king.

Besides the instruction contained in this sentence, to those that have the disposal of high offices in their hands, it teaches us all to value wisdom above pleasure, and all the means of pleasure. Wisdom can make a man happy without them, and wisdom alone can make them means of happiness to us, and enable us to use them without abusing them into means of our own dishonour.

It teaches us also to be pleased with our own condition. How ridiculous would an illiterate rustic appear, were he to be placed in a pulpit, or a man of low birth if he were seated on a throne! It is God's office to choose our stations, and ours to discharge with cheerfulness the duties of them.

When God raised Joseph, and Saul, and David, to power, and when he called fishermen to be apostles, this proverb could not be applied to them, because God gave them a spirit suited to their offices, and in like manner, when he raises the meanest of the sons of men to spiritual honours, he bestows upon them a suitable disposition of soul. Those that are made kings and priests unto God and the father of Christ, have the spirit of sons, working in them those heavenly tempers which become those who are exalted so highly by the grace of God.

Proverbs 19:11. A man's discretion makes him slow to anger, And it is his glory to overlook a transgression.

Are you affronted by any person? Now is the time for knowing whether you are a wise man or a fool. If you are a fool, you will follow that maxim of fools, that a man behaves honourably when he will not suffer any man to give him the least shadow of affront, without forcing him to repent it, if possible, or at least shewing that it is rather the want of power than will, that hinders him from taking revenge. If you are wise, then you will not suffer passion to domineer in your breasts, but when you find it raising insurrections, will force it to yield to the dominion of reason and religion; and before you display it in your words and behaviour, you will consider calmly whether you have reason to be angry, or so much reason as passion would make you believe; and if you have reason, yet another question still remains, Dost thou well to be angry? or dost thou well to be angry to such a degree?

A wise man will not only defer his anger, but pass over offences. Joab could suppress his anger at Abner for killing Asahel, but he was not a wise man, for his resentment broke forth at a fit opportunity, and instigated him to shed the blood of war in the time of peace. David was a man of a very different spirit. He not only restrained Abishai from killing Shimei, when he was fleeing from Jerusalem, but he pardoned that offender when he was returning in triumph to his palace. It was not revenge, but the love of peace, and a desire of the public welfare, that made David charge Solomon, on his death-bed, to keep his eye on that dangerous traitor.

It is our duty and wisdom to pass by, not only slight offences, but injuries of a deeper dye, such as may be called transgressions; for we need sometimes the forgiveness of such from men, and every day we are obliged to supplicate the forgiveness of transgressions from God, and we are bound to forgive men, even as God, for Christ's sake, hath forgiven us.

It is the discretion of a man to be slow to anger and ready to forgive; for as it is not the water that surrounds a ship, but the water which soaks into it, that sinks it, so it is not the injury done by another man that endangers us so much as the impression it makes upon ourselves. Our fretful and revengeful thoughts are the torment of our hearts, and deprive us of the government of our own souls, and it is a piece of folly, when our neighbour does us an injury, to do a much greater to ourselves, when we mean to be revenged on him.

It is a greater glory for a man to govern himself, than to take strong cities, and rule over mighty nations. It is the wisdom and honour of sinning creatures, to behave to offenders as men that need pardon for themselves. It is the glory of Christians to learn meekness and lowliness from Christ. It is the glory of pardoned sinners to shew forth the virtues of him that called them, to which they owe so much, not only in their praises but in all their conversation.

Proverbs 19:12. The king's wrath is like the roaring of a lion, But his favor is like dew on the grass.

We must be loyal to the king for wrath, if we will not be loyal for conscience sake; for here the Bible requires it, and represents the great danger of disobedience, to affright those that will not be governed by a sense of duty. As the lion among the beasts of the forest, so is a king among men, and as the roaring of the lion is terrible to the beasts, so is the displeasure of the king to those that offend him. But his favour is pleasant and refreshing like the dew upon the grass.

We must not wantonly provoke the displeasure, and forfeit the favour, of one that can do us so much good or evil; yet if conscience interfere with the king's commands, we must obey God rather than man, for what is the roaring of a lion, or the rage of a tyrant, to the torments of a mind enraged with a sense of guilt; or what is the dew on the grass, or the smiles of a monarch, to that peace of God which passeth all understanding, and made the martyrs happier in their dungeons, and at stakes, than their tyrants were upon their thrones*.

Proverbs 19:13. A foolish son is destruction to his father, And the contentions of a wife are a constant dripping.

When children behave ill, they are a great cross to their parents, but a peevish and contentious wife is a much greater cross, for children may be turned out of doors when they cannot be reclaimed, but death only, in ordinary cases, can separate those that are joined in marriage. As the rain that drops through an old house rots the timber, and will, in time, wear away the very stones, so the everlasting reflection and complaints of a peevish woman prey upon the vitals of a man, and consume his heart with unceasing anguish.

Women were made to assist and comfort their husbands, and therefore they ought to behave with a meek and quiet Spirit, for it will never be of advantage to a woman to cross the end of her creation. Those who make such a near friend unhappy, must bring a double share of unhappiness on themselves.

But husbands must not impute peevishness to their wives, without good ground. We are all the sons of Adam, and all women are the daughters of Eve, and it would be very unjust to call a woman contentious, for every instance of bad humour to which vexations may provoke her.

If a man has a froward wife, let him consider his own behaviour. Few women have so little of the heart of a woman, or a human creature, as to make those men unhappy that treat them with discretion and tenderness, or if women really deserve this character, gentle admonitions, and kind usage are the best means of reclaiming them.

If a wife has so much of the spirit of a tiger, as still to vex a good husband, his duty is to acknowledge God in this providence, and to consider it as a just correction, or a necessary trial. This will dispose him to perform his duty to a wife that does not perform her duty to him, and to become better by her means, if he cannot make her better by all his endeavours and prayers.

When men that have good wives consider this text, and the too frequent illustrations of it which the observation of the world gives us, it will teach them what reason they have of thankfulness to God, for appointing them a happier lot. It is not chance, nor our own discretion, but the providence of God that gives any of us a prudent wife.

Proverbs 19:14. House and wealth are an inheritance from fathers, But a prudent wife is from the LORD.

Houses and lands are given us by God, but he gives them to us by means of our parents or progenitors, whose industry acquired them. The providence of God shines more remarkably in bestowing good wives on men, for they cannot come by inheritance; and no man can guess beforehand what wife shall fall to any man's lot.

Prudence in a wife, includes not only skill in the management of domestic affairs, but likewise that good sense that makes her an agreeable partner, and directs her to that kind of behaviour which makes her husband happy in this connexion. To these qualities, if piety be added, it renders her a far greater blessing than any possessions that parents can transmit.

We are to thank God for every outward enjoyment, but chiefly for those in which his favourable providence appears most plainly. Houses and lands may tend, in a great degree, to render life comfortable, but a virtuous woman is an uncommon blessing, for her price is far above rubies.

He that findeth a wife has reason to thank God*. He that findeth a good wife has many reasons to be thankful. It was God that gave her prudence, that brought him into acquaintance with her, that disposed him to choose her for a wife, and determined her mind to comply with his desires.

When we receive a rich present from a friend, gratitude obliges us to use it according to his wishes. If a wife is a rich present from God, her husband is bound to shew her all that respect and kindness which God requires. Whatever character a wife deserves, God commands her husband to love her, but when a wife is prudent, the husband would be inexcusable that did not love her with the tenderest affection.

If a man desires to have a wife, he must acknowledge God by earnest supplications; for he alone knows the hearts of men and women, and exercises a sovereign influence over their affections; but let him not presume to affront God by pretending to seek a wife from him, without seeking prudence in her, preferably to houses or land; for God declares, that a prudent wife is a far richer gift than those things which are so much valued by the generality of men. When children wish to enter into marriage, they cannot expect the countenance of their parents, if they make a choice directly opposite to the judgment of their parents; and how can we expect that our heavenly Father should give us his countenance in pursuits opposite to his declared will?

Proverbs 19:15. Laziness casts into a deep sleep, And an idle man will suffer hunger.

A man would make himself universally despised, if he kept his bed all the time that other people are at work; and yet a slothful man might as well be in his bed, for whilst he is awake, he is sleeping, and when he is at work, he is idle. Slothfulness is to the body like rust to iron; it is a consumption to all the powers of the mind, and by its stealing influence and stupifying nature, it casts a man into a sleep, not of an ordinary kind, but a deep sleep like that of death. When a man does nothing as it ought to be done, he is like one buried alive, and may be numbered with the inhabitants of the land of silence and rest.

Would you avoid hunger and poverty, things so much dreaded by mankind? Then avoid idleness, which brings these miseries upon men, and deprives them of that pity which waits upon virtue in distress. Idleness brings hunger, and along with it temptations to fraud and theft, by which means it has led many to a gibbet.

Proverbs 19:16. As the word of God is called the Scripture, (or the writing,) as if there were no other writings in the world, because there are none that can bear a comparison with it, so the precepts of the Bible may be called the commandment, because, although there are men that have a right to command, yet the precepts of God lay an obligation upon us, of force infinitely superior to any thing else in the world. The authority of parents and kings is derived from God, and we are bound to obey them, because God require it, and when their commandments interfere with the will of God, we are bound to obey God, and not man.

The commandment of God is to be observed and obeyed by us in all things, and through the whole course of our lives. We must keep it, not only as the apple of our eye, but as our life and soul.

He that keeps the commandment keeps his own soul from those sins that would bring death and ruin upon him, and from the temptations of the adversary, that watches our halting, and seizes every opportunity he can find to do us a mischief. But how can a man keep his own soul? Is not the Lord our keeper? Certainly; but in converting and keeping men, he deals with them as rational

creatures. We greatly abuse the doctrine of free grace, if we imagine that it supersedes the necessity and advantage of obedience. Although the glory of salvation belongs entirely to Jesus, yet he condescends to give to faithful ministers the honour of being workers under him*. And although the glory of the strength of Christians stands in him, yet when he communicates the influences of his grace, he makes themselves instrumental, under his agency, in their own preservation from the snares of the destroyer. He that is born of God keepeth himself, and the wicked one toucheth him not.

Care and thought are absolutely necessary in those that resolve to keep the commandment; for he that despiseth his ways, shall die. The saint must not only endeavour to understand and remember the rule of the law, but likewise to observe his own way, that he may direct his steps, and form his course of behaviour in an agreeableness to it. The travellers that have their faces towards the better country, must have their eyes in their head, for there is no going to heaven by guess, and those that live at random must die. This truth is clearly taught by the apostle Paul in language sufficient to alarm the stoutest sinner, if any thing could alarm him. "If ye live after the flesh, ye shall die," etc.*

Proverbs 19:17. He who is gracious to a poor man lends to the LORD, And He will repay him for his good deed

Without the pity of the heart, the bounty of the hand is unacceptable to the Searcher of hearts; and professions of pity are mere hypocrisy, without the fruit of bounty, if it is in the power of our hands to shew it†,

How great is the mercy of the Lord to the poor! He hath appointed them to be the receivers of a part of his revenue, and what is given to them he accounts to be lent to himself. This mercy is not confined to the poor of his own people; although he interests those especially in our bounty‡, yet he would not have us to restrict the fruits of our compassion to them. Our Lord dispensed his cures to the ungrateful, although he knew what was in man, and God causes his sun to rise, and his rain to descend, upon the evil and the good, and requires us to give a portion to seven, and also to eight, dispersing the fruits of our liberality, as the husbandman scatters his grain, although he does not certainly know whether shall prosper, either this or that || .

"He that giveth to the poor, lendeth to the Lord." This is an argument for charity of wonderful force. No Pagan moralist could ever produce a motive for any social duty, equal to this. It is sufficient to open the closest fist, and to enlarge the most selfish heart. Does God shew so much regard to the poor, and shall we be indifferent to their happiness? Can we lose any thing by lending it to the Lord? Men refuse to give when they do not expect to receive, and they expect no return from the poor. If the rich were desirous to borrow from us, we would think our money safe in their hands, and esteem their bonds as good as money in our purses. But all the earth belongs unto the Lord, and shall we not trust our money in his hands, by giving to the poor? Here is his bond, and it must be a good one, if the Scripture is the word of God. The richest man in the world may, for ought we know, be poor to-morrow, or he may prove unfaithful to his word. But the Lord is the everlasting possessor of heaven and earth, and he cannot lie, nor deceive any one that trusts in him. Had we lived in the days of Christ's humiliation, when he had the goodness to live on the contributions of pious women, it is natural for us to think that we would cheerfully have given to him all our living, and thought ourselves greatly indebted to him for accepting it. We have not now Jesus with us, but the poor we have always with us; and when we have them to receive the fruits of our bounty, it is the same thing as if we had Christ himself.

God will be sure to repay what is given to the poor at his command, with great increase. The greatest usurer on earth cannot make so much of his money, as the man that gives to the poor. "Thou shalt be recompensed," says Christ, "at the resurrection of the just." Is that a long time to wait for it? Then you are assured, by the same faithful witness, that you shall have an hundred fold, even in this life, for every thing you part with on his account, Luke 14. Matt. 19. Men that may be safely trusted with our money, are not always ready with their payments. A poor man cannot have his money from them when he needs it, but God repays what is given to the poor at the best time; and if he does not return it in money, he pays it in what is incomparably better*.

Proverbs 19:18. Discipline your son while there is hope, And do not desire his death.

If you mean to do good to your children by correction, begin in due time. For if he be left to grow up under the government of self-will, it is to be feared that he will become like a horse or mule that were never taught to obey the rider; and when these animals come to a full age, without being forced to obey the rein, you may sooner break their necks than break them to obedience.

But your heart melts, and your bowels yearn to hear the cries of your poor child, and you cannot give him another harsh word. Let him alone then, and leave him to the government of his own passions, unless you think that it would be still more grievous to have your grey hairs brought with sorrow to the grave, and to hear him curse you at the left hand of your Judge, for suffering him to destroy himself, than to hear his groans for a few moments.

After all, parents ought neither to inflict unnecessary chastisement on their children, nor suffer their angry passions to mingle themselves with the duty here recommended. Those parents that make an angry use of the rod, need a rod to their own backs. ("Chasten thy son, so shall he be hopeful; but be not raised in thy wrath to insult him.")

An offending child must not be spared for his crying, and far less must he be spared for his anger. If his wrath procures his deliverance, he will soon learn the way of escaping all chastisement; and if thou deliverest him once, thou must deliver him again

and again, till he is past all hope of amendment This seems to be at least a part of the meaning of the next verse.

Proverbs 19:19. When Peter asked our Lord how often he should forgive his offending brother, he received a very surprizing answer: Not until seven times, but until seventy times seven. But will not this give great encouragement to men to offend their brethren, and to give every indulgence to their angry passions? No, for it does not imply that an outrageous person shall escape from punishment. It was once said to a man that was killing his adversary, let him alone, and he will die of his own accord. So may it be said to a man that thirsts for revenge upon his passionate antagonist, let him alone, and he will take revenge upon himself. Although you spare him at this time, he will soon expose himself again to punishment, and it cannot be supposed that he will always escape. You ought rather to pity him, than rage like him, for he is his own irreconcilable enemy, and will be sure to plunge himself into mischief.

Anger is said to be a short madness, but the passionate man is always mad till he gains the victory over the tyrants that domineer in his soul. He has sober fits, but he so frequently relapses, that you cannot say he ever possesses the use of reason. Any man that wishes evil to him may deprive him of the use of his understanding, by a single word, or even by a look.

Are your souls, subject to those storms of passion? Turn your anger upon itself. You are displeased with other men, because you take them for enemies; but your worst enemies are the passions of your own heart. Do you not hate that monster, Vitellius, who said that the carcass of a slain enemy was a pleasant sight, but the carcass of a slain citizen more pleasant? Why then don't you hate the violent tyrants of your own breast, that would wreak their fury upon the names and bodies of your neighbours, but discover it most of all in tearing your own souls? You are every day torturing yourselves, and exposing yourselves to a severe retaliation from those whom you insult, and to a more severe vengeance still, from your Judge, who will call you to account for every angry thought and every passionate word.

Proverbs 19:20. Listen to counsel and accept discipline, That you may be wise the rest of your days.

A friend that can give us good counsel is a precious treasure, and nothing but folly and self-conceit can keep us from valuing his good advice as more than fine gold.

If the counsels of our friends deserve respect, the counsels of the word of God are infinitely more useful. The testimonies of the Lord were David's counsellors in all his difficulties, and they made him wiser than the ancients.

Every name of our Redeemer is dear to the true Christian, and one of them is Wonderful Counsellor. He gives us counsel by his word and Spirit. Our ears and souls are his, and shall we not employ them in hearing and treasuring up his counsels, that we may direct all our actions by their light?

Instruction is very much needed by us, for we are naturally ignorant and foolish. When God gives us instruction, either by his word and ordinances, or by the rebukes of his providence, we must receive it with submission and meekness. Instruction, either by words or blows, would be welcome to us, if we had a due sense of our own stupidity, and of the value of our souls.

But what will we gain by hearing counsel, and receiving instruction? It will make us wise; "for the entrance of God's word giveth light, it giveth understanding unto the simple." The rod and reproof give wisdom, and wisdom is far more precious than gold and rubies. Without counsel and instruction, we must be fools for ever, and if we refuse wisdom, when it is presented to us in those means of God's appointment, our folly is desperate and stubborn, and admits of no excuse.

But we have used these means, you will say, and have acquired but very little wisdom from them. But a little wisdom is a very great attainment, and if you think that you have got none at all, yet you must still continue to use the means, and so you shall be wise at your latter end. A man will spend several years in learning a business that will enable him to live comfortably through the remainder of life, and we have no reason to grudge a whole lifetime employed in receiving instruction, if it make us wise at our latter end.

At our latter end it will be seen whether we have been fools or wise men. If our days are spent in the pursuit of perishing things, to the neglect of our eternal interests, we shall be forced to leave these vanities to which we sacrificed our souls, and at our end we shall be fools*. When the men that choose the world for their portion come to the close of life, and their former conduct presents itself to their eyes, how will they curse and tear themselves in their rage, at their own blindness and madness! Even whilst they are eager in the pursuit of vanity, and flattering themselves with the delusive hopes of many days of pleasure before them, they cannot forbear from wishing, like the covetous soothsayer, that they may die the death of the righteous, and that their last end may be like his.

But mark the follower of wisdom, and behold him that hearkens to the counsels of the Almighty. His latter end is peace and happiness. Those who hated his holiness, and despised his condition, are now obliged to acknowledge that his life was spent in wisdom, and that his last hour is blessed.

Do you think that you have already gained enough of wisdom? You are quite mistaken. You are yet a child, and speak as a child, that thinks himself a scholar if he can repeat the letters of the alphabet. A Christian must live and die learning*.

Proverbs 19:21. Many are the plans in a man's heart, But the counsel of the LORD, it will stand.

Men's hearts are perpetually filled with projects, and they seldom consider whether these projects are agreeable to the mind of God or not. But the counsel of the Lord revealed in his word, shall stand good after all the plans they can form. It is the way of happiness to hear his counsel and receive his instruction; for the world passeth away, and the lusts thereof, but he that doth the will of God abideth for ever, and must prosper whilst he acts by the direction of these unerring counsellors, the testimonies of the Lord†.

But the counsel of God is generally used in Scripture to signify the purpose of God concerning the events that shall come to pass; and this counsel comprehends every thing that has come or shall come to pass in the world, either by the immediate agency of God, or by means of any creature; for the worst of men, and devils themselves, are employed by the providence of God in executing his decrees. Men and devils act in an agreeableness to their own wills as far as their power reaches, but they are still under the absolute dominion of the Lord; and whether they are able or not able to execute their own devices, they are executing his decrees. How strange is the wisdom of divine Providence! Millions of creatures know nothing of the true God, millions of them are his constant enemies, and are incessantly employed in devising and executing those purposes which have for their objects the gratification of selfish and corrupt affections, that are filled with enmity against God, and yet they all concur in fulfilling his secret will. His counsels leave them to their own free will; and their free will, however corrupt, is managed by his holy providence to serve his own glorious designs, and where it would lead men beyond the line of his decrees, he powerfully and invisibly controls it.

It is vain for men to form any purpose, and to think of carrying it into execution, without acknowledging the providence of God. The Apostle James warns us in strong language against this piece of practical atheism*.

When we meet with hardships from the cruelty of men, let us consider this truth, and behave meekly and humbly. They do nothing without the observation and permission of God. Christ submitted quietly to those sufferings which he underwent from the hands of barbarous men, because it was necessary that the Scriptures should be fulfilled, and the determinations of God's hand and counsel performed. What David did pleased all the people, and shall not we be pleased with what the King of Heaven does?

Let, the people of God rejoice. The counsels of God concerning them are glorious in wisdom and grace, and though hand join in hand, they shall not be unaccomplished. The counsels of their enemies are dangerous, but no weapon formed against Zion shall prosper. All the counsels of the wicked shall be executed or frustrated according to the good pleasure of God, whose eyes run to and fro through the whole earth, to shew himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect towards him†.

Let sinners tremble, for their counsels and works are in the hand of God. He may suffer them to prosper for a time in mischief, and to bring some of their wicked devices to pass, but their mischiefs shall rebound upon themselves, and their nets shall entangle their own feet. God may use them for a time to accomplish his gracious though awful designs upon his people, but he will in a short time call them to account, and punish them for all the evils they have done, and for the greater evils they have imagined*.

Proverbs 19:22. What is desirable in a man is his kindness, And it is better to be a poor man than a liar.

A man's benevolence is not in proportion to the good deeds he performs, but to the real desires he has to do good, if it were in his power.

A man may perform many acts of kindness, and yet not perform all that he ought. When a rich man bestows a few of his superfluities, they may amount to a considerable sum, and yet in the balance of the sanctuary they will not equal in weight the little pittance that a poor man gives, when he stretches himself to the utmost of his ability, or even beyond it†. A rich man may even give more than a man could reasonably desire him to give, for the purposes of charity or public service, and yet be entirely destitute of charity and public spirit, seeking only the praise of men, whilst he professes, like the old Pharisees, much better things.

On the other side, a man may give only two mites, or nothing at all, and yet possess a generous soul, like that of Job, who never ate his morsel without sharing it with the poor. As God only knows the heart, the day of judgment will be the grand discoverer of the real characters of men. In the meantime, we must not love those only who bestow much kindness on us, nor confine our esteem to those who signalise themselves by their extensive liberalities; for the virtues, as well as the vices of men, are often concealed under rags, and pinched by poverty, so that they cannot display their blossoms, or produce their proper fruits.

The poor man that cannot give, and is obliged to receive, is a much better man than the liar who professes kindness, and yet does nothing to verify his professions by works. Good words are good things in their proper place, and do well become the mouth of the Christian, but good words instead of good deeds are mere hypocrisy; of so gross a kind, that even men often discern it, and despise the pitiful wretch who endeavours to shelter the baseness and selfishness of his spirit under empty professions. Do you say to your poor brother, be thou warmed and clothed, whilst thou givest him nothing to shelter him from the pinching cold, or to fill his craving appetite, although thou art well able to do it? Thou joinest hypocrisy and lies to the want of charity, and a poor man that lives upon the bounty of the parish is a more respectable man than thou.

Let us learn to value men by their hearts, as far as they lie open to the judgment of candour and charity, rather than their professions

and appearances, which are so frequently delusive. Thus shall we be enabled to choose our friends, and to put a proper value on their kindness; and by this means we shall be preserved from that injustice so frequently condemned by the wise man, of despising the poor, and paying an undue respect to the rich.

This proverb also teaches us to examine our own hearts, that we may know how far we are under the influence of a kind and charitable spirit. God will not accept of all the substance of our houses, instead of the charity of the heart. At the same time, desires are not real, nor are they genuine marks of goodness, if they are not followed by suitable performances, when the providence of God puts it in our power*.

Proverbs 19:23. Religion is the soul of happiness, it makes the present life long and happy, as far as a long and happy life is really for our advantage, and it is the beginning of eternal life in the soul. He that is governed by the fear of the Lord enjoys heart-felt satisfaction, and the joys that spring from it are not like the short-lived joys of the world, that die away into sadness and misery; they last through life, they are vigorous in old age, when the pleasures of sense have lost their relish, and they triumph over death and all its terrors. Christians are indeed exposed to heaviness through manifold temptations, but the fear of the Lord, and the faith of Christ, has often produced joy unspeakable and full of glory in such seasons; and the disquiets which the people of God often feel, are owing for the most part to the imperfections of their religious dispositions, and are blessed by God as means of improving their grace, and introducing sweeter joys into their souls. Christians have unfailing grounds of satisfaction, for they have health in their souls, they know that all their affairs are managed by a wise and gracious Providence, and they have the sure promises of the life to come. If God himself can give satisfaction to the souls which he has made, they have it, or shall have it in due time, for he manages all things for their good, and his eternal excellencies are their portion.

The saint of God is entirely delivered from the miseries of man's fallen state, as far as it can consist with the plan of his recovery which divine wisdom has contrived. The calamities which he suffers are unstinged to him through the Redeemer's cross, which, like the tree that Moses cast into the waters of Marah, makes bitter things sweet. He is not visited with any unnecessary evil, and those evils that visit him are made good on the whole by the tendency which they have to do him good, and make him good. Reproaches and tribulations, sicknesses and deaths, are the common lot of men, and they are very evil things to those who are strangers to God, but they are good to them that love God, for they are appointed and useful means to make them partakers of God's holiness, and prepare them for that blessed world where sins and sorrows are no more*.

Proverbs 19:24†. The sluggard buries his hand in the dish, And will not even bring it back to his mouth.

Solomon was a mortal enemy to sloth, as every wise man will be. He has often told us of the mischievous effects of this vice, and here he holds up the sluggard as an object of contempt and laughter, to make him ashamed, if possible, of his laziness, and to awaken us to diligence in the duties of our calling and religion.

It is a mark of a sluggard to make a great business of a little affair, and to make much ado about nothing at all. It is a business to the sluggard to take his hand out of his bosom, and it is a grievous affair for him to put it to his mouth to feed himself. Were it not for shame, he would desire to be fed like an infant, and he will at length be tempted to grudge that men cannot live like trees, on which their proper nourishment falls down from the clouds.

A man that employs his hands with diligence, is able not only to support himself and his family, but to give something likewise to him that needs†; and he finds less trouble in his work, and enjoys more contentment than a sluggard would do, if you should bring every thing to him that is needful for his support, without any labour of his own hands, because the things that no man can do for him are oppressions to his sluggish soul. It is a greater burden to a sleepy man to strip himself and go to bed, than for another man to perform some laborious service.

Awake, thou sluggard, out of thy deep sleep, unless thou desirest to be miserable through life; for life itself is an intolerable slavery when every piece of work is a burden.

Beware of spiritual sloth, which makes every duty of religion a toil. God loves a cheerful servant, that rejoices and works righteousness, but he will accept of no drowsy and spiritless services, which are a dishonour to him and to his ways. To the slothful Christian it seems a burden to pray, and to believe in Christ, although by these duties we only ask, and receive, and eat our spiritual food. The lively Christian admires the grace of God, which hath made these holy exercises our duty; but the sluggard grudges that he cannot have heaven in a morning dream.

Proverbs 19:25. The wise man has already told us that it is needless to reprove a scorner, because his pride will make reproofs useless to him. What, then, is to be done with him? Shall he be suffered to proceed in his wicked courses, and to corrupt others by his example? No; he ought to be smitten, at least when he lays himself open to the vengeance of the laws; and although there is little hope of reclaiming one that is so much hardened in wickedness, yet his punishment will be useful to other men, who will hear, and fear, and do no more so wickedly. The simple and thoughtless will be made to see how dangerous it is to follow the example of one that has suffered unto imprisonment, or whipping, or death, for his vices, and those who would not be restrained from evil by the fear of God, and the thoughts of an eternal world, will be checked by the fear of men, and the terror of present punishment. It is a

necessary thing in a land to punish gross offences; for without the execution of justice on the wicked, iniquity would overflow all its banks, and men would not live with safety among their fellow-creatures. We have, therefore, reason to bless God for the institution of magistracy*, and should concur in our stations to assist in the execution of the just laws against vice.

But a wise man needs not be smitten for his faults, which are generally of a much less atrocious nature than those of the scorner. He is not, however, to be connived at, or left to his own wisdom, to inform him of his miscarriages. Men are commonly too dim-sighted to discern their own miscarriages in a proper light, and reproofs are means appointed and blessed by God for bringing wise men themselves to the exercise of a lively sorrow and repentance.

Are you afraid to reprove a wise man, lest he should take it amiss? You need not fear this, if he is really a wise man. He will love thee for reproving him, and will understand knowledge. A fool is displeased when he is supposed capable of falling into a fault; but a wise man is meek and lowly, sensible of his imperfection and frailty, and when he goes out of the road of duty, is glad and thankful to be set right.

This proverb teaches us, how vain it is for men, through the pride of character, to cavil at admonitions, and endeavour to justify themselves in opposition to plain fact. Instead of serving our character by this behaviour, we greatly hurt it. When we receive reproof with gratitude, we shew ourselves wise men. When we are displeased with it, we shew that we are fools, or at least that our wisdom is mingled with much folly. To affect the character of perfect men, is a plain evidence that we know not ourselves, and do not remember the present state of human nature.

Proverbs 19:26. He who assaults his father and drives his mother away is a shameful and disgraceful son.

Some children are so graceless, as to think it no sin to steal from their parents, and to take at their own hands that portion of the goods which they think belongs to them. Others abuse the fondness of their parents, and ungratefully make use of it as a mean of robbing them by their own consent. Both these kinds of wicked children may be said to waste their parents. There is another kind of children who have some reverence for their father, because their interest depends on his will; but they have so little regard for their mothers, that they chase them away from their houses, by rendering their life uncomfortable, or by wasting that portion of goods which pertains to them. Esau, profane as he was, had some regard for his father, and sought his blessing with many tears; but he valued not his mother, and resolved to kill her dearest son, as soon as her husband's head was laid in the dust. On the other side, dutiful children will at all times endeavour to make their mothers happy, especially when they are reduced to the affliction of a widowed condition.

Those sons that behave so undutifully to their parents bring a reproach on themselves, which spreads to the whole family. They are monsters of mankind, who are entirely destitute of natural affection, and feel no gratitude for the highest obligations which one human person can receive from another. They barbarously disappoint and counteract the most reasonable hopes that can be formed by men, and prove the torment and disgrace of those who had the best reason to expect comfort at their hand. They violate the strongest obligations to duty, and make themselves unworthy of the least confidence from men. They greatly provoke the author of their being, by their base conduct towards the instruments of it. God hath placed in his law the duties we owe to our parents next to those we owe to himself, and will severely avenge the neglect of them. How, then, can they escape punishment, who do not only neglect, but scandalously counteract these duties! If the injuries done to strangers, or inferiors, expose men to the displeasure of the Most High, what punishments hang over those that wound, in the tenderest part, the persons to whom under God they owe themselves?

Is God so careful to enforce the rights of parents upon their children, how careful should parents be to inculcate on their children their duty to God, the sense of which, in the minds of their children, is their own best security for that regard which is due to themselves.

If God be the father of the human race, and of Christians in particular, what fear is due to him? What monsters of undutifulness are they that provoke him to anger continually?

Proverbs 19:27. Cease listening, my son, to discipline, And you will stray from the words of knowledge.

There are many deceivers in the world, who make it their business to clothe error with the appearance of truth, and to weaken the motives to holiness which are set before us in the word of God. And the exhortation in this verse speaks to us as children, warning us to beware of their artifices and insinuations.

Error may be rendered very plausible, for the Devil himself came to men with Scripture in his mouth*; and no wonder if his ministers can presume to plead both Scripture and reason in behalf of their pernicious doctrines: but a quagmire is not the less dangerous, because it is covered with beautiful verdure, and has the appearance of solid ground; nor is poison the less pernicious, because it is covered with honey. Error is error after all that can be said for it, and all the shapes which it can be made to assume.

It is, no doubt, our duty to prove all things, and to take nothing upon the mere testimony of men that concerns our precious souls, and it is the property of a sincere soul, like Nathaniel's, to be open to conviction, where there is danger of a mistake. But this does not imply that we are to be ever learning, without coming to the knowledge and assurance of the truth. The truth may be known, because it is plainly revealed in the Bible; and when we have found that which is good, we ought to hold it fast, that no man take our crown—to contend earnestly for it against all opposition, and to shut our ears against those instructions that would shake our regard to those things which are most surely believed amongst us.

It is dangerous for men to lend a ready ear to those that would exalt the dignity of human nature, to the dishonour of the righteousness and grace of Christ, or loosen the obligations of men to obey every law of God, because the corruption of our natures gives countenance to every thing that favours pride or carelessness; so that, when we think we are well fortified against the delusions of seducing spirits and false teachers, and rashly venture to hear what they can say for themselves, we are in great danger of being perverted, and falling from our fancied stedfastness.

The apostle John tells us, that it is a great and dangerous sin, when a man comes to teach false doctrine, to receive him into our houses, or to bid him God speed; and Christ tells us, that his true sheep hear and know his voice, and follow him, but will not follow a stranger.

Perhaps you have already given too much ear to the teachers of corrupt doctrine. The exhortation is chiefly addressed to you, by him that knows your danger. Cease to hear such instruction. The time past is sufficient to have listened to it. Examine carefully how far your judgment or practice have been perverted, by comparing them with the Scriptures. Adjust your profession and practice to that unerring standard. Endeavour to know the present truth, and to be established in it. Learn by the word of God, and prayer, to distinguish between truth and error. Hear those teachers that are of God, and preach sound doctrine; and beware of itching ears, which would tempt you to drink poison into your ears and hearts, instead of the sincere milk of the word*.

Proverbs 19:28. This is not the first nor second time that Solomon has informed us about the wickedness of false witnesses. It would be a great injustice to admit the testimony of a profligate wretch, against the life or fortune of his neighbour; for he neither regards man, nor fears God. He scorneth judgment, and has no reverence for the most sacred and venerable objects. He bids defiance to eternal justice, and swallows down the most enormous iniquities as if they were sweet wine; for his conscience is become hardened in iniquity, till a trifle will be a sufficient temptation to him to swear against innocent blood.

It is greatly the interest of a nation to take order that a sense of religion be preserved amongst the members of it. When men generally lose their reverence for an oath, the bonds of society are broken, honesty becomes a prey, and ruin advances with hasty steps.

Let all men beware of those sins that are counted little, for they are like little thieves that get in at the window, and then open the door for bigger villains to get in. When men learn to lie without scruple, because they hurt none but themselves, they will next learn to bear false witness, when they are tempted by love or fear, and from thence they will proceed to greater degrees of wickedness, till at length they will scarce put the devil to the trouble of tempting them to any sin, but drink iniquity like water. Every sin tends to harden the conscience, and a conscience long hardened in sin, will in time be seared as with a hot iron.

However stupid the consciences of ungodly men are, and whatever flatteries they use for deceiving themselves, their iniquity will in the end be found hateful.

Proverbs 19:29. Judgments are prepared for scoffers, And blows for the back of fools.

Scorners, in the pride of their hearts, think themselves secure from the vengeance of the law, and are sometimes so profane as to laugh at the threatenings of the Almighty. But the day is coming when their laughter shall be turned into heaviness. The God whom they despise, is the judge of all the earth, and it is his glory to exercise his high office in righteousness. He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but if they will not turn and live, they must die, and their blood shall be on their own head, and the Lord shall be known by the judgment which he executeth. The judgments that shall be inflicted on scorners, are already prepared, and determined for them. It is the triumph of lively Christians that they can look back to the days of eternity, and rejoice in the contemplation of a kingdom prepared for them before the foundation of the world. But sinners have great reason to tremble with astonishment, when they reflect upon the immutable decrees of God, for an everlasting hell was designed in them for every unrepenting transgressor*. As kings have their officers of justice, and instruments of vengeance ready to terrify profligate subjects into obedience to the laws, so the Everlasting King has every instrument of vengeance reserved among his treasures, to terrify men from sin, or to destroy them if they go on in their trespasses. Their punishment shall be disgraceful to the last degree, for stripes are prepared for the backs of fools. They shall suffer ignominious wounds as the basest of criminals, and their reproach shall never be wiped away.

Because sinners feel not the strokes of judgment, they foolishly think that they shall for ever escape. But did the old world of the ungodly escape, although they were spared an hundred and twenty years? Christ himself, the beloved Son of God, when he was bearing iniquity not his own, was not spared. Justice and judgment took hold of our blessed Surety, and he gave his back to the

smitters, and his cheeks to them that plucked off the hair. If God spared not his own Son, will he spare stubborn transgressors?

Perhaps you imagine, sinners, that vengeance will be long delayed, and that your sufferings are reserved to another world. Perhaps it may, and for ought you know, it may not be so. But, allowing that you should enjoy all the prosperity that your hearts can wish till you die, are you sure that you shall live another year, or another day? Your life depends absolutely on him whom you treat as an enemy; and when his much abused patience is at an end, where, O where are you!

CHAPTER 20

Ver. 1. WINE and strong drink are creatures of God, which are very useful to men when they are seasonably and moderately used, but by abusing them we sin against the goodness and law of God, and against our own souls and bodies.

Wine deceives and mocks those that use it to excess, and punishes those that abuse it as an instrument of dishonour to him that gave it to men to cheer their hearts. It promises refreshment, but it steals away men's senses, till it makes them the objects of scorn to the sober. It made the venerable patriarch Noah a laughing-stock to his own son. It deprives men of their reason, and gives the government of the mind to the passions; and then those that were men of good behaviour in their sober moments, become insolent and outrageous. When the king of Israel was made drunk with bottles of wine, he forgot his dignity, and stretched out his hand with scorners*.

Wine has been the beginning of many quarrels that have ended in wounds and blood; for it rouses the passions, it turns suspicions into certainties in the eye of the drunkard, and thus inflames resentments into irreconcilable animosities. It gives full range to all the hidden vices of the soul, and produces new vices of a dangerous kind. It destroys the power of reason, and infuses into the soul all the fury of a wild beast.

He that suffers himself to be deceived by it is not wise, for he wastes his memory and understanding, as well as his money; he wounds his conscience, he enslaves himself to a tyrant, and enters upon a course which, when it becomes habitual, will render him useless and miserable upon earth, and exclude him from the kingdom of heaven. When wine and strong drink are greedily swallowed down, they swallow the drunkard, and turn him into an unclean beast*.

Wine had the honour of being used in the service of God under the law, and is still used in it under the gospel, and why should we use it in the service of Satan? It is not allowed by God but with moderation, to the greatest men on the greatest occasions. Neither birth days of kings, nor happy meetings of friends, nor the transacting of the most important businesses, will justify men in excess of wine†.

We should remember, that the day of Christ is approaching, and take care that our hearts be not overcharged with surfeiting and drunkenness; we must remember from whom we receive the refreshments of life, and endeavour to glorify him in the use of them. We are called to the hope of drinking of the rivers of God's pleasures, and shall we fill ourselves with wine, wherein there is excess‡?

Ver. 2. Solomon had probably seen too much evidence of a seditious disposition in that people over which he reigned, and therefore warns them again and again of the sin and danger of provoking kings to anger. Men have such a degree of self-will and pride, that they can scarcely be prevailed upon to submit to the necessary restraints of their liberty. Liberty is a valuable thing, but licentiousness is the ruin of nations.

If the fear occasioned by the displeasure of a king is so intolerable, what must it be to encounter the wrath of Him whose voice is not only like the roaring of a lion, but like the sound of many thunders. His voice shakes the heaven and the earth, and neither men nor devils shall be able to endure the terrors of it. To sin against Christ is to sin not only against our lives, but against our immortal souls*.

Ver. 3. It is an honour for a man to leave off strife before it be meddled with, and to overlook these things that might stir up anger†. But when a man is engaged in contention, is it an honour for him to give it up? Will not the world say that we have a bad cause, or weak arguments, or a mean spirit, if we have not the last word?

No matter what the world says, if the Spirit of God says other things. It is here declared to be honourable for a man to give up a debate for the sake of peace and quietness. By so doing we testify our humility and meekness, our obedience to God, and our aversion to sin. Christ did not strive, nor cry, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street, and surely it is a man's honour to imitate, as far as our weakness will allow, the meekness and gentleness of Christ. It was wise in Paul to make an acknowledgment of his error in speaking disrespectfully of the high priest, although that partial judge well deserved the sharpest reproof for his partiality and tyranny; and it would have been wise in Job's friends to have yielded to the force of his convincing arguments, rather than, by endeavouring to maintain their errors, to expose themselves to the displeasure of God, and to the just mortification of being obliged to have recourse to the intercessions of that good man whom they had so deeply injured.

But every fool will be meddling; for a fool is so self-conceited, that he can bear no contradiction; so impertinent, that he will have a hand in every other man's business; so proud, that he cannot bear to be found in the wrong; and so stubborn, that he will have the last word, although his lips should prove his destruction. Amaziah was fairly warned of the danger of meddling with the king of Israel,

but he would not hear reason, nor cease from strife, till he was brought with his kingdom to the verge of ruin. Zedekiah, the son of Chenaanah, entered into contention with the good prophet Micaiah, and had the insolence to strike that faithful servant of the Lord, but was soon after compelled to flee to an inner chamber to hide himself.

This is one difference between wise men and fools: The former are for peace, the latter are ordinarily keen for battle*. This may be illustrated from the difference between the behaviour of Nabal and David; Nabal had a very bad tongue, for as Nabal was his name, so folly was with him. He gave a very provoking answer to a very civil message from David, and thereby exposed himself and his family to ruin; David had human nature, and his passions were too fierce, but it was his honour that he was easily pacified, and although he did not leave off contention, as he should have done, before it was meddled with, yet he left it off before it came to a fatal extremity.

Ver. 4. It is one plain evidence of sloth for a man to be dexterous in finding excuses to shift off necessary work. If a small inconveniency be allowed as an apology for idleness, excuses will never be wanting.

The sluggard will not plow by reason of the cold, and he will not sow because the ground is not in good order, and he will not weed his field because of the heat of summer, and he will not reap in harvest because he cannot endure to bend his back, and is afraid of an headache. But is there any other useful business that can suit him, since husbandry is so disagreeable? No, one business would oblige him to a sedentary life, another is attended with too much fatigue, a third is too mean for a gentleman, a fourth requires a man to rise early in the morning. He will sleep or lean on his elbow, or he will divert himself with any kind of sport, or he will talk till you are tired with him, or he will play at cards, for although he abhors business, he loves busy idleness. He will either do nothing, or what is worse than nothing.

But he that will not work must beg, and this is surely a mean employment for a man that is able to work; but although he can conquer shame sufficiently to betake himself to it, his misery is, that nobody will give him any thing, for why should drones eat the labour of the bees? Even in harvest, when plenty smiles all around, and when the hearts of men are enlarged with joy, and bestow liberal quantities of food upon their beasts, the wretched sluggard finds that every man's bowels are shut against him. The industrious and disabled poor have then a good time, for the law of God requires the gleanings and leavings of the fields to be allowed them; but the same law requires that he who will not work should not eat.

Spiritual sloth is discovered by this mark, and attended with the like misery. The careless Christian will not attend the house of God, by reason of the cold of winter, or the heat of summer; he will not keep up the worship of God in his family because he is encumbered with worldly business; or if shame and love of character oblige him to perform those services which the eyes of men behold, there is so much attention of spirit necessary for the duties of the closet, that he cannot find in his heart to perform them at all, or to perform them to any good purpose. What will become of such sluggards at the end of the world? Our Lord tells us, they will beg and have nothing*.

Ver. 5. The heart of man is a great deep, and there are thoughts and devices in it as much past numbering as the creeping things and fishes in the sea. God alone searches the hearts, and tries the reins of the children of men. By one glance of his eye he pierces into the bottom of our souls, and knows our thoughts infinitely better than we ourselves.

But although a man cannot go to the bottom of a deep well, he may draw out some of its water for use by means of a bucket, and although a man cannot penetrate into the bottom of another man's heart, he may find out some of his thoughts and contrivances, his purposes and designs, or form such conjectures about them as are necessary to regulate his own motions. A man of understanding, without the gift of prophecy may know many things that are useful to be known about the counsels of those that are most desirous to conceal them. David discovered, and represented before his God the secret projects of his enemies against him, when both the inward thought and the heart of every one of them was deep; and Job saw clearly what his friends aimed at by all their flaming discourses about the misery of the wicked, before they named himself as the object of that vengeance which they described†.

A man of sagacity has a knowledge of human nature, which assists him in finding out the contrivances and designs of particular men. He can avail himself of their gestures, their general course of behaviour, their behaviour in particular instances, and on sudden emergencies, their silence, their words, even when they are disguising their thoughts, their connections and company, their interests and humours, to form our judgment of their thoughts and designs, and by this means he is often enabled to guard himself and his good name from the snares of the wicked. Wisdom is profitable, you see, not only for the life to come, but likewise for the present life; but hypocrisy and dissimulation profiteth little. It is often detected by men, it is always known to God; and the day is coming in which he will make manifest the secrets of all hearts.

Ver. 6. It is very natural for men to have an high opinion of themselves, and there are few men who have not a better opinion of their own worth than any other man has, but a man of consideration will discern the folly of self conceit, and will be cautious of publishing his own imagined virtues to the world.

There are few who have the good sense to consider these facts, and therefore it is very common in conversation to hear men proclaiming their own praises either directly, or by plain insinuations. If they are ashamed to talk of their own generosity and charity in an avowed manner, they catch at the good opinion, and applause of other men, by a variety of methods, sometimes commending virtue and goodness with a design of shewing their own love to it, at other times running down their neighbours, for the want of these virtues, imagining that the depression of other men will be their own exaltation. Sometimes they insist upon particular instances of goodness, which they think, from some known pieces of their behaviour, will be a mean of leading persons to think of themselves, and on other occasions, they will take occasion, from what others in the company are saying, to hale into the conversation some of

their own good deeds, as if they had been led to mention them without any previous design.

But a faithful man can rarely be found. A man is not a proper witness in his own cause, for he is ready to form, from the influence of self love, too good an opinion of himself. If the love of our wives or children covers their faults, and magnifies their virtues, self love must have a still greater influence in bribing our judgments, so that an honest man's testimony of his own goodness can scarcely be taken. But among boasters, you will scarcely find a man so honest as not to exceed, in his own praise, the bounds of what he himself knows to be fact.

The Scripture declares, that a truly good man it rarely to be found, and yet if men's own word could be taken, there is scarcely a bad man to be found. We have therefore great need to be cautious in forming our judgment of ourselves, lest we deceive our own souls, and pass a sentence upon ourselves, opposite to that which our great judge will pass upon us at the last day.

Nor must we be rash in trusting men, and choosing friends. He is one among a thousand, who possesses such kindness and integrity, as will entitle him to the character of a faithful friend.

We learn, in the last place, from this proverb, to let strangers praise us, rather than our own lips, except when evident necessity obliges us; for self praise will make an hundred to conceive a bad opinion, sooner than one wise man to entertain a good opinion of us.

Ver. 7. The just man lives by the faith of the Son of God, for, like his father Abraham, he believes in the Redeemer, and his faith is counted to him for righteousness; but although he is pronounced by God a righteous person, for the sake of a righteousness not wrought by himself, yet he is not the less earnest in endeavouring to be holy in all manner of conversation, for he knows that those men deceive themselves who turn the grace of God into lasciviousness, and that he who doth righteousness is righteous, even as God is righteous.

The just man is a man of integrity, for he follows after perfection, although he knows that he cannot reach it and live. He does not think that a good and kind behaviour towards men, will compensate for the neglect of his duty to God, any more than a social behaviour will atone for disloyalty to his prince, and therefore he makes it his daily practice to walk in all good conscience before God, and to testify the utmost gratitude to him that loved us and died for us. At the same time, he feels the force of that saying of Scripture, which is sufficient to strike an alarm into the most hardened consciences of those that neglect morality whilst they profess religion, "If a man say I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar*. The integrity of the just man, is not like the pretended integrity of the moralist, for it includes piety, justice, sobriety, and a conscientious regard, to every precept of God, without excluding those that appear to vain men to be of small importance, or those that most directly oppose the prevailing disposition of the mind.

The just man walketh in his integrity, for his righteousness is not like the morning cloud, but like the light of the sun, which shineth more and more unto the perfect day. God tries him, the devil and the world, and the flesh, solicit him to sin, but he will not turn aside into the ways of iniquity, or if he should, he will not continue to walk in them, but returns with bitter regret to that good and straight way, which leadeth unto life, and continues in that path till the end of his life, for his heart is set upon it, and upon that heavenly city to which it leads. As for such as turn aside unto their crooked ways, it is plain from Scripture that they never really knew the way of life*.

Blessed is the man that fears the Lord. He is blessed in the day of prosperity, and in the day of adversity; he is blessed in life and death; he is blessed after death, for he rests in his bed, and enters into peace. His soul is blessed in heaven, and he leaves blessings to his children upon earth. If the children of Jehu, who never took heed to walk in the law of the Lord, were blessed with outward prosperity, to the fourth generation, how much more may the truly godly expect a blessing to their seed? It is said of the wicked man, that God layeth up iniquity for his children, he rewardeth him, and he shall know it; and will the God who delights in mercy, exercise less kindness to his own people, than severity to the wicked?. Far from it†. Whilst the rich man rejoices that he has much treasure laid up in his house, to be enjoyed by his family after him, the godly man has much more reason to believe that God has a treasure of blessings laid up for his children.

Are you children of the godly? know ye the God of your fathers, and plead this promise at his throne of mercy‡.

Ver. 8. Kings have majesty in their countenances, and when they preserve their dignity of character, their eyes are terrible to the breakers of the law. This awe of royalty is impressed by God upon the minds of men, for the peace and benefit of human society, and kings are obliged to use that authority with which the Most High has dignified them as his ministers, for the encouragement of virtue and the suppression of vice. Kings in our days don't sit on the throne of judgment in their own persons, but by delegates, but both they and those who are employed by them as judges, are bound to observe this rule. Kings are accountable for the choice they make of persons to be employed under them for the administration of justice, and those that serve them must account also to the King of all the earth.

How tremendous is that Eternal King, whose eyes are like a flame of fire, and how shall sinners be able to stand before him, at whose presence the heaven and the earth flee away, and no place is found for them! How can men presume that the Judge of all the earth will suffer sin to go unpunished, when he will not permit his vicegerents on earth, to leave open wickedness to go unpunished. But earthly kings can punish only the outward enormities of men's lives. The universal Judge brings every work into judgment, with every secret thing. Earthly kings reach only the body, but the King of heaven can destroy both soul and body in hell fire.

Ver. 9. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, for we were conceived and shapen in iniquity, and unless our hearts are made clean, we must remain for ever abominable in the sight of the most holy God. The depravity of the human race is not here expressly asserted, but it is taken for granted, as an incontestable truth.

The call of God to sinners is, Wash ye, make you clean; Cleanse your hands, ye sinners, purify your hearts, ye double minded. But neither our righteousness nor our strength lies in ourselves. Except Christ wash us, we have no part in him, and remain under the reigning power of sin. But even those that are washed by his blood and spirit, cannot say that they have made their hearts so clean, that they are entirely pure from their sin. They are daily employed in cleansing themselves from all pollutions, and yet the leprosy of sin will cleave to their earthly tabernacles, till they are pulled down by death.

If sin dwells in the best of us, our dependence must be on the grace of the Redeemer, by whose blood our sins are expiated, and by whose powerful agency we crucify the flesh with its affections and lusts. Purity of heart ought to be our constant study, for so far as our hearts are cleansed, we are pure from our sin; and under all the imperfections of our holiness, we have reason to join thanksgiving with our sorrows, for although no man on earth can lay claim to perfect purity, yet every believer in Jesus has abundant encouragement to hope that he shall be presented in due time, without spot or blemish, before the throne of God.

Ver. 10. Once hath God spoken, yea twice have we heard this, that unjust weights are detested by God*; and it is plain that unfair measures come under the same condemnation. But here they are expressly mentioned, so that no man can pretend to observe the letter of the law, whilst he transgresses the spirit of it. If a man keeps one measure or weight for selling, and another for buying, or if he keeps one for selling to people that have too much skill to be cheated, and another for selling to the ignorant and unwary, he exposes himself to the hot anger and severe vengeance of God, who hates all unrighteousness, especially that which lies in perverting the means of justice*.

If the perversion of the instruments of just trade is detestable to God, how much does he abhor the perversion of law and justice, and every kind of partiality in those whom he entrusts with the administration of government, in church or state. Injustice in merchants is very bad, but unrighteousness in those that bear the sword for God, or rule in the name of Christ, is a great deal more dishonourable to God, and offensive to the eyes of his glory.

Ver. 11. Except ye be converted, says our Lord, and become as little children, ye cannot enter into the kingdom of God. Sincerity is one of those qualities wherein we ought to resemble children, for they cannot disguise their inclinations, but a little attention to their childish talk and behaviour will enable a person to discover their present dispositions, and to form a probable conjecture concerning their future behaviour.

One thing appears in the behaviour of children with too much evidence, that they are the descendants of Adam. The selfishness, vanity, and revengeful spirit, that appears in all of them, are lineaments of the image of the first transgressor. But there is a very great difference among them in their temper, which may be justly considered as an indication of a greater difference in the manner of their conduct, when they arrive at manly years. Some are kind and obliging, and easily managed, others are intractable, sullen, and spiteful; and it is the duty of parents to improve and cherish the good dispositions which they discover, and to check every appearance of vice, before it is matured by time into settled habits. Parents generally consider the genius and inclinations of their children, to direct them in the choice of a profession, but they ought to be no less careful to consider their turn of mind in their earliest years, to direct themselves in their religious education. Herein several parents discover their partial fondness for their children, regarding with applause every appearance of goodness as a happy presage, but considering every instance of perverse behaviour as an instance of childish ignorance, which time will reform of course; but Solomon tells us, that their bad, as well as their good behaviour, when they shall become men, may be conjectured from their childish doings.

Children of a pleasant disposition may disappoint the expectations that have been formed of them, but in that case parents may generally thank themselves for neglecting to avail themselves of their good dispositions, to graft on them religious instructions, or for permitting them to fall into the dangerous society of those that not only live in sin, but, like Jeroboam, make Israel to sin.

When bad dispositions appear in children, it is necessary for parents to use betimes those means which God has appointed for reclaiming them. The rod and reproof give wisdom; and when these, and the like means, are neglected, or not accompanied with fervent prayer, parents have great reason to reflect on themselves with shame, if their children prove thorns in their eyes, when their vices have attained the vigour of riper years, and confirmed custom.

There is an old proverb that says, a young saint makes an old devil, but Solomon was not the author of it.

Ver. 12. And did he not make every other part of our bodies, as well as the eye and the ear? No doubt, but we ought not to rest in general truths, when we contemplate the wonderful works of God. It is highly proper for us, to survey with attention the particulars of what the Lord hath done for us, and we shall find abundant materials for gratitude and praise, in every member of our body, in every faculty of our soul, and in every event of our life.

It is said that the famous physician Galen learned the absurdity of atheism from the consideration of the human eye. The structure of it clearly displays the amazing wisdom of God, and his goodness shines with no less brightness in the pleasures and advantages derived from the ministry of this admirable organ. The ear is that sense by which we enjoy the pleasures of society and friendship, by which we learn the most interesting and entertaining truths, and by which we receive the instructions of life.

It is by the kind agency of our Maker that our eyes see, and our ears hear, for in him we live and move. When he pleases to withhold his influence, we see, and do not perceive, like Hagar at Beer-lahai-roi. We hear a voice, and know not what it says, like the companions of Saul in his journey to Damascus.

To use these instruments of sense as inlets to temptation and sin, is as unnatural as for infants to rend that breast which gives them suck. How shocking is it to deserve the reproof that the prophet gave to Belshazzar! "The God in whose hand thy breath is, and all

thy ways, hast thou not glorified." We are God's creatures. Our senses are his; our souls are his; all our enjoyments are from his bounty, and our activity depends upon his all-governing providence. Whether, therefore, we see, or hear, or think on those objects which we are acquainted with, by means of our bodily senses, or the exercise of our rational powers, let us mind above every thing, the glory of God.

Ver. 13. Sleep, must be taken, but not loved. Sleep, as well as food, is necessary for refreshing our frail bodies, but neither food nor sleep must be used for their own sakes, nor must we be intemperate in either of them. Sleep taken in a moderate degree, is the nurse of nature, it recruits our animal powers, and prepares us for the labours of life; but excess of sleep enervates the body, and stupifies our souls, and is loved only by sluggards. We have received time and talents from God, to be used according to his direction, and to waste the one, and bury the other, is a very great sin; and yet by immoderate sleep, we do both in some degree, for all the time that we sleep beyond what is needful for us, our talents are unemployed, and the time of our life is running on in vain. Long life is universally desired, and death set at as great a distance as possible, but the lover of sleep voluntarily gives up a considerable part of his life, and during all the time that he wastes in needless sleep, he might as well be in the state of death, for any thing he does, or enjoys. I remember Dr. Doddridge gives this reason for his being able to write so many books, notwithstanding all the weighty employments that were constantly lying on him, that he found a great difference between rising at five, and rising at eight in the morning, the one making several years more in the course of a life than the other.

Poverty and hunger, in the course of things, according to the righteous appointment of providence, are the ordinary consequences of too much sleep; plenty and satisfaction, the consequences of early rising. Open thine eyes, rise and go to work, for he that gets out of bed, and sits idle at the fire-side, is still sleeping, even when he is awake. But he that rises to his employment, shall have bread for himself and his family. It is not said, he shall have every thing that an unbridled appetite might crave, but he shall have, by the blessing of God, bread to eat, and raiment to put on. These things would have satisfied Jacob, although he was brought up in a very rich family, and these things will generally satisfy a man diligent in his business, for his work makes both sleep and food pleasant to him.

If persons that love their work, should prove unsuccessful in business, or be disabled from working, they will meet with pity and relief, whilst starving sluggards, are hated and despised.

Ver. 14. Solomon was a teacher to men of all ranks, for he was acquainted with the life and manners of men in every profession, and writes instructive proverbs for merchants as well as kings. There is one piece of fraud censured in this verse, which is very common with the lower sort of dealers, and is scarcely reckoned a piece of unrighteousness. It is the art of buyers to get a good bargain, by depreciating the commodity which they mean to purchase. The inspired moralist, that he might come home to men's bosoms, gives us their very words, "it is naught, it is naught." What is the ill of saying this? Why, if it be not true, it must certainly be a lie, and no lie is of the truth, nor any lying habit consistent with the character of an honest man. Men may, if they please, form to themselves rules of morality from the general practice of the world, but these are not the rules by which they must be judged at the last day. If we were heathens, we could not be excused in using little tricks that come not within the compass of the criminal law, but we are Christians, and our bibles testify against them, and threaten punishment to those that go beyond and defraud their brother. Indeed, very little is to be made by such poor artifices but guilt, for they are so common that almost every man sees through them.

The people that use these pitiful tricks in making a bargain, don't think there is much evil in them, for they boast of their art and good fortune. But men's shutting their eyes will not alter the nature of things. Ephraim became a merchant, the balances of deceit were in his hand, he loved to oppress, and yet he would not have it said, that any iniquity was to be found in him that were sin; there was either no sin in his conduct, or if there was any, it was very venial*. Men bless and applaud themselves in their dexterity to impose upon their neighbours, but what says the spirit of God about them? "Woe to them that call evil good, and good evil." Whilst they boast of the goodness of the commodities which they formerly called naught, they denounce this woe against themselves.

The spirit of this proverb includes in it, a condemnation of the like methods that sellers use to get bad commodities disposed of. When a man commends his wares above their value, or gives a false account of the price which they cost him, or of the price that he was offered for them, or when he uses deceitful means to conceal their bad properties, he is dealing unrighteously, and seeking the gain of extortion, by which he is not so likely to fill his purse as to wound his character, and bring the curse of God upon his substance.

Ver. 15. It is a great deal easier to spread riches than wisdom through a nation. In the days of the wisest of kings, silver was plenteous as the stones, but wisdom was still a rare commodity*. Yet Solomon never ceased to inculcate the superior value of wisdom, but such is the depravity of man's understanding, that the gifts of fortune are generally preferred to those of the mind, and you will find many that learn the art of being rich, for one that acquires the lips of knowledge.

The wisest and richest of kings, inspired by the Author of wisdom and riches, frequently reminds us, that the lips directed by true knowledge, are a more precious jewel than any that can be found in the mines of the east; and a deep impression of this truth would be of very great advantage to our souls. When a man values gold and rubies above wisdom, he lies exposed to a thousand temptations of a very dangerous kind, for he is like a blind man that knows not whither he goes, and will leap into a pit, if he imagines that money is at the bottom of it, because he sees not how deep it is, and how impossible it will be to get out. But he that prefers the lips of knowledge to riches, has his eyes in his head, and steadily observes the ways of religion and happiness.

Did we really believe this truth we would not grudge time, and expense, and labour, in obtaining wisdom for our own benefit and the use of others, and would account a wise and faithful friend, one of the most precious treasures. The word of God would be valued as

it deserves, and the world would lose its tempting influence.

Ver. 16. We lately heard that the love of sleep will soon reduce a man to poverty and hunger. It is not, however, the speediest method of becoming poor, for nothing will so soon ruin a man's estate and credit, as rash suretyship. If you see a man that engages in cautionry for one that is a stranger to him, and especially for a strange woman, trust him not if he should swear, and offer you the surest bonds for payment; he will in a very short time become a bankrupt, and therefore lend him nothing, and if you sell him any thing without ready money, be sure to have a sufficient pledge. You may even take his garment without any breach of charity, for the law about restoring the garment taken by way of pledge, was made for the benefit of the poor and unfortunate, and not for those that are running to ruin by their own wilful folly. If a man, by an excess of generosity, hurts himself by engaging in suretyship for his friends, he plays the fool, and yet he may be pitied; but how can that man expect pity, who squanders away his substance for the sake of people with whom he has no connexion, or of bad women, with whom it is infamous to have any dealings?

Ver. 17. There is some kind of pleasure in sin, by which the devil draws men into his snares, and keeps them entangled. There are indeed some sins in which we cannot discover any pleasure, but those who practise them appear to love the devil's service so well, that they will do his work without any wages; such are profane swearers, and the agents for infidelity; but sinners in general must have some present enjoyment from their sins, to compensate for the guilt and danger of them.

A man would not do a piece of injustice without the prospect of some gain and satisfaction from it, and when he has gained what he expected, he feels some pleasure from it, and applauds himself for his wit and success; for his present advantage drowns for a time the thoughts of what shall come to pass hereafter.

But men should always remember, that the time now present, was some years ago far distant, and yet is now come, and our feelings of pain and anguish are as lively as ever, and the time to come will one day be present, and bring its sensations of happiness and misery along with it. He is rather a brute than a rational creature, who would rather be happy for a day, and miserable for the rest of his life, than deny himself the present pleasures which are sure to bring lasting misery in their train. Such are the gains of dishonesty; they are like pleasant bread in the mouth of the covetous man, but his teeth are afterwards tormented with gravel, and his belly is racked with pains more grievous than those of the fiercest diseases that ever preyed on the human constitution. Providence usually crosses and disappoints unrighteous men, and makes them to vomit up the riches which they have swallowed down, and they produce a worm in the conscience, that gnaws the soul with teeth more poisonous than those of the viper.

Zophar uses every terrible image to illustrate the miseries of the unjust man, and yet all are insufficient to describe the terrors of that vengeance, which the wrath of God inflicts on those who have the presumption to think, that any advantage can be gained by sinning against God, and wronging their fellow creatures.

Ver. 18. Wisdom lies, in the first place, in forming right purposes, and secondly, in devising, and executing proper plans for bringing these good purposes to pass. However good our designs are, yet rashness and inconsideration will be sure to render them abortive; and, besides our own wisdom, it is necessary for us, in all matters of importance, to take the advice of the wise and upright. If we have such a high opinion of our own wisdom, that we think we have no need of counsel from other men, we prove ourselves fools of the worst kind, for there is more hope of any other kind of fools, than of those that are wise in their own conceit. Do we restrain wisdom to ourselves? are we wiser than Solomon, who had too much sense to think himself above the need of a privy council of the wisest men in the nation*?

Above all things, war is to be made with good advice, for the want of which, many nations have been brought to desolation. It is one of the greatest judgments to a land, when the wise counsellors of it are removed, or infatuated, or when the sovereigns of it are so unwise as not to make use of their counsels. Rehoboam, foolish as he was, had the sense to make use of his father's instruction in this point, although he had neglected it a little before, in another affair of no less consequence. By his neglect of it, he lost ten tribes, but his observing it afterwards, was the mean of preserving his authority in the other two.

We have need of good advice in our spiritual warfare, for our enemies are incomparably superior to us in strength and skill. We may receive great benefit from the counsels of some of our fellow soldiers, but the word and Spirit of God are infinitely the best counsellors in this, and in every other point. They only shall overcome, who are strong in the Lord, and use those divine weapons that God has prepared for our defence, and cry for God's help against the enemy. These are the counsels given us by the Spirit of God, and as our success entirely depends upon his help, we must comply with his instructions.

Ver. 19. Flatterers are generally tale-bearers. They sooth and caress a man to fish his secrets out of him, and they tell the secrets which they have got by these base means, to the next companion they meet, and perhaps make very considerable additions to them, for they take the liberty to add conjectures of their own to what they have heard. By spreading their stories, they sow the seeds of contention among neighbours, and their words are as wounds which go down into the innermost parts of the belly.

Beware, then, of those flatterers, that cajole you with good words, and fair speeches. Self love makes us flatterers of ourselves, and disposes us to be well pleased with those that comply with all our humours, assent to all our opinions, and approve of all our actions. But those who speak us fair are not our friends, but for the most part the most dangerous enemies we have. If we give them our company, we are very likely to hear stories about ourselves that will vex us; if we tell them any of our secrets, we may be sure of having them divulged, and represented to our disadvantage. When they tell us stories about other people, we may judge how they will behave to us, for when they were in the company of these persons, they flattered them as much as they now flatter us, and by their pretences of friendship, they made a shift to pick up these tales with which we are now entertained.

It is an excess of self love, that makes the company of a flatterer tolerable. It is the want of love to our neighbours that makes us

bear with tale bearers, but if we will not discountenance them for the sake of our neighbours, let us do it for our own, for they will mete out the same measure to us, that they have already meted out to other men*.

Ver. 20. For a man not to honour his father and his mother, is a violation of one of the ten commandments in the letter of it. A curse was pronounced from mount Ebal upon him that setteth light by his father or his mother: The miserable condition of the Africans, and the negroes in America, is a monument to this day of God's judgments upon a man, who lived 4000 years ago, for discovering his father's shame. But is it possible that any man can rise to such a pitch of impiety, as to curse his father or his mother? It seems it is. But wo to them who are chargeable with it. Had they lived under the Mosaic law, they must have died without mercy†. But if they live in our times, their sin is not the less, and although they should escape punishment from men, they shall not escape the vengeance of the Father and King of the universe.

When those crimes that deserve death are unpunished by men, the perpetrators of them are not always so safe as they expect; God often permits them to fall into other crimes, that bring them to the gallows, as we may learn from the confessions and last speeches of many malefactors who have lamented their disobedience to their parents, as the first step to their ruin, or acknowledged other crimes worthy of death, besides these for which they suffer. But if those who treat the instruments of their being with insult and outrage, should escape every visible testimony of vengeance in this life, their lamp shall be extinguished in the blackness of darkness. The punishment prepared for all impenitent sinners, is described in Scripture by this gloomy image; but surely there are regions of thicker darkness than the rest in hell itself, for those who are guilty of crimes that would shock the ordinary run of sinners.

Ver. 21. We have been often told, that no profit can be made by the wages of unrighteousness; but experience seems to contradict this truth, for we have seen or heard of several that have amassed great treasures by fraud and extortion.

This does not, however, militate against any thing which the inspired moralist has said, for he never meant to deny that treasures may be obtained by wickedness. They that will be rich may get riches by cheating and lying, by fraud and oppression, by grinding the faces of the poor, and by toiling their poor servants till they groan under their hard bondage. These and a thousand other ways of getting, and saving unjustly, may put money in their pockets, but the fact is that it is of no use to them, when they have got it.

Treasures of wickedness profit nothing, for a very plain reason, because they are not attended with the blessing of God, and it is only this blessing that preserves riches and makes them a comfort to men. It is far better to have nothing, than to have the riches of kingdoms without the blessing of God, for those that want it, will find every thing they have a curse.

But you will say, how do they succeed in getting an estate without the blessing of God? wait a little, and it will be seen that there is no blessing in what they have got. If they have been heaping up mountains of gold, they will be found only mountains of snow, which the curse of God will soon melt. He shall not be rich, neither shall his substance continue, neither shall he prolong the perfection thereof upon the earth; what he gets unjustly shall not only be blasted, but it shall blast every thing that he had got by fair means. Ahab lost not only the garden of Naboth, but his life, and kingdom, and family, by his wickedness.

Beware of anxiety about wealth, for covetousness disappoints itself. It leads men to poverty, by pushing them on to unfair methods of gaining money. Stronger arguments might be advanced, and will be found in this book, against this sin, but this argument will have a deeper impression upon the minds of some persons, than any other. It is addressed to the only ear by which the covetous man can hear, for he is deaf to every thing but what concerns the mammon of unrighteousness. If he believes any thing that God says, he must see that he is taking a very foolish course, when he endeavours to enrich himself by those very means that are declared in Scripture to be the surest methods of bringing poverty and ruin.

Ver. 22. If private revenge were allowed, it would soon fill the land with confusion and blood; for whilst men's passions are kindled by the smart of a fresh injury, they cloud the judgment, and hurry on those who are under their power, to the most dangerous irregularities. By indulging them, we would be driven on to make very disproportionable returns for the wrongs done to us; we might wreck our vengeance on the blameless, as David would have done, if Abigail had not disarmed his fury; we might bring upon ourselves the guilt of the bloodiest crimes, and make ourselves miserable through all the remainder of our days. Most wisely, therefore, and graciously we are forbidden to avenge ourselves, or so much as to say that we will do it. It is a bad thing to have any thought of revenge, but if we say, or swear, that we will take satisfaction at our own hand from him that has offended us, we are entangled in a dangerous snare by the devil, who will endeavour to persuade us that our honour is doubly engaged by the provocation received, and by our word to take revenge.

To say that we will recompense evil, is the same thing with saying, that we will step into the throne of God, and wrest his thunderbolts out of his hand, to hurl them against all that we judge to be our enemies; for vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, and I will repay it.

But our corrupt hearts are dexterous in mustering up objections against our duty, and the inspired writers are equally dexterous in answering them. If I suffer the wrongs done to my credit and estate to pass unrevenged, says one, I expose myself to every shaft of malice, and may expect still greater injuries than those I have already received. There is no fear of that, says Solomon, wait on the Lord, and he shall save thee. Art thou defrauded in thy interests? wait on the Lord who gives and takes away at his pleasure, and he will make up, if he sees it good for thee, all thy loss. Amaziah, king of Judah, was none of the best of men, and yet at the persuasion of a prophet of the Lord, he could part with an army that cost him an hundred talents, because the Lord could easily give him much more than that. Art thou wronged in thy credit? Trust in the Lord, and he shall bring forth thy righteousness to the light, as you find he did in the cases of Job, and David, and Mephibosheth. Whatever injury you have felt, or fear, commit thyself to God with

a calm and forgiving spirit, and he will either prevent your fears, or make a rich amends for the malice of your enemies; only you must give him his own time for doing it, for he that believeth does not make haste, but waits God's leisure, as it well becomes us to do when it is God whom we trust.

We must not wait on the Lord for destruction to our enemies. David was blessed with divine inspiration, and had directions for praying against some of his spiteful enemies, but herein we are not to consider him as a pattern for us. We have the noble example of our Lord Jesus Christ, who rendered not railing for railing, but prayed for his persecutors, leaving us an example that we should follow his steps. Wait on the Lord, and whatever way he deals with thine enemies, he shall save thee, and that is all thou canst reasonably desire.

Will you still insist that it is better to secure yourself against new injuries, by revenging the old? The question is clearly this: Is your safety and protection best lodged in God's hand or your own? By indulging your revengeful spirit, you do yourself a greater hurt than your greatest enemy can do you, for you gratify his ill-nature, when you suffer it to make a deep impression on your spirit, without which it could do you little or no hurt; but by committing your cause to God, you turn his ill will to your great advantage, making it an occasion for the exercise of the noblest graces, which are attended with the sweetest fruits, and with the rich blessing of God.

Ver. 23. Injustice is a poisonous weed, that springs up very plenteously in the heart of men, and it needs great pains to pluck it up, and the inspired writer does not grudge his pains for this purpose. When he might have been dazzling us with new discoveries of surprising truths in every sentence, he repeats the same warnings over and over, to reclaim men from every instance of dishonesty. How inexcusable will the unjust trader be, if he continues unreformed, after all that the Spirit of God has inculcated so frequently for his conviction, and amendment*.

Ver. 24. The steps of all men are ordered by the Lord. Bad men are under the dominion of his providence, as well as good men who rejoice in his sovereignty, and he has a righteous hand in the most unrighteous actions of men. They sit deliberating and contriving, but they are under the eye of God, who laughs at their impious imaginations, and without suspending the freedom of their wills, determines them to concur in the execution of his holy and immutable purposes. They know not, when they are consulting, how they will determine; and when they have determined, whether they shall be steady in their purpose; and when they are fixed in their minds, whether they shall be able to perform what they intend; and if they perform it, whether it shall answer their intention, or some purpose entirely opposite to what they designed. But known unto God are all the thoughts that come or shall come into the minds of men, and how far their measures shall prosper, and what shall be the event and consequences of them. All the affairs of particular persons, and all the weighty businesses of states and kingdoms are in his hand like the potter's clay, to be moulded into any shape he pleases. And he will manage every thing wisely for his own glory, justly towards men, and graciously towards his own people.

Go to now, ye that say we will do this or the other thing, without any impression of God's sovereignty, or dependence on his providence. It is presumption in you to dream that your motions are under your own sovereign direction. Are you sure that you will be in the same mind an hour hence, that you are in at present? Alexander the Great went to Jerusalem with an intention to wreak the fury of his revenge upon the people of God, and when he arrived, he shewed them greater favour than he ever did to another conquered nation. But if your resolutions should continue the same, do you live and move in yourselves, that you can be sure of the continuance of your life, and ability for doing what you propose? The kings and princes of the world sought to destroy our holy religion in its infancy, but the emperors who ruled the world were driven from their thrones, or chased out of the world, and of the kingdom of our Redeemer there shall be no end; for he that sits in heaven, saw from his dwelling place all their foolish contrivances, and baffled all their efforts, and said, "Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion." If you should be able to accomplish your designs, are you sure that they will have the effects you propose. The rulers of the Jews crucified Christ to gratify their spite, and to secure their place and nation from the Romans, but Christ conquered every enemy by his cross, and the Almighty executed the most tremendous vengeance by the hands of the Romans on the murderers of his beloved Son.

A conviction of this truth would make us to acknowledge the Lord in all our ways, and to endeavour to walk before him unto all pleasing. It would raise us above those strong temptations which have all their force from the fear of men's displeasure, or the hope of their favour. It would make the believer in Christ cheerful under every cross, whilst he could say, my heavenly Father rules all, and mine enemies can do nothing without his providence. It would raise us above all earthly confidences, being persuaded that the kindest and most powerful friends can do nothing for us, but as God pleases to incline and enable them. This truth has also a mighty influence to destroy our confidence in our own strength and wisdom. The children of Israel made great promises to God at mount Sinai, but they soon broke them, for the Lord had not given them eyes to see, nor ears to hear, nor hearts to understand*. Peter was very sincere in promising to cleave to Christ, although all men should forsake him, but by his self-confidence, provoked God to withhold the succours of his grace, and was left to behave, not like a rock, but like the slender twig which bends before the gentlest blast.

Ver. 25. Stealing and robbery are crimes so detestable and pernicious to men, that they are every where severely punished. But God is greater than men, and to rob God is a greater and more dangerous crime than those by which our fellow men are wronged in their substance. But will a man rob God? Can any man be so bold as to try it, or so mighty as to accomplish it? Malachi complains that this crime was very common in his time, and there are too many instances of it, even in these latter days. He that gives to the poor lends unto the Lord, and that which is appropriated to the service of the Gospel and the support of the ministry, be longs unto God, and should be given to his servants as the receivers of his revenues, and therefore, when the poor are cheated of their dues, or those that labour in the gospel are deprived of their hire, or any thing alienated that was justly devoted to the service of God, a

robbery is attempted, and, in some sense, executed, upon God himself, who cannot be pleased with so base and ungrateful conduct towards him, from whom we receive every thing that we possess.

The man who applies to his own use, and devours that which is holy, is greatly mistaken if he thinks himself a gainer. He is just in the same degree a gainer by his dishonest conduct, as the silly bird, when it snatches at the bait which the fowler has placed for it to draw it into his snare. The people of Judah in Haggai's time, were crossed and disappointed in all the labours of their hands, because they bestowed their money upon building houses to themselves, rather than in building the temple of the Lord; and in Malachi's time, the whole nation was cursed with a curse for robbing God in tithes and in offerings.

It is no less a snare for a man, after vows, to make inquiry, in order to evade the obligation of his solemn engagements. Some men are much more forward in making, than in paying vows. Their religion lies in transient flows of affection, not in solid piety. When their affections are roused by some remarkable providence, or allured by some pleasant, or roused by some alarming sermon, they are ready with their promises to the Most High, like Israel in the wilderness, but when their affections return to their usual temper, they endeavour to find out some shift, to free their consciences from their obligations, which they voluntarily took upon themselves. Their conduct draws them into the snares of the devil, who will suggest an hundred pretences to excuse the breach of them. We must therefore be leisurely and considerate in making vows, and speedy in performing them.

If we are Christians, we have engaged ourselves to be the Lord's. Justice and truth and gratitude require us to pay our vows, and every transgression against Christ, derives the great aggravation of treachery from our sacred promises. If our promises to men must be kept inviolate, how much more our promises to God. If it is sinful to make inquiry after vows, who can express the guilt that arises out of downright violations of them!

Ver. 26. Such a king was David* and his son Solomon, and above all others the king that sits upon the throne of David for ever, who breaks in pieces the wicked like a potter's vessel.

The wicked in the nation are like the chaff among the wheat, and in those ancient times, the husbandman used to bring the wheel over the grain to separate from it the chaff. In like manner, the king who does not loll in his palace to indulge his pride and leisure, but sits upon the throne of judgment, will treat the wicked of the nation, breaking and dispersing them, that they may not prove a nuisance to society, an infectious plague to the country, and provocations of the wrath of God, against the whole nation.

Kings have but a limited power for this purpose, and must confine their punishments within the bounds of law. But the king of Zion, will thoroughly purge his floor by the fan in his hand, and will scatter all the impenitent sinners in his dominions, like the chaff before the wind†.

Ver. 27. The Father of our spirits, has bestowed on us a glorious distinction from the fowls of the air, and the beasts of the field. Our bodies were framed by his powerful agency, but our spirits were created by him within us‡. In our animal bodies we have some resemblance of the brutes, but our intellectual faculty raises us to some degrees of likeness to the angels of God, for they are candles lighted within us, by him that breathed into man's nostrils the breath of life, and made him a living soul.

By the light of reason, especially when it is brightened by divine revelation, we are enabled to survey many of the wonderful works of God, and to discern the evidences of his eternal power and Godhead. By this candle we can take a view of the wonderful structure of our own bodies, which are fearfully and wonderfully made. But the most necessary kind of knowledge which it gives us, next to the knowledge of God, is that of our own spirits. Deep as the hearts of men are, yet this candle of the Lord searches all the inward parts of the belly.

A king that was perfectly acquainted with the constitution, laws, and history of every country but his own, would be only an intelligent fool; and the man is equally void of true judgment, who is thoroughly versed in every art and science, in all histories, and every branch of commerce and law, and yet is unacquainted with his own heart, where his main business lies. Heathens themselves were so deeply impressed with the importance of self knowledge, that it was a general opinion among some wise nations that the celebrated maxim "Know thyself" came down from heaven.

Reason rightly employed, will make us acquainted with the excellent nature and uses of our faculties, with our personal dispositions and talents, with our defects and constitutional faults, with our prejudices, and the temptations by which we are most ready to be overcome, with our state and frame in relation to God. The mention of these different branches of self knowledge, is enough to show the value and necessity of it. We are commanded to keep our own hearts with all diligence, and how can we keep them without some knowledge of their most important concerns?

But we do not know ourselves unto perfection; and therefore we ought to search deeper and deeper into our own hearts, to keep an eye upon the movements of our own minds, and the frame of our hearts under prosperous and adverse providences, and under injuries from men, or whilst we are employed in the performance of our duty to God, that we may improve in self-acquaintance. Above all, we ought to compare our hearts with the word of God, and to pray earnestly that God may discover us to ourselves, and preserve us from those self flatteries by which multitudes are deceived into eternal ruin. It is God alone that searches and knows infallibly the heart of man, and without the help of his Spirit, the candle within us will mislead us like wild fire, till we fell into the ditch of perdition.

Ver. 28. A king must scatter and crush the wicked, but he will prove a tyrant unless he temper his severity with clemency and goodness. Severity to criminals is exercised by a wise king, from a principle of mercy to the community at large, and he will spare where he can spare without betraying his trust. Such behaviour secures the affections of his subjects; and is attended with the blessing of providence, by which thrones are established. But unmerciful severity has often overturned the mighty from their seat.

The Emperor Aurelian was called an excellent physician to the state, except in taking too much blood. His rigour drew upon him the hatred and fear of some of his own servants, who deprived him of his life after he had performed many signal services to the empire. Truth must be joined with mercy in the administration of a good prince. Dissimulation may serve a single turn, but faithfulness and uprightness, in conjunction with clemency, are the sure and lasting pillars of the throne. If truth were banished from all the world beside, said Lewis IX. of France, it should be found in the breasts of kings.

How glorious is the Prince of the kings of the earth! Mercy and truth go before his face, his throne is a throne of grace, and faithfulness is the girdle of his reins.

Ver. 29. Equality of age and dispositions naturally produces affection and friendship, but difference of age and talents tends too much to produce mutual alienation. To remedy this, the wise man puts the old and the young in mind that each of them have their different endowments, which should endear them to one another.

Old men should not despise the young for their want of experience and gravity, for God has honoured them with vigour of body, which qualifies them for active service to God and their generation. How could old men defend their lives and properties, or how could they subsist, if they were not assisted by the strength of the young?

Far less should the young despise the old for their infirmities, or for that fretfulness of temper which old age too often produces. For God hath favoured them with length of days, and crowned them with grey hairs, the badge of their experience, and, it is to be hoped, of their wisdom. If the hoary head is the beauty of old men, it should draw respect from the young, who are commanded by God to rise up before the hoary head, and to honour the face of the old man.

It was a saying of Lewis XI. of France, when he was old, that if he had possessed in his youth that wisdom he had now acquired, or if he were still in possession of the vigour of youth, he could conquer all the world. It was better, it seems, for mankind that he did not possess both these qualities at once. God is wise and good in distributing his gifts amongst men of all ranks and ages, that none, by having every good quality, might become an idol to himself and others, and none, by wanting every thing valuable, might become an object of contempt.

Let young men beware of debasing their glory, by abusing their strength to the service of sin. Let old men endeavour to make their grey hairs venerable by wisdom and piety, by cheerfulness, and the command of their temper. Finally, let old men remember that they were once young, and young men remember that they would be glad to be one day old.

Ver. 30. We are naturally very averse to chastisement and pain, and Solomon often represents a due regard to chastisement as a sign of wisdom, and here he tells us the great advantage of it to overcome our aversion. Correction and affliction for the present, seem to be not joyous, but grievous; but there is a far worse evil from which they are a means of reclaiming us. Sin is infinitely worse than affliction, and affliction is really turned into a blessing to those that rightly improve it, for those wounds that leave a blue mark behind them cleanse away evil, and stripes are instrumental, not only in reforming the life but in cleansing the heart.

Parents ought not, therefore, to spare the rod through foolish pity; at the same time they ought to join instruction and prayer with it, for still it must be remembered that the blessing of God alone can make it useful for cleansing the inward parts of the belly. Children ought to welcome the rod of chastisement, as a necessary means for their spiritual advantage.

The chastisements inflicted by magistrates upon malefactors that deserve not death, may have the same happy effect, and therefore mercy ought to mingle itself with the punishments inflicted upon them. According to the law, when a man deserved stripes he was not to receive more than forty, and the reason given was, "lest thy brother should seem vile unto thee." He was to be considered as a brother that might be reclaimed, and was not to be treated contemptuously, lest, by despair of recovering his character, he should be hardened in sin. The like tenderness is to be used in the administration of church discipline, that offending brethren may be gained.

Corrections from God are gracious and merciful, even when they are most severe, for his design in them is to make us partakers of his holiness, and to purge away sin. They are a tried medicine which God has often blessed for curing that vanity and earthliness of mind, that lukewarmness in prayer, that pride and thoughtlessness about eternal things, which are so common and dangerous distempers among men. Many that once groaned and cried out bitterly because of their afflictions, are now praising God for them among the choirs of angels, and many have seen great cause to be thankful on their account, before they left the valley of tears. Thou hast dealt well with thy servant, said the much afflicted king when he reviewed the providences of God towards him*.

CHAPTER 21

Ver. 1. IT is men's ordinary way to court the favour of princes and great men, as if their happiness depended on the smiles of kings, whilst they make little scruple of forfeiting the favour of God, by bending their consciences into a compliance with the humours of those for whom they entertain such undue respect. The like compliances are too often made, to avoid the displeasure of those that have power to hurt or kill the body.

Solomon directs us not to forfeit the favour of princes, or incur their displeasure, by any needless or wanton instances of disrespect. At the same time, he instructs us in the first place, to seek the favour of God, which is infinitely more necessary for us, than the friendship of the greatest men, and to avoid every thing that may displease him, if we should offend the mightiest tyrant in the world;

for the favour of God is all in all to us, and his wrath is tremendous beyond all conception, whilst kings are entirely dependent on the King of kings, and have their hearts governed by him, in such a powerful, though invisible manner, that they must, whether they design it or not, execute his unchangeable counsels.

The currents of water may be directed into any channel that is cut out for them by the hands of men; even the mighty river Euphrates had its course changed by Cyrus, at the siege of Babylon. The waters still retained their nature and properties, and yet the power of that great prince managed their natural tendency to descend, in such a manner as to gain his purpose, and to take that great city, whereof they were reckoned the sure defence. The like influence has God upon the hearts of kings. He destroys not their natural faculties, nor takes from them the freedom of their wills; and, what is still more wonderful, he leaves them for the most part under the power of those natural corruptions which dispose them to exalt themselves above God, and to oppose his will. Yet still he makes them the instruments of his pleasure, and the ministers of his providence. Nebuchadnezzar thought himself almost a god*, and laid waste the Lord's land, and burnt his temple, and yet God calls him his servant, and used him to accomplish his work upon his people, as really as that noble king of Persia, whom he called his shepherd and anointed, and employed in doing his pleasure upon Babylon, and delivering his captives.

Those that walk before God unto all pleasing, may behold the stern countenances of tyrants without trembling, for God can easily turn their hearts to favour those whom they hated. The history of the three heroes in Babylon is a noble encouragement to all that are called to the like encounter for conscience sake. The fury of the king was raised to madness, his countenance was like a flame, and his fiery furnace burnt with a fierce rage; but all on a sudden the king commanded them out of the furnace, and he almost adored those whom, a few moments before, he could have torn like a wild beast with his own teeth.

It is certain that God has often suffered kings to wade in the blood of his people. This is a strange providence, but we can understand the consistency of it, with the truth delivered in the text; Daniel and John account for it to our satisfaction†.

If the heart of kings is in the hand of the Lord, why does he suffer them to use their power so frequently in opposition to the interests of his kingdom? This is a piece of the mystery of providence, which will be cleared up in due time, but appears dark to us at present. Meanwhile, we must believe that God is righteous and holy in all that he does, and suffers men to do; he has brought a rich revenue of praise to himself, out of the dark administrations of providence in former ages, and will in the end pour such light upon his ways, that he shall appear in all things to be wonderful in counsel, and excellent in working*.

Ver. 2. This is the same useful instruction which the wise man already gave us†, and no admonition is more necessary to be inculcated than this: that men are too often flatterers of themselves, and ought to remember that they have a judge who will not be mocked nor imposed on, but searches the spirits, to give to every man according to his ways, and the inward disposition of his spirit. The inspired writers of both testaments insist greatly on this point, and our Lord in his sermons frequently warned men against the dangerous influence of self-deceit‡.

Ver. 3. It was a very common fault among the people of the Jews, to lay too great a stress upon the performance of sacrifice, as if that could atone for their sins, and give them a title to transgress the moral law; and the wise man warns them against that piece of self-deceit, in this verse. Solomon was far from undervaluing sacrifice as an institution of God, and a means of faith. No man ever offered a greater number of beasts to God, or did so much to encourage men in the observation of the ceremonial law, unless we may except the lawgiver himself; and perhaps the glory of the temple which he built, and the splendour of the temple service, might dazzle the eyes of men in his days, and occasion them to entertain too high an esteem of the ordinances that belonged to it. If any man had reason to say, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, Solomon had much more, but he learned otherwise from the Spirit who instructed him.

Sacrifices were appointed by God, they typified Christ, they were acceptable to God, as expressions of faith and obedience; but they were detestable to him when they were valued on their own account, as if they had been instituted for their own sake, or to give men opportunity of pleasing God so much, as to procure an allowance for the neglect of more important service. Sacrifices were appointed for a single nation; judgment and justice are required from every nation, and from every man under heaven. Sacrifices were required by a positive law, that depended on the pure will, not on the nature of God, and the observation of them was dispensed with on many occasions; but the love of justice is founded in the nature of God, obliges all men at all times, and can never be dispensed with. The law of sacrifices is long ago abolished, but the law of righteousness is an eternal statute. Sacrifices had no goodness in their own nature; and when men rested on them, they were abominable to God. Judgment and justice are a part of the image of God in man, and have an everlasting excellency in their nature. Sacrifices typified Christ, and were set aside in consequence of his great oblation; but is the law of justice abolished by the faith of Christ? nay, it is established, and shall continue when heaven and earth are no more.

If we would shew ourselves to be Abraham's seed, we must keep the way of the Lord, to do judgment and justice. It is a gross hypocrisy, it is a grievous dishonour to Christianity, and a ruin to the souls of men, to pretend religion, and observe the forms of divine service, and yet live in the neglect of those duties which we owe to our fellow men*.

Ver. 4. The state of wicked men is miserable beyond expression, for they are every day and every hour adding to those treasures of guilt which are already more than sufficient to sink them into the bottomless pit. They are unclean before God in all the labours of their hand, and those works which are accepted at the hands of others, as instances of obedience to God, are reckoned to the wicked in the number of their sins.

That an high look is abominable to God, is no surprise to us, for it is abominable even to men, and must be infinitely more abhorred by God. We do not wonder to hear that the pride of the heart is hateful to him, for he is the Searcher of hearts, and is jealous of his own honour, and cannot bear that men should exalt themselves into a rivalry with him; but how the plowing of the wicked should be sin is not so plain, because they are commanded to plow, and severely reprov'd for the neglect of that work by which they ought to support themselves and their families. If they are plowing when they should be praying, or on Sabbath days, every man will see that they are sinning; but how can their ordinary plowing be sin, when we are told that plowing is a duty?

Whether we eat or drink, or whatsoever we do, we are required to do all to the glory of God. But the wicked man neither eats nor drinks, nor plows, nor sows, to the glory of God, and therefore he lives in a course of sin, even when he is employed in those actions that are most innocent or necessary. His soul is infected deeply with the venom of sin, which spreads itself over all his conversation; for to the unbelieving and impure there is nothing clean. They are corrupt trees, and no fruit that grows upon them can be good. Their hands are defiled with sin, and their fingers with iniquity, and, therefore, every thing they touch must be defiled by their impurity*.

What then must the wicked do? Must they let alone all work lest they should sin in doing it? By no means. Idleness would bring upon them far more guilt than the labour of their callings, for that is sinful in itself; whereas plowing is sinful only by means of their own impurity communicated to it. Their business is to get free of that plague of sin that spreads infection to every thing they meddle with. Let them have recourse, like the leper, to Christ, that he may make them clean, and then being pure, every thing will become pure to them.

Some render these words thus: "The lamp or prosperity of the wicked is sin." Their prosperity is turned into a snare, and an occasion of sin to them by their wicked dispositions, which use it as an incentive to pride and impiety. Because their candle shines with brightness, they think it will never be put out, and think they stand in no need of the Sun of Righteousness to illuminate their souls. Wickedness is a most unhappy thing, for it perverts the objects that are most desirable in themselves to means of sin and ruin.

Ver. 5. Is not the hasty man a diligent man? He is often busier than those who think before they act; and one would think that he must carry the prize of industry. Yet Solomon will not allow him a share of the praise that he bestows upon the diligent, because his activity is not under proper direction, and therefore cannot serve any good purpose. True diligence lies between laziness and too much speed, and is directed to its end by prudence and consideration. We must remember that we are rational creatures, and act as such both in our religious and civil affairs, and not suffer ourselves to be hurried hither and thither, by the impulse of humour and passion, or to be pushed on in any enterprise, however commendable, without thinking of the means proper for obtaining success.

Saul was in too great haste to make an end of the Philistines, and, therefore, he laid the people that were fighting with him under a curse, if they should eat any meat till the sun went down, by which step the victory was hindered from being complete. In common life, we see multitudes of persons that make too much haste to be rich, and so make themselves poor, by plunging into a multiplicity of business, and bringing confusion and embarrassment into their affairs. A man, by running himself out of breath, weakens his strength, and is later in arriving at the end of his journey, than another man, who walks at leisure, and puts himself under no necessity of stopping; and a man that minds his business, and carries it on with a prudent activity, is in a fair way of being rich, when another man, that drives on post haste to get an estate, becomes a bankrupt.

Although lukewarmness in religion is a very detestable disposition, yet rashness is no less dangerous. No business of life requires so much thought and prudence. Many, under the impulse of a rash zeal, have run briskly, and soon stopped and turned aside; and young converts, when their passions were more deeply tinctured with religion than their judgments, have too often hurt their own comfort, and the cause of religion itself, by their indiscreet forwardness in displaying their attachment to it. Christ would not have any person to embrace his cause without considering the cost of it*.

Ver. 6. A lying tongue is an abomination to the Lord, and yet some will venture upon his displeasure, if they can make any profit by it; and it must be confessed that some present gain may be made by lying†, but then it answers no good purpose. Who would part with his sincerity, and the pleasure of a good conscience, for a little smoke, or for a handful of chaff? and all the treasures that can be made by a lying tongue, however great, are no better. They are vanities and lies that deceive the possessor, making him to believe that he is rich when he is miserably poor. They are a vanity tossed to and fro, like chaff or smoke in the wind, which will soon be out of sight; for riches gotten by vanity are soon consumed into nothing‡.

But this is not the worst of the matter; for the persons that use such methods of obtaining riches seek death. Although they abhor the thoughts of death, yet in the judgment of God they love and seek it, for they take a sure method of bringing eternal death upon themselves, if not a miserable death in this world. Whilst others are walking towards the region of destruction, they are running to it post haste. They make haste to be rich, but greater haste to be damned, for neither their dishonesty nor their lies, will suffer them to be admitted into the kingdom of God.

Ver. 7. It is impossible that the unrighteous should escape punishment, for they bring it upon themselves by the work of their own hands. Although there should be no magistrates to pass sentence upon them, or executioners to execute the sentence, yet their own robbery should destroy them. Their sin is the seed of misery, and it cannot fail of producing its proper fruit. They have none but themselves to blame for the vengeance to be poured out upon them. Their punishment cometh forth from the Lord of hosts, but the cause is in themselves.

Is their sin then unpardonable? No. The blood of Jesus can cleanse from all sin. Zaccheus the publican was probably an extortioner, but salvation came to his house. His sin was pardoned, and he was made to abhor it as much as ever he had loved it; and if he had

taken any thing from any man by iniquitous means, he resolved to restore fourfold; but this was a rare miracle of grace. When men have entered upon a course of injustice, they are seldom brought to repentance, for they are entangled in the snare of the devil, in such a manner that they seldom get out. Repentance brings with it restitution of what is gained by unrighteousness; and when men restore, they are obliged to confess to their shame, their former acts of unrighteousness, and sometimes to impoverish themselves and their families.

These are terrible inconveniencies, to which men, in general, will not submit; but the very thought of them is often sufficient to stifle all motions of their spirits towards any thing that is good. They will rather run the risk of God's wrath, than think of exposing themselves to disgrace and poverty in this world. Thus they go on in sin, and violently suppress the remonstrances of conscience whilst they live; and when they die, they envy those grosser offenders who were condemned to the gallows, because the shame and punishment to which they were doomed, were effectual means of removing those peculiar obstacles which hinder the reformation of the unjust.

Beware of entering into this snare of the devil, if your hands are yet untainted by the pollution of filthy lucre, for there are mighty impediments to repentance for this sin. If you are entangled in these snares, remember that shame and poverty at present, are but painted misery in comparison of hell fire. Fly to the blood of atonement, which purged away the sins of the great transgressors at Corinth*. Repent, restore, shake your hands free of unrighteous gains; for whilst you hold them fast, you are exposed to the destruction threatened in the word of God, because your hands refuse to do judgment.

Ver. 8. The way of man is froward. Is the way of every man froward? or is it consistent with the dignity of human nature to contrast the way of man in general with the right work of the pure? Are not men justly distinguished into the froward and the pure; why then does Solomon speak as if all men were froward? There is certainly truth in the division of men into the pure and impure; but this distinction is the work of grace and not of nature, for men are all sprung from the first transgressor, and have derived a corrupt disposition from him, and till they are renewed by the grace of God, their way is froward and strange. They are all together become corrupt, and have done abominable things, if we may believe the testimony of the omniscient God himself†.

In our state of innocency our way was straight and even, whilst the glory of God was our great end, and the will of God the rule of our practice; but in our fallen state we walk in a crooked and perverse way, following the bent of our own evil inclinations, and seeking after happiness in creatures, which are like broken cisterns that can hold no water. Our course of life is directly the reverse of what it ought to be, for instead of making the will of our Creator the rule of our behaviour, we make it our business to provoke him to anger continually, by trampling upon his authority and despising his laws. Our way is a strange way, being a course of estrangement from the God that made us for his glory, and framed our natures to a capacity of enjoying him, and receiving happiness only in him. Till we are restored to communion with God through the mediation of Christ, we are aliens to the commonwealth of Israel, and our conversation is a continued proof of alienation from the life of God.

But as for the pure, he is raised above other men, and his work is very different. He is purified by the Spirit of Christ, and created in him unto good works. His work is regulated by an unerring rule, and directed to the noblest end, for his constant endeavour is to cleanse his way by taking heed thereto according to the word of God, and to walk in the world as Christ walked; and he lives not to himself, but unto the Lord.

It is too natural for us to think that, if we are worse than the generality of our neighbours, we are safe. But Solomon and Paul teach us, that, to walk as men, is not to walk like saints*. Whilst we are following the course of this world, we are walking in the broad road that leadeth to destruction, and not in the narrow way that leadeth unto life†.

Let every man prove his own work; but it must not be tried by the maxims or example of the world, but by the word of God, by which God will judge us at the last day*.

Ver. 9. A man might dwell on a house top, if it were flat like the houses of the ancient Israelites; but it would be a very uncomfortable place of dwelling, because it is exposed to rain and wind, to frost, and snow, and lightning; but as the least of two evils is to be chosen, a wise man would rather choose to dwell on a house top, and be confined to a single corner of it, than to have his ears dunned, and his spirits crushed, with the endless brawls of a peevish and fretful wife. A man on a house top would have at least some intervals of comfortable weather, but a brawling woman will never want something to make her uneasy to herself, and a torment to those who have the misfortune to be connected with her. She is perpetually vexing her children and servants, but her husband is most to be pitied, because she is of one flesh with him. She may be a scourge in the side of others in the family, but she is rottenness in her husband's bones. She is the greatest plague to him to whom she is bound by every obligation to be the greatest pleasure. She is one flesh with him, and yet she is a constant grief to his spirit. She torments herself most of all, and, next to herself, all others in proportion to the obligation she lies under to behave in the very opposite manner.

God said, it is not good for man to be alone, and therefore made woman to be an help meet for him, and yet the contentious woman is such a perverse creature, that she perverts the design of our Creator, and proves a scourge instead of an help. She makes it better for a man to be in the most solitary circumstances imaginable than with her.

Those who choose a wife for the goodness of her portion, rather than the sweetness of her temper, are not Solomon's disciples. He declares that the married life is better than the single*. But he likewise tells us in this place, that it is much better to live alone in the deepest poverty, than to enjoy affluence with a clamorous and peevish woman.

Ver. 10. The difference between evil and good men does not lie in complete freedom from what is evil on the side of good men. Paul was one of the best men that ever lived, and yet he confesses that he had not obtained perfection in goodness, but found evil

present with him, when he was most inclined to do good. But herein lies that goodness which the saints attain in this life, that they love what is good with an ardent affection, and hate that which is evil with their whole soul, although they cannot do all that good they wish to do, and too often do that evil which they hate†. On the contrary, bad men are not only doers of iniquity, but their souls are fully inclined to it. With their souls they desire evil; and although their consciences frequently remonstrate against sin, and are a strong bridle upon the lusts of most unregenerate persons, yet sin dwells as a king in their inner man, and is not resisted with hatred like a tyrant, but is suffered to possess the throne of the heart.

This is a miserable disposition, for sin is the worst of all evils. No man expressly and directly desires misery, and yet all that love sin desire the worst of misery in reality, for sin is the sickness, the death, the ruin of the soul.

The desire of all unrenewed men is towards evil, and not one of them would think himself happy if he were not suffered to enjoy the pleasures of some sin: yet their relishes for these cursed pleasures are very different, and the desires of evil in some are stronger than in others. There are many that have some regard to the voice of conscience, and the great principles of morality, and many others that push on in their pursuit of the pleasures that suit their vitiated taste, in spite of their own consciences, and their neighbours and friends find no favour in their eyes. Saul persecuted David, although he had been the champion of Israel, and was his son-in-law; for his corruptions had gained the victory over his conscience and feelings, and he pursued the gratification of his malice with unrelenting fury.

This is the tendency of sin; to sink a man deep in the abominable gulf of self-love, and to harden his spirit against those whom he ought to love most tenderly. Let us therefore choose our friends from the number of those who love God; for their hearts are enlarged with charity, and in their eyes their neighbours find favour. Those are bad persons who are so entirely swallowed up by a selfish spirit, that they will scarcely perform an office of charity, or good neighbourhood, without the expectation of a return. If we are good men, let us shew it by doing good. Our neighbours and friends have a special title to expect good at our hands.

Ver. 11. It is a bad thing in a family, or church, or nation, when scorners are not duly corrected or punished. It was a sign that the inhabitants of Laish were a ready prey for any invader, when there was no magistrate in the land to put them to shame. Those that are too unwise to see the evil of sin, have sense enough to see the evil of shame and pain; and when they behold these disagreeable consequences following sin, their dispositions to wickedness receive a check, to their own great advantage, as well as the good of the society to which they belong. If the fear of censure or punishment does not make men holy, it will make them sober; and this is a good thing in itself, and puts men in a fair way to become still better, by leading men to the means whereby holiness is ordinarily produced.

The wise that do not expose themselves to punishment, are not beyond the need of instruction, and sometimes of admonition and rebuke. David was one of the best of men, but he was not faultless in his behaviour, and we find what happy effect instruction and rebuke had upon his soul. He improved in knowledge and grace by the ministrations of the sanctuary, and the rebukes of the prophets*. A rebuke entereth more into a wise man, than an hundred stripes into a fool.

Even the simple man receives knowledge from the instructions and rebukes that are given to the wise. He is so foolish that an attempt to instruct himself awakens his jealousy and anger. He thinks you know him, or take him for a fool, when you begin to instruct or admonish him; but when he sees that the wise are instructed, and are thankful for it, he is forced to see his own stupidity, and his conscience tells him, If the men that are so much wiser and better than I can pretend to be, are so thankful for instruction, surely I have much greater need of it. The rebukes that are administered to them ought to enter ten times deeper into my heart, who deserve them so much better. The simple begins to learn wisdom, when he applies to his own case that which is said or done to other men†.

Ver. 12. We have a clear illustration of this truth in the conversations between Job and his three friends, all of whom had considered the house of the wicked, and God's providence in overthrowing it, but with very different degrees of wisdom.

Eliphaz had considered the sudden overthrow of the wicked man, and the unhappy end of his prosperity, and from thence inferred the justice of God, the danger of sin, and the necessity of repentance to sinners. His two friends joined with him in opinion; and we have no reason to doubt that they had received great benefit from the observations which they made upon the providence of God, to the wicked in their own days, as well as in ancient times; for they had taken advantage of the wisdom of the ancients, and of the histories which had been handed down to them, to increase their own stock of knowledge*.

Job had considered the house of the wicked with more wisdom, and learned much instruction from the providence of God concerning it. He had observed so many instances of the downfall of prosperous transgressors, that he saw wickedness to be a very dangerous thing, however prosperous it might be for a time, and therefore he abhorred the counsel of the wicked†. At the same time he observed, and understood from the reports of travellers, that some wicked men lived and died in affluence, and were buried with great pomp, and had stately monuments erected for them; from thence he justly inferred that the wicked were reserved to a future day of wrath, and defended his own character against his friends, with solid arguments drawn from the unequal distributions of providence in this world*.

It is a great point of wisdom to learn instruction from the calamities that befall the wicked, or have befallen them in former times. By this means we may render all the histories of past ages very beneficial to ourselves. We find that the destruction of the old world by the flood, and the burning of Sodom and Gomorrah, were means of impressing the mind of Eliphaz with an abhorrence of sin†, and the prophet Ezekiel severely censures the Jews in his time, because they had not taken warning by the fate of Sodom and Israel‡.

It is not safe for us to pronounce men wicked merely because they are overthrown; but when God makes his judgments upon sinners manifest, it is our duty to observe it, and to glorify and fear God. And although we have no reason to think that those who meet with signal calamities are worse than other men, unless we have good evidence of it, yet their calamities are loud warnings, and calls to repentance || .

Ver. 13. There may be a very good excuse for not giving to the poor; but insensibility to their extreme distress is an unnatural and a crying iniquity. Our eyes and ears are organs fitted by nature for working upon the heart, and exciting bowels of compassion in us; and if we regard not the cry of the poor with sympathy, we put a force upon nature by stopping our ears. When Eliphaz meant to convince Job that his transgression was infinite, he charges this among other horrid crimes upon him, that he had not given water to the weary to drink, and had withholden bread from the hungry; but Job was innocent, and could with a good conscience declare that he never withheld the poor from their desire, nor caused the eye of the widow to fail*.

Those that are hard-hearted to the distressed, should remember that they cannot make a covenant with death, nor hinder the scourge of distress from reaching themselves. They also shall cry, for the days of distress will come upon them; and whilst they shew no pity to the poor, they harden the spirits of men against pity to themselves, and provoke God to leave them to fall without succour.

If we should never fall into distress that needs relief at the hands of our fellow creatures, it is certain that we need help from God to our souls, and although we feel not our need of his pity at present, the day is coming when we shall feel it at our hearts, and cry out for mercy. Our poor fellow creatures need a few pence from us, but we need talents at the hand of God; and when we disobey his voice, and refuse to shew mercy unto men, we have just reason to fear that we shall have judgment without mercy to ourselves. God is a most gracious God. He delights in the voice of prayer, and continually answers those requests that believers present unto him in the name of his Son; but he has not bound himself to hear those cries which necessity extorts from the wicked. This is a part of the extreme misery of those who refuse to hear the cries of wisdom, that they shall cry out in their time of calamity, and he will not hear them, and the same punishment is here threatened to those who will not hear the cries of the poor.

What extreme wretchedness is this, to cry and not be heard by a most merciful God! How provoking is the sin which is so severely threatened! When David's enemies cried unto the Lord, and were not heard, it was plain that they were doomed to irremediable misery. Job could not imprecate severer vengeance upon himself, on supposition he was guilty of the crimes charged upon him, than this, Let my cry have no place. This is the height of the misery of the damned, that their cries are not regarded with pity by God. This truth need not however discourage us from presenting the prayers of faith to the throne of grace; for the prayers here spoken of, are only the cries of strong distress extorted from men that have not the love of God, or the love of Christ in them. It is rather an encouragement to pray; for it shews us that the refusing of prayer is God's strange work, and a piece of his severity to great sinners who are destitute of compassion to their fellow men.

When we have reason to complain that we cry and shout, but God shutteth out our prayer, let us consider our ways; perhaps we have shut our ears on some occasions against the cries of the poor. This was one reason why God accepted not the prayers and fasts of those people whom Isaiah speaks of in the 50th chapter of his book.

The poor may see in this threatening, great encouragement to themselves to apply to his throne of mercy. He that condemns uncharitableness so much in others, is full of love and pity, and listens with a gracious ear to the sighs and groans of the poor and destitute*.

Ver. 14. Anger is a very outrageous passion, and strong wrath makes a man like a savage beast, which attacks in its fury any creature that comes in its way. Yet such is the power of money and presents, that the fiercest rage is assuaged by them; and therefore when a good conscience allows, it is often a piece of prudence to disarm an enemy by gifts, rather than to fight with him. By such means did Jacob and Abigail secure themselves from those enemies that threatened them with destruction. But to give, or to receive bribes, is a very sinful thing, because it is a perversion of justice. For ministers to receive gifts to soften their severity in censuring offenders, (if such unfaithful ministers can be found,) is one of the worst instances of corruption.

Although men are generally fond of receiving, yet they are as generally unwilling to be reckoned fond of gifts, and therefore those who have the art of giving will do it in secret, and avoid every appearance of ostentation in themselves, and every thing that might cause a blush in the receivers of their gifts.

If the love of gifts is so universal and so powerful in the hearts of men, we ought to try our own hearts, how far we are influenced by it, or whether we believe our Saviour's words, that it is more blessed to give than to receive. Take heed, says our Lord, and beware of covetousness. We must keep a double guard against this sin, because it is so natural to us, and yet so dangerous. Those who receive gifts should take heed to themselves lest they receive a bribe under the colour of a gratuity. What is given in such a manner as to shun the light, deserves to be at least suspected*.

Have gifts such a powerful influence to disarm resentment? Then let no man plead, in apology for the fury of his passions, that he is not able to conquer them. If money can conquer them, shall reason, and the fear of God, and the command of Christ, be too weak to bridle them? Surely the commandments of our God and Saviour have too little authority with us, if they have less influence upon our spirits than gold and jewels have upon the spirits of almost all men.

Ver. 15. Men that are utterly unacquainted with the spirit of religion, and view it only at a distance, form very false notions to its prejudice, and are affrighted from it with much the same reason that children are afraid to walk in the dark. They fancy that religion is a dull and melancholy thing, and that it affords and allows no pleasure to saints, at least whilst their present life continues; but the

wise man here tells us, that the very doing of what is right is a part of its own reward, bringing with it an heart-felt satisfaction. Love is the soul of our obedience; and a well-regulated love is a delightful passion, communicating pleasure to all the toils and dangers that are endured for its sake. Jacob endured the sultry heats, and chilling frosts, for seven years, with great pleasure, for the love he had to Rachel, and the holy love of Christians will dispose them with greater joy to encounter the assaults of the tempter, to mortify the deeds of the body, to strive against sin, and to continue resolute in piety, notwithstanding of all the discouragements which often attend it.

The joy of the saints in doing judgment is not complete in this world, because the flesh which remains in them lusts against the spirit; yet it vastly exceeds in purity and vigour the highest joys of sinners. The Christian is unspeakably more happy in resisting and vanquishing the lusts of the flesh, than the worldly man is in gratifying them.

This sentence is a mark by which we ought to try ourselves. Many do judgement without taking pleasure in it; their consciences will not suffer them to do otherwise, but their hearts are on the side of sin; or they will do many good things with pleasure, because their constitutional and beloved sins are not affected by them; but there are other things at which, like King Herod, they stop short, because they will rather risk damnation than part unreservedly with the pleasures of sin. But the just man takes pleasure in the way of God's testimonies, without any exception to particular steps of it, as far as it is known to him. He lifts up his hands to the commandments of God which he loves, and in his measure he resembles Christ, whose meat and drink it was to do his Father's will: nor is his love of the commandments confined to the first table of the law: it is as much his joy to pay his debtor, as to receive payment of what is owing to himself, and to bestow charity on the poor, as to receive a present from some rich friend.

The wicked have an aversion to judgment. Perhaps they are not immoral in their conduct, but it is no pleasure to them to render unto God his due; and they say of his service, Oh! what a weariness is it! Their religion is but a dull lifeless form; but there is some iniquity which is relished as honey by them, and drunk greedily as water. But that sin which is sweet in their mouth is bitter in their belly, and shall be found more deadly than poison; for destruction shall be to the workers of iniquity*.

Ver. 16†. The way of holiness is the way of understanding; for a good understanding have all they that do God's commandments, and all besides are fools. Whilst men wander in the forbidden paths of sin, they are dead whilst they live, and are sinking themselves deeper and deeper into the dungeon of misery.

But of all the wanderers in the ways of sin, those are in the most dangerous condition who were once to appearance walking in the ways of understanding, and have now turned aside into the ways of darkness. It had been better for them never to have known the ways of righteousness, for they bring great reproach upon the ways of God, and behave as if they had found iniquity in the Holy One. They sin against convictions and vows; they prejudice multitudes against the way of truth; and bring the blood of many souls upon their own heads. They harden their spirits against God, and if their consciences are ever again awakened, they are in danger of sinking into the hideous gulph of despair. Although apostacy is not in itself an unpardonable sin, yet it is sometimes an introduction to it, and never fails to render repentance extremely difficult, and almost impracticable*.

These unhappy wanderers once ranked themselves, and were ranked by their neighbours, among the living in Jerusalem, but they were no better than stalking ghosts; they belong to the congregation of the dead, and, without astonishing exertions of omnipotent grace, must for ever remain amongst that wretched crew.

Those that walk in the light must die, but their death is an entrance into a better life; for it cannot dissolve their blessed connexion with the Lord of life: but those that wander out of the way of understanding, are twice dead, they are like trees plucked up by the roots; death will be the king of terrors to them, because it opens their passage into the lake of fire and brimstone, which is the second death.

Consider, ye revolting sinners, the greatness of your guilt and danger*; be thankful that your situation is not yet altogether desperate. There is hope even for you, in the all-sufficient Saviour, but fly to him without delay, before the decree bring forth, before the fierce anger of the Lord come upon you, till there be no remedy†.

Ver. 17. Love not the world, nor the things of the world, for if any man love the world, or the lusts of the flesh, or other things in it, the love of the Father is not in him.

Must pleasure then be renounced, and every earthly satisfaction given up? Who will enter into the ways of wisdom, if she insists on this? Pleasure is not to be absolutely renounced. The truly religious man finds more pleasure, even in his earthly enjoyments, than the happiest sensualist; but pleasure must not be loved as our chief happiness. Our hearts must be given to God, and nothing earthly must be suffered to usurp his throne in our souls.

It is no hardship imposed on us, to be forbidden the love of pleasure, for the sensualist by his love to the delights of the flesh, undoes every thing that is dear to him. He not only wounds his soul, but prejudices his health, and wastes his estate: if he is rich, he makes himself poor; if he is poor, he reduces himself to beggary, and perhaps to a prison. Even in the land of Canaan, where vines and olives abounded, poverty was the ordinary consequence of dissipation and revelling: and how can a man escape poverty, who lives in a country, where the climate concurs with the scripture, to forbid extravagance, and to threaten poverty as its present recompense?

We see every day instances of the truth of this proverb, in men who have reduced themselves to hunger and want, by gratifying the love of pleasure. Gluttons, and drunkards, and revellers, are fools for this world, as well as the world to come; they exhaust, by their intemperance, the very source of their pleasures, and after contracting by habit an unconquerable desire after wine, and other objects of a sensual taste, they are reduced to a want, not only of the luxuries, but even of the necessaries of life.

Let us therefore, if we wish to be happy, follow the Apostle's rule: The time is short; let those that rejoice, be as if they rejoiced not, and they that use this world, as not abusing it. Feasting is not unlawful, but when men feast without fear, their jovialty leads them to revelling, which is expressly condemned in Scripture. Let us make no provision for the lusts of the flesh, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Ver. 18. "I gave Egypt for thy ransom," says God to his people, "Ethiopia and Seba for thee." When Jerusalem appeared to be on the point of ruin, God gave a diversion to the Assyrian forces, by means of Tirhakah king of Ethiopia. In like manner, Achan was a ransom for the people of Israel in the days of Joshua, and the seven men of Saul's sons in the days of David. In these, and in many other instances, the righteous were delivered out of trouble, and the wicked came in their stead*.

When the wicked flourish, and the righteous meet with humbling providences, we must not take offence at the providence of God, or the way of holiness. The proud are not happy, and those that tempt God are not delivered: God tries the faith and patience of his people, and will in due time make it to appear, that they are gold and jewels in his eyes, and that he puts away the wicked of the earth like dross.

God's people need not despair when they are in trouble and see no likely way of getting out of it: God can see methods of relief, when they cannot see them, and he can perform wonders for their relief. Israel in Egypt was brought very low, and their oppressors were too mighty for them; it seemed impossible for them to escape out of the land of bondage, or if they could get out of it, to be safe from the pursuit of their enemies. But their Redeemer was wise and mighty, and gave Egypt for them. By the plagues of Egypt, their release was accomplished, and by the drowning of Pharaoh and his army, they were preserved from their pursuers.

But God's people must walk uprightly, if they wish to enjoy the benefit of this special favour. If they step out of the path of integrity, God may shew that he is no respecter of persons, to their cost. Jonah for his flight from the presence of the Lord, was made a ransom for the heathen sailors that were with him in the ship. Those that shall not be condemned with the world, may expect to be chastened, although others should escape.

Ver. 19. Contention and anger commonly go together, and they kindle a flame that can scarcely be extinguished. The wise man has already told us, that it is better to dwell in an ill-thatched house, or even on a corner of the house top, without any covering from the storm, than with a contentious woman; but here he goes farther, and says that it is better to dwell in the wilderness, than with a contentious and angry woman. The wilderness would make a very bad habitation, because there are the lions' dens, and the habitation of dragons, so that a dweller in the desert would be not only destitute of every conveniency, but exposed to constant perils of his life. Yet it would be a more desirable habitation, than a wide house with the company of a woman that was tormenting her husband with everlasting brawls. The contentious woman is a greater monster than the tiger of the desert, and her tongue is more noisome than the tongue of the viper.

A contentious woman is not worse than a tyrannizing husband. A man may more easily make his escape from the presence of a scold, than a woman from the face of a brutal tyrant; and the delicacy of her mind makes her more susceptible of melancholy impressions from bad usage, than persons of the other sex ordinarily are.

When a husband and wife find the marriage yoke sweetened by love and peace, they should bless God for the happiness they find in each other's society. Their pleasures are the most delightful which this world can afford, and they are indebted for them to that kind providence which has made them one flesh and one soul.

Ver. 20. Works of charity are requisite, but don't imagine that they will make you poor. Christ commands us not to lay up treasures on earth, but to lay up treasures that never decay, nor become a prey to thieves. But he does not require us to give every thing away to the poor; on the contrary, he insinuates that a prudent householder has in his treasure things new and old. We must give alms of all that we possess, but we are not called to give all that we possess in alms; that would be at once to drain up the fountain of beneficence, and preclude ourselves from doing good, as we see occasion, through the remaining part of our lives.

Solomon directs us to be liberal in charitable distributions, and yet he tells us in this place, that the wise have a desirable treasure, not only of the necessaries, but likewise of the comforts and conveniencies of life. Charity dispensed with wisdom, will not hurt but improve a man's estate. Was there ever a more liberal man than Job, and yet he was the richest of all the men in the east. Abraham abounded in hospitality, and he abounded no less in flocks and herds. It seems a riddle, and yet it is a certain truth, that expenses and losses on God's account are real gains.

Poverty is often the lot of the wise and religious, but it is not the native consequence of piety. Industry, and temperance, and frugality, are recommended by religion, and these are natural means of plenty. Above all, godliness has the promise of the life that now is, and therefore it must be a great error to imagine that worldly prosperity is inconsistent with the grace of God; for God delighteth in the prosperity of his servants; and if he does not smile upon their outward estate, it is because his love is directed by infinite knowledge, which sees a different condition to be, for the present, more conducive to their best interests.

But if the good man has not a treasure of the good things of this world in his house, he possesses a large treasure for himself and his family in the promises of God*. A man is not poor, although he wants ready money, if he has plenty of good bills. The Christian may want every thing that glitters in the eye of flesh, but he has rich treasures laid up in heaven, and the written word of God is his security.

But a foolish man spends and devours the substance of his family. His wealth is consumed by idleness or extravagance, or by the blasting curse of God; or if he is still rich in possession, he does not hold it by a sure tenure. Sin is often the destruction of men's

estates, as well as their souls, and brings present misery as well as eternal ruin. But, however the wicked may flourish, or the righteous decline in the world, (for this world is not the place of full recompenses,) the righteous man when he is poorest is immensely rich, and the richest of sinners is miserably poor.

Ver. 21. This world is not the place of perfection. The best Christians must confess their daily failings, but their desires of holiness are sincere, and accompanied with vigorous endeavours. Slothful professors have some cold desires after it, and sometimes their desires are accompanied with endeavours, but these are weak and ineffectual, or however ardent they may appear to be, yet they soon spend their force, and all their goodness is like the morning cloud and the early dew. Christians that deserve the name, are, like Caleb and Joshua, of another spirit, for their endeavour is to follow the Lord fully. They are followers of the Lamb whithersoever he goes, and whatever it may cost them.

The grace of the gospel teaches us, not only to live godly, but to follow righteousness and mercy, and these two virtues cannot be separated in practice. To be righteous, is to render unto every man his due. Now love is a debt we owe to every man, and mercy is due to the unhappy. The great rule of righteousness is to do to others, as we would wish to be dealt with, if we were in their circumstances, and certainly we all wish to enjoy kindness and pity from our neighbours, as circumstances require. The righteous, says David, sheweth mercy, and giveth*. And in another place he says that the righteousness of the merciful man endureth for ever.

It is in the strength of Christ that we must follow after righteousness and mercy. As his righteousness is the ground of our hopes, his grace is the fountain of our supplies. He is the vine, and unless we are branches ingrafted into this vine, our fruits will not be good. Love and fidelity are mentioned among the fruits of his Spirit†, and those that have not his Spirit are sensual and selfish, and bring forth fruit only to themselves.

Men think they will be losers, by following righteousness and mercy with too much eagerness, but the Scripture assures us that they shall be great gainers. They may suffer present loss, but their gains will be infinitely greater. They shall find life, and life is the foundation of every enjoyment. What is sweeter than life? and yet the life of most men is but a vain shadow and an empty dream; but that life which comes from the special favour of God, and is secured by promise, must be a pleasant and happy life. Some have lost their life for the sake of righteousness, but Christ assures us that their loss was unspeakable gain. They shall find righteousness; for as those that love cursing, shall have cursing poured into them like water, and like oil into their bones, so those that love righteousness shall meet with righteous dealing from men‡, and the righteous God will take care of their interests, and fulfil his faithful promises to them. The justice of God is engaged on their side, through the mediation of Christ, and he cannot be unrighteous, to forget their works and labours of love§. They shall find honour, for their upright and generous behaviour is very likely to procure to them honour from men. If fools should despise them, they will be respected by the wise and good. If all men should despise them and cast out their names as evil, they are precious and honourable in the eyes of the Lord. They shall at last be dignified with a place at Christ's right hand, with approbation from their judge, and with an eternal crown*.

Ver. 22. Men are generally so deeply sunk in flesh, that they value the endowments of the body, and the outward bounties of providence, above the noble qualities of the mind. This error is corrected by Solomon in this verse. He tells us that in every point of view, the qualities of the mind are preferable to those of the outward man. Counsel is better than strength for war, for one wise man will take a city defended by many strong men, although they have the advantage of high walls, and strong fortifications on their side. By the wisdom of Cyrus in turning the current of the Euphrates, was Babylon taken, notwithstanding of its stupendous walls and numerous defenders. By the discipline of the Romans were the brave and strong nations of Gaul and Germany subdued, and in almost every battle, it has been found that wisdom is better than weapons of war†.

If military wisdom is so much preferable to strength, how excellent is that religious wisdom so much commended in this book! This divine wisdom even in war, has a vast superiority over the wisdom of generals and ministers of state, for it leads men to victory, because it teaches them to trust in the Lord of hosts. By this wisdom Abraham conquered four kings when they were flushed with victory. By this David, the stripling, overcame lions, and bears, and giants. By this many of the old believers waxed valiant in fight, and turned to flight the armies of the aliens, for they knew their God, and were strong, and did exploits. By this wisdom the weakest believer is victorious through the blood of the Lamb, and the word of his testimony, over the dragon and his angels.

Ver. 23. A furious horse needs a double bridle to restrain its fierceness, and it seems the tongue of man needs more than a double bridle to keep it in from doing hurt. The wise man never ceases to admonish us about this point, and in this place he mentions particularly two of the instruments of speech, and puts a bridle on each of them. As an high-spirited horse, if its fury is not curbed with a strong hand, will hurry its rider along without regarding pits, or precipices, or deep waters, and expose him to extreme jeopardy of his life, so an unbridled tongue will make a man hateful to God and men, plunge him into contentions and debates, and expose his estate, and life, and credit, to extreme danger.

Who is the man that wishes to enjoy a quiet and peaceable life? Let him set a guard over his mouth, and refrain his tongue from profaneness and corrupt communication, from railing and reviling, and all evil speaking, from foolish talking, and from inconvenient jesting. Let prudence and the fear of God stand continually like centinels at the door of his lips. Let him follow the instructions of David, and Solomon, and James*. Let him pray to God to keep the door of his mouth, and remember that an ungoverned tongue is inconsistent with religion and happiness, and exposes a man to the same danger as a ship when it wants a pilot and an helm, and is ready to dash against every rock that comes in its way†.

Ver. 24. The anger of a proud man is very fierce. When he meets with the smallest shadow of an affront or provocation, his passions are on fire, and his vengeance must be satiated, be the consequence what it will. He would have every man to do him homage, and

when his opinion is contradicted, or his humour not complied with, he rageth like a tempest, which threatens to spread desolation and ruin. Such was the proud wrath of Haman, which could not be glutted with the blood of Mordecai alone, but thirsted after the blood of a whole nation.

What does the proud worm design by all this fury? It is his honour that set him in a flame. He thinks highly of himself, and cannot bear the thought that another man has not the same deference for him which he has for himself. To repair the fancied attacks upon his honour, he gives way to revenge, and seeks the reputation of a man of honour and spirit, but he disappoints his own views, and meets disgrace, when he is hunting for praise. He shall be called a proud man, and that is a character so base, that a proud man cannot bear it, for pride seeks to hide itself under any covert rather than be seen. He shall be called a haughty scorner, for he puffeth at his enemies, and pours contempt upon his reprovers. Now a haughty scorner is a very hateful character, for the scorner is an abomination among men.

Haman the Agagite, and Uzziah king of Judah, have brought great dishonour upon their memories by their proud wrath. Moses and Job, are men of glorious memory, for their humility and meekness. The godly man is not ambitious of praise, but he receives honour from God. The proud man cannot live without honour and applause, and his ambition and pride load his name and memory with contempt.

Ver. 25, 26. Solomon has already said enough to banish sloth out of the world, if those who are under the power of this vice were not besotted with it; but here he tells us a worse thing about it than in any of his former proverbs, for he represents it as a degree of self-murder. The slothful man brings diseases upon himself, by reducing himself to want of the necessaries of life, and the refreshments of sleep, for he will not labour for his food, nor take that exercise which prepares the body for quiet rest; but besides this, his very desires are hurtful to his constitution, for his mind must be employed, when his hands are idle. His wants, and the time that lies heavy upon him, are strong incitements to those insatiable cravings of desire which rack the heart and have a sickening influence upon the body. If the desire accomplished is a tree of life, those desires that cannot be accomplished, must have the quite opposite effect. If hope deferred make the heart sick, how cruelly must it be tortured by those insatiable desires that are not sweetened by any mixture of hope.

What is the reason that the slothful man's desires have such a pernicious influence upon him? His hands refuse to labour. If you bid him go and work, he will perhaps promise to do it, like that son who said to his father, I go, sir, to work in the vineyard. He is sensible of the necessity of it, he wishes earnestly to enjoy the fruits of labour, he has even some faint wishes that his hands would submit to the toil of labour; but the loss is, that his hands will not comply, because they must be taken out of his bosom if they work. If he could work with his tongue or his feet, without his hands, he would be a very industrious man; but he hates work because it does not consist in talking or sauntering about*.

Slothfulness is very prejudicial to the soul, as well as the body. As sleep is the nurse of our animal constitution, so the deep sleep into which slothfulness casts a man, is the nurse of the body of sin. The sluggard coveteth, he coveteth greedily; greedy covetings are his constant employment; although he will not work for necessaries, he could not be happy without the luxuries of life. Those greedy workings of covetous desire, are a strong temptation to him to pilfer and steal, and sometimes they push him on to those crimes that procure the gallows.

Wicked men disappoint themselves by their sins of that wished enjoyment, which they seek and hope to obtain by their iniquities. The sensualist deprives himself not only of pleasures, but of necessaries, by casting away that money that should procure them†. The vain and proud bring infamy upon their name, by the very means they take to support their honour‡; and slothful men, whilst they seek rest and ease, endure much more fatigue than the diligent man, because they make themselves a prey to the restless workings of their own unbridled desires.

But the righteous giveth. He does not say the diligent man giveth; for all bad and selfish men are not slothful. Some men toil hard, not from any regard to God's authority, but entirely for their own interest; they do not glorify God in their labours, for they do not work with their hands, that they may have to give to him that needeth, a part of what they have earned. The righteous man is of a nobler spirit, for he is ever merciful, and his mercy is one motive to his industry. He labours in his calling, and the blessing of God gives him success, and he shews his thankfulness to God, by giving with an unsparing hand. The slothful man covets the fruit of other people's labours, but the good man does not wish to eat that morsel alone, which is procured by his own sweat and toil. God is well pleased with his bounties, for he is a cheerful and liberal giver*.

Ver. 27. We have already heard that the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord: we are here told, that it is an abomination, although it is presented with the very best dispositions that a wicked man is capable of. Some unregenerate men are anxious for eternal life, because they cannot always live on earth; some of them have a great deal of seriousness in their devotions, and will even worship God in the exercise of tempers of mind that have some resemblance of love to God, and faith in Christ. Will not such service be accepted of God? By no means. Our great teacher tells us to make first the tree good, and then the fruit; for a corrupt tree, at the best, produces corrupt fruit. It must, therefore, be a very foolish thing, for men to dream of preparing themselves for Christ by a course of serious devotions, or of waiting till they are in a better disposition for believing in Christ, before they will venture to commit the salvation of their souls into his hands. Without his grace, we can have no good dispositions, nor do any thing that is acceptable to God, for it is only in the beloved, that we are accepted†.

What then must bad men do? Must they be driven to despair? or must they give up with duty? No‡. It is certain that without faith it is impossible to please God; but it is equally certain, that they are fully warranted to believe in Jesus. Let them make a thankful use of

this privilege, and from henceforth do all that they do, in word or in deed, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

If the sacrifice of the wicked at the very best is an abomination, how abominable must it be at the very worst? It is more than abominable, if he brings it with a wicked intention. Balaam presented many rich sacrifices; but they were designed to bribe the Holy One of Israel to be unfaithful to his people, and changeable in his purposes. It is a detestable thing for men to think they can prevail on God by the multitude of their holy services, to dispense with sin, and suffer them to escape unpunished, although they still live in the practice of injustice towards men, and in the neglect of several necessary duties which they owe to God*.

It is no less presumptuous for men to be diligent in the practice of religion, to obtain the applause of men. This was the vice which our Lord so frequently reproveth in the Pharisees, and this fault is still too common among the professors of religion. It will be a comfortable evidence that we are not under the reigning power of it, if we are as conscientious in the secret performances of religion, as in those that come under the view of men.

Nothing can be more detestable, than to cover vice with professions of religion. Some have the daring presumption to walk on in the ways of sin, and to practise the forms of duty, that their character may be shrouded under the mask of piety. These are followers of the Scribes and Pharisees, against whom our Lord pronounced so many dreadful woes†. They walk in the cursed way of Jezebel, who caused a feast to be proclaimed, that she might destroy an innocent man, and yet keep up the forms of religion and law; and they are likely to perish in the gain-saying of Korah*.

Ver. 28. He is a false witness that speaks what he has not been assured of, by the testimony of his ears or eyes, or some other way that secures him from the danger of lying. He may possibly speak what is true, without having sufficient evidence of it; but it is evident, that he is a man of a loose conscience, who speaks things with a greater air of certainty than his ground of belief will warrant. "We testify," says the faithful witness, "the things that we have seen and heard," and his followers must imitate his example.

The false witness was to be punished by the magistrate, according to the law of Moses; but if he should escape the punishment which his crime deserves from men, God says he shall perish, and his threatenings are not wind and vanity†.

But he that hears the words spoken about which he bears witness, and will say nothing without sufficient grounds of assurance, betrays not himself by any self inconsistency, nor exposes himself to punishment from God or man. He shall live when liars perish, his character shall continue good when liars lose all credit, and whilst he lives, he shall have the honour of being sustained as a good and credible witness; for lying lips are but for a moment, but the lip of truth shall be established for ever.

Wherefore, putting away lying, let us speak truth every man to his neighbour, especially in witness-bearing. If the commandment of God, and the mighty motives of his gospel, will not induce us to do so, let us regard our own honour and interest, which suffer irreparable injury by every deviation from truth.

Ver. 29. The wicked man walks in a crooked path, where peace and happiness never were, nor shall be found. God calls upon him to leave this cursed way, and to turn into the straight way of life. He thunders in the curses of his law, and orders his ministers to lift up their voices like trumpets, to proclaim in his ears the dangers of his course. He deals with him by his providence, and makes him to feel some of the first fruits of that vengeance which is the fruit of sin. He sets before him the peace and pleasure to be found in the way of holiness, that he may be encouraged to leave the way of destruction; but the perverse sinner disregards the voice and providence of the Lord. The ways of sin are so pleasant to him, that he will venture the consequences, rather than be turned out of them for the present.

The wicked man has many devices to harden his face in his sinful course. He walks in the same paths as other men do, and many are much worse than himself. He has time enough before him, to repent and serve God. He does many good things to overbalance his evil deeds, or he will make amends for all at once, by fleeing to the mercy of God at last. By such corrupt reasonings as these, he hardens himself in iniquity, and sets God at defiance, setting at nought the terrors of his wrath, and trampling upon the grace and blood of the Redeemer, who came to turn ungodliness from Jacob. By degrees he contracts so powerful habits of sin, that his conversion is almost impossible; he casts off shame and fear, and sins without restraint, till he finds that there is justice and vengeance, as well as forbearance with God*.

But the upright man directeth and established his way. He may slip with his feet, but he recovers himself by the aids of divine grace. If he turns aside, as a good man may do, he will not persist in sin, but, like Job, he confesses with self-aborrence his vileness, and will proceed no farther in it*. He endeavours, in the general course of his life, to keep at a distance from sin and temptation, and to order his conversation with such prudence, that he may not by surprise be ensnared into sin, nor meet with any occasion of stumbling. Thus did David direct his way, when he had the word of God in his heart to keep him from sin, and fortified himself with firm resolutions, and fervent prayers, when he knew that he was to meet with snares in his path†. Thus did Abraham direct his way, when he was commanded to sacrifice Isaac. He never told Sarah, nor even his servants that attended him on his journey, that he had received so strange a command from God, for he was fully resolved to obey the voice of the Lord, and wished to obviate every advice in opposition to his duty. Let us follow the example of these holy men, making straight paths for our feet, that what is lame may not be turned out of the way; and to him that ordereth his conversation aright, will God shew his salvation.

Ver. 30. Wisdom excelleth folly, as much as light excelleth darkness, and Solomon often directs us to manage all our affairs with discretion and counsel, by means of which purposes are established; but he warns us in this place, not to trust to our own wisdom or prudence, nor to dream that they can accomplish any thing without the permission and pleasure of God. Wisdom and counsel can do much with the blessing of God, but all the wisdom of men and angels could do nothing in opposition to his counsels, which are all

executed by the arm of omnipotence.

There is, no doubt, wisdom and strength in many of the sons of men, but with God is wisdom and strength in an infinitely superior degree*. One wise man excels another wise man so much that he can manage him as if he were a child; but the only wise God turns the wisdom of all the philosophers in the world into foolishness, and the foolishness of God is infinitely wiser than the best wisdom of creatures.

Herod formed a project deep as hell to destroy our infant Saviour; but Jesus lives and reigns. Herod and his family were soon extinct. The like success has attended all the contrivances of men to destroy the church of our Redeemer, and God hath glorified himself upon the mightiest and wisest enemies of his people, by making their infernal devices the means of ruining themselves, and of advancing the interests of Zion†. Let Zion rejoice because of God's judgments, and let all the daughters of Judah be glad, for the Lord of hosts hath purposed good concerning her, and who shall disannul his purpose? The enemies of Zion may associate and combine, and form their plans for her destruction, but they shall not stand, for the Lord hath founded Zion, and the poor of his people shall trust in her‡.

There are men who aspire to honour, and in their pride would exalt themselves in opposition to the will of God, who hath annexed honour to piety, and disgrace to pride and ambition§. But shall they succeed? The Lord hath purposed to stain the pride of all glory, and they shall be scattered in the imagination of their hearts. There are some that try to carry on their plans for enriching themselves and their families, in spite of God. But poverty and ruin is the fruit of their presumption*. In short, all that seek for profit or pleasure, in transgressing the law of God shall find loss and misery.

Trust in God at all times, acknowledge him in all your ways, and be not afraid that any of his gracious counsels shall be frustrated. But those that harden themselves against God shall be ruined without remedy†.

Ver. 31. Solomon here teaches better than he practised, for we need from God not only light to guide us in the way, but grace to walk in it‡. He provided 40,000 horses even though God had expressly forbidden the kings of Israel to multiply horses, lest their hearts should be drawn away from the hope of Israel. But this proverb was abundantly verified by the consequences of the change that Solomon introduced into the management of public affairs, for from his days the people never made such a figure in war, as they had done in former days, when the judges of Israel went on foot against those that fought from chariots of iron§.

Horses and warlike preparations of every kind are nevertheless necessary to be used in war, when they are not expressly forbidden by God. Yet if you trust in horses, you will find that they are flesh and not spirit, and that they cannot afford safety to those whose hearts are turned from the Lord ¶. When the people of Judah went down to Egypt for help, and trusted in the Egyptian horses for safety against the king of Assyria, the prophet Isaiah, with a loud voice, remonstrated against their conduct, and cried that their strength was to sit still, and wrote it in a table, and noted it in a book, that it might continue for ever and ever as a testimony on record against those that trust in chariots and horses rather than the name of the Lord*.

Are we obliged to fight for our liberty and religion? let us set up our banners in the name of the Lord, believe in him as the Lord of armies, that mustereth the hosts of the battle, and decides the fate of war, and beware of every thing that might provoke him to sell us into the hands of our enemies†.

Prudence obliges a nation to avoid dangerous wars‡. Religion teaches us, if possible, as far as lieth in us, to live peaceably with all men. But necessity is sometimes laid upon Christians to expose themselves to jeopardy in the high places of the field, for their country and religion. In such cases the firm belief of this proverb will encourage us to venture into the field against a superior force, persuaded that every bullet has its direction from God, and that he is able to give us the victory, or to make defeats and deaths our advantage§.

Salvations of every kind belong to him. The means of safety must not be neglected, but God alone must be trusted, and when the means are attended with success, the glory is to be ascribed to him. Joshua employed the whole force of the armies of Israel against the nations of Canaan, and he praised those tribes that generously and faithfully assisted their brethren to subdue the country; but he was fully sensible that it was not their sword and bow that had gotten the land, but God's right arm and favour, and the light of his countenance ¶.

In our spiritual warfare, we must arm ourselves with the whole armour of God, but our strength must be in the Lord, and in the power of his might. If we must trust him for safety in fighting with flesh and blood, how can we wrestle successfully against the powers of hell without his divine succour*?

CHAPTER 22

Verse. 1. A great fame is none of the most desirable objects, but a good character and the love of men are frequently represented by Solomon as valuable blessings.

Riches are greatly esteemed in the world, and, under the management of wisdom, serve very valuable purposes; but they don't contribute so much to the quiet and happiness of life, as the esteem and love of our neighbours, nor do they qualify us so much to honour God and do good to men. Paul does not require it as a qualification in church rulers to be rich, but he requires that, along with knowledge and good behaviour, they should have a good report among Christians, and even heathens. He was sensible that

the most useful instructions from a suspected person would have no better relish than wholesome food presented in an unclean dish. Our Lord requires all Christians to do those good works that are esteemed by men, not indeed that they may receive praise from men, but that God may be glorified on their behalf. The like exhortations are frequently given us by the apostles of Christ†.

But we must still remember that a good name and the favour of men are not to be compared with the pleasures of a good conscience, and the favour of God; for if the friendship of men is so pleasant and useful, God is greater than men, and his favour is infinitely more valuable. And we have no reason to be vexed if we lose the esteem of men in our endeavours to please God. The esteem and good will of men are to be valued chiefly because they will enable us more effectually to serve the interests of God's kingdom, and to do good to the souls of men. When they are valued for their own sakes, they become a snare to us, as they were to some of the ancient Jews, who would not confess Christ, because they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God. When our names are cast out as evil, for a good cause, we have reason to rejoice and triumph, because we are made partakers of the sufferings of Christ, that when his glory shall be revealed we may be glad also with exceeding joy.

If we seek chiefly to please men, we are not the servants of Christ, but if we are the servants of Christ, we must endeavour for his sake, to please men, for their good to edification, and for the honour of his gospel. We must value our character above money, and avoid every thing that is mean, although it might promote our outward estate. We must not only attend to the secret duties of religion, but those also that recommend it to the world, and take all care that our good be not evil spoken of, and that religion meet with no reproach by our misconduct. We should be thankful to God, if we enjoy the benefit of a good name, and employ our influence for the advancement of his glory, but we must abhor the thoughts of making any sinful compliances with the course of the world for the sake of our credit, remembering that instructive saying of God, "Them that honour me, I will honour, but they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed."

Ver. 2. What is a king to a man? what is a crown and a throne to a thinking substance, capable of enjoying God? Majesty is a high sounding title, but the name of a reasonable being would be accounted much more noble, were not kings reasonable beings like other men. The things wherein men of different circumstances agree, are infinitely more important than those wherein they differ; yet such is the vanity which generally attends riches and power, that great men often treat persons of mean station, as if they were some lower rank of animals.

The poor and rich are made of the same blood, and the same glorious power is displayed in the formation of their bodies, and the creation of their souls. They breath the same vital air, and enjoy the light of the same sun. They owe their support equally to the earth, and shall return to the same dust. Their souls are equally precious, and shall dwell in the same eternal habitations, unless there is a distinction between them of a very different kind, from that which makes the rich too often to trample upon the poor, and the poor to return their contempt with the no less criminal passion of envy. They are alike lost in Adam, and have the same right to salvation, through Christ revealed to them in the gospel.

They meet together in the same family, and church, and nation, and they are useful to each other, if they comply with the designs of providence. The rich man's wealth would be of little use to him without the labour of the poor; and the rich man ought to return protection and wages to the poor. Like members of the same body, they ought neither to despise nor to grudge at one another, but to contribute their joint endeavours to the good of the whole.

The Lord is their common creator and father, and by his providence he hath made this man rich and the other man poor, and can invert their conditions when he pleases, as the experience of every day declares.

Why should the rich man despise his poor fellow creature? Did not he that made you make him? Did not one God fashion you both in the womb*? Did God frame you of finer clay, or form you of better blood, than that of Adam? or do your riches make you better, or wiser, or even happier than the poor man? The horse is not so much worse than brutish, as to reckon itself a nobler animal than another of its own species, because it has got a finer saddle on its back.

Let not the poor grudge at their poverty, and repine at him that has given a larger portion of land and money to their fellow men, for he is the Lord. He hath given you more than you can claim by the rights of justice, and if he has given more to some others than to you, he has given them what was his own and not yours, and has commanded them to be kind and useful to such as you, in the spending of it†.

Ver. 3. Common prudence will teach men to provide for their security against plain and evident dangers. Drunkards, and whoremongers, and rash sureties, are destitute of common sense as well as religion, otherwise they would not rush upon certain destruction for a momentary gratification.

This mark of prudence appears chiefly in those who partake of the wisdom that is from above. As Noah, when he foresaw the deluge, prepared an ark to the saving of his house, so the prospect of the deluge of wrath alarms them, and instigates their flight to that blessed refuge which God hath provided for our souls. When Moses foretold the tremendous storm that was to destroy the fields and cattle of Egypt, it was seen who of Pharaoh's servants were fools, and who were wise. The foolish left their cattle in the fields to perish, the wise amongst them put their cattle under a shelter. Now God threatens punishment to sinners in his word, but he is pleased in his great mercy to shew us where we may find refuge. Christ is an hiding place from the storm, and a covert from the tempest; and those who are made truly wise, will give no rest to their eyes, nor slumber to their eye-lids, till they are hidden under the covert of his righteousness. Besides that terrible wrath which shall seize upon all sinners at last, God oftentimes gives commission to particular judgments, to avenge his quarrel upon a land or church. Now prudence will enable us in some measure, to discern the signs of the times, and to judge of effects from their causes. There are some men so stupid, that they will not see God's

hand when it is lifted up, but the wise man, by the threatenings of the word and the appearances of providence, can see God's hand when it is about to be lifted up, and enters into those chambers of safety which are provided for his safety in the evil day.

It is only sensual and earthly wisdom that teaches men to shelter themselves from danger, by venturing on sin, or neglecting duty. This is just as wise, as it would be for a man to run upon a drawn sword to avoid the scratch of a pin*. But the simple walk in darkness. They see not the evil coming, or if they see it, they are so senseless that they pass on in their dangerous course, till they meet with deserved punishment, and they are more stupid than many of the brutal creation, who foresee the storms and run to their shelters†. Many of the feathered tribes, before the cold sets in, fly away to warmer climates. How then do ye say, we are wise, and the law of the Lord is with us, if you are more senseless than the beasts of the earth, and less wise than the fowls of heaven? Will you call yourselves reasonable creatures, and Christians, when neither reason nor revelation can make you so prudent about your best interests, as instinct alone renders animals that cannot boast of these precious gifts*.

Ver. 4. Many great things are said of humility in Scripture, and many precious promises are made to it. But the humility meant, is not that false humility that is often found among the proudest of men, nor that constitutional modesty, or that condescension of temper and behaviour, which is the mere effect of good sense, and is a very amiable quality, but not a Christian grace. Christian humility is that which has the promises belonging to it, and it is always joined with the fear of the Lord. It arises from an apprehension of the glorious excellencies of God; for when our eyes are open to his terrible majesty, we cannot but perceive our own meanness; when we behold his spotless purity, we must be ashamed of our own loathsomeness; when we contemplate his awful authority, we feel our obligations to deny our own perverse wills; when his sovereignty is felt, we cannot but yield the management of all our concerns into his hand; and when we have the knowledge of his righteousness, we are obliged to renounce our own works, and submit to the righteousness of God. Thus Job and Isaiah were humbled. They saw God with the seeing of the eye, and humbled themselves in the dust before him.

Humility, arising from an impression of the glories of God, is attended with other Christian graces, and an holy conversation. The humble man will walk humbly with his God, and bend all his endeavours to please the Most High.

By this humility are riches, and honour, and lives, (marg.) These things are greatly valued by the sons of men, especially when they attend one another. Riches are universally coveted, and yet many that possess them are discontented, because they covet the addition of titles and dignities to their wealth; and some that have riches and honours in abundance are more unhappy than those who want them, because they must die, and leave their beloved dignities and riches to others. But here Solomon instructs us, in few words, in a short and sure way of attaining those blessings, which men so ardently covet, and in securing them against every contingency, and even against death itself. But if we follow his direction, we must renounce the wisdom of the world, which teaches the opposite doctrine. It is generally believed, that if men would obtain riches and greatness, they must push themselves forward, and make themselves men of importance, and that they must not too scrupulously adhere to their duty, but in some cases venture to displease God by venial sins, to secure the favour of men. But we are here taught that humility and the fear of the Lord are the straight road to every thing desirable; and if we believe that God is the fountain of life, and every blessing, the doctrine of Solomon will be clear as the light. For to whom do kings give their favours? to their friends or enemies; to those whom they love, or to those whom they hate? We know that the Lord delights in the humble, and takes pleasure in them that fear him; and as he waters the humble vallies with the fructifying showers, so he refreshes with his abundant blessing, those who are low in their own eyes, and willing to render the glory of all that they receive to the Giver. If the humble want any thing that is good in this world, they shall possess unfailing treasures and a crown of life in heaven*.

Ver. 5. When the children of Israel spared the Canaanites, in opposition to the commandment of God, they found the consequences of their sin, though it might seem a little one, very troublesome, for the remnant of the accursed nations were thorns in their eyes, and snares and traps to them, and scourges in their sides. Such shall sin be to every froward transgressor. It is generally allowed that the end of transgressors is miserable, but we are assured by Solomon that their way is hard, and that it is all covered over with thorns and snares. The tyranny of lusts, the cravings of inordinate desires, the disappointment felt in the enjoyment of the pleasures of sin, which never answer expectation, the stings of conscience, the bitter fruits of many sins even in this world, and the sore rebukes of providence, are thorns and briers which pierce the souls of transgressors every day. And as Gideon taught the men of Succoth, with thorns and briers, so men, if they were not become brutish, would learn, from the pains that attend or follow the pleasures of sin, that it is an evil and a bitter thing to forsake the Lord†.

The wicked cannot get free of these miseries, for snares are in their way, by which they are held fast, as a bird in the snare of the fowler. They are compassed by God with a net, and all their efforts will be insufficient to disentangle them‡

There are snares also in their way, by which the devil holds them fast in sin, so that they cannot get free from his tyranny. They resolve to repent at last, but they find that Satan keeps them fast in the cords of their sins. They are like galley slaves chained to their work, and nothing but almighty grace can work out deliverance for them*. Such is the malignant nature of sin, that it turns every thing into a snare, and an occasion of sin. Adversity and prosperity, the comforts of the table, the ordinances of God, and Christ himself, are a snare to the froward†.

Who is the man that shall be preserved from these attires and thorns? He that keepeth his soul by watchfulness against sin and temptation, by prayer, and, above all, by committing it to the care of him that is the keeper of Israel He shall be preserved from every evil thing, he shall be far from those thorns and snare which the froward man is continually meeting in his path.

Are these things so? Did not Job keep his soul with all diligence, and even the souls of his children, and, yet the met with snares,

and nets, and darkness, in his: paths‡. This cannot be denied, but Job was only tried for moment, to improve his graces, to raise his name, and to brighten his crown. The people of God may expect manifold tribulations, but, amidst them all, they have peace in Christ: And what are the tribulations of the world to the peace that is in him! They shall be preserved by the power of God, through faith unto salvation, and whilst they sow in tears they can rejoice in the hope of reaping in joy§.

Ver. 6. Take this child, said Pharaoh's daughter to Joehebed, nurse him for me, and I will pay thee thy wages. Children are an heritage of the Lord, and he lays claim, in a special manner, to the children of professing Christians, as his own*. And he commands them to be nursed and trained up for himself, and those that obey his orders shall be richly recompensed, in the good behaviour of their children, or at least, in the approbation of God and the satisfaction of their own minds.

Satan will soon address himself to your children, to be speak them for his service. Their reason will no sooner begin to operate than he will take advantage of that foolishness which is bound up in their hearts, to fix them in his service. Endeavour therefore to be beforehand with him. Instruct them in the knowledge of God, of their own fallen condition, of the way that God hath provided for their recovery, and the way of holiness wherein they should walk. Convince them, by methods suited to their tender years and weak minds, that religion is pleasant, and necessary for them. Check the first appearances of vice, by such means as will not give them a disgust at instruction. Accommodate yourselves in the methods of your instructions to their capacities and dispositions, that they may be drawn to religion with the cords of love, and with the bands of a man. Parents do not give the same food to all children, but attend to the difference in their constitutions and tastes, in their care of their bodies? and why should they not make the like difference in their management of their minds? Let all your instructions be sweetened by good nature, and enforced by good example, which has a greater influence than precepts upon all men, and especially on children. Correction must likewise have its place in training up your children; and God must be earnestly implored to crown the whole with his blessing.

When children are thus trained up, they will be led into the paths of life and peace, and even when they are old they will not turn aside out of them. Timothy from a child was trained up in the knowledge of the holy Scriptures, and the faith which dwelt in his grandmother and mother, dwelt in him also, for the scriptures made him wise unto-salvation. It is a great pleasure to parents to see their children walking in the truth, and it is an unspeakable heightening of that pleasure, when their own instructions and admonitions have been blessed by God, as means of conducting them into the good path. Parents love their children, because they were the instruments of their existence, but they will look upon the fruit of their bodies to be doubly their children, when they are spiritual fathers to them, as well as the fathers of their flesh. But how painful must it be to the heart of a parent, to see the misbehaviour of a child, whose Christian education was neglected? Every wicked act in such a child, must be a wound in the heart of his cruel father, who by his cruel negligence, left his child to be a prey to the devil, and, carried captive by that cruel tyrant, to be employed in his hellish drudgery. If the father lives to see him die in such a situation, what an hell must it be to his own soul. Even the agonies of a wounded conscience are unequal to the torment of reflecting that, in spite of all the obligations of nature, and interest, and religion, a poor child was suffered to be carried away by Satan to the lake of fire; where he is now justly cursing the instrument who brought him into the world in a sinful state, because he never used the proper means for preventing that horrible misery, to which he is now reduced.

Will children always walk in that way wherein they are trained up? For the most part this will be the case, God is a sovereign dispenser of grace, and he is not under any obligation to bestow it upon the children of his faithful people; but this proverb teaches us, that he uses to bless the attempts of parents, to train up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. If parents are disappointed in their expectations from their children, they will be free at least of those terrible remorse which sting the hearts of careless parents, when their children prove wicked. They have the pleasing consciousness of having done their duty. They can pray, with humble boldness, that God may yet bless his own appointment for their children's advantage; for the seed of early instruction may be many years buried under ground, and at last spring up. They may even form some pleasing hopes, that although they have not the pleasure of seeing their houses such with God as they could wish, they may see at the great day, some at the right hand of Christ, who gave them too much reason to fear the contrary. The instructions of Hezekiah had no influence upon Manasseh, till he had been long in his grave; and yet Hezekiah will be able, we hope, to say at the last. Here am I, and the son when God hath given me.

Ver. 7. When Job's three friends endeavoured to convince him that he was a great sinner, and could make no impression upon him, Eliphaz at last ventures roundly to tell him, what his transgressions were; but as he had only conjecture to go upon, he could only judge, what those sins were that he was most likely to fall into, and fixes upon those that were most natural to a man in his circumstances. Job was the greatest of all the men in the east, and therefore Eliphaz tells him, that he had taken a pledge from his brother for nought, and had tyrannized over the poor; for he knew that the pride of riches often displays itself in such conduct, and that those whose circumstances enable them to lend to others, are too often betrayed, by their circumstances, into insolence and oppression. It is not for nothing that Paul directs Timothy to charge those who are rich in the world, not to trust in uncertain riches, nor to be high-minded. Rich persons ought narrowly to examine their own hearts and conduct, whether they are not puffed up with vanity, and disposed to behave imperiously towards their inferiors, especially those who are obliged to have some dependence upon them, and whose circumstances oblige them to be in their debt. Let them remember that they have received their riches from God, by whose providence things are so managed, that this man is poor and the other man rich; this man must borrow, and another man is able to lend. Let them attend to their own poverty and absolute dependance in respect of God, before whom the rich and the poor

are equal, and by whose justice, those who take their brethren by the throat, because they owe them a few pence, will have the many talents exacted, in which they stand indebted to God.

This proverb is a warning to men to be industrious and frugal, that they may not lose their liberty. Men who labour diligently in their callings, need not cringe to the rich, nor live in any man's debt. Some persons care not how much they borrow, never remembering that the day of payment is coming, and that a man has as many masters as he has creditors. Paul did not choose to be burdensome to any man, nor to be meanly dependant upon the generosity even of those who were best affected to him, but he laboured, working with his hands, and helped by his labours to supply the wants of his friends.

Ver. 8. The husbandman does not expect to reap wheat if he has sown tares, and yet men are often so foolish as to expect, that, after sowing to the flesh, they shall reap the same thing with those that sow to the spirit; and, therefore, Paul warns men not to suffer themselves to be deceived in a this momentous point*. Solomon gives a like warning in this place, and so does Hosea†.

He that lives in the practice of any sin, is sowing iniquity; for the thoughts of the mind, the words of the mouth, and the labours of the hand, are seed which shall spring up and produce a corresponding harvest. Men expect pleasure and profit from sin, but it will yield them nothing but disappointment and mischief. The wages of sin is death, and the truth of God stands engaged for the payment.

This harvest of disappointment and misery is some, times begun in this world, as Eliphaz assures us from his own observation‡. But the first fruits of it only are reaped at present: the full harvest is at the end Of the world§; and then sinners will be horribly amazed at the immense crop of misery, produced from that seed which they thought had been for ever buried. In vain do sinners think that their works are forgotten, because they are not presently recompensed; the husbandman would be thought a fool, who mourned as if he had lost his seed, because he cannot reap in the beginning of summer, when all the world knows that there must be a long interval between seed time and harvest. Sinners shall reap in due time, if they give not over then sowing.

Wicked men will not think of these things in time, but indulge their pride and folly, and many of them beat their fellow men with the rod of their anger, abusing their prosperity for the support of their insolence; but their rod shall not always abide in its strength, God will wrest it out of their hands, and break it in pieces, and punish them with the more dreadful rod of his own wrath. Eliphaz was an eye witness of this truth also, and describes it with great force of language. The roaring of the lion, and the voice of the fierce lion, and the teeth of the young lions are broken: the old lion perisheth for lack of prey, and the stout lion's whelps are scattered abroad*.

Ver. 9. "Mine eye affecteth mine heart," says the mourning and merciful prophet, "because of all the daughters of my people." There is a correspondence between the heart and the eye in the merciful man; for the sight of misery: produces compassion in his soul, and the tenderness of his heart beams forth in his eyes. The man whose eyes are the index of a bountiful heart, is a blessed man, for he enjoys the sweetest of earthly pleasures, that of kindness and beneficence, and pleasant reflections on his own conduct. He shall be blessed by all the wise and good, the blessings of widows and orphans shall come upon his head, the loins of the poor bless him, and he shall receive abundant blessings from God, who will not leave him unpitied in the day of his distress, but make all his bed in his sickness. He shall enjoy blessings in his body, and blessings in his outward estate, and blessings in his inner man; he shall be blessed in his person, and blessed in his family; he shall be blessed upon the earth, and blessed in the day of judgment, for his bountiful works performed from a principle of faith and charity, will be produced as the evidences of his interest in the Redeemer*.

He shall surely be blessed, for he giveth of his bread to the poor, and thereby makes it to appear that his tears of sympathy are the expressions of genuine charity. He is not one of those hypocrites that say to their neighbours, "go away, be ye warmed and filled," whilst they give them nothing of what is necessary for the body. He gives, and he does it with an air of kindness which cheers the heart of him whom he relieves. He gives not of the bread of other people, but his own, for he would abhor the thoughts of robbery, for acts of charity. He does not give all his bread, for he does not think it his duty to rob himself and his family, that he may give to others; but he gives liberally out of what he possesses, and that which is left to himself is sanctified to him.

Some that have a bountiful eye have no bread to give; but they will give what will turn to as good an account to the donor, and sometimes will be as pleasing to the receiver; tears and attention, and offices of tenderness and prayers to Him that is able to help.

Those that are unfeeling in their dispositions, and cannot open their hands but to receive, are already cursed with an hard and contracted heart. They are more savage than the wandering Arabs of the land of Tema†. They have not the faith of Christ, nor does the love of God dwell in them, and their ears shall hear; at the great day, those dreadful words, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire‡."

Ver. 10. Hagar, for her insolent behaviour, was obliged to flee from the house of Abraham. She humbled herself, and was again permitted for a time to dwell with that happy family, but her son Ishmael, by his contemptuous behaviour, procured his own expulsion, and that of his mother, at the appointment of God himself. It would be happy for all families, and churches, and societies of every kind, if scorners, could be cast out of them, for they are the authors of strife and reproach, of debates, and revilings, and railings, whereby the sweets of society are poisoned, and turned into gall. But if this cannot be well accomplished, we ought at least to avoid all friendship and fellowship with them, and to exclude them from every voluntary society, formed for mutual improvement or entertainment. Peace is essential to the comfort of men, but peace cannot be maintained whilst scorners are allowed to sow the seeds of variance by their rude reflections and unmannerly reproaches. Their behaviour is such, that they will inflame the passions of the best natured men that do not keep out of their way; and when they have once kindled the fire, none can tell when it will be quenched. We are commanded, as far as lies in us, to live peaceably with all men, and therefore it is necessary to set a mark on those who cause divisions and offences, and to avoid them. But will contention cease, if these firebrands of society are cast out?

Yes, unless we have too, much of their disposition in our own breasts. We must expel from thence the principles of scorning, those proud and fiery passions from whence all divisions arise.

How long, O ye scorers, will you delight in your scorning? Don't you observe what brands of infamy are set on your name; what a plague you are to all around you, so that the wise exclude you from their company, because your dispositions are so wicked and perverse that there is no bearing with you? Why do you indulge that arrogance which makes you the serpents of human society? Go and learn of Him that is lowly and meek, and you shall find rest to your own souls, and become the delight of those amongst whom you were an abomination*.

Ver. 11. No saint can say that he is perfectly pure from his sin; but every saint may safely say, that he is a lover of purity, and a hater of hypocrisy. The pharisees loved the reputation of purity, and they were very pure in their own eyes. They thought themselves as clean as those pots and vessels which they purified with such exactness, whilst they were in reality like cups and platters, whose outside was clean, but the inward part filled with every impurity. But real saints are more anxious to approve themselves unto God, than to enjoy reputation from men, and their outward holiness proceeds from a love of purity in the heart†.

The pureness of heart, here meant, consists chiefly in sincerity and uprightness, and stands opposed to all dissimulation. The love of it is necessary to grace in the lips, which must be directed by an honest heart; and admit no pollution of flattery and doubleness, which so much stains the communication of a great part of mankind‡.

The lips may assume an appearance of purity and sincerity when there is none in the heart, but this empty appearance cannot be long supported. A very small degree of sagacity will enable a man soon to discover it, and the discovery is attended with abhorrence. Grace in the lips is necessary to recommend pureness of heart. We ought always to speak the words of truth, but we ought to speak it in the most pleasing manner possible, that we may not render it unacceptable by our manner of representing it. Daniel shewed his integrity and politeness at once, by the manner of his address to Nebuchadnezzar, when he was called to give him very disagreeable information.

Every man ought to be a friend to the man of integrity, and the king himself, if he is not an absolute fool, will be a friend to him that joins purity of heart with gracefulness of tongue. Daniel, the captive, on this account, found favour with two haughty kings of Babylon. It is the general opinion, that flattery is necessary in our conversation with great men, if we wish to recommend ourselves to their favour; but the surest way of gaining and securing the favour of any man, is to seek above all things the favour of Him that has the hearts of all men in his hands. The favour gained by flattery and complaisance, soon decays. The favour, lost by truth, is in time recovered. Falsehood may support itself for a year or two, but truth stands on an immoveable foundation, for it is supported by the God of truth, as we are told in the next verse.

Ver. 12. When knowledge in the mind is attended by pureness in the heart and grace in the lips, they form an amiable and worthy character, which draws to it the eyes and hearts of wise men: but that is not the principal recommendation of it, for the eyes of the Lord himself preserve knowledge, and watch for good over the man whose lips and conversation are regulated by it. The king should be his friend, but there are Ahab's among kings who have not so much sense as poor Belshazzar, but love only those that speak pleasing things to them, whether true or false: but the King of kings will surely be his friend; his eyes are upon him for good, and every loss that he sustains for his adherence to truth shall be gain. But the words of the transgressor are overthrown by Him. He disappoints their hypocrisy, and brings evil upon them, instead of those advantages which they expected from their cunning and insincerity.

It is mostly safe to follow the counsels of a wise man, for they are likely to be attended with happy success, and if it is in his power he will contribute for his own honour to the success of them; but it is always safe to follow the counsels of God, who can insure and command success, and will not suffer any man to lose in the end, by obedience to his will. God did not indeed interpose in the same visible manner, for the support of John Baptist, as he had formerly done for the preservation of Shadrach and his companions. But John the Baptist had done his work, and was fit for a better world, and this world was not worthy of him; we cannot suppose him a loser, because his integrity procured him the crown of martyrdom, and he now praises God as cheerfully for the administrations of providence towards him on earth, as the three children who escaped the violence of fire, or he that came unhurt out of the lion's den.

Ver. 13. The sluggard will not plow by reason of the cold, and he will not move out of his house lest a lion should meet him, and kill him in the streets. This is a very odd excuse for his laziness. Lions are seldom found in the fields in the day time, and it is a very extraordinary thing, if they be found in the streets. Does the sluggard himself believe there is any truth in it? If he does, why does he sleep in his house, since it is possible that it may be set on fire by some accident in the night? Why does he ever take a meal, for some have been choked by the bread which they put into their mouths?

When we are employed in the duties of our calling, we need not vex ourselves with the apprehension of lions. "I will give mine angels charge over thee," says God, "and they shall keep thee in all thy ways." Thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder, the young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under thy feet. But let the sluggard remember that there is a lion in that bed where he dozes away his time, and in that chamber where he sits folding his arms together. The devil goes about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour, and he rejoices greatly when he lights upon a sluggard, for he looks upon him to be a sure prey. Poverty, like an armed man, is fast marching up to the sluggard, and will soon prevail against him, like a king prepared to the battle.

We are safe from the lions in the way of duty, and never safe when we avoid it. Lions, when they met David feeding his sheep, were torn in pieces by him like kids. A lion unexpectedly came upon that young man of the sons of prophets, who declined his duty when he was commanded to smite his neighbour, and rent him in pieces.

Ver. 14. If you will believe the fond admirer of the strange woman, her cheeks and lips are like the roses and lilies, her eyes are like stars, and her mouth drops honey. But if you will believe Solomon, speaking from the mouth of God, her mouth, and every thing about her that charms the hearts of men, is like a deep ditch, made for catching the unwary passenger, and all her flatteries and blandishments are so many traps and snares, set by the devil to catch men, that he may take them captive and keep them fast till their doom becomes irreversible as his own. Solomon had discoursed at great length on this point, in the beginning of the book, but young men need to be frequently put in mind of it.

They are unhappy that fall into this ditch, for it is a proof of the Lord's heavy displeasure, when men are suffered to fall into it, and therefore, in order to be preserved from this danger, it is necessary for us, not only to observe the precepts of God, levelled against the sin of uncleanness, but to observe the whole system of divine precepts, because God may suffer us to fall into this sin, to punish us for others. The heathens were given up to it, as Paul tells us, for their idolatry. They had dishonoured God by their vain imaginations and their abominable worship, and God in justice suffered them to dishonour their own bodies, and to make themselves brutes, as they had represented God himself by the images of brutes.

Have we been left to fall into this sin? Our situation is very dangerous, for nothing less than divine power can raise us out of this ditch; and how can we expect miracles of divine power to be exerted in our behalf, when we have drawn upon ourselves the sore displeasure of the Lord? But our situation is not altogether desperate, for miracles of mercy have often been performed by the Lord. Let us acknowledge his justice, and humble ourselves under the tokens of his displeasure, and look to him with earnest expectation and ardent cries, till he raise us up out of the deep pit, and set our feet upon a rock.

Ver. 15. Men generally use children like play-things, and divert themselves with their childish tricks and follies; but there is another kind of foolishness in children, that is too serious and mournful to be the subject of sport. Sin is the very essence of folly, and sin dwells in young and old, and none of the children of Adam, except him that was, in a peculiar sense, the seed of the woman, could ever deny with truth, that he was shapen in iniquity and born in sin.

This foolishness dwells in the hearts of children, and makes their way froward and strange*, for the understanding is darkened, the will perverted, the affections sensualized, and the disposition rendered averse by it to every thing good, and turned to evil. It is bound in the heart by cords that no man can loose, and twines to it like ivy to the walls of a house. It is not more natural for a man to breathe, than for a child of Adam to violate the law of the Lord, and to covet forbidden fruit.

When parents rejoice with a fond heart over the fruit of their bodies, they should remember that they were the instruments of conveying a corrupt nature to their children, and be deeply concerned to have this mortal disease effectually cured. But how can this be effected? Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean; or who can say that he has made either his own heart or any other person's clean? God only can loose the bonds of sin, and drive foolishness away from the heart, and therefore his grace must be sought for this end. But whilst his favour is earnestly supplicated, the methods appointed by his wisdom are to be used with a dependence on his blessing. Parents ought to join correction to instruction, and to use it as an appointment of God, on which his blessing may be expected. The rod of correction shall drive this foolishness far from the child, and he is a cruel parent that loves the ease of his son more than his soul, and would rather see him grow up in folly, than endure those painful feelings which compassionate parents suffer, when they are scourging the son whom they love.

Ver. 16. Sin pays its servants very bad wages, for it gives them the very reverse of what it promised. Whilst the sin of oppression or injustice promises mountains of gold, it brings them poverty and ruin. "Shalt thou reign because thou closest thyself in cedar?" said the prophet to Jehoiakim. It could not be, for he used his neighbour's service without wages, and gave him nought for his work. There is a flying roll of curses which enters into the house of the thief and the oppressor, which consumes it with the timber and stones of it. Injuries done to the poor are sorely resented by the God of mercy, who is the poor man's friend, and will break in pieces his oppressor. The threatenings of God against the robbers of the poor are sometimes laughed at by the rich and great, but they will find them in due time to be awful realities*.

But if the oppression of the poor is an impoverishing sin, will not liberality make a man rich? True liberality, exercised to proper objects, will. But not that which is exercised to the rich. Some give to the rich for the same reason as they oppress the poor. They propose to gain the favour of the great, and to receive tenfold for every present they make, and so they expect to be soon rich. But he that giveth to the rich with these views shall surely come to want. If he would give to the poor he might have an hundred-fold, but he has only God's word for that, and rather chooses to trust the generosity of rich men; but when they see the trick, they are on their guard, and will pay with scorn the man that designed to impose on them with deceitful professions of regard.

It is plain from reason, as well as Scripture, that it is not always a sin to give to the rich, but it is very often a sin; and that, not only when men are in danger of hurting their families, or wronging their creditors by it, but likewise when they give those superfluities to the rich, which are due to the poor. We are not proprietors but stewards of the gifts of providence, and must distribute that which he has entrusted to our care according to his will. And it is his pleasure that we should make to ourselves friends, by the mammon of unrighteousness, not of the rich but the poor*.

Ver. 17. It signifies nothing to speak to a man that is sleeping or inattentive, and yet we are often inattentive when we hear the word of God, especially the precepts of it, which we are too ready to look upon as an heavy burden, and a grievous yoke. Solomon was well acquainted with the heart of man, and knowing how many would read or hear his excellent precepts without bestowing proper attention on them, he rouses us by frequent calls for our most earnest heed to the things that are spoken.

We must bow down our ears to hear him with attention, reverence, and humility. The words of the wise deserve this regard from us, for they are means of communicating their wisdom to us. And if the words of wise men merit so much respect, we can never attend too earnestly to the words of the only wise God. He made our ears and shall he not be heard by us?

Our hearts must be applied, as well as our ears, to the knowledge contained in this book. We should labour to understand it with our minds, to fix it in our judgments, to impress it on our consciences, to have it treasured up in our memories that it may be constantly ready for our use. God requires us to give him our hearts, and if we only lend an ear to him, we render him only a little bodily service. The word of God is very pleasant, and the sweetness of it is relished when it enters into the heart.

Ver. 18. Honey from the comb is sweet to the taste, but all the words of God are sweet to the soul. Wine gives a pleasant refreshment to the faint and thirsty, but the truths of Scripture are sweeter than wine, for they give refreshment to the inner man. Shall we value those things that are delightful to the organs of taste, and yet despise those pleasures that fill the soul with heart-felt satisfaction? Shall every joy be pursued with eagerness, and that only contemned which arises from the word of God? Do you say, you never received any pleasure from the word of God, and that an entertaining history gives you more entertainment than any thing that Solomon has said? The reason is too obvious. Solomon tells you that the words of instruction are pleasant to a man when they are kept within him. It was a severe reflection, which Christ made upon the Jews, my word hath no place in you. The same may be made, with too much reason, upon those that taste not the sacred joys of the Bible.

As the word of God is pleasant to the relish of a saint, so its dwelling in the heart is attended with happy consequences, for it shall be fitted in the lips. The knowledge of truth will supply the lips with wisdom, and enable them to talk with discretion and judgment. A talent of speaking with propriety, and wisdom on any subject, is a great ornament to him that has it, and enables him to be useful to others; but it must be founded on knowledge, for how can any man communicate that knowledge which he does not possess. But clear and distinct apprehensions of things, will always enable a man to speak of them with ease and plainness, to others.

The application of the heart to the words that have been spoken to us, will also tend to encourage our confidence in God.

Ver. 19, 20. The chief design of this book, is to instruct us in every duty that we owe to God and man; and confidence in God is a fundamental duty, without which we can perform nothing aright. Solomon calls sinners, in the beginning of the book, to return unto God, depending on his mercy, according to his promise. He directs us about believing in Christ, and in God his father who set him up from everlasting*. He expressly enjoins us to trust in the Lord with all our heart, and to renounce all self-confidence†. And the whole strain of his proverbs, wherein he constantly insists on the advantages of righteousness, and the misery that follows vice, encourages us to commit our souls in well-doing unto God. Confidence in God, is our shield against temptations, and the means of deriving from God through Christ all the supplies of grace needful for our assistance and support in the ways of holiness; and every thing said in this book, when it is duly considered, will contribute to strengthen our trust, as well as to direct our practice.

That our trust in God may be encouraged, and our steps directed, we must read and hear this book with application to ourselves. "I have made known to thee, even to thee," says the inspired penman. It is God that speaks, and he speaks to each of us in particular, and we ought to receive what is said into our hearts, believing that the word of exhortation speaketh to us in particular, as really as if it had been written for our own use, without a view to any other person in the world. Till we hear the word as the word of God, and as his word addressed unto us, we hear it not with due regard.

God hath not only spoken, but likewise written unto us by Solomon. "Receive I pray thee," said Eliphaz to Job, "the law at his mouth, and lay up his word in thine heart." Job did so, for he esteemed the words of God's mouth more than his necessary food. Did the holy men pay such reverence to the word of God, when there was no scripture, and shall we shew less regard to it, when God has been graciously pleased to write unto us the great things of his law and covenant.

The things that are written are not only words of truth, but excellent and princely things, worthy to be written by the wisest of men, by inspiration of the spirit of wisdom. God refers it to our own judgments, whether they are not excellent. If we discern not their excellency we are blind and stupid. They have an excellency that far surpasses the most valued objects upon earth. Their value lies not in a glittering appearance, like gold, and silver, and diamonds, nor in affording entertainment to a curious mind, like a well written history, but in affording counsel, to make us prudent in all manner of behaviour, and in giving us knowledge, to enrich the mind with the most precious truths. To be wise, to understand our way to heaven, to know God and his Son Jesus Christ, and the acceptable and perfect will of God, are excellent attainments; and the things written in this book are of excellent use to assist us in acquiring them.

To have the judgment settled about the great things that are intimately connected with our best interests, is another benefit to be derived from a due attention to this book.

Ver. 21. If a man has a cause depending before a court of law, wherein his all is concerned; he will certainly be anxious to know what lawyers he may most safely trust, and what are the surest means of obtaining an happy event to the suit. Religion is our all, and it is a criminal sluggishness and stupidity in men, to be careless whether they are rightly instructed in it or not. Our teachers have instructed us in the principles which they themselves believe, and ministers teach us, every Sabbath, those doctrines which are professed in the church to which they belong. We believe that their instructions are sound and good, but on what ground do we believe this? We do not believe in the infallibility of any particular church, and we must have better warrant for a right faith, than the testimony of men. This and other books in Scripture, were written to establish us in the truth, by shewing us whether that is the true doctrine of God wherein we stand. We have not a sure hold of the truths of God, unless we are sure that they are the truths of God, and we can be assured of this only by the Scripture. A scriptural knowledge, will preserve us from being like children tossed to and

fro with every wind of doctrine, of which we are in constant danger whilst we are unacquainted with the Scripture, although we had the knowledge of every truth in our religion, by instruction from men.

But there is still another great advantage arising from a serious regard to this book. By establishing our minds in the truth, it will enable us to satisfy others that send to us for information about the principles of truth and duty. Men were not born for themselves only, we are members one of another, and Ought to consult the good of the body, and of other members of it besides ourselves. As men, when they perform the duties of their callings, are useful members of civil society, so if we live as becometh saints, and seek after the knowledge of the truth, we will be useful members of the church of Christ, ready to give an answer to every one that asketh us a reason of our faith and hope, to instruct the ignorant, to satisfy the doubts of the scrupulous, and to fix those that waver.

Such are the pleasures and advantages to be found in the book of God, and in the Book of Proverbs in particular. He has gained every point, says an heathen poet, who has mingled the pleasant and the useful together. These attractives of the soul are nowhere joined together with such exquisite skill as in the word of God; and if we read it with a superficial eye, and hear it with an inattentive mind, we despise not men but God. We despise him, when he is employing all the methods of divine condescension and wisdom to recommend his truths to our hearts. O let it not be said, that we give a patient hearing to all that speak to us, except only to him, to whom we are indebted for the faculty of hearing and understanding any thing He that hath an ear, let him hear the great things which the Spirit of God speaks unto men.

Solomon now proceeds in his directions about the conduct of our life. His following proverbs, are generally expressed at greater length than the foregoing ones, for under the direction of infinite wisdom, he solicits our attention, by every method of address.

Ver. 22. The gate was in ancient times, amongst the eastern nations, the place of judgment, and therefore this instruction is to be understood to respect judges. They are forbidden to take advantage of the friendless and indigent circumstances of the poor and afflicted, to oppress them by perverting justice in favour to the rich. The Scripture forbids us to countenance a poor man in his cause, but it is far worse, and more ordinary, and therefore more frequently forbidden, to oppress a poor man in judgment.

This is a crying sin, which contains, together with injustice, the most unmerciful cruelty, and is a plain evidence of an inhuman and cowardly disposition. This was one of the sins for which Eliphaz guessed that Job's calamities had come upon him; but that good man was of a very opposite spirit. He did justice to all men, but to the poor he was merciful as well as just. "If I have lifted up mine hand against the fatherless," says he, "when I saw mine help in the gate, then let mine arm fall from my shoulder blade, and mine arm be broken from the bone."

Not to relieve the poor and afflicted, when we can do it without injury to ourselves, is hard: to oppress them, and add to their affliction, is brutal and monstrous. It is to act not like men, but like the monsters of the desert, which prey upon the weaker animals. For magistrates to be guilty of this crime, is a perversion of an institution of God into an engine of abominable wickedness.

If poor men had rich friends to plead their cause, or avenge their injuries, men would not rob them because they are poor. Well, they have a friend that will plead their cause; and break in pieces their oppressors. If a great man should take the part of a poor man, he would reckon himself safe, but God is infinitely greater than any man, and here it is declared that he will be the advocate and avenger of the poor and oppressed.

Ver. 23. He pleads their cause with admirable eloquence in his word. "What mean ye, that ye beat my people to pieces, and grind the faces of the poor?" saith the Lord God of Hosts. Who can answer such pleadings as these? However, they are but words, and bad men look upon words to be but wind. But God will plead the cause of the poor, by furious rebukes of providence also. He will render unto their oppressors severe vengeance for their wickedness. Have they rifled the poor of their little all? God will rifle the oppressor, not only of his substance, but of his life and soul. The robber of the poor is a poor unhappy creature. It is terrible to have the justice of God engaged against a man, but this is the unhappy case of the spoiler. He may obtain a temporary success in his extortions, but when he makes an end of spoiling, he must be spoiled. He has the mercy of God against him, as well as his justice. Mercy is that pleasant attribute of the divine nature, on which all the hopes of sinners must rest; but the mercy of God is engaged on the side of the poor and afflicted, against their persecutors. Mercy and justice meet together in this text, and make it both a promise and a threatening. What a terrible case is it, to have grace itself turned into a terror, and to be under the wrath of God because he is merciful. Yet such is the actual condition of those, whose conduct is a contradiction at once to the rules of justice and mercy. It shall come to pass, says God, that when the oppressed cries unto me, I will hear, for I am gracious*.

Let the mercy implied in this declaration, encourage the poor and afflicted to make God their refuge. Your tyrants may look upon these words as empty threatenings, which shall never have effect, but it would be a very ungrateful return in you for so much goodness, to consider them in the same light. The words of God whereby he encourages the needy, are pure words, they are like silver seven times purified*. Have you such a glorious advocate? commit your cause to him, with meekness, in imitation of our great example. Make no unconscientious compliances to avoid oppression, and take no unjustifiable steps to preserve yourselves, but trust to your great advocate, who stands at the right hand of the poor to deliver him†.

Ver. 24. Friendship is the balm of life, when it is entered into with discretion, but it is a plague and a snare, when it is injudiciously contracted. Our divine teacher wishes us to be happy both in this world and the next, and extends his instructions to every thing that is connected with our happiness. He forbids us to enter into friendship with any bad man, and here he cautions us particularly against the friendship of the passionate. We must not so much as keep company with angry men, nor take a walk with them, if we can possibly avoid it. But what will be the great evil of making friendship with a man of this temper?

Ver. 25. Is there any danger of learning that man's ways who makes himself so very disagreeable? No doubt there is, if we love him.

We are either like our friends, or will soon be like them. Conversation has a mighty influence upon our manners, and evil communication corrupts good manners: When we see bad things practised by those we love, the horror of them abates, and we are insensibly drawn to the practice of them.

But if we make passionate men our friends and companions, we are in great danger of becoming like to them, on another account. Although we should be good-natured, yet their unreasonable behaviour will be apt, on many occasions, to set our temper on fire, and from occasional bursts of passion, we may be led by degrees to contract obstinate habits of falling into a passion, on every trifling occasion; for custom is produced by frequent acts, and in time becomes a second nature.

Thus we are in danger of being ensnared into sins of fatal consequence to our souls, for although anger is not always a sin, yet to be under the government of imperious passions, is very sinful and very dangerous*.

Our lives may be exposed to danger, if we walk with furious men. When Cain walked with Abel in the field, his furious passions subdued his reason and his natural affection, and he slew his brother. There have been many Cains in the world, who have wounded or slain their friends by the impulse of fury. But if we should escape this danger, yet by contracting an habit of being angry, our tongues may in time become rebels to reason, and bring down mischief on our heads.

Consider this proverb, ye that give a loose to your passions. Perhaps you suppose that you have good qualities to atone for this bad one. But you are quite mistaken. The meaning of this instruction is plainly this, that no good qualities should induce us to enter into friendship with an angry man. It is taken for granted, that a passionate man may have some qualities that would engage esteem, if they were separated from this wretched temper, for otherwise no person would be in danger of contracting an intimacy with a furious man. But it is plainly asserted, that these qualities in conjunction with such a temper, forfeit their claim on our friendship. Don't you see, then, that your miserable temper casts a shade over every thing that might otherwise adorn you, and that you are fit only for a desert, where you can disquiet none but yourselves. God himself is so much displeased with you, that he will suffer none that will take his advice to be intimate with you, or so much as to keep your company. Fly then to his mercy for pardon, and implore the exertions of his power, to subdue your ungovernable passions. Let your souls be impressed with the example of our meek Redeemer, and watch over your spirits, that you may not again disturb the peace of society, and deserve to be sent forth to dwell among the beasts of the desert.

Ver. 26. Solomon has already said much against rash surety-ship*; but bad examples have a greater influence upon many people, than good precepts, and because many others make little scruple of putting their name to a bond for another man, we are in danger of being seduced into the same dangerous practice; but before we follow any man's example in any thing, we should observe what the event of it is likely to be. If other men do bad things, and smart for it, it will be no motive to a wise man to run into the same error. Let us at least consider one thing, in this case: Suppose the principal debtor should prove unable to pay the creditor, will we be cheerfully willing to take his place, or are we sure that we will be able, if called upon, to pay his debt? We are rich at present, but we know not whether we will be rich or poor at the day of payment. And,

Ver. 27. You may say, it will never come to this. The law of Christ will not suffer the creditor, to exercise such rigour, if I should be unable to pay. How do you know that? Are you sure that the creditor, and his heirs, and executors, will not depart, in any instance of conduct from the law of Christ, when their interest pushes them, and the laws of the land will bear them out.

Religion, you see, allows and requires us to pay a proper attention to our own interest and comfort. It requires no instances of self-denial, but such as are more for our own interest than self-gratification in those instances would be. It does not forbid us to love ourselves, when it requires us to love our neighbours as ourselves. Indeed, we cannot hurt ourselves, for the most part, without hurting some other men also. What can we do for the poor, for our families, for our friends, if our bed is taken away from beneath us? A philosopher, when he saw a generous young man spending his substance too liberally upon one that pretended great poverty, told him, that "perhaps the man he was serving was an honest man, but he was certain that he himself was honest; and therefore," added he, "you are doing an unjust thing, for you are ruining an honest man, for one that is, for aught you know, a rogue."

Ver. 28. Naboth would not sell the inheritance which his father had left him, when he was offered a very good price; but there are some who have so little respect for their fathers that they will remove, if possible, the land mark which their fathers have set, and so little regard for justice, at the same time, that they intend to give no price at all for what they add to their estate by such unjustifiable means.

It may be alleged by the covetous, that our fathers were under a mistake about the just bounds of their inheritance. Could that be proved to the satisfaction of the other party concerned, or to the conviction of the judge, it would be a good plea. But this can seldom be done. If ancient usage and prescription be not allowed as a good claim to property, nations might soon be convulsed and broken in pieces.

Land marks are means of preserving peace, as well as maintaining justice, and therefore the removing of them is a breach both of peace and honesty. It is so great a sin that a solemn curse was pronounced against it from Mount Ebal*.

It is above three thousand years since this curse was pronounced, and we learn from it that land marks were a very ancient mean of distinguishing property; that it is the will of God that men should know what is their own, and that every unrighteous invasion of another man's property, is an abomination to him.

Ver. 29. To be a busy body in other men's matters is a scandal, but it is a pleasant sight to behold a man diligent in his own business†.

Some persons look upon the slothful, not to receive instruction, as Solomon did from the sight of his work, but to take encouragement to themselves, in following his example, or in being only a little better than he is. They would not choose to be the greatest sluggards in the world, but if they can name a man more slothful than themselves, they think that no man is entitled to censure them. Solomon directs us, on the contrary, to look upon the industrious man, that we may be excited by the advantages which he gains by his labour, to go and do likewise.

Such a man shall stand before kings. This does not imply, that every man who deserves this character can expect the honour of being appointed to the high offices of state, but it points out to us that great activity is necessary in the servants of kings, and that great activity in private stations is the way of obtaining honour and advancement. If other kings were as wise as Solomon, this proverb would be oftener verified in the letter of it, for he advanced Jeroboam to the charge of the house of Joseph, because he saw that he was an active man. That Pharaoh, who reigned in the days of Joseph, would have none to rule over his cattle that was not a man of activity.

If the diligent man does not obtain the honour of standing before kings, his industry, with God's blessing, will, for the most part, preserve him from the disgrace of standing before mean men.

Some women, by their industry, joined with other virtues, have obtained the honour of an alliance with the noblest families, of which Rebecca and Ruth are famous instances.

If we are diligent in our spiritual business, the advantage will be vastly greater*. Let us watch, then, and pray always, that we may be accounted worthy to escape those miseries which shall come upon the wicked, and to stand before the Son of Man†.

CHAPTER 23

Verse. 1. WE must add to our faith virtue, and to virtue knowledge, and to knowledge temperance. Temperance is to be preserved at all times, and to be guarded in a special manner when we are called to eat with a ruler; for then is the trial of this virtue, and in a time of trial we are in great danger of falling, unless we consider the temptation, and watch against it.

We ought, therefore, to consider diligently the plenty, the variety, the delicacy of the dishes that are served at the great man's table, the danger of being drawn to intemperance, and the abominableness and danger of that vice.

Ver. 2. A man given to appetite is in great danger of running to excess on such an occasion; for his fleshly lust within, and the well-spread table before him, combine to betray him; and men's consciences are too often so lax, as to think that the laws of temperance are to be dispensed with, when there is a fair opportunity, and a strong temptation to break them.

A man of a sensual and gluttonous disposition ought to mortify his appetite. Gluttony is a great sin, as well as drunkenness. "Take heed," says our Lord, "lest your hearts be overcharged with gluttony and drunkenness, and the cares of this life." If the disciples of Christ were under obligation to guard against this sin, although they sat almost always at mean men's tables, what need have those to take heed, who are admitted to entertainments where every thing concurs to solicit their appetite, and to throw them off their guard.

"But it will be very painful," says the glutton, "to deny my craving appetite, when it is so strongly solicited. It will be as uneasy to abstain, as to have a knife stuck in my throat." Be it so, better to have a knife in your throat than to have your soul betrayed by it to sensual indulgence. Is not affliction rather to be chosen than sin? Is it not better to pluck out a right eye, or to cut off a right hand, than to be betrayed by them to pleasant sins?

This verse is rendered by some interpreters, "Thou hast put a knife to thy throat, if thou art a man given to appetite." Sensual gratifications are prejudicial to the body, as well as the soul, and are the frequent causes of sickness, and weakness, and death. It has been often said, that the throat has killed more people than the sword.

Ver. 3. His dainties have a good appearance to the eye, and they are delicious to the taste, and powerfully tempt an ungoverned appetite; but remember that the forbidden fruit did the same, and yet the eating of it "brought death into the world, and all our woe." When you see a number of dishes of very different kinds, think with yourself, "Here are fevers, and agues, and gouts, in disguise. Here are snares and traps spread along the table to catch my soul, and draw me into sin. Sense gives a good report of this plenty, but reason and religion tell me to take heed, for it is deceitful meat."

His meat is deceitful in another view. The ruler himself has no generous or friendly intention in treating you. He makes great professions of kindness and regard, and the civilities of a ruler open the heart, and put a man off his guard. His real design very probably is, to pump out some secret from you, or to gain you by his flattering caresses to some mean or sinful compliance with his pleasure. Such are the ends designed, and too often effected, by means of those feasts that are given at the elections of members of parliament, and on some other public occasions of the like nature. It is often difficult, if we attend them, to return as independent Britons, and as temperate Christians as we went.

Ver. 4. To be rich has been the lot of many saints; and when God bestows riches upon us, we are not required to throw them into the sea, as a certain old philosopher did; but when God denies us riches, we must not reckon ourselves unhappy on that account. Solomon often speaks of riches as a reward that wisdom frequently bestows on those who love her, but here he cautions us against supposing that wisdom encourages the love of riches—that universal passion which has been so mischievous to the human race,

since the beginning of the world.

In our fallen condition, we must labour and sweat for our subsistence; but that kind of labour is useful to the body, and not prejudicial to the mind. The labour after riches here forbidden, is exceedingly hurtful to both. It arises from an immoderate esteem of present things, and an aspiring mind. It is joined with a distrust of God's providence, and an hurry and distraction of men's thoughts, which renders them unfit for the service of God. It destroys all relish for the comforts of life, that might be enjoyed at present, and is a continual incentive to unmerciful and unjust behaviour. It is a pity that we do not more attentively consider the alarming things that are said by our Lord, and the apostle Paul, on this subject*.

But you will say, money is a necessary and an excellent thing. It keeps a man from want and dependence; it raises him to dignity and consequence; it furnishes every thing that is desirable in life. But cease from thine own wisdom, which is not the wisdom from above, but that earthly, sensual, and devilish wisdom so greatly condemned in the Scripture. Money, under the direction of wisdom, will indeed serve all these purposes, and some others too, of far greater value. But the love of money is not merely a bad thing, but the root of all evil, and a confidence in money is very foolish thing.

Ver. 5. Wilt thou let thine eyes fly upon money with eager joy? Thou shalt soon see them fly away never to return.

To look at other men's money with covetous desires, and an admiration of the happiness of the possessor—to look upon our own money with rapturous delight, because our hand has gotten much, is to make to ourselves gods of gold, as the ancient Israelites did, and to give them the worship of the soul, and therefore covetousness is called idolatry; and to rejoice in money more than in God, is to say to the gold, Thou art our hope, and to the fine gold, Thou art our confidence.

It is foolish, as well as sinful, to set our eyes and our hearts on riches. Will a man set his eyes upon a mere nothing? But what does Solomon mean by calling them so? Does not their splendour shew that they are true substance? It must be confessed that they are very glittering nothings, but so are bubbles upon the water, when they shine with the rays of the sun, which make them to glare for a moment, but don't hinder them from vanishing the next. Our Lord tells us that they are not the true riches, and that a man's life does not consist in the abundance of them. The wise preacher has written a book to prove, that they are the very vanity of vanities. Philosophers in every age have declaimed in proof of this point, and all men are sensible of its truth at the season when the eyes of men are forced open to the sight of truth.

But in this passage Solomon means the uncertainty of riches. They are not, for they fly away out of sight never to return. They are mine to-day, they were another man's yesterday, they will be yours to-morrow, and whither they shall have flown in a few weeks, we cannot tell.

But how do they get away? They make to themselves wings. Whilst you sit brooding upon them, they are fledging; and although you should try, by bills and bonds, and bars, and bolts, to clip their wings, you will not be able to hinder their elopement; and when you think to recover them, you are often making wings to what is left you. The eagle is the swiftest of birds, and with the swiftness of an eagle they mount up towards heaven, and receive their commission to whom they should next go. Doth the eagle fly by thy command, or canst thou bring him back, like the hawk, to thy lure? As little can you recover those riches of which Divine Providence has bereaved you.

Those who place their happiness on worldly wealth, build their foundation on a flood poured out, as some render Job 22:16. Their joy is short, and dashed with a large infusion of fear and vexation. Their disappointment is certain; their end is dreadful: for those who mind earthly things above heavenly things, are enemies of the cross of Christ, and their end is destruction; but true Christians seek for the true riches, their conversation is in heaven, and their treasure is in a place where there is no moth nor rust, nor any of those feathers which compose the eagle wings of riches, with which they flee away*.

Ver. 6. The Scripture directs us about the choice of occasional companions, as well as friends. There are some persons whom we must not receive into our houses, and there are some to whose houses we are forbidden to repair, or to sit at their tables. We are not, on every occasion, forbidden to eat with a ruler, although his dainties are generally deceitful meat; nor are we absolutely forbidden to feast with heathens and bad men†. But we are forbidden to eat at the table of him that has an evil eye, although it should be covered with dainty meat, and his words full of kindness.

A selfish and churlish disposition discovers itself in the eye, so that the miser declares his character against his will. Perhaps, through shame, he endeavours to hide his churlish disposition under the mask of a plentiful entertainment; but his malignity peeps through his eyes, which betray him in spite of all that he can say or do; for nature abhors dissimulation, and often detects it.

But why must we not eat his bread, nor partake of his dainties? Because it is not the quality of the food, that you are to consider, but the disposition of the company, and especially of the entertainer.

Ver. 7. It is not a man's words and professions that must determine his character, and direct our correspondence with him, but the disposition of his heart, which is often discovered by the general course of a man's behaviour, to be very different from what he would have men to believe it is. A man that rolls in his mind impious thoughts of God, is a wicked man, however good his words may be, and a man that indulges a selfish disposition is unfit to be a companion or a friend, although he invites you to his table, and never ceases, when you are there, to tell you how welcome you are, and how earnestly he wishes you to eat and drink.

You see how vain it is for men, to pretend that kindness which they do not feel. They are discovered more easily than they imagine, and the professions they make are means of rendering their dissimulation more evident; for true kindness delights not in many words.

Let men then either be what they profess, loving not in word nor in tongue, but in deed and in truth, or else let them lay aside the

profession of what they are not, for it is idle to add the guilt and shame of hypocrisy, to that of a sordid and selfish disposition. But when that which is set on his table is full of fatness, may we not make a very delicious meal, and pay him for it, to his satisfaction, by agreeable conversation? No.

Ver. 8. Men often think it a noble piece of diversion, to sponge upon a miser, and to take advantage of an invitation extorted from him by shame, to prey upon every thing that is in his house; but Solomon teaches us that this diversion will end in vexation. Thou mayest eat the morsel with pleasure, but thou shalt repent of eating it, as much as if thou hadst vomited it up. All thy agreeable or useful conversation is lost upon him, and he is so far from thinking it a proper recompense for the expense he has bestowed upon thee, that he will endeavour to extort some thing in return, which it may be very inconvenient to grant, and yet when thou refusest, he will brand thee with the character of the ungrateful guest.

When we are called by God to a feast of fat things, and hear his blessed voice calling us to eat that which is good, and let our souls delight themselves in fatness, we may safely venture, at the gracious invitation, to make use of Christ, and the blessings of his salvation, as our own; to suspect the sincerity of the gospel call, is to suspect the God who is abundant in goodness and truth of an evil eye.

Ver. 9. A fool cannot utter wisdom, but there might be good hopes entertained of him, if he could hear it; but there are many fools, who are equally unfit to speak and to hear. Concerning such, this direction is given, and not concerning fools of every kind, for there are some that want wisdom, and have some conviction of the want of it, and these are on the road that leads to wisdom, the first step of which is to become a fool in one's own eyes.

The fools to whom we are forbidden to speak the words of wisdom, are those that will despise the wisdom of our words, and even these are sometimes to be dealt with by those that have a call, by their office or church connexion, to do so, even after they have refused admonition; for the souls of men are precious, and if there is some hope, though faint, of doing them good, we must not decline the disagreeable task of reprovers*.

Our Lord orders the gospel to be preached to every one that will hear it, not excepting scorers*. But he will not have his gospel forced on those that obstinately reject it†. He himself left the Gadarenes, when they preferred their swine to him, and the Nazarenes, when they wanted to destroy him.

Although the worst of sinners are to be invited to repentance, in the public assembly, yet there are some to whom our Lord tells us, it is needless and unsafe to administer personal reproofs. These are the dogs and swine that would trample our pearls under their feet, and turn again and rend us. How pitiable is the case of such persons, when our Lord himself directs us to give them up to themselves.

Those that are reproved by ministers, and Christian friends, may learn from this verse, that they have no reason to take it amiss, or to think that they are treated with contempt. They are considered as offenders, but at the same time as offending brethren, who are not incurably perverse. They would be treated in a very different way, and might reckon themselves with more justice, to be considered in the light of scorers, and dogs, and swine, if there were no means used to recover them to repentance.

Ver. 10. May we then remove other people's land marks, and enter into their fields? By no means, but there is less danger of that. Wicked men are afraid to do any injury to those who have it in their power to retaliate, or powerful friends to espouse their quarrel. Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father, is this, to visit the fatherless, and the widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world. And yet there are none so ready to be trampled upon, in this evil world, as the fatherless and widows. But let the poor and fatherless commit themselves to God, and the widows trust in him, and he will make their adversaries to know, that the mightiest on earth are not more dangerous to be meddled with, than themselves.

Ver. 11. He that meddles with the widow and fatherless, needs better armour than he that touches the sons of Belial, who must be fenced with iron and brass. God himself hath undertaken their defence, and dare we provoke the Lord to jealousy, are we stronger than he? He graciously calls himself their kinsman or Redeemer. They have lost the best of earthly friends. But there is one in heaven who calls them to trust in him, as their husband and father, their Redeemer and advocate. He hath promised to supply their wants, and protect them from every enemy. Their enemies set themselves in opposition to God, and endeavour to make him a liar, by frustrating his promises, but they do it at their peril.

Perhaps those that oppress the widow and fatherless, may allege that God is the Redeemer only of his own people, and that the poor and fatherless, whom they oppress are none of them. To this it may be answered, that God executeth righteousness and judgment for all that are oppressed. He is the great lover of righteousness and mercy, and the avenger of all that are unrighteous and unmerciful. One part of the office of the kinsman redeemer under the law, was to avenge the mischiefs done to his poor friend; and this part of it God will perform for all that are oppressed, without exception, so that the oppressor will feel the terrors of the threatening contained in this declaration, although the fatherless and the widows through their unbelief, should lose the comforts of that grace, which is discovered in it. But how do you know, O ye presumptuous opposers of God's mercy to the poor, that those whom you wrong are not God's people? Can you know the hearts of men? If you can do this, can you also look into the heart of God, and into the book of life, to know who are the objects of his special favour? How do you know but God may choose those whom you afflict, in the furnace of affliction. The oppressors of Judah, said, we offend not, for they have sinned against the Lord, the habitation of justice, and the hope of their fathers; yet for their sakes, he sent to Babylon, and brought down the Chaldeans and their nobles, whose cry was in their ships. He thoroughly pleaded their cause, for he had chosen them in the furnace of affliction. And the vengeance of the Lord, and of his temple, was upon Babylon and Edom, and Ammon, and all that had afflicted them*.

Here the widow and the fatherless, may find comfort under every injury, and instruction how to derive the greatest advantages out of the greatest wrongs, by making use of the injustice of the enemy, as a motive to flee to God as their Redeemer, and a plea in their supplications for help†.

Ver. 12. This direction is often repeated, but there is need for it: too often we hear as if we heard not. An hour or two passes after we have been reading a chapter, or hearing a discourse on one of the most important subjects, and scarcely a trace of it is left upon our minds. I have read of a minister, who was preaching a sermon on the day of judgment, and the awful truths which he delivered made such an impression on the audience, that they all appeared to be alarmed, but the preacher told them that he had something yet to tell them more awful than any thing he had said, that in two hours they would be as little affected with these things, as if they had not heard them; which accordingly proved to be the case.

Let us take heed that we be not found among those of whom it is said, that the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it, for the word will not be a means of salvation to us, unless it is received with meekness, and ingrafted into our souls*.

Ver. 13, 14. Parents are here required, to give due correction to their children, with their own hands, and not to entrust that office entirely to others; at the same time they are forbidden to withhold it from them, even when they are under the care of others. If teachers are employed to instruct them, they must have the power of correcting likewise, and no offence must be taken at them for using it. Parents would take it amiss, if any thing they thought necessary for their children, was withheld from them by those under whose care they are placed; and what is more necessary than correction? The world will think that man cruel, who does not give food and raiment to his child, but Solomon looks upon him also to be a cruel man, who does not give needful correction.

But the fond hearts of parents will suggest several objections to this duty. They cannot bear the cries and sobs of their children; they are afraid they will die under their hands. There is no fear of this, answers the wise man, they only wish to frighten you by their complaints. They shall not die but live. Beat them with the rod, for it is one of the means that God has appointed for delivering them from an untimely death in this world, and destruction in the next. What an idea does this give us, of the usefulness of the rod of correction! What parent that loves his child, and has any sense of the terrors of eternal punishment, will spare his rod, after he has heard this saying of God? Would you not force your children to suffer bleeding by the surgeon, if you saw it necessary for the preservation of their lives, and are their souls less precious than their bodies? You think that gentle means are always the best, but does not God tell you that this does not hold in every case? No doubt Eli and David wished well to their children, and their parental fondness told them that gentle admonitions and time, would correct all the disorders in their families. But they mourned at last over these children, that had been so much hurt by their indulgence. Whether the disorders in David's family, were the occasion of Solomon's making so many proverbs on this subject, I shall not say, but after what he has said, and after what Eli and David suffered, those parents that perform not this duty, are more inexcusable than these good men were*.

Your children may perhaps complain of your severity, when there is no ground for it. But this is easier to be borne, than it would be to hear them curse you, at the last day, for suffering them to take their course in sin.

Ver. 15, 16. Solomon was a wise father, and had the same wishes for his son as for himself. He did not greatly mind whether he was to be very rich or not, but his main concern was, that he might be wise; for he knew that if he was a fool, the riches he was to leave him would do him no good*.

Parents may form a judgment of their own dispositions, from their wishes about their children. Worldly men make it their great work to provide those things for their children, which they account their own best things. Saints desire above all things, that the hearts of their children may be richly furnished with wisdom, and that their lips may speak right things; for the heart is the throne of wisdom, and by the lips she discovers her possession of that throne. Those that are evil cannot ordinarily speak good things, and the lips will undoubtedly speak good things, when there is a good treasure in the heart.

Language cannot express the cordial joys that a wise parent feels, from the wise and good behaviour of a son; and when parents enjoy this blessing, let them consider, to heighten their joy and thankfulness, the smart that others have felt from the undutifulness and folly of their children. It seems probable that Solomon was taught by painful experience, to speak so feelingly of the joys of happy fathers. Rehoboam was far from being his father's son, yet his father did not give him up as desperate. He was a fool, but who knows, said his father, whether he shall be a wise man or a fool, when I am dead†. Let parents use every means recommended by God, for making their children wise. Then shall their souls be glad, and their reins rejoice, in the happy effect of their endeavours, or at least in the consciousness of having done their duty. It is likely that Rehoboam received at last some benefit from the instructions of his father, for he behaved so well during a part of his reign, that in Judah things went well.

Ver. 17. When we see the wicked flourishing in prosperity, and the people of God languishing under oppression, we are sometimes tempted to doubt, whether there is a providence, and whether the promises and threatenings of God be true or not, and to grudge that there is not a present distribution of rewards and punishments, according to the works of men. Unfit as we are for managing our own affairs, we are too much disposed to usurp God's office of governing the world; and if he does not shower down blessings into the lap of those whom we esteem, and fire and brimstone upon the head of the wicked, then we think that God cannot see things through the dark cloud, or is unfit to manage them. But we are here directed to banish envy from our hearts, and as an antidote to this mischievous passion, to be in the fear of the Lord continually.

Envy at sinners is a great enemy to the fear of the Lord. Asaph's feet had almost stumbled when he looked with a grudging eye at

the prosperous circumstances of transgressors; but by the fear of the Lord, he was preserved from falling, and was recovered from his dangerous situation; for a deep and heart-affecting impression of the infinite excellencies of the divine nature will silence our murmurings, and subdue the insurrections of our spirits. If we are deeply impressed with a sense of the righteousness and holiness of God, and of his wisdom and goodness, we will believe that his ways are all judgment, and that there can be no unrighteousness in his administration, even when we cannot discern the reasons of it. "Clouds and darkness are round about him, but righteousness and judgment are still the habitation of his throne*."

We are required to live in the fear of the Lord all the day long. Whether we are in prosperous or in adverse circumstances, and whether the wicked around us rise into affluence and power, or sink into insignificance and misery, an impression of God's perfection, and of the happiness that attends religion, and the misery that follows sin, must dwell upon our hearts, and govern our conduct. This fear of God will banish from our minds impious reflections upon God, and dispose us to keep his way, even when wicked men are in power, and threaten to banish all religion out of the world; for still we shall believe that it will be well with the righteous and ill with the wicked, perhaps in this world, but most certainly in the next*.

Ver. 18. If things were to continue in their present state through eternity, or if there were no eternity before us, much might be said for the wisdom of impiety, and the folly of religion; but reason and tradition give us probable arguments for a future state, and the Bible assures us of it. Job saw the prosperity of the wicked with astonishment, but the counsel of the wicked was far from him, for he knew that their day was coming; and when he saw that some of them died amidst friends and prosperity, and were honourably buried, he inferred that there was a day of wrath to which they were reserved†. He was in like manner fully persuaded, that his living Redeemer would raise his own dust at the last day, and wipe off all his reproach, and give him the transporting sight of the divine glory, to his eternal happiness. His hope of this blessedness was so lively, even when there was no Scripture, that he expresses an ardent wish that his profession of hope might be inscribed for ever on the rock, with a pen of iron and lead. And it was written, not on a rock, to be read by the dwellers in the land of Uz, but in the book of God, to be seen and read of all men.

Did Job triumph in this blessed hope amidst afflictions that would have swallowed up all the courage of a philosopher and hero? Shall we faint, who are instructed by Moses and the prophets, by the Apostles, and the Lord himself, concerning the unspeakable felicities of a future state, and the right we have to look for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life? Besides, we have a great cloud of witnesses to assure us that it is not a vain thing to wait for the salvation of the Lord, and that the expectation of the poor, although it may seem to be cut off, shall not perish for ever? Abraham had a promise of a son, by whom his seed were to be like the stars for multitude, and yet he waited till Sarah's womb, which was formerly barren, was now dead, before he had the promised son. He waited sixty years longer, before he saw any children by Isaac, but still he was persuaded that the word of God was true, and that his promise was the same thing as performance. He had the promise of Canaan, and yet he travelled through it as a stranger and pilgrim, but he trusted God, and what he had promised, he performed, long after Abraham went to sleep with his fathers. And those that give credit to the testimony of God, and wait with patience in the hope of the promise, are blessed with faithful Abraham.

Soldiers, in the uncertain hope of spoil, endure all the severities of the campaign, and encounter all the dangers of the battle; and shall not the professed soldiers of the Redeemer meet every discouraging providence without terror and complaint, when the God of truth says their expectation shall not be cut off*?

Ver. 19. It is not sufficient, although it be necessary, for us to hear the instructions of the inspired moralist. We are called to learn wisdom, which is to be acquired by hearing under the influence of that blessed Spirit by whom these truths were dictated. Hearing without being made wise, will aggravate our guilt, and make our condemnation more dreadful. But to expect wisdom without hearing, is to expect nourishment by miracle without food. Let us hear then, with all that meekness and affection which is due to a kind father instructing his beloved children; and with hearing let us join prayer to that God, by whose direction and in whose name Solomon speaks to us as children; for our heavenly father will give the Spirit of wisdom and revelation to them that ask him.

What is that wisdom that we are called to seek after? Wisdom to guide our heart in the way, for Zion's travellers must have the way that conducts to blessedness in their hearts. Our feet and our hearts must be in the same good paths, for no man is truly religious, whatever his outward conversation is, unless his heart be right with God. The word of God is then truly useful to us, when we rejoice in the way of God's testimonies more than in all riches.

If we would have our hearts guided in the way, then we must hear what the wise man is going to say to us against intemperance in eating and drinking; for as those that run in the Grecian races, and strove for masteries in their games, were obliged to be temperate in all things, in the view of a corruptible crown; so those that have the eternal crown in their eye, must exercise a proper care over themselves, that they may not be overcharged, or pressed down with the immoderate use of meat and drink, and thereby rendered unfit for the Christian course.

Ver. 20. Although we do not dethrone reason by drinking, yet if we impair the vigour of it, and render ourselves less fit for the business of life, and the service of God, than we are at other times, by the free use of the bottle, we are wine-bibbers.

Flesh is fit provision for our bodies, and it is freely allowed us by God, who has enlarged our charter for bodily provision, under the new testament dispensation, but it is great ingratitude to God to abuse his goodness in order to serve the lusts of the flesh. The body ought to be the servant of the soul, and ever ready to execute its commands; but when, by the riotous eating of flesh, or any thing else, our bodies are disabled from doing their duty, or have their vigour impaired, and the seeds of weakness, and drowsiness, and disease, sown in them, we sin against our own souls and bodies.

We are forbidden, not only to be drunkards or gluttons, but to be found in the company of such persons; for bad Company is the common temptation which the devil uses to draw men to these sins. By giving them our company, we are exposed to their solicitations, and many that were once sober, have been enticed by them to go to excess at a time, and, by a repetition of the same rash conduct have been led on, step by step, to the greatest excesses, and the most confirmed habits of intemperance, till they became senseless brutes, a burden to their friends, and fit only for being laid in the grave, and consigned to those regions which shall be the everlasting habitation of those who make their belly their god.

Those who have been long inured to a temperate course of life, must not think that they are at liberty to infringe this precept, and to mingle themselves with the sons of riot, because they are strong enough in their own eye to overcome all the temptations of sensuality. Christ charges his own disciples, who had been practised in every virtue under his own eye, and who had less temptations to this vice than any other men, to take heed to themselves that their hearts might not be overcharged with surfeiting and drunkenness; and we find the apostle Paul, who was so often in want, very anxious that he might not transgress this precept*.

But what harm is there in learning the ways of the drunkard and glutton? Much harm even in this world, as any man may see, that will but open his eyes;

Ver. 21. Poverty may be born with patience and cheerfulness, when it is merely a misfortune; but that poverty fills the mind with remorse and vexation, which is the fruit of a man's own bad conduct. And no self-contracted poverty is so disagreeable as that which a man brings upon himself by gluttony and drunkenness, which at the same time that they deprive a man of the necessaries of life, create in him a craving appetite after superfluities and luxuries.

Miserable as men must be, by being reduced to such unhappy circumstances, they are almost unpitied when they fall into them; for who will pity one for misfortunes into which he rushes with his eyes open? If a man will not pity himself, it is vain for him to expect pity from his neighbours.

The drunkard or glutton may flatter himself with vain hopes that he shall escape poverty, and that to-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant; but reason and experience, as well as Scripture, confirm the truth in our text: for if the slothful man bring himself to want, the waster must do it much sooner, especially as luxury and revelling bring drowsiness and sloth in their train: for by a course of sensual indulgence, a man is indisposed to labour and prudent care; so that, whilst he throws away with one hand, he gathers nothing with the other to supply his numerous wants. The slothful man is brother to him that is a great waster, but when the great waster is likewise a slothful man, as is generally the case, poverty is coming to him with hasty steps, and with resistless force.

Hell is at a great distance, the sensualist thinks, and lies quite out of the view of mortals, and wine has so besotted him, that he cannot think seriously about it; but here he is told of one part of his punishment, which he cannot put off to a distant day, and must feel, unless he is stupified to an extraordinary degree; for his vitious relishes might themselves excite a proper sense of the mischief of poverty; and how hardened must they be in sin who cannot be driven from it, either by the terrors of the world to come, or the miseries of this?

Christians have nobler motives to keep them on their guard against intemperance; for the grace of God teaches them to live soberly, and their character as children of the light is inconsistent with drunkenness and revelling, which are works of darkness and of the flesh*.

Ver. 22. Solomon takes it for granted that our fathers and mothers will give us good counsel and instruction; for they are monsters, and not parents, that are unconcerned about the present and eternal welfare of their children, and quite negligent of those means that may contribute to such valuable ends.

Children should consider what they owe to their parents, and what affection they discover in their good counsels and instructions, and what monsters of ingratitude they are, if they do not shew respect to those who have conferred obligations upon them, for which they can never make a sufficient recompense, and to those instructions which can have no object but their own benefit.

Mothers are to be honoured as well as fathers; nor must we despise them, but reverence their good advices, and kindly sympathize with their infirmities when they are old. They may then prove peevish and fretful, and lose much of their understanding, and become children a second time. But they took care of us when we were helpless children, and our froward passions did not then provoke them to cast us away, but engaged their pity and help*.

It is only when the instructions of parents are good and sound, that we must receive and comply with them, for we are bound to cleave to the truth at all risks.

Ver. 23. The truth revealed in the word of God is infinitely valuable and interesting, and therefore we are commanded to buy, and not to sell it. Men are enriched by buying and selling other commodities, but in our dealings about truth we are enriched by buying alone, whatever be the price, and impoverished by selling, whatever price we might receive.

But why are we commanded to buy? Does God receive a price from us for his truths? By no means. But we are commanded to buy, because we must grudge no expence or toil in seeking the truth. The wise merchant is he that is so impressed with its value that he is willing to go and sell all he hath, that he may obtain possession of this precious treasure. Merchants will venture their money and their lives for those commodities by which they expect to make profit, although they often meet with disappointments and losses. Why then should those who profess to value the truth above every thing, be so careless about obtaining the knowledge and experience of it, when the value of it will abundantly recompense all our pains and losses in the search of it, although we should lose our life on its account?

On no account must we sell the truth. Had Paul been offered all the kingdoms of the world, and all the glories of them, for one article

of truth, he would have answered, "I have suffered the loss of all things already for Christ, yea, doubtless, I count all things but loss and dung for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus, my Lord." We must rather part with our lives than with the truth, and here we have the example of the noble army of martyrs who loved not their lives unto the death for its sake. He that loses his life for the sake of truth, and a good conscience, is a great gainer*

If it is a great sin to sell the truth, even when our life is offered for it, what shall we say of those who part with it in profession or practice, without receiving any price at all for it? Surely they have a small regard for the truth, or for the great Author of it, who wantonly cast away this precious pearl, and take a pebble in its room.

We must shew the same sacred regard to wisdom, and instruction, and understanding, which are inseparably connected with the truth. For we have no true hold of the truth, however clear our apprehensions of it are, or however zealously we profess it, if we are not made wise, and led in the way of duty by its influence. That wisdom and understanding which is not grounded in truth, is but cunning craftiness and splendid ignorance, and that instruction which is not according to truth, is poison to the soul*.

Truth is to be received into the mind and heart, and rule our conversation. Those only are wise unto salvation who receive the truth in the love of it, and hold it forth in their profession, and walk in it till they reach the end of their course†.

Ver. 24, 25. And what son is there so unnatural as not to wish for the happiness of his father and his mother? Your father has spent many anxious thoughts, and endured many toils on your account. Your mother has born you with sorrow and danger, and reared you up with tender anxiety, and what requital do they ask or expect from you? They love you with a disinterested affection; they earnestly desire you to pursue those courses which will make you happy; and they will be satisfied, and glad, and bless God on your account, when you walk in the ways of wisdom, because all their labours and toils are richly recompensed. Can you resist the wishes of your parents, and blast their hopes of gladness, when the joy they expect from you is no selfish pleasure, but that pure and disinterested joy which arises from your own happiness? Can you bear the thoughts of embittering their old age, when it is attended with so many unavoidable pains and griefs, which will be sweetened by your good behaviour? Will you be the wretched instruments of bringing down the grey hairs of your parents with sorrow to the grave?

What a blessed thing is righteousness! It gives great pleasure to him that practises it. It diffuses joy all around. Your parents and friends, and all that fear God, will be glad to see you walking in God's truth. Our Father who is in heaven takes pleasure in it, and all the angels of God are glad to see righteousness and wisdom among the sons of men.

Ver. 26. This divine teacher, in the name of God, requires our hearts to be applied to the word of exhortation. "Set your hearts to all the words which I testify among you this day," said the Jewish lawgiver, "which ye shall observe, to do all the words of this law." The same demand is made on us in this and in several other passages of this book. And the demand would not be so frequently made, if it were not necessary. We are naturally indisposed to give a due attention to the word of God, for our hearts are vain, and earthly, and carnal; and yet, unless we give our hearts to God and to his truths, we can receive no benefit by them. Paul gives thanks to God for the saints at Rome, because, from the heart, they had obeyed that form of doctrine which was delivered unto them, or rather, into which they were delivered, as into a mould, that their whole temper and life might be formed into a correspondence with it. Our Lord, in his parable of the sower, speaks of four different sorts of hearers of the word, and there was only one sort that received real benefit from it, and that was the set of hearers who understood it, and received it into an honest and good heart.

Our hearts are naturally intractable and perverse, and we cannot work them into a proper disposition for receiving his truths, but we must give them up to him that fashions the hearts of men at his pleasure. Our hearts, vile and worthless as they are, are claimed by him. He is our former and Redeemer, and he calls us to give up our souls and bodies unto him*. He will form them anew, and take away the stony heart out of our flesh, and give us hearts of flesh, and put his Spirit within us, and cause us to walk in his statutes.

Our eyes must be fixed upon the ways in which God directs us by his inspired penmen. Thus David regulated his life; he laid the judgments of God before him, and kept his mind fixed upon the directions of God in his word, and his feet were kept from stumbling and falling. The ways in which Solomon walked during a part of his life, are a warning to us that we may not involve ourselves in those snares that brought him into so much danger and distress; but the ways that he instructs us to walk in are those good paths wherein rest is to be found. He smarted greatly with the wounds made in his conscience by his correspondence with worthless women, and none of the Old Testament writers sound so loud alarms of the danger that we are in from the arts of such seducers.

He fell into the deep and narrow ditch, but by the grace of God he escaped with life, and warns us all not to risk our souls in the manner he had done.

Ver. 27. And when it is both deep and narrow, the danger is extreme. Who would choose to be in the situation of Jeremiah when he was cast into the dungeon, out of which Ebedmelech and his companions, delivered him with so much difficulty? but it is far more dangerous to fall into that narrow pit of which the wise man is now speaking, for none that go unto her return again, neither take they hold of the paths of life. Righteous men, such as Sampson and Solomon, were scarcely saved when they fell into this ditch? and where shall the abhorred children of the devil appear*?

Ver. 28. The profligate woman is not only a deep pit, but a robber; for a single comparison is insufficient to show the numberless mischiefs occasioned by her seductions. She lies in wait, not to rob men of a few pounds, but to rob them of all their substance and credit, of their health and comfort, of their bodies and souls. And those who voluntarily comply with her alluring insinuations, are confederates with her and the devil, against God and themselves. She increaseth the transgressors among men; for she spreads her nets and entangles those unwary men, of whom better things might have been reasonably expected, if they had escaped her,

and when she has them fast, she blindfolds them, and leads them on through the ways of sin and folly, till she plunge them into the gulph of perdition. She is not only a servant but a factor of the wicked one, drawing as many as she can into his snares, and therefore if we love our own souls, we must avoid the doors of her house.

Would we be preserved from this mischievous enchantress, who has been the instrument of drowning such multitudes in destruction and perdition, let us turn our hearts to the divine instructions of this book, and call wisdom our sister, and understanding our kinswoman. Let us put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.

Ver. 29. He is no doubt a miserable man on whom all these misfortunes meet at once, and yet he scarcely deserves pity, for he brings them upon himself. If any man were attacked with a disease that had so many dismal symptoms, he would certainly draw pity from every beholder; but those of whom Solomon speaks, are persons that chuse both sin and misery at once.

Ver. 30. Wine is very useful to men when used to serve them, but when it is suffered to become their master, it is a raging tyrant, like fire or water, when they are not kept in their proper bounds. But who are they that suffer wine to rule over them? Those who are so fond of it, that they cannot rise when they have sat down to the bottle, but continue from noon-day till evening, till wine inflame them; and those who cannot want it, but go in search of it, feeling themselves quite unhappy when they are not pouring it down their throats, and who are such sensualists that they cannot be satisfied, unless a variety of ingredients are mingled with it, to make it higher flavoured, and more grateful to their nice palates. These are not the only persons that sin by abusing this good creature of God; for when men render themselves heavy, and languid, and unfit to think and act with composure, or to draw near to God in spiritual exercises, they are guilty of excess, although they do not make themselves brutes, and bring upon themselves all the present mischiefs that are here mentioned. But those who give themselves up to sensuality, to such a degree as to tarry long at the wine, and go to seek mixt wine, bring upon themselves, in part, the present recompence of their error, for they do not only render themselves obnoxious to an everlasting hell, but they pull down sorrows upon themselves with their own hands. They have some present pleasure to suit their vitiated taste, but woe to that pleasure that brings so much pain and vexation along with it. Wine is raging, and pushes on the persons that swill it down, like madmen, to debates and contention. It takes from them, in a great measure, the use of their tongues, and makes them to stammer, and yet it fills their minds with so much vanity and wickedness that they must speak, and pour forth floods of profaneness and ribaldry, of nonsense and ill nature. By this means drunkenness stirs up squabbles and fightings, which end in wounds without cause; for the drunkards themselves, when they are sober, confess that their quarrels had no object earthly, but were produced by their own self-contracted madness. Redness of eyes is another effect of immoderate drinking, which ends in a weakness of the sight, in violent pain, and sometimes in total blindness. If drunkenness is attended with so wretched consequences,

Ver. 31. And what harm is there in looking upon the pleasant liquor sparkling and mantling in the cup? What harm, you may as well ask, was there in Eve's looking at the fruit of the forbidden tree, or in Achan's looking at the golden wedge, or Babylonian garment? Or what harm is there in looking at a beauteous face, till lust is excited in the heart? To look with pleasure at a tempting object, is very unsafe, for the imagination catches fire, and the passions are inflamed, and reason is gradually, deposed from its throne. Such are the natural consequences of looking at the delicious liquor. Cæsar came, and saw, and conquered; but the drunkard comes to the tavern, he sees the flowing blood of the grape, and is conquered. He drinks and tastes a little pleasure, whilst the liquor is passing down his throat, but,

Ver. 32. If drunkards saw an adder at the bottom of the glass, although it were dead, they would rather pour all the liquor into the street than drink it. But the wine itself is worse than any serpent. It infuses a deadly though slow poison into the drunkard, and his body becomes the seat of disease; nor are the miserable effects of it confined to himself, but they are frequently entailed upon his posterity, who suffer by their father's fault, and are often obliged to drag out a wretched life in weakness and disease, and pills and potions.

But it stings the soul worst of all, for it breeds that worm of conscience in comparison of which the bite of an adder (or rather cockatrice,) is pleasure and health. It exposes the drunkard to the lake of fire and brimstone, which is the second death, where the wine of the fierceness of the wrath of Almighty God must be drunk, without intermission or end, and where the drunkard shall be punished, not only for drunkenness, but for a countless multitude of sins, to which this vice led the way. Other vices work their own way into the soul, but this mischievous vice makes way for every other vice, and especially for the damnable sin of uncleanness and filthy communication.

Ver. 33. Drunkenness produces new vices, and discloses the old. It removes every fence of reason and religion, and makes the person overpowered by it to resemble a city without walls, into which the besiegers find an open passage that they may enter, and commit what ravages they please. Lot kept himself pure in Sodom, and yet his daughters, by making him drunk, knew that they could easily draw him to incest, for they had seen the men of Sodom tempted, by their fulness of bread and intemperate drinking, to every excess of wickedness. A Roman author tells us, that, in the good days of Rome, drinking of wine was absolutely prohibited to women, lest drinking should tempt them to unchastity; for, as the same author observes, it shuts the door against every virtue, and opens it to every vice.

Drunkenness besots the heart, and makes it to utter perverse and abominable things by the tongue; unless that instrument of the soul is made quite dumb by the power of the liquor; for blasphemy is wit, and ribaldry is eloquence to a man that is turned into a brute. How loathsome would the heart of a wicked man be, were it laid bare to the world; but drink lays it bare as far as the powers of language can go.

Ver. 34. Thy brain shall be giddy, thy reason disordered, thy mind altogether unhinged, and thy danger shall be extreme, like his who lies down in the heart of the sea, or on the top of a mast, the most dangerous of situations imaginable.

Can a man that is a slave to strong drink find no possible mean of escape from his bondage? He will not make his escape, for his heart is infatuated*, and he cannot prevail upon himself to forego a momentary indulgence, although it should cost him the torments of a whole life, and of an awful eternity. He feels the inconveniences that result from his indulgence to his appetite. But his appetite has a sovereign dominion over his reason, and forces it to find out some pitiful shifts and pretences to excuse his continuance in his abominable habits.

Ver. 35. "Drink," says one, "steals away a man from himself, and leaves a brute in his stead." This is saying much, but not all. A drunkard is a self-made brute, and is far more senseless than a natural brute beast. It has been found upon trial, that a brute, after being once deceived by wine, would not venture upon it a second time; but the self-made brute, after he has felt an hundred times the mischiefs of drinking, becomes still fonder of his misery, and makes his understanding to serve only for palliating his folly. It is true, he says, I have felt some trifling disadvantages from the free use of the creature. My companions abused and insulted me, but what of that? Shall I deny myself the chief pleasure of life, because they struck me, and beat me? I was nothing the worse of it. I wish I could get free of that drink which now clogs my senses, and inclines me to sleep. I will return to the tavern after all that is come and gone. Why did not nature, manage things so that a man might be always drinking? Life is not life in the intervals of it.

If wicked men can patiently bear such mischiefs for the sake of a beloved lust, which will at length bite like a serpent, and sting like an adder, why should we grudge at the little hardships that we sometimes undergo for the sake of religion, which will be so richly recompensed? If the servants of Satan are willing to bear innumerable crosses and curses for the love they have to his service, why should we bear with reluctance, in the service of God, those crosses which are blessings in disguise?

Let those drunkards, that have any remainders of understanding, compare the inconveniencies that might attend the mortification of their appetite with the miseries that God hath inseparably joined to a continuance in their criminal indulgences. And if they can say that it is not a thousand times better to put a knife to their throat, than to be tyrannized over by such a pernicious lust, let them swallow down gallons every day of their life.

The Lacedemonians used to make their slaves drunk in the presence of their children, that when they saw what monsters men were turned into by sensuality, they might contract an irreconcilable aversion to this vice. Solomon gives us such a lively picture of this vice in the paragraph before our eyes, that we need not the sight of a drunken man to excite our detestation of drunkenness. Isaiah gives us a description of it equally shocking*. What excuse is left for a drunkard that has ever read the Bible? How will his mouth be stopped at the last day! How will he curse himself through eternity, for making himself first a beast, and then a devil!

An inferior master in the art of moral painting, gives us a just picture of drunkenness in these words, "Drunkenness is a distemper of the head, a subversion of the senses, a tempest of the tongue, a storm in the body—the shipwreck of virtue, the loss of time, a wilful madness, a pleasant devil, a sugared poison, a sweet sin, which he that has, has not himself, and he that commits it, doth not only commit sin, but is himself altogether sin."

Let us therefore follow the counsel of the wise man. Be not amongst wine-bibbers; for he that goes to the tavern for the love of company, will soon go thither for the love of drink. Let us follow the like counsel of another inspired writer, "Be not filled with wine wherein is excess, but be ye filled with the Spirit. Let us walk in the spirit, and we shall not fulfil the lusts of the flesh." If, after all, we rather choose to follow the council of the wicked one, there is no help for it; but those that walk according to the prince of the power of the air, and fulfil the lusts of the flesh, must have their portion and dwelling with him whose galling yoke and crushing burden they prefer to the sweet yoke and light burden of the Redeemer.

Christ would heal you, but if ye will not be healed, howl, O ye drinkers of wine, for the fruit of the vine shall be cut off from your mouths. Joy shall wither away from your eyes, and a cup must be put into your hands, of which the wine is red. It is poured out full of mixture, and the dregs thereof you must wring out, and drink.

CHAPTER 24

Verse. 1. WE must be careful of our hearts as well as our lives, for out of the heart are the issues of life. Our hearts are well known to God, and he warns us, in the precepts of his word, against indulging an evil disposition, or corrupt passion, which might pollute our souls and conversation. He warns us particularly in this passage, against all envious thoughts at the sight of wicked men's prosperity, which are so natural to us, that the best saints have not been altogether free of this root of bitterness*. When we see waters of a full cup poured out to the wicked, and behold these gains and pleasures which are the present fruits of sin, we are too ready to say in our hearts, "O that God would relax in some degree his laws, that we might without incurring his displeasure, revel in those pleasures which the sons of Belial enjoy. Those men have a happier life at least than we have, whose consciences will not suffer us to imitate their lawless conduct." Such wicked imaginations are strictly prohibited in this place of Scripture. We must not account the proud happy, although they triumph over every enemy, and enjoy the world at their will. We must not entertain a thought of imitating their cursed manners: Why? Their hearts and their lips are black as hell;

Ver. 2. And which of the two is best for us, to have our hearts beautified with the lustre of holiness, and purified into unfeigned love

of our brethren, or turned into a den of every malicious fiend: to have our tongues sweetened with honey and milk, or set on fire of hell? The punishments of sin are very dreadful; but sin itself is such a deformed ugly monster, that we are lost to understanding if we do not abhor it for its own sake.

But you will say, that sinners enjoy great advantage from their way of life. They acquire fine houses and elegant furniture, and every thing delightful in the service of sin. Is sin then attended with better fruits even in this world, than wisdom and holiness? By no means.

Ver. 3. Houses have been sometimes built through wickedness, but never established. By wisdom and knowledge they are built as it were on a rock, to stand firm against every blast*.

Convenient furniture is desirable, as well as a sure house; and this also is a fruit of that wisdom and industry which belongs to religion.

Ver. 4. Wicked men are represented by Solomon†, entertaining their fancies with high expectations of the precious substance, with which robbery and fraud will fill their houses, but what wicked men vainly expect, good men find, if God sees it to be good for them. Should the wicked prosper in their pursuits, their joy is mingled with the racks of a tormenting consciousness of guilt, and the apprehensions of a speedy period to the pleasures of sin. If good men are disappointed in their expectations and wishes as to this world, they have the consolation of knowing that they have mansions of blessedness prepared for them in Christ's father's house, and that their substance is the better and enduring substance, laid up for them in heaven. Although the Old Testament dispensation of grace abounded in promises of earthly blessings, yet many of the ancient saints met with innumerable crosses and afflictions. They were obliged to dwell in dens and caves of the earth; they were destitute, afflicted, tormented, and still they believed that God was faithful to his word, although outward events contradicted it; or if at any time, doubts of God's faithfulness and goodness arose in their minds, they resisted the abominable thoughts so derogatory to the Most High, and called themselves brutes and idiots before God*. How inexcusable then must it be for us, who live in the sunshine of the Gospel, to give place to blasphemous doubts of the providence of God, and the truth of his word, when God does not think fit to give splendid palaces and fine furniture to his people? The promises respecting this life, belong to godliness under the new testament as well as the old; but they are to be understood in a consistency with the nobler promises that respect spiritual blessings, and the happy influence which crosses of different kinds have in the accomplishment of these promises. When God appoints poverty and losses to the wise, and bereaves them of the native fruits of their honest labours and temperate course of life, he is not breaking but fulfilling his word. And the most afflicted saints will find reason to say in the end of their Course, "we know that all thy judgments are righteous, and that thou in faithfulness hast afflicted us." Strength is reckoned an useful and necessary quality, for acquiring or maintaining any valuable property. Now,

Ver. 5. Health and vigour of body are not inseparable from that temperance and labour which religion requires; but they ordinarily accompany these virtues†. Religion is at any rate fitted to give us strength, and animate us with courage, because it directs us to depend on the arm of the Almighty, and to be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. If political and military wisdom supply the place of strength, the wisdom which is from above, has incomparably greater efficacy. Many have been animated and emboldened by it, to encounter giants, and mighty armies, and have turned to flight, and utterly destroyed the most dreadful adversaries, combined in countless multitudes against them*.

Wisdom teaches us not only to trust in God, but to take advantage of that wisdom which God has granted to other men, not merely for their own benefit, but to render them useful to others who have the meekness and humility of wisdom to consult with them.

Ver. 6. Wars are too often necessary by the covetousness and ambition of men; and those that have most of the meekness of wisdom, are sometimes dragged into them, and then wisdom is found to be of far greater value than strength, or weapons of war. A multitude of wise counsellors are far more useful to a nation engaged in it, than a great number of valiant soldiers.

The wisdom of statesmen and generals is of great use in its proper sphere, but the wisdom of saints is of incomparably greater use in fighting for the cause of liberty and religion. In the wars of Israel, piety was commonly attended with success, for those that knew their God were strong and did exploits; and if the wisdom of one poor man could deliver a city besieged by a powerful king, what may not be expected from the combined wisdom of many? But useful as wisdom is, there are some men so egregiously foolish that they cannot attain this quality.

Ver. 7. A fool sees not the excellency of wisdom. Although he may value the reputation of it, yet he wants eyes to behold the real glory of wisdom; or if he has any sense of its value, yet he cannot bring his mind to that degree of care, and diligence, and self-denial, which is necessary to obtain the knowledge of it, far less can he resist the imperious tyranny of his passions, to put his soul under the government of wisdom; and therefore he continues a fool under all the means of wisdom that are used with him. A price to get wisdom is of no use but to render his folly more inexcusable; for he has no heart to it, but is deeply in love with his folly, and must bear the shame and misery to which it exposes him.

But if wisdom be too high for a fool, how can he be blamed for not getting wisdom? Because the fault is not in wisdom, nor in the means of it, which God has given us, but in the fool himself. Wisdom speaks to men in plain language; and we have no occasion to say, "who shall ascend into heaven to bring her down from above?" But fools have corrupt minds, and perverse hearts, and refuse to hear the voice of wisdom, or to receive the instructions of wisdom into their hearts,

A fool, through his incapacity of getting wisdom, is unfit for speaking in the gate, the place of concourse and of judgment. He is either made dumb by his consciousness of having nothing to say that deserves to be heard, or if his self conceit open his lips, he betrays his folly by speaking more effectually than others do by their silence.

That the wisdom which is the gift of nature and learning is necessary to qualify men for public offices is universally allowed; and that wisdom which is the gift of the Spirit, is likewise highly requisite, if not absolutely necessary. Jethro would have none to be rulers in Israel that did not fear God and hate covetousness; for the fear of God is the most effectual preservative against all those temptations that attend power and high offices.

Ver. 8. That tree is rotten which is broken by a gentle gale of wind, and the man has a rotten heart, who sins upon a slight temptation; but words are insufficient to express the malignity of that man's heart, who needs no temptation from the devil at all, but contrives and plots sin in his own mind, spending his thoughts about iniquity when he is lying on his bed, or sitting in his house, and searching out the most dextrous and effectual methods of gratifying his own depraved mind, and doing mischief to others. To be driven or drawn to sin is a bad thing, but to draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and to sin, as it were, with a cart rope, is hellish.

The person who does so shall be loaded with infamy. He may think himself a man of genius and wisdom. He may acquire to himself an honourable name among fools; but the God from whose sentence, promotion or infamy comes, calls him a master of mischief, and by this vile title he shall be known amongst all that are wise. He may be really a man of genius and learning, but all his talents, natural and acquired, concur to sink him so much the deeper in the gulph of disgrace. All his honour shall consist in his being not a private soldier, but a leader in the bands of hell. And in this dignity he shall share with Balaam, the son of Beor, who taught Balak to seduce the Israelites; with Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin; with Jezebel, the wife and tutor of the most infamous of the kings of Israel; and with Beelzebub, the prince of devils.

Ver. 9. It is too general a notion that thoughts are of little consequence, and that words and actions only expose men to danger of punishment from God; but we are to remember, that there is an infinite distance between the judges of this world and the Judge of all. Earthly judges cannot penetrate into the hearts of men, and have no business with their secret thoughts; but it is the glory of the universal Judge, that He is the sovereign and searcher of spirits. He requires from us truth in our inward parts; and when he comes to judge the world, all the churches shall know that he searches the hearts, and tries the reins of the children of men. If we study to shew ourselves approved unto him, we must not only cleanse our hands, but likewise purify our hearts; for foolish and sinful thoughts are Contrary to his law, and abominable in his sight. He beholds with detestation all the impure workings of the mind, in wicked contrivances, in impious reasonings, in vain and foolish musings; and when he bestows the grace of his Spirit upon any man, he makes him to hate vain thoughts, as well as wicked actions*.

If the thoughts of foolishness are sinful, how sinful are scornful words. There is much more sin in the thoughts of bad men, than in their lips or lives, but when the lips are employed to express a sovereign contempt of all good admonitions, it is an evidence that the heart is desperately corrupt, and that thoughts of foolishness abound and overflow. The thoughts of foolishness are abominable only to Him that sees the heart, but the scorner is an abomination to men also. And if he is abominable even to those that have so much impurity of their own, how detestable must he be to Him that sees more evil in the least sin than we can discern in the greatest?

How long, ye scornors, will ye delight in your scorning? You are so miserably polluted with the defilements of sin, that your fellow sinners cannot bear with you; and how then will the Most Holy God suffer you to escape unpunished? Sit no longer in the seat of the scorner, but humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, lest your bands be made strong.

Ver. 10. If we sink into despondency, and think that our happiness is for ever lost, because God has been pleased to afflict us with some grievous calamity, it is plain that our strength and courage is but small. Where is the vigour of our faith, if we cannot believe that there is help for us in God? A lively faith in the God of Jacob as our refuge and our strength, would make us to stand firm and unshaken, although the mountains were removed, and the earth shaken, and overwhelmed by the swelling waves of the sea. It would make us to rejoice in the Lord, when every thing looks dreary around us*.

If we faint in our Christian course, and use unlawful means of escape when dangers surround us, it is a sign that our strength is almost nothing. The church of Philadelphia had a little strength, and she held fast the name of Christ, and did not deny his faith. Peter's strength was so far lost, when he denied his master's name, that he needed in some sense a new conversion.

As gold is tried in the fire, so our strength is tried in the furnace of affliction; and surely when men are tried, it is their interest and honour to see that they come forth as gold, and not as reprobate silver. Trials are necessary for us, and appointed to us, and the times of trial are critical seasons; and therefore we ought to be prepared for them, that the trial of our faith may be found unto praise, and honour, and glory.

But how shall we be furnished with strength to stand in the evil day? Paul gives us necessary directions for this purpose*. Christ is the author of all grace. Faith and hope, and patience, are fruits of his Spirit; and we must not only receive those militant graces out of fulness, but depend on his power to maintain them in our souls; and then neither persecution, nor distress, nor any thing else shall be able to overthrow our souls, or destroy our comfort†.

Ver. 11, 12. We are required by God to love not in word or profession, but in truth and in deed, taking every proper opportunity to shew our love in its proper fruits. One of these is recommended in this text, which enjoins us to appear in the defence of those who are unjustly doomed to destruction. Christ laid down his life for us, and we ought also to lay down our lives for the brethren, and to risk every thing dear to us, in the cause of righteousness. By the same law of charity, we are required to interest ourselves in the cause of those who suffer any injurious treatment, and to do it without hesitation or delay. We must not be slack to afford relief to our enemy's oxen or asses, if they are fallen into a pit, far less may we defer the giving of needful relief to our distressed brethren.

The wise man represents this piece of charity as a duty which we owe to our neighbours without exception; and with him agrees our

Lord in the parable of the good Samaritan. We are not the disciples of Solomon or of Christ, if we shew love to those only who are nearly related to us, or who are of the same religious profession with ourselves.

The wise man knew that this is a duty against which we are too ready to muster up exceptions, because the performance of it may expose us to trouble or danger; but he answers every exception that can be made to it in few words, but with strong and convincing arguments. We cannot pretend that it is not our duty to relieve the oppressed, as far as our power extends; but, as the priest that passed by the wounded man, kept at a distance, that he might not behold that object of compassion, so we are too ready to allege that we knew not, the peril in which our neighbour was involved, or did not know that he was an innocent man, that did not deserve such treatment. If this be strictly true, and if our ignorance was not voluntary and affected, the excuse is good; but it is to be remembered, that no excuses for the neglect of duty ought to be sustained by our own minds that will not be sustained by God our judge. Excuses may serve to blind the eyes of men who are short-sighted, and who are obliged to judge on the charitable side in a doubtful case; but God is greater than men, and knoweth all things, and will not be imposed upon by any false pretence.

God pondereth our hearts, and knows with certainty how far we act from a careless and selfish spirit, when we neglect the offices of charity to the distressed. In weighing the spirits of men, the want of charity alone serves to turn the balance; and the omissions of charity, which are known by God to spring from the want of that necessary virtue, exclude men from the kingdom of heaven*.

God is the keeper of our souls, and therefore we need not be afraid to risk our lives in obedience to his will. We cannot subsist one moment without his kind providence, and why should we scruple to risk every thing dear to us in the service of Him in whom we live, move, and have our being? We are always safe in the way of duty, we are never safe in neglect of it. For safety cometh from the Lord our judge and lawgiver; and if our lives are exposed in his service, he can easily preserve them, or compensate the loss, if he suffers them to be taken from us. But if we preserve them by declining our duty, we expose them to more dreadful dangers than death.

God renders unto every man according to his works. He will not forget the works of faith and the labours of love, and he will never suffer any man to be a loser by them. The greatest gains in the world, are the losses suffered for the sake of a good conscience; and the greatest losses are the gains of sin. If we neglect duty from the prospect of safety or advantage, the honour of God is engaged, to convince us by experience, that no profit is to be found in disobeying his will. Queen Esther could not have reasonably expected to secure herself, even in the house of her imperial husband, from the vengeance of God, if she had neglected to exert all her influence at the peril of her life, for the deliverance of the Jews, when Haman was pursuing them with deadly hatred†.

These truths are so plain, and so decisive in the present case, that the wise man propounds them in the form of questions, and leaves it to the consciences of men to return answers to themselves. A lively impression of our absolute dependance upon God, and our accountableness to him, would answer millions of objections against the hardest duties.

If we must not forbear to succour those whose lives are exposed to danger, it must be the extreme of wickedness to suffer immortal souls to perish, when our persuasions and instructions may be a mean of preventing it. It is indeed still worse by bad example or corrupt doctrine, to destroy the souls that must be happy or miserable through endless ages.

Ver. 13, 14. God, in his great goodness, has provided for our delight as well as our subsistence, and has given us leave to use honey, because it is sweet to the taste, as well as bread to strengthen our bodies. How great is his goodness, and how great is his beauty! But how great is our ingratitude, if we serve him not with gladness, amidst the abundance of our enjoyments?

All men relish those things that are sweet to the palate, but there are many that have no spiritual taste to relish those things that are sweet to the purified soul. Had we senses spiritually exercised, we would readily confess, that honey, and milk, and wine, are tasteless, when they are compared with that knowledge of God, and of his Son Jesus Christ, which makes us wise unto salvation. Honey is sweet to the mouth, but the knowledge of wisdom is sweet to the soul. The sweetness of honey lasts for a moment, but the sweetness of wisdom is everlasting. Honey soon satiates, and when it is taken in too large a quantity it is bitter in the belly, and hurtful to the constitution; but wisdom is the joy and happiness, the health and vigour of the soul.

There is pleasure in the knowledge, and pleasure in the practice of wisdom. As soon as we become wise, we taste exquisite satisfactions, of which we could not formerly frame an idea to ourselves, any more than a man that wants the sense of taste, could form a conception of the sweetness of honey. The sweetness of it is experienced more fully in our religious progress, and most of all at the end of our course. There shall be a gracious and abundant reward unto the wise man, for God has promised it; and the hopes that are founded upon the word of God can never make us ashamed. The wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament, and shall enjoy celestial delights in the presence of him with whom is the fountain of life.

Let Christians hope to the end, for the grace that shall be brought to them at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Perhaps they may be brought into very trying situations, and the tempter will persuade them to say, our hope is lost, and we are cut off for our part. But the devil is not to be believed at anytime, especially when his suggestions are so manifestly contrary to the word of the living God, who says, there shall be a reward, and thine expectation shall not be cut off. The living hope of the glory that is to be revealed to us, will sweeten every bitter thing that we meet with in the pursuit and practice of wisdom; for when the Christian soldier is sure of victory and white robes, and of admission to the new Jerusalem, and the tree of life, the toils and dangers of the field of battle are turned into gladness.

Ver. 15, 16. The people of God have many enemies: The principalities and powers of hell lay wait for their souls; and there are men so desperately wicked, that they will not scruple to lay wait for their lives or properties. Christians may entertain assured hopes of the eternal rest; but if they expect an uninterrupted rest in this world, they will find themselves mistaken. They have, nevertheless, a

ground for strong consolation under every attack, and every instance of success in their enemies. They must not expect exemption, but they may firmly hope for deliverance from the cross. They may fall, but they shall not be utterly cast down; for strong is the Lord God that helpeth them.

It is vain for sinners to hope that they shall be able to do any real mischief to the righteous. They may flatter themselves with the hopes of success in their unrighteous designs: they see the righteous fall before them, and persuade themselves that they shall not be able to arise; but the God who maintains their cause, suffers them to fall into trouble to try and refine them, and when he has accomplished his work upon them, will raise them up with renewed vigour, and take a severe vengeance upon their enemies. When they fight against God's people, they fight against God himself; and are they stronger than he, from whom they receive the little strength they have? He is a wall of fire round about his people, and their enemies are like stubble, fully dry, or like thorns folded together.

Be not afraid, ye righteous, of the strength or cunning of your adversaries; and believe not those tempters, who tell you that there is no help for you in God. Be not dismayed at their success, nor let your falls into calamity damp your hopes. You are taught by Solomon and Micah, to triumph even when you are defeated, because your losses will end in victory, and the victories of your enemies in ruin. "Rejoice not against me, O mine enemy, though I fall, I shall arise, though I sit in darkness, the Lord shall be a light unto me, &c.*"

Perhaps you will say, had I fallen only once, I would not be much afraid; but I have often fallen before the enemy, and one day I must perish. But hear what God says:—The righteous man falls not once or twice, but many times, and still he rises. Your experience of former deliverances should encourage your hopes of new deliverances, for the salvations of the Lord are never exhausted. In six troubles he will deliver, and in seven there shall no evil touch you.

Woe to the wicked, and to the enemies of the righteous, they shall fall never to arise. They shall fall into misery. They shall fall into the grave. They shall fall into the lake of fire, from whence there is no returning. They have a load of sins and curses upon them heavier than mountains of lead; and when they begin to fall, they shall, like Haman, utterly perish. Babylon intended to destroy Zion, but Zion was purified and redeemed whilst the vengeance of Zion and of Zion's Redeemer, sunk Babylon into irrecoverable perdition, as a millstone is sunk in the mighty waters.

Ver. 17, 18. He that is glad at calamities, shall not be unpunished, says Solomon in another place. But may we not be glad at the calamities of our enemies? By no means. It would be unlawful and inhuman. We must not be glad at the calamity of our enemy's ass, but help it out of a ditch if it has fallen into one. It is very opposite to the spirit of Christianity to rejoice at the misfortunes of our enemies. Our blessed Saviour prayed for his enemies, and commands us to pray for our enemies. If we neglect prayer for them, we neglect a plain and positive duty, enforced by the noblest example. If we pray for them, and yet rejoice when they fall, or even when they stumble, and are in danger of falling, we are gross hypocrites. If we have the hearts of monsters, and not of men, why do we pretend to be Christians?

But does not Solomon say, elsewhere, when the wicked perish there is shouting? And are we not frequently told, that the righteous are glad at the vengeance executed upon the wicked? This is true; but they do not rejoice, on such occasions, from a vindictive or selfish spirit. They rejoice that God is glorified, that wickedness is suppressed, and the people of God delivered from oppression. Such was the joy of Moses and the children of Israel, when Pharaoh was drowned in the Red Sea. Of this kind shall be the joy of the church of Christ in the day of Antichrist's destruction*. But to rejoice because mischief has befallen our fellow men, or because we expect some advantage from the misery of our enemies, is to behave like heathens or devils, and not like Christ, or his saints. We must still remember that the eye of God is upon us, he observes all the movements of our spirits, and the workings of our passions. He is well pleased when we look with a pitying and generous eye upon the sins and miseries of our worst enemies; but looks with displeasure on those selfish souls that rejoice at the calamities of those that hate them. An unforgiving and revengeful spirit, in those that need so much forgiveness from God, must be very provoking to him.

Our joy at the fall of our enemies cannot procure their reconciliation to God, but it may kindle God's displeasure against us. He may suspend the present execution of judgment against them, and transfer it to ourselves; for if they wronged us, and exposed themselves to punishment, we have wronged God and them, and have exposed ourselves, in no less a degree, to punishment. If we rejoice at the fall or danger of our enemies, we ourselves have fallen into a greater evil, for sin has more evil in it than affliction, and brings affliction along with it. The whole book of Obadiah seems to be written to show the miseries which men bring upon themselves, by triumphing in the ruin of their enemies; and many chapters of the Bible insist on the same necessary subject*.

If this sin was so dangerous under the dispensation of Moses, how is it possible that those should escape punishment who are guilty of it under the Christian dispensation, when the law of love to all men (enemies not excepted) is so wonderfully enforced, that it is called, by Christ, his new commandment, although it is the old commandment, which we had from the beginning?

Ver. 19. It seems that wicked men were often prosperous, even under the law, and that there is a strong disposition in men to make a bad use of the wise and good Providence of God, in sometimes allotting prosperity to the wicked, otherwise Solomon would not have so frequently cautioned us against indulging this propensity. He had guarded us against this sin by telling us of the future happiness of the righteous, and of the cursed disposition of the wicked. He now gives us another motive to quietness and composure under this strange providence of the universal sovereign†.

Ver. 20. What avails a happiness (if it can be called by that name,) which continues only threescore and ten years, when the person that enjoyed it must continue for millions of ages? Will it be any comfort to the wicked in another world, to reflect that they enjoyed

their good things in this world? Heaven is despised by the wicked at present, for they are stupified by their earthly enjoyments; but it is not despised by the damned in hell. They know, to their sorrow, the immense value of the heavenly inheritance, and weep, and gnash their teeth, and melt away with envy, at that celestial happiness, from which they find themselves for ever excluded, and separated by a gulph that cannot be passed. There is no merciful reward, but there is a reward of justice and vengeance to evil men. They are shut out from the celestial city, and have their everlasting abode in those regions where rest and peace and hope never come. A perpetuity of bliss is bliss; and those immortal souls that have no title to it, are the objects not of envy but of pity. When a prosperous transgressor is pining away under a loathsome and mortal distemper, we don't reckon him worthy of our envy, although he drags out his days in a magnificent palace, surrounded with pleasures which he cannot taste, and to which he must soon bid farewell; and if we viewed things in the light of the word of God, we should not grudge at his prosperity, when he enjoys the most perfect health, for even then his soul is pining away to death, and his prosperity is precarious and transient. The joys of the just are permanent and increasing, like the light of the sun, which shineth more and more unto the perfect day; but the prosperity of the wicked, is like the light of a candle: if you leave it to itself it will soon consume away; but it may very probably be extinguished before it has time to burn to the socket. Shall those who rejoice in the light of day, grudge the happiness of those who dwell in a dungeon, enjoying only the light of one taper which must soon expire, and leave them buried in perpetual night.

Ver. 21, 22. To fear God is a duty so necessary, that there can be no religion without it. The excellencies and works of God, the favours we have received from him, the relations we stand in to him, the account we must give to him, and our absolute dependence upon him, loudly call upon us to fear him. He is so much to be feared, that the Fear of Isaac is one of the names given to him by Jacob; and the wise preacher tells us, that to fear God and keep his commandments is the whole of man,

To the fear of God, must be joined reverence to the king, for God's sake; for by him kings reign, and they are his ministers for our protection from enemies and wicked men, and for promoting virtue and suppressing wickedness. God has conferred dignity and power upon them, and they are entitled to honour for the sake of their office and work.

Yet we must not carry this reverence of royal dignity to a degree of adoration. We must be subject to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, but to the Lord for his own sake, because absolute dominion belongs to him. Although kings are called gods, yet they shall die like men; and when their commandments clash with the authority of God, they are worthy of no regard; and our safety lies in fearing him that has power to kill both soul and body, and to cast both into hell-fire. If the wrath of a king is like the roaring of a lion, the wrath of God is infinitely more to be dreaded.

If we would preserve our religion and loyalty, we must not meddle with those who are fond of changes either in religion or government, for "evil communications corrupt good manners." The people of Israel, when they mingled with the nations, learned of them their ways, and changed their glory for that which did not profit; and they were so fond of being like their neighbours, that they rejected the Lord from being king over them, and desired rather to have a royal tyrant like the other nations. When Absalom rebelled against his father, many followed him in the simplicity of their hearts.

The scripture does not require us to be subject to tyrants; but single acts of maladministration will not justify men in casting off the yoke of government. In most cases, it is our duty and wisdom to be quiet and peaceable subjects, to those who have the possession of the throne granted them by divine providence, and to say with more sincerity than Hushai the Archite, "whom the Lord and this people choose, his will I be, and with him will I abide."

Impiety and disloyalty are great and dangerous sins. Kings are terrible enemies; and God is infinitely more dreadful, and he is the avenger, not only of insults against himself, but of indignities and injuries to those powers that are ordained by him. How many were destroyed in the gainsaying of Korah, and in the rebellion of Absalom? Who knows what ruin awaits those who are guilty of rebellion, which is as the sin of witchcraft; or how suddenly, the tempest of vengeance may hurl those men into perdition, who fear not God, or do not reverence those who are authorized by him to administer justice among men. The apostle Paul spends a large part of a chapter in shewing the sin and danger of those who do not submit to the higher powers.

How miserable shall they be, who refuse subjection to that great king whom God has placed on the throne of grace, and to whom he hath given a rod of iron, to crush those rebels that attempt to break his bands, and cast away his cords? The princes and judges of the earth must serve him, as well as the meanest of their subjects, and his enemies shall lick the dust. "Blessed are all they that put their trust in him, and obey him*."

Ver. 23. Princes usually have a sufficient sense of those duties which their subjects owe them; and they would generally find these duties better performed, if they had a proper sense of their own duties. The precepts of wisdom are binding on them, as well as on poor men, and the dominion of God extends alike to the prince and to the peasant.

All the precepts already delivered are precepts of wisdom, and those which follow were likewise dictated by the father of lights to the wisest of men; and the best proof we can give of our wisdom, is to observe them. They are fools that will not hear the voice of wisdom, or look upon any of her precepts as superfluous. We may more reasonably complain of too much money in our purses, or too many clothes in our closets, than of too many precepts of wisdom in the book of God.

We have no reason to complain that God is strict in requiring our obedience to rulers. He is no less strict in requiring rulers to govern justly, and to make their subjects happy. In this verse, he commands them to do justice and judgment, like David, to all their people. Whatever favours they may confer on particular persons, they must be impartial in judgment. They must not accept the rich and great, nor their own favourites, nor even a poor or a righteous man in his cause. To accept the person of any man is not good, but

very wicked. Elihu durst not accept the person of Job, although he was the best man on the face of the earth, when he gave his judgment about the cause which he had debated with his friends. Although absolute dominion belongs to God, and he dispenses his favours according to his sovereign pleasure; yet in judgment he respects not his own favourites. When he determined by his providence the cause between his beloved servant David, and Saul whom he had rejected, he examined David, and proved him by night, and found nothing, judging him according to his righteousness, and not according to the special favour he had to him. And when the same good man had dealt injuriously with Uriah, he was punished before all Israel, and before the sun. In like manner, when the Gibeonites were treated with abuse and cruelty by the king of Israel, in zeal to God's favoured people, God gave full satisfaction to the Gibeonites. Kings and judges are honoured with the name of gods on earth, and they ought to imitate the justice of God in all their administrations.

But may not criminals be suffered to escape by a merciful perversion of the law, although the righteous must not be wronged? No: Ver. 24, 25. He that justifieth the wicked is an abomination to the Lord; and his iniquity is attended with such mischievous consequences, that he is an abomination to men also, and provokes against himself the execrations of whole nations. If robbers and murderers escape unpunished, how can any man think himself sure of his life or property, when public encouragement is so evidently given to the pests of human society? Mercy is to be shewed to bad men, as far as it consists with equity, and the public good, but when it is carried farther it becomes cruelty to millions.

The curse causeless need not be dreaded, but the curse deserved is dreadful. It is sinful to curse men from the impulse of ungoverned passions; but those curses that are sinfully uttered, or wished by men, are often righteously executed by God; and therefore it is dangerous for us by our bad conduct, to tempt men to curse us in the bitterness of their spirits.

But those magistrates who faithfully execute their trust, shall have much pleasure from the testimony of their own hearts, and from the happy effects of their faithful and impartial administrations. They shall have the blessings of those who live under their government, and the blessings of men, when they are well earned, are ratified by God*. Job looked upon it as one part of his happiness, that he enjoyed the blessings of those that were ready to perish, and of every eye that saw him.

We may safely risk the abhorrence of all mankind, and despise their favour, when our duty requires us; for if we seek to please men at the expence of sinful compliances, we are not the servants of Christ. But as far as we are allowed by the law of God, it is our duty to practise those things that are of good report, living unblameably and usefully in our respective stations, that we may adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things.

How important is the behaviour of men in elevated stations. Thousands or millions of men are losers or gainers by it, and applaud or abhor those who rule over them. Kings and magistrates have much need of our prayers, that they may receive wisdom from God. We who are in inferior stations, have likewise our contracted sphere of influence, and ought to consider how much others are affected by our behaviour. Let us endeavour to deserve at least their blessings, and to avoid every thing that may justly incur their displeasure, or hurt their interests.

If it is of so much consequence to the public, that magistrates should punish the wicked; and if they would incur universal hatred by the neglect of this part of their duty, shall we deny to the sovereign Ruler of the world, that praise to which he is entitled for his acts of just vengeance? He is glorious in his administrations of justice as well as mercy. Who would not fear him and glorify his name, for he only is holy, for his judgments are made manifest? If he did not punish the wicked, we would have reason to say, every one that doth evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delighteth in them, and where is the God of judgment?

Those magistrates who give a right judgment in any cause that comes before them, procure universal respect and good will, as the wise man instructs us in the following verse:

Ver. 26. No doubt prejudices may take place, and obtain ground among people, by which rulers may for a time lose that approbation which is due to their conduct; but the history of all ages proves the truth of this proverb. Good princes have in general possessed the cordial esteem of their subjects; and the tyrants of the world are the men whose lives have been embittered, and their deaths accelerated, by the hatred and insurrections of those whom they ruled.

This proverb contains an useful rule for private persons, as well as rulers. When we are asked an important question, or consulted on an affair of consequence, every man will esteem and love us, if we give a right answer; and that our answer may be right, it is necessary that it should be sincere, prudent, and meek. We must not give an answer calculated merely to please the person that advises with us; for that would not be consistent with integrity. We must consider all the circumstances of the affair, that we may give a proper and pertinent answer; and we must speak with that meekness, which renders wisdom lovely. If our answers to those that advise with us have these qualifications, although they may be sometimes distasteful, because truth compels us to speak things disagreeable, yet they will tend, on the whole, to the advancement of our character; and our character is no contemptible object, because the goodness of it is necessary for us in accomplishing the great business of life, glorifying God, and doing good to men. The instances of Joseph in his first conversation with Pharaoh, and of Daniel's plain dealing with Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar, are illustrations of this truth.

Let us never give a wrong answer to any man, if kings should kiss our lips for it. Zedekiah the son of Chenaanah, will tell us how little the royal favour which he obtained by his court flattery availed him, and how short its continuance was*.

Ver. 27. Things absolutely necessary, are to be sought after in the first place, and, in the next place, those things that may minister delight and satisfaction. For this reason we are commanded by our Lord, in the first place, to seek the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, because the salvation of our souls is infinitely more interesting than our welfare in this world. But as there is a lawful

care about the things of this world also, we are directed in this place, to mind the things most needful to our present subsistence and comfort, before we proceed to those things that have an inferior influence upon the comfort of our lives. Solomon takes it for granted, that we have already a house in which we can live, and enjoy shelter from the inclemencies of the weather: but perhaps we wish to have a more elegant and commodious house. A wish of this kind is not unreasonable, only it must be kept in due subordination to our most important concerns. The work of the field, on which our subsistence depends, is of more importance than the building of a better house, and ought therefore to be first attended to, and then we are at liberty to build our house, if we can afford time and money for it. This rule of the wise man is of great use for the wise management of our secular concerns, and by neglecting it, many have been reduced to poverty and contempt; nor is it so remote from religion, as some inconsiderate persons may apprehend, for religion requires us to act prudently in the common business of life, and to do nothing that may reduce ourselves, or our families to want, or deprive our creditors of their just claims upon us.

In our religious concerns, the same rule ought to be observed. There are first principles which ought in the first place to be well studied, and then we must go on to perfection*. To think of going on to perfection without learning the first principles, is as foolish as to think of raising the superstructure of a house, without laying the foundation; and to rest in the first principles, is as foolish as to lay the foundation of a house, and then to think that all our work is over.

God is a God of order; and he requires us to do all things in their proper order, both in our civil and religious business.

Ver. 28. It is in many cases a man's duty to bear witness against his neighbour, and then the glory of God and the welfare of society, call loudly upon him to perform this necessary, that disagreeable service; but it is a great sin for a man to bear false witness against his neighbour, or to bear testimony against him from a principle of malice and revenge, when there is no call to declare even the truth against him. The real faults of other men must not be published by us, when there is no good to be done, nor any danger to be obviated by it. We would not wish our own faults to be wantonly blazed abroad to the world; and why should we behave in one way to others, and expect another way of behaviour to ourselves? This would be as unreasonable as keeping one kind of weights and measures for buying and another for selling.

We must not deceive with our lips, either before a judge or in private conversation. The gift of speech was given us, for glorifying God, and doing good to men; and it is a wicked perversion of it to make use of it for dishonouring God and deceiving men, by flattery or falsehood, or by speaking truth in such a manner as to deceive; for the history of the false testimony that was borne against our Lord, shows us that truth falsely and deceitfully represented, may become an instrument of deceit and mischief.

That truth is generally to be spoken, you will allow, but perhaps you will allege that you have some wicked neighbour, that has no right to truth from you, because he has borne testimony against you without cause, or by some other injury deserved a mischief at your hand. But,

Ver. 29. To speak in this manner would be the same thing as if you said, "Vengeance belongeth unto me, I will repay it." I will step into the throne of God, and hurl the thunderbolts of vengeance upon mine adversary.

What would become of us, if God should render to us according to our evil works. We need great mercy at the hand of God, and shall we render nothing but rigid justice to our fellow men, in direct opposition to the royal law of love? When our neighbours do us an injury, shall we borrow weapons from hell to retaliate? When we revenge injuries at our own discretion, we may do hurt to our enemies, but we do much greater hurt to ourselves; for the punishment of malice and revenge to which we expose ourselves, is far worse than any vengeance which our feeble arm can inflict. Let us therefore show ourselves to be the disciples of Christ by loving our enemies and recompensing evil with good. Thus we shall heap coals of fire upon the head of our enemies, to melt them; but by following an opposite course, we heap them on our own, to our destruction.

Ver. 30. The sluggard is wise in his own conceit; but in Solomon's judgment, sluggard is another name for a man void of understanding; for what understanding can that man have who buries himself alive, and neither performs the duties of life, nor takes the proper method of being able to enjoy and relish its comforts.

The slothful man hopes to escape poverty, because he is born an heir to fields and vineyards; but Solomon, that great observer of the manners and conditions of men, passed by these fields and vineyards, and saw what was sufficient to convince any man, of the folly of such hopes.

Ver. 31. How could it be otherwise? Thorns and thistles, since the fall of man, spring up every where, to remind us of our rebellion against God, and the greatest industry can scarcely keep them down; but where slothfulness leaves them to spring up at will, the field must be covered with them, and every useful plant choked; or, if any thing useful for man springs up amongst them, it becomes a prey to every spoiler, because the stone wall is broken down and left in ruins.

Such is the situation of the sluggard's field and vineyard; and spiritual sloth is productive of the like effects in the soul of man. If we are careless about our spiritual interests, our souls will soon be overrun with noisome and pernicious vice; and left without guard against those destructive enemies, "that go about seeking whom they may devour." A neglected garden is disagreeable to the eye, but a neglected soul is a spectacle of horror. The stinging nettles of envy, the thorns of anger, and ungovernable passion, spring up abundantly in that scene of desolation. Every lust and every temptation have an uncontrolled influence; and the lion out of the bottomless pit wastes it at his pleasure.

But what pleasure could Solomon have in looking at the sluggard's vineyard? He saw nothing that did not afford instruction to his enlightened mind; for wisdom teaches us to improve every object, however unpleasant, to useful purposes, and finds nourishment for itself even in the folly of other men.

Ver. 32. He did not take a cursory and superficial view of this field, but spent many thoughts upon it. How useful is meditation? It is the nurse of knowledge and prudence. It furnishes our minds with truths, and applies them to the heart, and teaches us to live in a manner suitable to them. Solomon was already wise, but he wished to be wiser, and learned wisdom every day. Another man would have learned self conceit or self indulgence, from the field of the sluggard. Some persons, when they see the faults of others, applaud themselves for their superiority in virtue. No man, they think, can say they are bad men, because they know that some other men are worse. There are other persons that think it safe for them to do like other people, and to let alone what other people omit; but to compare ourselves among ourselves is not wise. Our wisdom lies in learning from the example of other men, compared with the law of God, what we are to do, and what we are to avoid. We see the sluggard, the drunkard, the lukewarm professor; but we see no good arising out of their vices, but much harm to themselves. They are condemned by the providence as well as the word of God. Their souls are unprosperous, and the outward circumstances of some of those kinds of sinners, have the marks of divine displeasure mingled with them. Is it not better to learn wisdom at the cost of other people than at our own expense?

Solomon learned instruction from this dismal spectacle, the field and vineyard of the sluggard; and the instruction which he received he communicates to us in a proverb, which, for its importance, is repeated from a former chapter.

Ver. 33, 34. The sluggard had no intention of suffering his field to be all covered with weeds, he only wished to indulge himself a little while in ease and sleep, and then he designed to rouse himself and root up all the weeds. His ruin was, that, when he had got a little sleep, he wished for a little more, and when he had taken the little more, he felt himself as little disposed to work as before; and so he loitered and wasted away the time, day after day, doing nothing at all, or nothing to purpose, till his field was all overrun with noisome weeds, and every good herb destroyed, and his vineyard lay in ruins. Thus poverty came upon him swiftly and unexpectedly, and with irresistible fury, and plunged him into the gulph of misery and remorse.

Would you avoid sloth? Beware of every temptation to it, and allow not place to any thought of delaying a necessary business. It was a maxim of a certain prince, who was celebrated for his success in every undertaking, never to defer that till to-morrow which could be done to day. Putting off things till to-morrow is the thief of time. It is unsafe in any business. It is infinitely dangerous in our spiritual concerns. Boast not therefore of to-morrow, for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth, but whatsoever thine hand findeth to do, do it with all thy might*.

CHAPTER 25

Ver. 1. A BOOK written by Solomon, and published by the order of Hezekiah, would deserve very high regard. But the proverbs of Solomon need no human recommendation. Their intrinsic worth, and their divine original, place them far above the compositions of the greatest philosophers and kings that were not favoured with divine inspiration.

Those servants of Hezekiah that copied out the following part of Solomon's proverbs, and joined them to the rest, are here mentioned to their honour. They were the publishers, and not the composers of the following chapters; but they performed a piece of service to the church for which their names shall live. If we cannot do so much for God and his people as some others have done, let us do what we can, and we shall in no wise lose our reward. The contributors of goat's hair to the tabernacle are mentioned to their honour, as well as those who gave silver, and gold, and precious stones; for if there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to what a man hath, and not according to what he hath not.

Many of the following precepts respect the duties of kings. Hezekiah walked in the good ways of David and Solomon, and he desired instruction in his duty as a king. Every one of us ought to study the duties that belong to our respective stations, that we may be thoroughly furnished for every good work.

Ver. 2. How arrogant are those men who must know the reasons of all God's works; or, if that exceeds their capacity, call them in question, or find fault with them, as if they knew better what God ought to do than God himself! There are unsearchable mysteries in the excellencies and ways of God. His way is in the sea, and his path in the mighty waters, and his footsteps are not known, and it is his glory that they are not known. His wisdom would not be divine, if we could understand him to perfection, nor his sovereignty absolute, if he were obliged to do nothing but what his creatures would approve.

The meanest of the creatures of God have qualities that we cannot fully understand; how strange then is it, that we will not allow his providence to transcend our comprehension, or that a doubt should be entertained about the mysteries of his grace, because they are incomprehensible to our feeble understandings? It was a good saying of a pious divine, "Lord preserve us from a comprehensible God." It is our duty to venerate and wonder, and not to pry with curious eyes into the secrets of God. The history of the fall is an everlasting warning to the sons of Adam to prefer the tree of life to the tree of knowledge.

But the kings of this earth are infinitely inferior to the God of heaven, and their honours are of an humbler kind. It is their honour to search out a matter. When God is said to search the hearts of men, he is spoken of in the language of men, for he beholds all things past, present, and to come, by one glance of his infinite mind; but kings, who need a great deal of knowledge and wisdom, must obtain it, like other men, by labour and diligence. It is their honour to be diligent in searching out every thing that princes ought to know. They must employ much care, and make use of the wisdom of other men to inform themselves about all the interests of their kingdoms, and their various connexions with foreign states. They must endeavour to acquaint themselves with the dispositions and humours of their subjects, with the best means of suppressing vice, and encouraging goodness, and making their people happy, and the proper methods of preserving peace, or of defending their crowns and kingdoms from foreign enemies. When kings act the part

of judges in their own persons, as they did in ancient times, their sphere of labour is greatly increased; for every intricate cause they must search out. They must neither refuse to judge in it because it is difficult, nor must they pass sentence without good ground, to save their own labour, but they must search things to the bottom, and judge wisely and righteously, as Solomon did in the case of the two harlots.

On these accounts kings cannot conceal their important affairs within their own minds. They must have assistants to bear the burden of government, and make use of the counsels and abilities of other men, to whom they must communicate their secrets. It is the glory of God to need no counsellor. It is the honour of kings to choose right counsellors and to follow their salutary advices. Yet it is not to be expected that their subjects in general should be their privy counsellors.

Ver. 3. No man can measure the height of heaven, or the depth of the earth, as little can the hearts of kings be searched out. But is every king a Solomon, with an heart large as the sand on the sea shore? Every king needs a very enlarged heart. The throne is not a bed of repose, but the seat of care and labour. What knowledge and prudence is requisite to understand the intricate science of government, and to manage the complicated affairs of kingdoms? and as kings are not born wiser than other men, they certainly ought to improve the many advantages they have, for acquiring that knowledge which is suited to their station, and to pray earnestly for wisdom to him by whom kings reign, and whose servants they ought to be. Without a large measure of wisdom they are fit only to be the tools of their own ministers, who are often lovers of themselves, and of their own families, more than of their king and country.

But the heart of kings is oftener unsearchable in another sense. Their designs cannot be known by their subjects, or by foreign princes, because they industriously conceal them from the knowledge of all but their privy counsellors; and this is often necessary, because a discovery of their counsels would obstruct the execution of them. Besides, the affairs of government are so various and complicated, they have so many designs to carry on, so many mischiefs to obviate, so many opposite tempers of men to consider, and so many unknown difficulties to encounter, that persons in a lower station cannot possibly understand the reasons of a great part of their conduct, or the ends which they have in view. It is therefore presumptuous in subjects to pry too narrowly into their behaviour, or to be rash with their censures on the public management. Those who take a liberty to despise dominions, and speak evil of dignities, should be sure that they do not speak evil of those things which they do not understand.

If the heart of kings, who are infinitely inferior to God*, is so unsearchable, how foolish is it to think that we can search out God unto perfection†!

Ver. 4, 5. The interests of prince and people are so evidently the same, and a bad king is so evidently his own enemy, that it may well be wondered at that so many kings have proved tyrants, and exposed themselves to the danger and infamy that are the inseparable attendants of oppression and injustice in men of high place. To account for this fact, we must consider that kings cannot govern their people without the assistance of ministers and counsellors, and these servants of government have private interests of their own, different from those of the prince and people, which they too often prosecute with a selfish and wicked spirit. To serve their own covetous and ambitious views, they too often corrupt the mind of their prince with the sweet poison of flattery, and lead him, by their misrepresentations, into false notions of the state of things in his kingdom, and of the character and behaviour of many of his subjects, and draw him on to compliance with their own interested or malicious views, to the prejudice of his kingdom, and the ruin of many of his faithful subjects. If we read the histories of nations with attention, we shall find that unjust wars, oppressive taxes, iniquitous laws, unjust executions, seditious and civil commotions, and the overturning of thrones, and the confusions of kingdoms, have originated in the wicked counsels of bad ministers. The histories of Rehoboam, and Joash, and Ahasuerus, are scriptural instances of this truth.

Wicked men are often compared in Scripture to dross; and as the dross must be separated from the silver before a beautiful vase can be framed, so the wicked must be removed from the throne, that it may be established in righteousness; and kings need our prayers, that they may be furnished with wisdom to choose their counsellors and ministers from their best deserving subjects, and to turn all flatterers and self-seekers out of public employment. If Rehoboam had possessed so much wisdom, the kingdom might have remained entire in his hand; but Solomon his father could not infuse this wisdom into his mind by all his instructions, and God left him to his folly, that his awful purpose of dividing his people, and diminishing the kingdom of the house of David, might be fulfilled*.

Ver. 6, 7. Impudence is a very disagreeable vice to any man, and it is especially odious to kings, who are jealous of their honour and dignity, and cannot bear those who would intrude into their presence, or push themselves without their own choice, into places of trust or power under them. It is ambition that prompts persons to seek high station, and royal favour; but ambition often disappoints its own designs, by an eager pursuit of them, and by those methods which it uses to accomplish them, and where it expected honour it meets with shame and disgrace. How mortifying must it be to a man who places his chief happiness in the smiles of a king, and those honours which are derived from earthly majesty, to find himself disgraced in the eyes, and by the order of that prince whom his eyes have beheld, and of whose favour he supposed himself secure! Kings, if they are wise, will look with a suspicious eye on those who court them for high posts, and will seek out the modest and unassuming to fill every station or importance.

If we consult our interest and duty, we shall be contented with the stations in which the all-wise God is pleased to set us, and rather avoid than covet the place of great men. David was anointed with holy oil, and yet he could appeal to God for the falsehood of the charges that were laid against him, of an aspiring mind, and ambitious attempts to obtain a superior station to that which he occupied*. It is our business to mind the duties of our present station; and, if providence thinks fit to raise us higher, to follow its calls with humility and gratitude.

If it be a sin for us to put forth ourselves in the presence of a prince, what lowliness of mind becomes us in the presence of him, who regards not the prince more than the peasant! A due impression of divine majesty would humble us in the dust, and fill us with wonder at the least smile of God's countenance†.

Our Lord spoke a parable like this proverb of Solomon, and gives a wider extent to the instruction contained in it‡. It is our duty to entertain such a low opinion of ourselves, as willingly to take a place even below our inferiors, as far as the duties and decencies of our station will permit. None are so likely to meet with disgrace as those that are too fond of honour, like the Pharisees, whom our Lord severely censures for loving the best seats in the synagogues, and the chief rooms at feasts. None have so much honour from God or man, as the meek and humble, whose temper it is, in honour to prefer their neighbours, and to serve them in love, and condescend to men of low degree.

Ver. 8. That is a good maxim,—“Do nothing till thou hast well considered the end of it.” Many might have prevented shame, and poverty, and destruction, had they duly considered the possible and probable consequences of their words and conduct. Beasts have not the gift of reason and foresight, and therefore mind only present ease and comfort; but rational beings should act with reason, and not incur lasting misery, to gratify a fit of humour, or a transient passion.

If men considered the consequences of every important action before they entered upon it, it would cut off ninety-nine out of an hundred of the law-suits with which the world is pestered. If it be the desire of saving or gaining money that pushes men to go forth to strive with their neighbours at the bar, they should consider, that going to law is little better than fishing with a golden hook. A few fishes may possibly be caught, but something may be lost of more value than many fishes. If men are instigated by their pride to go to law, (and pride is the real cause of many more pleas than covetousness,) they should consider well, whether they are most likely to gain or lose the cause, or, if they gain it, whether the gain will compensate the loss of time, and money, and temper, which are inseparable from law-suits. That sense of honour which leads so many into contention, would keep them out of it, if it were under the regulation of prudence. That pride which plunges men into the gulph of the law, must end in the most galling remorse, when the cause is lost, and shame, instead of honour, is gained by it.

Contention of every kind ought to be avoided by us. Before we venture to gratify our rage by strife and debate, it is necessary for our peace and comfort, to consider with coolness, whether we have reason on our side. Self-love will tell us that we have met with wrong, although no real injury was done, or intended to us; and we cannot expect that the other party, or the judge, (if the matter be referred to a judge,) should have the same bias in our favour with ourselves.

Ver. 9, 10. If we are forced into debate, the more privately it is managed the better; and therefore, if we think ourselves ill used, our best course is to reason the matter with the offender in the spirit of meekness, to convince him of the wrong he has done to us, and to show him a forgiving spirit, which will be the most effectual means of bringing him to repentance, and to put an end to the difference, if possible, without exposing ourselves or our neighbours to the censure of the world, which will conclude that there are faults on both sides.

If we cannot bring our neighbour to a sense of his fault by this method, our great teacher allows and prescribes other methods of convincing him, which we ought to put in practice only when we are sure that we have met with an offence which will justify our conduct*. In other cases we must keep the matter to ourselves, as the wise man here directs us. When we make complaints of the injustice done us in another manner than our Lord directs us, we will not be believed, and ought not to be believed, till the other party has given in his defence; for he is an unjust judge that passes sentence till both parties are heard. Those who are ever complaining of the injustice of others, may or may not be believed, to the prejudice of those concerning whom they may complain; but strong suspicions will most certainly be entertained to their own prejudice, and by their own tongues they bring an indelible reproach upon themselves, as men of a quarrelsome and unforgiving temper.

It is not uncommon for persons, when they are at variance with those that had once been their friends, to take every opportunity, and to use every means, however unfair, to blacken their characters; and if they have been entrusted by them, in the days of intimacy, with any secret, they will divulge it, to gratify their present spleen. This is base conduct, and must fix an everlasting stain on those that make use of such abominable methods to support their own credit and interests. A man that has the least degree of generosity in his nature, would rather suffer blame, or lose a cause, than defend himself by such dirty and dishonourable means; but when a man is reduced to such pitiful shifts, it is a strong presumption that his cause is not good. On the whole, if we would preserve ourselves from lasting disgrace, we must either leave off contention before it be meddled with, or, if that cannot be done, manage it with the weapons proper for a man and a Christian.

Ver. 11. That words may deserve this character, they must be the words of truth; for falsehood and error are on no occasion fit to be spoken. And therefore Job reproves his friends for endeavouring, by false doctrine, to comfort him, and direct his exercise in the time of his distress*.

But words may be true and yet unfitly spoken, for although nothing is to be spoken but truth, yet truth is not always to be spoken. Doeg the Edomite was guilty of murder before he killed the priests of the Lord, by telling the enraged tyrant that David had received bread and a sword from Ahimelech. Jonathan was a man of a very opposite spirit, and discovered it by the seasonable mention he made to his father of David's exploit in slaying Goliath. By putting Saul in mind of this noble action, he disarmed for a time his angry resentments.

It is necessary to consider, not only what we speak, but likewise the persons to whom we speak, and the time and the place of speaking. Job complains with justice concerning Bildad, that he spoke things to him, which, though certain and important truths,

were not at all fit to be spoken to him in his distressed situation. "To whom hast thou uttered words?" says he. Nabal deserved a severe reproof from Abigail; but she did not think it proper to speak to him about his foolish conduct towards David, till he awoke from his drunkenness. Paul preached in a very different manner at Jerusalem and Athens, when he was before Agrippa, who believed the prophets, and when he was before Felix, who acknowledged no other rule but the light of nature.

"A word fitly spoken, is like apples of gold, in pictures" (or network) "of silver." The words themselves are like apples of a golden hue. The manner of speaking them is like network of silver, whose elegant apertures give an additional grace to the pleasant fruit that is served up in the salvers of exquisite workmanship and precious metal. By words fitly spoken, the fiercest passions have been allayed, and the strongest enmities dissolved. By such words, wicked men have been checked in their career, fainting souls have been revived, the perplexed have been relieved from their difficulties, and Christians have been often invigorated in their work and warfare. Words fitly spoken unite the pleasant and the profitable, and thereby gain every point that words can gain.

In a time of persecution, some ministers met together to consult what was proper to be done in their situation. All of them wore a dejected countenance, and appeared almost at an equal loss to determine what their duty was in their distressed condition, till one of them observed, that they were all immortal till their work was done. This seasonable hint cleared up every countenance, and they parted with spirits ready to encounter every difficulty.

Ver. 12. No words have greater need to be fitly spoken, than words of reproof. Few are capable of reproving wisely, and fewer still are able to receive a reproof in a right manner.

Wisdom is necessary in a reprove, to direct him about the time and manner of giving the reproof. Elihu shewed great wisdom and great faithfulness, in performing this difficult office; and when Job had been irritated by the unjust reproofs of his friends, he was silent under the smart reproofs of Elihu; for he charged nothing upon Job, but what had some truth in it, and discovered his friendship for Job, and his good opinion of him, with regard to the general course of his behaviour, at the time that he rebuked him with great severity, for the unjustifiable expressions which came from him, when his mind was fretted with the weight of his troubles, and the injurious reflections of the former speakers.

An ear obedient to reproof, is a very rare thing. It is observed by an eminent divine of the last age, that the professors of religion are generally more stubborn against reproof than fornicators, or common swearers, and that they are ready to fly at the faces of men who reprove them, for those very faults which they daily confess to God. If there was more of the meekness of wisdom discovered in giving reproof, it is probable, that greater meekness and submission might be shewed in receiving it, and yet a due sense of the evil of our faults, and of the necessity of amendment, would make us to value just rebukes even from the mouth of an enemy.

It is a false sense of honour that makes us to fret at reproof; but if we had the same sense of honour with the wise man, we would not judge ourselves on a supposition that we are unblameable, and irreproveable, but reckon it our honour to receive reproof with gratitude, and improve it for the correction of our vices.

Ornaments of gold were worn in ancient days in the ears of people of distinction; but nothing adorns the ear so much, in the judgment of the inspired philosopher, as the obedient hearing of wise reproof.

It would be a great honour to us to need no reproof, but this is scarcely to be expected in our degenerate race. We ought, therefore, if we have forfeited our credit by falling into sin, to recover it by welcoming needful rebukes, and if others have been overtaken in a fault, to hold them in the same esteem as formerly, when they have given proper evidence of their repentance, by submitting to reproof. By their sin, they have shewed themselves to be men of like frailty with ourselves; by their obedient hearing of reproof, they have discovered a degree of meekness too rarely to be met with among Christians.

Ver. 13. Nothing is more refreshing in the sultry heat of harvest, in those southern climes where the harvest is very early and hot, than the liquors which are mingled with snow, kept from the winter, to cool their drink in the hot season of the year. Equally refreshing to the soul, is the faithful execution of an important message by those that are entrusted with it. It is required of all servants that they be found faithful, and it is required in a special manner of messengers who are employed in distant and important commissions; and fidelity is the more praiseworthy in them, because they are not under the immediate eye of their masters. Such a messenger was Eliezer to Abraham and Isaac, for he valued the service and interest of his master more than his necessary food, and God blessed him with success, to the great satisfaction of his venerable master, and his son Isaac.

If we are employed in any business for another person, we should make a point of managing it with the same activity as if it were a business of our own; and whether we are successful or not, we shall give satisfaction to our employer, and receive his thanks, if he is not wholly destitute of the feelings of gratitude. If we are obliged to perform any affairs of consequence by the hands of other men, it will be our wisdom to entrust men of honour and tried fidelity with our affairs; for he that is faithful in one thing, is likely to be faithful in another thing also, though of much greater consequence*.

Ministers of the gospel are messengers of Christ, for the benefit of the churches. If they are faithful, they are accepted of Christ and useful to men†.

Ver. 14. Covetousness is so much detested in the world, that the persons who are guilty of this vice are ashamed of it, and desire to be esteemed liberal; and therefore, if they have ever been able to master their disposition so far as to perform one generous action in the course of their life, they will boast of it as long as they live, and think themselves ill used if they are not honoured by other men with the character of being generous persons. But it is moreover very usual for them, to talk of charities which they never bestowed, and thus they add vice to vice. Their arrogance and dissimulation, added to their stinginess, makes them doubly detestable. They

are like clouds carried about with the wind, that seem to be full of rain when there is not a drop for the refreshment of the weary earth.

Those that are large and ready in promising, but are never ready to perform, are likewise like clouds without water. When you ask any favour from them, they give you great reason, by their frankness and professions, to believe that they will serve you, but when they are called on for performance, some unlucky accident has come in their way, and they can do nothing for you at present. They will only give you new promises, which you may believe if you can, and they will be sure to perform them as well as the former ones. It is shameful to behave in this manner, raising expectations and then disappointing them, and perhaps reducing to great straits and perplexities the very men that were trusting to their friendship.

The apostles Peter and Jude speak of a set of men that may be compared to clouds without rain, because of their religious professions and promises. These are false teachers, who make large boasts of their knowledge in the mystery of the gospel, and promise liberty to men that will receive their doctrines, whilst they themselves are ignorant of all sound principles, and in bondage to corruption. No kind of corrupt teachers in our times answer this description so much as those of the church of Rome, who pretend to make a monopoly of heaven for those of their own church, and who sell, for small pieces of money, the most wonderful promises, all which will be found by their deluded votaries to vanish into smoke when the performance is expected.

Ver. 15. A prince is not easily pacified when he reckons his dignity despised, and his authority trampled under foot. He is little used to contradiction, and therefore has small experience of those situations in which forbearance is to be exercised. Yet strong as the passions of princes generally are, such is the power of patience and meekness, that those virtues allay their stormy passions, and a soft answer softens their hearts, although they were as hard as their bones. Saul was so fierce in his rage against David, that in spite to him, he slew eighty-five priests of the Lord, and yet David melted his heart unto softness by his generous behaviour, and his calm defence of his own innocency. The tyrant felt a temporary change in his temper, and said, "Is this thy voice, my son David, return, for I will no more do thee hurt."

If meekness and gentleness have such a powerful influence upon princes; if they can break hearts of stone, how great must be their influence upon private men, and persons of moderate passions?

It is certainly a piece of great folly if we will not make use of these harmless weapons to end debates, when they are the most effectual means for that end.

But are there not some men that will not be wrought upon by such means? Yes: But they are savage brutes, and not rational creatures. Their hearts are made of something harder than adamant; and they are objects of our pity, because they are cursed with such unrelenting hearts that they cannot possibly taste any of those social pleasures that sweeten the life of man. Nothing can subdue the fierceness of their spirits but that grace which turns the flint into a pool of water*.

Ver. 16. The God who has replenished the earth with his goodness, has not required us to lead a niggardly and uncomfortable life. He allows us to eat as much honey, and to enjoy as much of every earthly comfort as is sufficient for us, to strengthen our bodies, and to refresh our spirits; all that he forbids is that excess in eating and drinking, and other animal enjoyments, which would enfeeble our frame, clog our souls, and end in bitterness.

Although we are allowed to eat as much honey as is sufficient, we must not eat what would suffice to satiate a ravenous appetite. Reason, and not appetite, must direct us when we have enough, otherwise there would be no such sin as intemperance in the world. Nature itself makes us to feel the bad effects of immoderate indulgence, which overloads the stomach, and turns the sweetest things into bitterness, so that no ease can be obtained till they are thrown off.

It is represented in the book of Jude as a great sin to eat without fear. When we are at a well covered table, there are more guests present than such as are invited, for the devil comes to graft some temptation upon the dishes which are served up, and very often he finds an opportunity of getting some iniquity to pass down the throat along with the meat or drink that is used. We are to remember at all times our chief end; and it is explained by the Apostle in these words, "Whether, therefore, ye eat or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God." From God we received our food, and it is a very wicked thing in men to use it as a weapon of rebellion against him, by making a god of our bellies.

Nothing earthly must be suffered to engross our affections, so as to sensualize our souls, and alienate our minds from spiritual objects. The time of our connexion with the world is short, let us therefore rejoice as though we rejoiced not, and use this world as not abusing it, for the fashion of this world passeth away.

Ver. 17. We must not indulge ourselves without restraint in any of the pleasures of life, however delightful. Honey is not so sweet to the taste, as the intercourses of friendship, amongst those that have a cordial love to one another, are to the heart. But as we must eat only so much honey as is sufficient for us, so we must use a prudent caution in our familiarities with our most affectionate friends. Although their houses are a home to us, yet we must not be frequenting them at every hour, nor continue in them till our company become wearisome. It is highly proper for us to visit our friends, and preserve by that means our mutual friendship, and enjoy the sweets of it; but it is very improper to tease a friend by too frequent visits, which may have the unhappy effect of dissolving the closest intimacy, by creating disgust where love in former times took place. Our friends have their business to mind, and their time is valuable to them; and friendship is bought too dear by him that ceases to be master of his own time, and may be called off the most necessary employment to receive a visitant. Besides, we ought to consider the circumstances of our friends, and take care not to load them by our visits with expence which they may be unable or unwilling to bear. The freedom of friendship does not consist in a liberty to tease one another, but in a liberty to contribute to one another's happiness and comfort, beyond what strangers

can presume to use.

How different are the pleasures of earthly friendships from those which are vouchsafed to Christians in their admission to fellowship with God! The oftener we visit the best of all friends, we are the more welcome, and the more we frequent his house to partake of the provisions of it, he is the better pleased with our conduct*.

Ver. 18. This proverb is sufficient to strike an alarm into all evil speakers, that spread scandal against their neighbours, merely because they have nothing else to do, or because they have some little quarrel with them. Consider, ye that deal in such conversation, whether you could think of treating the objects of your defamatory discourse as Jael did Sisera, or as Joab treated Abner. Would you shrink with horror at the thought of beating out your neighbour's brains with a hammer, or of piercing his bowels with a sword, or a sharp arrow? Why then do you indulge yourselves in a piece of the like barbarity, destroying, as far as you can, that reputation which is dear to men as their life, and wounding all their best interests by mangling their character†?

It is a happy thing to be free from this terrible mischief of a virulent tongue. We should therefore live unblameably, that we may take away all occasion from those that would reproach us. And yet the purest innocency will not be a sure protection to us from the tongue that speaketh evil. We must commit the care of our good name, as well as all our other interests, to the Lord, and he will preserve us from the scourge of the tongue, or from all the evil effects of it‡.

Ver. 19. A broken tooth, and a foot out of joint, are not only useless for their respective offices, but the causes of great pain and uneasiness. In like manner, a friend that does not shew kindness in the day of distress, is not only an useless friend, but likewise causes many painful feelings in those who trusted to his kindness. The supposed infidelity of Job's friends produced great bitterness of spirit in that venerable sufferer, and added greatly to that load of distress which lay upon his body and spirit; and he compares them to the brooks of Tema, which abounded with snow in the winter, but had no water in them for the thirsty traveller in the sultry heat of summer.

Let us be faithful in our friendships, as well as in the duties of every other relation. Insincerity and inconstancy in friendship is immoral and impious; as the forementioned sufferer observes, "To him that is afflicted pity should be shewed by his friend, but he forsaketh the fear of the Almighty*."

In the times of our distress, we have reason to expect sympathy from our friends, but we must not be too sanguine in our hopes; they may prove unable to help us, or unfaithful, or some temporary alienation may estrange them from us, or God for our chastisement or trial may bereave us of the comforts of their friendship, or trouble may fret our spirits, and make us to think that they are become cold to us, when they shew us all that friendship which ought to be expected from frail creatures like ourselves.

When we lament the treachery or insincerity of our friends, we should remember that David, and Christ himself, felt all the bitterness of this calamity. One of our Lord's disciples betrayed him, and his most affectionate, and highly favoured friend forsook him. In many cases of this kind we have greater reason to complain of ourselves than of our false friends; for had we chosen our friends more wisely, and fixed our regard to them upon the ground of piety, we would not have found so much reason to complain of violated professions.

Ver. 20. He that takes away a garment in cold weather, leaves the person whom he robs of it to starve, and perhaps to perish. Vinegar poured upon nitre deprives it of all its virtue and usefulness; so he that tries to charm away deep-rooted sorrows by the help of music, does only sink the person whom he designs to cheer into a deeper melancholy. It is to be confessed that sorrows of a slight kind may be diverted and soothed by the charms of music, as the spirit of Elisha was composed for prophesying by a minstrel. But when the heart is laden with grief, it is exasperated and not revived by unseasonable and ill-directed endeavours to dispel the sorrow which feeds upon it. Mirth and gaiety, and the sprightly airs of vocal and instrumental music deaden the spirit, as vinegar does nitre, and are just as ineffectual to restore gladness, as the taking away of clothes in cold weather is to restore heat.

Is any man afflicted? let him pray. Does any man wish to administer comfort to the afflicted soul? let him weep, and not laugh, with those that weep. Is the heart oppressed with anguish, or the conscience laden with guilt? let the Scripture, and not instruments of music, be applied for relief. The music of David's harp may indeed be still used for driving away the evil spirit. His psalms are full of strong consolations, and we shall never sink into despondency whilst we muse on the precious and reviving truths which he presents to our consideration, and endeavour to walk in the steps of his faith.

It is doubtless our duty to administer comfort to the mourners, but we must take heed to use those means which are proper to the end, that we may not deserve that reproof which Job, with great justice, gave his friends, "Miserable comforters are ye all."

Ver. 21. This precept is grievous to flesh and blood. We are disposed by our pride and rage to inflict a severe revenge, not only on our enemies, but even on our offending friends. To do to them as they have done to us is not reckoned sufficient, but sevenfold vengeance must be rendered into their bosom. A stab at the heart has been often returned by the modern men of honour for a rude expression.

But we that are Christians have not so learned Christ. Enmity against God is infinitely worse than enmity against us, and yet God spares his enemies, and does them good from heaven, giving them rain and fruitful seasons. We ourselves were sometimes alienated from God, and enemies in our mind by wicked works, and if we had been recompensed according to our works, we had now been in the lake of fire and brimstone; but God who is rich in mercy, sent his Son to accomplish our redemption from ruin. By Christ, we that were guilty of horrid enmity against God have received the atonement. We are reconciled to God, and blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ; and shall we now think that God lays an unreasonable command upon us, when he requires us to be charitable and kind to our enemies, and not to return railing for railing, but courtesies for injuries?

It is easy for us to say that we forgive our enemies; but do we make it evident in our works that we forgive them in love? We may bring our minds without very great difficulty to overlook their injuries, and to bury them in silence; but a sullen disdain of injuries is no Christian grace. Our duty is to wish real happiness to our enemies in this world and the next, and to shew the truth of our love in praying for them, and in doing them good as opportunity presents, and their needs require. It was so habitual to the good Archbishop Cranmer to shew kindness to those that had wronged him, that it became a proverb: "If any man would have a good turn from the archbishop, let him do him an injury." But will not behaviour of this kind lay a man open to injuries? No.

Ver. 22. It is said to be a custom to this day among the Arabians, to cure some diseases, by the application of burning coals to the head. The disease of rancour and spite will certainly be healed, for the most part, by those coals of love that Solomon here directs us to heap upon the heads of our enemies. As the hard metals are softened and melted by the fire, so the hard and stubborn spirit is softened and melted by the solid expressions of charity and meekness. He is a wild beast of the most untameable kind, that feels no shame for his own conduct, nor any warm emotions of gratitude to him whom he has offended, when he sees him returning good for evil. No enmity is stronger than the enmity of man's heart to God, and God makes use of his own kindness to subdue it; and we are to be followers of God as dear children, and try the like experiment upon our own enemies, as far as the infinite difference of persons and circumstances will admit the resemblance; and if our enemies are warmed into friends, have we not gained a nobler victory, by gaining our brother, than if we had humbled them to the dust? The pleasantest and noblest of victories is to overcome evil with good*.

But perhaps we shall be losers by kindness to our enemies? Who knows but their hearts may be untameably savage, and then our bread and water is thrown away upon them? Let them be what they will, it is not thrown away. If they persist to return evil for good, the Lord shall graciously reward thee. The Lord loves mercy and goodness, and there are no instances of it that he loves better, and rewards more bountifully, than those by which we most resemble himself, and cross our selfish and haughty spirits. David preserved the life of a railing Shimei from the rage of Abishai, as he had formerly done the life of a persecuting tyrant. The good man hoped that God would return him good for the evil that his enemies did to him, when he shewed kindness to them, and his hopes were not disappointed.

Ver. 23. Fair weather cometh out of the north, says Elihu†. This text probably induced our translators to render the verse before us in the manner they have done; for the original word, which stands for driveth away, more properly signifies, to produce, but the north wind may have different effects in different countries, and even in the same country at different times. But whether we follow the translation in the text, or that in the margin, it will give us very useful instruction.

It is a great encouragement to tale-bearers, to observe that their wicked stories are heard with attention. If a man looks upon them with a cheerful countenance, and listens to their tales, and makes them welcome to his table, they naturally conclude that the person to whom they speak has as bad a heart as themselves, and they will not fail to bring him new stories of the like kind, as soon as they have got an opportunity to learn or to make them. But if the receiver of stolen goods is a sharer with the thief in his guilt, and if any man that encourages another in evil partakes in his sin, then he that hears the backbiter with complacency is little better than himself, and would probably follow the same trade if he had the same talents for it. We cannot, therefore, clear ourselves from the sin of backbiting, unless we refuse to receive a bad report of our neighbour, and testify our displeasure, by all proper methods, at the base conduct of the assassins that would murder in the dark the good-name of their fellow-creatures. When the murderers of Isbosheth brought their master's head to David, judging from their own disposition that it would be an acceptable present to him, he treated them in such a manner that no man ever sent another present of the like kind to him. And if we gave proper evidence to those who expect to entertain us by ill-natured stories, that we have no relish for them, they would not trouble us a second time. Anger is a bad passion, as it is commonly exerted, but we may be angry and not sin, and in this case, we sin if we do not put on an angry countenance.

But as the north wind, not only drives away rain in some places, but likewise brings it in other places, or at other times in the same place, so an angry countenance brings a backbiting tongue. He that meets with insolent and surly treatment, may conceal his sense of the injury, from the person that uses him in this manner, because he thinks it more prudent to stifle his displeasure; but he will be tempted to take revenge by speaking evil of him in his absence, for nothing is commonly more irritating, or sticks more deeply in the heart, than angry and imperious treatment, and no injury is harder to be borne with patience.

If other men speak evil of us, we should examine our own conduct impartially, that we may know whether we have not given them some provocation. If we have, we should look upon ourselves to be the more criminal persons; as Judah acknowledged that Tamar was more righteous than himself, because his own behaviour had tempted her to the sin, for which he thought she deserved to be burnt. Other people have at least as good a right to talk against our ill conduct, as we have to give them occasion for it.

Let us neither speak evil of men, nor countenance evil speakers, nor give any man occasion to speak evil of us, nor burst into rage, when they have treated us in this manner, but in all things follow meekness, righteousness, charity, and the example of Christ.

Ver. 24. Solomon put this proverb into his own edition of the proverbs, but the men of Hezekiah finding it likewise in those papers from which they extracted this appendix, inserted it here likewise. They justly considered it as an useful admonition to women, and to men that have wives to choose, and wished it not to be forgotten.

Ver. 25. Nothing is more the object of desire in a hot country, than cold water when men are thirsty; and nothing is more agreeable than to hear glad tidings from a distant country. Good news are always agreeable, but good news from a far country are most

agreeable of any good news, because they have been the subject of tedious and anxious thoughts, and because they generally respect some object of importance. Solomon had experience of this fact, when he sent his ships on voyages that lasted three years, and when he had affairs of importance to be transacted in other kingdoms.

We that move in the lower sphere of life have little concern with foreign countries, but if we have the generous spirit of Christians, it must give us great pleasure to hear of any thing that tends to the happiness of other nations, or the advancement of the Redeemer's kingdom among men. We daily pray that the kingdom of Christ may come, and it would certainly give us much joy to hear of any event whereby our prayers are fulfilled. Let us in the mean time rejoice at the good tidings brought to us from far countries by the prophets of God, who tell us of things that they have heard from the uttermost parts of the earth, even glory to the righteous.

Heaven is the better country from whence we have heard tidings that will for ever gladden our hearts, and fill our mouths with praise. Messengers from that blessed region have been sent to our earth with glad tidings of great joy to all the people of God, and to every Gentile nation, that to us is born a Saviour, and that he is now gone to his native heaven; and will appear again on earth to our complete salvation*.

Ver 26. A righteous man falls down before the wicked when he is oppressed and cannot obtain justice, but is obliged to submit to injury and violence. When such injustice prevails in a country, every thing is in a state of disorder. The fountain of justice is poisoned; the public administration, instead of being a public blessing, is a general curse; and those who should be the fathers and guardians of the poor, are worse than street robbers, for they not only pillage them of their property, but grind their faces, and pull of their skins and pick their bones*.

He that poisons a public fountain, deserves a thousand deaths; and those by whose mismanagement the fountains of justice are corrupted, must be equally criminal in the sight of God. He is an enemy not to men only, but to God, by giving encouragement to wickedness, and suppressing goodness, and perverting an ordinance of God into an engine for serving the designs of Satan.

Those righteous men that fall before the wicked, must take care that they fall not into sin, for they are strongly tempted to it by their unhappy circumstances. When wicked men drive the righteous into sin, the fountains become corrupt, in another and worse sense than that now mentioned; for those who are like springs of water for the refreshment of their neighbours becoming polluted and loathsome, are a means of perverting and poisoning those that are too much disposed to judge of religion and duty from the behaviour of religious persons.

When the righteous persist under temptation in duty, they have rich sources of comfort in the promises of God, and the doctrine of a future judgment†.

Ver. 27. Men may eat some honey, so likewise men are warranted to pay due regard to their own honour. If there be any praise, Paul recommends it to us to think on it, and our Lord enjoins us to make our light to shine before men, that they may glorify our Father who is in heaven.

But it is a loathsome thing to the stomach to eat much honey, and it is a loathsome thing for a man to be anxious about his honour, and to fish for praise, as too many do, who use a variety of methods to obtain the applause of men; sometimes putting on all the external appearances of humility with that view, and saying things of themselves which would inspire them with fury if they were said by another person, or believed by that very person to whom they are spoken.

We must value our own reputation because it enables us to be useful to men, and to glorify God; but when we indulge an unbridled desire after glory from men, we forget our chief end, we disqualify ourselves for the most important duties, we expose ourselves to the worst temptations; and if our fortune were equal to that of Cæsar, our ambition might draw us to equal in crimes that enemy of Cato, and cut-throat of mankind.

The humble are sensible that they deserve shame rather than glory, and would be content that all their glory were taken from them, that it might be ascribed unto God to whom it truly belongs. The vain and proud would rob God Almighty of his crown, that they might set it upon their own heads. But God will not suffer them to escape without a punishment suited to their crime. When Herod was affecting the honours of a god, he perished by a viler death than if he had died in a ditch*.

Ver. 28. It is necessary for our happiness and peace, that we should have the government of our own spirits. He that possesses not himself possesses nothing, although he should possess all other things. As a city that is broken down, and without walls, is exposed to the invasion of every enemy; so the man who has not a mastery over his own desires and affections, is a ready prey to every devil, and his imagination is tainted, his corrupt desires are inflamed, and his active powers hurried into the most criminal excesses by every slight temptation. A city in flames, or a ship seized by a drunken and mutinous crew, are not so terrible spectacles as a soul where the judgment and reason are laid desolate by intemperate passions and appetites. What mischiefs have been wrought, and what oceans of blood have been poured out by the passion of anger alone, when it was unrestrained by the principle of conscience? When Simeon and Levi heard the dying blessings of their father upon the rest of his sons, and the severe censures that he passed upon themselves, what remorse must have torn their hearts at the thought of that fatal day when in their cruel fury they slew so many men, and destroyed the city of Shechem.

Let us hold in with a strong and steady hand our disorderly passions, otherwise they will make us wild beasts, of a more furious kind than wolves and leopards; because our rational powers will be forced into their service, and tend to no other purpose, but to make us more fell and destructive enemies of mankind. No leopards or lions ever destroyed men or beasts in such multitudes as those tyrants have done, who were slaves to their own love of glory and vindictive spirits.

It is a happy thing when the body is subject to the mind, and the mind deeply penetrated with an habitual sense of the authority of

God. That we may be placed in this delightful state, we must give up ourselves to the Lord, and pray for the accomplishment of these promises, "I will put my spirit within you, and I will cause you to walk in my statutes:" "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid."

CHAPTER 26

Ver. 1. SNOW in summer and rain in harvest are unseasonable, disagreeable, and sometimes very hurtful. In like manner, honours bestowed on foolish and wicked persons sit very ungracefully on them, and enable them often to prove hurtful to their inferiors. When Haman was raised to high station, he soon became hurtful to all men by his pride; and if providence had not baffled his designs, he would have ruined a whole nation of innocent men, and banished true religion out of the world.

This proverb contains a very important instruction to those who have the disposal of offices and honours in their hand. By advancing unworthy persons to stations of influence in church or state; they may render themselves deeply accountable for the follies and crimes of other men. One of the Caliphs of Babylon, was so sensible of this, that he voluntarily resigned his authority, and refused to choose his successor, that he might not be accountable for his conduct.

Most men are fond of honour and preferment, as if happiness were inseparably connected with it; but few are sensible how difficult it is to wear honours with a becoming dignity, and how much better the providence of God has chosen their situation than they could have chosen it for themselves. Great numbers of those princes who make a despicable or hateful figure in history, might have become a private station very well, and left the world lamented by all their acquaintances.

It belongs to God to determine our station in life, and to us to believe that he has determined it in his wisdom and goodness, and to fulfil the duties of it without aspiring to those honours that God has not been pleased to bestow upon us.

Those that are in stations of honour ought not to trust for honour to their stations, but to seek it by wisdom, without which, their exalted situation will only render their disgrace more visible. The infamous names of Pilate and Tiberius, and Caiaphas, might have been buried with those of the meanest instruments of their iniquities, if they had not, to their great unhappiness, filled high stations whilst they lived.

Ver. 2. When you see a bird wandering about, or a swallow flying hither and thither, you are not afraid of any hurt from them. They will not touch you, but fly back to their nests. You have no more reason to be afraid of hurt from unmerited curses, whoever the persons are that pronounce them. They are but harmless lightnings, that will not blast you; they will fly back to the place from which they came, and light with dreadful vengeance on the heads of those who profaned their Maker's name, and gave scope to their own malice in uttering them; for, as they delight in cursing, they shall have cursing for their portion, and unless the pardoning mercy of God prevent, their curses will enter into them like water, and like oil into their bones.

Groundless fears are real torments, for no passion is more distressing than fear; whether it has a just cause or not, its present effect is the same, and therefore God in mercy has given us antidotes against every needless and unprofitable kind of fear. The curses which bad men sometimes pour forth from their vindictive spirits, have such a dreadful sound, that they strike an impression of horror into the tender spirits of the innocent and conscientious, although they know they have not deserved them; but if our consciences do not condemn us, we need not be afraid of the blasphemous imprecations of the wicked, although they were expressed in the coarsest language of hell. The curses of a conclave of cardinals, or the excommunications of an assembly of divines, could do no prejudice to one whom his own heart does not reproach. They may open their mouths wide, and speak great swelling words of terror, but their arm is short, and God has not entrusted them with his thunderbolts. Their curses, instead of being prejudicial, will be very useful to us, if we are wise enough to imitate the conduct of David, whose meekness was approved, his prayers kindled into a flame of desires, and his hopes invigorated by them*.

But we have just reason to fear the curse that is not causeless. Although persons when they meet with ill usage, are not warranted to wish a curse upon those that wrong them, yet the curses that are extorted by anguish from their spirits, will not fall to the ground†. The most just curse in the world is the curse of God, that lies upon all the children of disobedience; and we cannot escape the execution of it, but through Christ who was made a curse in our stead‡.

Ver. 3. A fool is more brutish than the horse or the ass; for the horse, as well as the ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib, but foolish sinners are insensible of the obligations they are under, both to God and man. The horse needs the lash to chastise it when it is unruly, and to urge its speed when it is dull. The ass, when it was used for riding, needed the bridle to govern its course (or the spur to push it on its way, Sept.) The rod is equally needful for the fool's back. Are you the unhappy fathers of foolish children? you must make use of the rod and reproof to give them wisdom. Are you authorized to bear rule in the church? the rod of church discipline must be applied to offenders, that they may be reclaimed, and others warned. Are you magistrates? the rod which God has put into your hands may be a means of preserving young malefactors from the gibbet at a more advanced period of life. Are you wise? beware of turning aside unto folly, that you may never need the rod. Are you fools? learn wisdom, or do not blame those whom duty and charity will oblige to use the rod for your correction. Is it not better that you should be treated by your superiors with love, and in the spirit of meekness, than to be beaten with the rod*? Are you obliged, for your faults, to undergo the pains of church censure, or criminal law? Kiss the rod, and sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto you. Have you formerly endured the rod? Let the impressions and effects of it abide with you for life, lest the sword of divine vengeance be unsheathed against you, because you refused to hear the voice of the rod and him that hath appointed it†.

Ver. 4. There are many cases in which a fool is to be heard, and not answered at all. When a scorner reviles us, it is needless to reprove him for it; for he is a dog, and the best way you can deal with him, is to let him bark till he ceases of his own accord: if you cast a stone at him, he will only follow you the longer and bark the more furiously. When Rabshakeh railed at Hezekiah, and blasphemed the God of Israel, the servants of Hezekiah were expressly forbidden by their master to answer him a word, for he knew that an answer would only produce some blasphemous reply. Our Lord himself often kept silence when impertinent questions were asked at him. He was well acquainted with all the secrets of wisdom, and, if he had spoken, his words would have been the fittest that could be spoken in these cases; but silence was, in his infallible judgment, fitter than any answer that his perfect wisdom could make.

But must this be a rule for us in every case? Should not the multitude of words be answered, and when the fool mocks shall no man make him ashamed? In many cases it is very fit that a fool's words should be answered, only you must take care in answering not to imitate him. If he speaks unreasonable, profane, peevish, or passionate words, you must not answer him in his own style. You are angry at him for his folly, and reprove him for the extravagance of his behaviour, and therefore you cannot but confess that yourselves are worthy of a very sharp reproof, if you behave like him at the very time that you are testifying your displeasure at his conduct. You cannot allege that his passionate manner of speaking and acting will justify you in behaving passionately; for if one fire kindled from hell burns so fiercely, and threatens to devour every thing that comes in its way, why should another fire be lighted from it to do still greater mischief? It becomes not the followers of Jesus to return railing for railing, or one angry reflection for another, but in whatever manner others talk, our tongues ought still to be governed by the law of meekness and charity.

There are no cases in which this rule is more frequently transgressed than in religious disputes. Passion and railing, when they are employed in the support of truth, appear to many to be just expressions of Christian zeal; and that noble and necessary grace of the spirit has been brought into suspicion, and regarded with a very jealous eye, by reason of those who have substituted ill nature in its place, and called it by a name to which it is as well entitled as the prince of darkness is to be called an angel of light. The scripture enjoins ministers to instruct opposers in meekness*. It declares expressly that the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God; and it informs us that Michael, that great prince among the heavenly hosts, durst not bring a railing accusation against Satan†.

Ver. 5. When we answer a fool, we must give him the answer which his folly deserves and requires. If you do not answer him at all, other men may believe that he is in the right, and where there is any danger of that, the edification of your neighbours calls upon you to shew the folly of what he has said. Besides, if he is not answered, he will conclude that you cannot answer him, and his vanity and self-conceit will be increased by your silence. When Job's friends were all silenced in the course of their dispute with him, the next speech which the good man delivered is called a parable, or commanding speech‡; for he spoke like one that had gained the victory, and claimed a right to be believed in what he said. And the fool when he is not answered, will conclude more naturally than such a man as Job, that his cause is good; for although prudence bind up your tongue from speaking in the ears of a fool, yet there is no man that reckons himself less a fool than he, or has less conception of a man's holding his peace, when he is not baffled in argument.

It will be doing a good piece of service to the world, and to the fool himself, if you can answer him according to his folly, so as to humble his vanity, and make him ashamed of himself. Our Lord triumphed by his wisdom over his insolent enemies. When they blamed him for curing distressed persons on the Sabbath day, he exposed their self-inconsistency and inhumanity, to the conviction of the people, and their own shame. When Pilate insolently pretended to a sovereign power of life and death, and thereby entrenched on the prerogatives of the God of heaven, our Lord (who did not open his mouth, because he knew it was to no purpose, to vindicate his own injured character,) gave his assuming judge an answer which reminded him that he was but a man.

Let us seek wisdom from God, that we may know when we should speak, and when we should be silent; and that we may be preserved from speaking such things as are improper for the mouths of saints, and taught to give an answer with meekness and prudence to the words of wise men or fools, as occasion requires.

Ver. 6. It would be very ridiculous in a man when he sends a servant on an errand, to cut off his feet, and disable him from doing that business in which he was employing him. It is equally foolish to employ an unwise or unfaithful man in a business of importance; for he is like a man whose feet are cut off, for any good he can be expected to do, and his employer not only meets with damage in his affairs, but he drinketh damage in great abundance, losing his reputation for sense, and suffering great loss in his important interests.

This proverb, like many others of them that were copied out by Hezekiah's men, is instructive chiefly to princes and other great men; but it is not without its use to us also in the management of our less important concerns, which we ought for our credit and comfort to manage with prudence; and one great branch of prudence, consists in employing those to assist us in any affair, who will discharge that trust like wise and honest men. Have we a vote in the election of the legislative body? We are accountable for the use we make of it. If we choose for our representative, one that is likely to betray the interests of the nation, for serving his private interest, or the purposes of a faction, we concur, in his person, in all the public mischief that he does. Do we choose a minister to take the oversight of our souls? We must beware of fixing our choice upon an ignorant, or erroneous, or graceless man, otherwise we cut out the tongue, (to use Solomon's style,) and bring great damage, for ought we know, not only upon our own souls, but upon the souls of thousands of our fellow men.

Ver. 7. A lame man is very untowardsome in his manner of walking. But a fool appears with a still worse grace when he presumes to talk of subjects beyond his reach, or to speak in praise of those virtues to which he is a total stranger in his practice. A clown would

be laughed at, if he were to talk about Greek and Hebrew, and navigation, and court breeding; but it would fill a person with indignation, to hear a thief speak in praise of justice, a drunkard commend temperance, or a hypocrite talk in praise of the uprightness of David. Our tongues and our lives must be of a piece, otherwise all our professions will serve no other purpose but to condemn ourselves, and to procure us a portion in the other world with hypocrites. A grave and wise sentence becomes the mouth of a wise and holy man. It is very unbecoming in a Christian to be silent on occasions when he is called to glorify God or edify men, and it is still more unbecoming in a saint, to allow himself on any occasion in foolish and vain talking; but when open sinners profane the scripture and religion, by their unhallowed mouths, they are like an ass dressing himself in a lion's skin, or a devil transforming himself into an angel of light.

There must be a conformity between every part of our character and conduct, if we wish to be upright in the way of the Lord, and like Caleb and Joshua to follow the Lord fully. No man in this world is perfect in wisdom and goodness, but an uniformity of conduct in the general course of life is attainable. Although we cannot all run in the way of God's commandments, or mount up with wings as eagles, yet we may walk on with an even course in the way of holiness, shewing an equal respect to those precepts which regard our speech, and to those which regulate our heart and conversation. God denounces vengeance upon those hypocrites that take his covenant into their mouths, whilst they join with the wicked in their sinful courses; but to him that ordereth his conversation aright, he promises to shew the salvation of God*.

Ver. 8. Honour is not seemly for a fool, and he that gives him honour is himself a fool, for he acts like one that means to sling a stone at some mark, and yet binds it up in the sling that it cannot get away from it. He disappoints his own intentions by taking the most absurd means in the world to accomplish them. When we give our applause to foolish persons, expecting their favour, or hoping that our praise will induce them to respect their own honour in their manner of conduct, we only make them more self-sufficient and domineering, and swell that pride in their hearts which makes them insufferable to all about them. If those that have the disposal of high offices bestow them upon undeserving men, they are only preparing disgrace and repentance for themselves; as king Ahasuerus found to his great vexation, when he was deceived so far by that wicked minister whom he had foolishly advanced, that he ignorantly signed a death-warrant for his much loved queen and her whole nation. Men cannot search the hearts of their fellow-creatures, and if they are the means of advancing some to public offices who disappoint the hopes that were entertained of them, they cannot help it. But we can form some probable opinions of the dispositions of men from their behaviour, and ought to do so, before we take any share in placing them in those stations where they are likely to do much good or much hurt. Besides, we should pray to the Searcher of hearts to direct our judgments on all such occasions, as we find the disciples did in the choice of an apostle. Without consideration and prayer, we run a great risk of sharing in other men's sins, when we contribute to the elevation of men to places, where, if they be fools, they will find great scope for their folly.

But does not God himself often give honour to fools? Yes. But who art thou, O man, that settest thy heart like the heart of God? God is the absolute sovereign of the world, and is not bound to give an account of any of his matters. He is the judge of nations, who has a right to punish men by subjecting them to the power of fools. He is the infinitely wise God, who brings good out of evil. We must be holy, as God is holy; but we must not pretend to claim the prerogatives of sovereignty, because God is the sovereign of the world. Our business is to acquiesce in the disposals of God, to adore where we cannot comprehend him, and to regulate our conduct not by his secret, but his revealed will; and we are thereby taught that bad men ought to be despised in our eyes, and that we must honour them that fear the Lord*.

Ver. 9. Wise and holy sayings, especially on deep and mysterious subjects, are not only improper for the mouth of fools, but often hurtful to themselves and others. They are like thorns, or sharp-pointed weapons in the hands of drunkards, which wound the hands that hold them, and may be used to wound others that happen to be in company with them.

Proverbs have sometimes been hurtful even in the mouths of wise men, through the imperfection of their wisdom. Job's friends dealt much in parables, which they had learned by tradition from their wise ancestors, but they misapplied them to the case of Job; and although they meant to plead the cause of God, yet they displeased him so much by their uncharitable speeches against Job, which they drew, by unjust inference, from undoubted truths, that he told them they had not spoken the thing that was right concerning him as his servant Job had done. If Job had not been a strong believer, their management of truth must have sunk him into despondency.

If wise and holy men have done hurt to themselves and others, by meddling with parables beyond their capacity, or by unjust comments upon them, what mischief may a fool do by dealing in them! When he speaks of the wonderful mercy of God, he will praise it at the expence of divine justice, and maim the attributes of God by dashing them one against another. When he speaks of the necessity and beauty of holiness, he will bestow on it a part of that glory which is due to Christ: When he speaks of the efficacy of the atonement, he will insinuate encouragements to sin into the minds of his hearers. Every doctrine will be perverted by his management; or, if he speaks correctly and properly on any religious subject, yet the inconsistency of his life with his words, will bring suspicions to the prejudice of truth into the minds of those that converse with him. And if he shews the true way to heaven, and yet takes the road to hell, those who pay any regard to him, will be disposed to think that the way in which he chooses to walk is preferable in his eyes to that of which he only talks.

From this proverb we learn, that all ministers of the gospel must be men of knowledge, soundness in the faith, and a pious conversation. Without the former qualities, they cannot handle the word of God in an edifying manner, and may pervert precious souls. Without the latter, their conversation will do more evil than their sermons can do good.

Christians ought to have their speech seasoned with salt. Knowledge of the form of sound words is necessary to furnish their lips with this kind of discourse; and their practice must correspond with their words, otherwise they make themselves, and, perhaps, their profession likewise, to be abhorred.

Ver. 10. Sinners shall in due time be punished, whether their wicked courses are the effect of folly and inconsideration, or of stubborn and hardened dispositions. Fools will not be excused, because they did not know, or did not think upon the evil of their courses; for men are accountable not only for the knowledge they possessed, but likewise for that which they might have got, if they had not wickedly neglected to make use of the means of grace, and to improve those talents which were given them; as our Lord clearly shows in the parable concerning the talents, where he tells us, that the man who had received but one talent was punished, not for spending it in riot and dissipation, but for hiding it in a napkin.

Those that have been eminent transgressors, that have rebelled against the light, and stifled the loud clamours of their consciences, and led others in the way of sin, shall be rewarded in proportion to the greatness and aggravations of their offences. Every sinner that continues impenitent shall receive from God that recompense of his error which is meet; and divine omniscience and justice shall shine in proportioning the severity of punishment to the nature and number of the offences that have procured it*.

The judge of all the earth is the great God, who is clothed with terrible majesty. His greatness shews the greatness of the evil of sin, for the greater that any superior is, the more aggravated is any instance of disrespect shewed to him. God is infinitely great, and therefore we are under infinite obligation to obey him; and if we transgress his laws, that grandeur which was insulted, by our disobedience, must be vindicated and glorified by inflicting a vengeance worthy of itself. It is a terrible thing to provoke the wrath of a prince, but who knoweth the power of God's anger? According to his fear so is his wrath.

God is the former of all things, and he made all things for himself, and will not suffer his creatures to frustrate his purpose of glory to his own name. Rational creatures may abuse the gifts of reason and free will to the dishonour of the Almighty; but if he is not glorified in the obedience of his laws, he will be glorified in the execution of the penalties denounced in them against transgressors, who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power. Revenging justice belongs to the great Creator. He punished sin even in his own beloved Son, who never knew sin; for the Lord made the iniquities of all his people to meet in Christ, and he was oppressed and afflicted, and bruised, and put to unspeakable grief. He pardons no sin to any man, that was not first punished in Christ; and if the great God dealt in this awful manner with his own Son, and with his chosen people in the person of their surety, how can impenitent and hardened sinners escape the damnation of hell? They sometimes indulge hopes that the God who made them will not finally destroy them; but their obligations to God as their Creator and preserver, make their sins inexcusable, and therefore he that made them will not have mercy upon them. It is true he gives them space for repentance at present, and loudly calls them to turn and live, and swears by his own life that he has no pleasure that they should die*. But the words of this gracious oath are a plain evidence that the glorious mercy of the Lord will not exempt from punishment the obstinate sinner who goes on still in his trespasses. To those that are found unbelieving and impenitent, the precious displays of grace will at last be like rivers of oil to enrage those flames in which they are tormented.

This text has a very different translation in the margin, which appears agreeable enough to the original: A great man grieveth all, and he hireth the fool, he hireth also transgressors. This makes it a political instruction, teaching us what mischief a prince does to the country by employing foolish and wicked ministers. This was exemplified in the administration of Saul, who did great hurt to the nation, and grieved the hearts of all lovers of their country, by employing such ruffians in his service as Doeg the Edomite. We are accountable not only for the mischiefs which we do with our own hands, or by the orders which we give, but likewise for those which we do, by enabling persons of corrupt dispositions to gratify them, to the hurt of other men. If one puts a sword into the hand of a drunkard, or madman, he deserves to be punished for all the mischief that follows upon it.

Ver. 11. Sin is called by the worst names in Scripture, and the vileness of it is represented by comparisons taken from the most loathsome objects. It is folly, it is the vomit of a dog, it is the poison of asps, it is the superfluity of naughtiness; but no words are sufficient to describe, no images are sufficient to represent, the malignity of sin. The worst thing that can be said of any sin is, that it is exceeding sinful. Sinners are fools and dogs. All sinners are unclean beasts; and some have so much of the temper of a surly dog, that Christ forbids us to admonish them, lest they should turn and rend us.

When sinners hear of the vengeance of the great Creator against themselves, they are sometimes startled, and in some degree convinced of the necessity of reformation; and therefore they will stop short in their wicked course, and forbear those gross sins which press hard upon their consciences, and, like Herod, do many things which they are commanded to do, that they may obtain some ease to their minds, and reputation among saints; but, unless their nature is renewed by the grace of the Spirit, which turns dogs into sheep, their hearts are still much the same as formerly. Their awakened consciences resist sin; but their love to it is not diminished; and for the most part their corruptions obtain the victory over their consciences, and they return to their former course of life with redoubled eagerness.

The sight of a dog returning to his vomit is very loathsome; but it is much more detestable for sinners to return to their former wickedness. Nothing is more dishonouring to God, or insulting to his majesty; nothing is more hurtful to the souls of men, and especially of the sinner himself; for if any man draw back, it is to perdition of the most terrible kind. Impenitent sinners, that never shewed any disposition to repent, shall be severely punished; but not so severely as those who, after they have known and tried the way of righteousness, have turned aside from the holy commandment delivered unto them. The reproach which they cast upon God,

as if iniquity were to be found in him, is intolerably provoking; and God, in righteous judgment, suffers the devil, when he returns into these wretches, to take with him seven devils, and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first.

Turn, O ye fools, at the reproof of wisdom; but if ye will return, return unto the Lord, and put away all your abominations; make to yourselves a new heart, and a new spirit; and if ye cannot perform this great work, (as indeed ye can no more make to yourselves a new heart than a new heaven and earth) give the Lord no rest till he perform his great promise of making you a new heart and a new spirit. A dog chained, and silenced from barking, is a dog still, and cannot find entrance into heaven*. You must be created anew in Christ Jesus, otherwise your partial reformations will only tend to your greater security in your present condition, to your greater reproach, what your convictions are stifled by the rage of your corrupt passions, and to your greater condemnation in the day of the Lord.

Ver. 12. When a man has left some of his follies, he thinks himself a new man; old things, he imagines, are passed away, and all things are become new; for there is nothing in which the power of folly appears to a greater degree, than in the judgments which a fool passes on himself. For this reason those fools are in the most dangerous condition of all others, who persuade themselves, either from some change in their conduct or from any other cause, that they are become wise. Many of the publicans heard with pleasure the sermons of John Baptist, and of Christ, concerning repentance; whilst the self-conceited Pharisees and scribes rejected the counsel of God against themselves. The Gentiles in like manner were made to see the folly and wretchedness of their former course of life, and to receive with thankfulness the offer of a better righteousness than their own, whilst Israel, trusting to their own righteousness, did not submit to the righteousness of God.

There is some hope of a fool and a sinner, if you can make him really to believe that he is what he is. The first lesson to be learned in the school of wisdom, is our own folly*. And when we are deeply sensible of this truth, the revelation of Christ, as our wisdom, and our salvation, will be pleasant to our ears; but if we still think ourselves wise, when we are fools, we shall despise Christ as much as the pharisees did, and the discoveries of the Gospel will be either idle tales or taste, less stuff, in our apprehension.

Woe to them that are wise in their own conceit, and prudent in their eyes. They depend on wind and vanity; or if they really possess some of that kind of wisdom which a fool may have, they lean on a broken reed, which will go into their arms and pierce them, and rend their souls with eternal remorse, because, in their vain opinion of their own understandings, they rejected the light of the world. "For judgment," says our Lord, "am I come into this world, that they which see not might see, and that they which see might be made blind." None are more blind than those who are readiest to say, with the Pharisees, "are we blind also?" They say that they see, and take away all excuse from themselves, and shall have the mortification, at the great day, to find that God has revealed those things unto babes which he has hidden from the wise and prudent*.

Ver. 13. Solomon published many proverbs against slothfulness in his own edition of this book. The men of Hezekiah repeat some of them, and join some others to them on the same subject.

The slothful man is reduced to such pitiful shifts for excusing his conduct, that he saith, contrary to all reason and experience, that there is a lion in the way, and that he may be killed in the very streets of the city if he should go forth to his work. This sign of sloth is in nothing more observable than in the excuses that people make for excusing themselves from the duties of religion. The first Christians never minded lions, when they were in the path of duty†, for they were deeply impressed with the love of Christ, who regarded neither the bulls of Bashan, nor the lions of the pit, in working out their salvation; but when we make religion our smallest concern, a frown, or a jeer, or a few drops of rain, will be a sufficient reason to us for declining the most important services. We should remember that our consciences are God's deputies in our bosoms, and not bribe them to sustain any plea that will be rejected by our Judge*.

Ver. 14. How dearly does the sluggard love his sleep! but, to his great vexation, he cannot sleep always. When he finds himself half awake, and wearied with lying so long, he tries to get a little more sleep by changing his posture. As the door turns upon its hinges, but still continues in the same place, so the sluggard turns from one part of his bed to another, and from his right side, to his left, and then he turns himself on his back, and on his face; for to put on his clothes is a dreadful and intolerable toil. But when every part of his body is wearied with the fatigue of lying and turning, he slowly draws to his clothes, and with great difficulty gets them thrown about him, and perhaps necessity or weariness drives him to some kind of work; but still he is like a door moving upon its hinges, for he only trifles about the most serious affairs, and the night finds his work in much the same state as the morning.

In this manner do sluggards trifle and sleep, not only in the things that concern their present happiness, but in things of awful and eternal consequence, As if they could work out their salvation with faint wishes, and spiritless endeavours, their hearts sleep when they are calling on God for the pardon of their sins, and when they come to church, the words of the preacher are forgotten almost as soon as they are heard; and it is ten to one but their pew serves for a bed, and the book-board for a pillow to them; and, as if the devil had given them some opium on the Sabbath morning, they can scarcely be awakened out of their sleep by the united voices of the congregation in the praises of God.

Alas! how do men loiter and doze away their time, which can never be recalled, whilst their grand adversary is ever busy and watchful for their ruin. Awake, sleepers, and call upon your God. Who knows but God may think upon you, that you perish not!

As drunkards and gluttons enjoy less pleasure in eating and drinking than the sober and temperate, so the sluggard never enjoys that sweet and delightful sleep by which the labourer is refreshed; for his excess in this bodily indulgence, makes his slumbers broken and interrupted; nor can he taste that pleasure in eating which other men enjoy, for although he could procure meat without work, eating is a toil to him.

Ver. 15. This is a strong expression of the power of laziness, and yet it is literally true of the spiritual sluggard, who will not put forth his hand to receive the richest blessings, nor open his mouth to eat that which is good*.

But when laziness is so prodigiously foolish, and productive of such mischiefs, may not the sluggard be reasoned into another kind of behaviour?

Ver. 16. He reckons himself wiser than all the seven wise men of Greece put together. The wisdom of Chalcol and Darda, and Ethan and Heman, and Solomon, in one man, could not convince him of his folly. "What," says he, "if I should go forth to work in such a sultry day, I might catch an headach; and an headach cost the Shunamite's son his life. If I should expose myself to the terrible cold of winter, I might catch a cold that would bring on a fever or a consumption; for cold is the beginning of almost all diseases; and what is a little worldly gain compared to one's health or life? Is not a life of ease and tranquillity incomparably better, though attended with poverty, than a life of toil and anxiety with riches?" These and the like reasons for his behaviour, appear to him demonstrations, and his disease is incurable, because he cannot be made to believe that he is sick.

Self conceit never fails to attend spiritual sloth; for it prevents the receiving of those instructions that tend to the humiliation of the soul. Kings were commanded by Moses to read the Bible with care, that their hearts might not be lifted up above their brethren; for truths abound in the Scripture, of sovereign efficacy to mortify pride; but the sluggard never learned them, or will not take the trouble of thinking upon them. He has perhaps heard or read, that wisdom's ways are pleasantness, and from thence concludes that they are fools who are at the pains to enter into the strait gate, or walk in the narrow way. He expects, by the gift of grace, to obtain heaven, as well as the most laborious Christian; and thinks himself a far happier and wiser man, than those who work out their salvation with fear and trembling.

None are more foolish than those who have the highest opinion of their own wisdom. Those only are truly wise, whose understandings and wills are regulated by the wisdom and will of God, revealed in his word.

Ver. 17. He that takes a dog by the ears, can scarcely escape without a wound, for the enraged cur will be sure to leap at him as soon as it finds itself at liberty; and he that interests himself in quarrels that he has no business with, can as little expect to escape unhurt.

It is foolish for us to quarrel about our own concerns if we can possibly avoid it; for contention is like an unfathomable gulf, into which a man may easily leap, but will find it a great difficulty to get out; but it is the height of folly for men to engage in quarrels where they have no interest, for we cannot derive any advantage, and are very likely to get much damage from it. If we can make peace, by interposing between contending parties, and persuading them, in the spirit of meekness, to compose their differences, we are doing a very good work, and are in little more danger than a man that is casting a piece of bread to a dog; and yet, if either of the parties have a contentious spirit, his angry passions may lead him to say very disagreeable things to the most friendly mediator, as the quarrelsome Israelites did to Moses in a like case. But if we become a partner in the dispute, by taking one of the sides, we will either receive blows, or hear something to inflame our passions into rage, or suffer some mischief on another occasion, from the person whom we have offended. The apostle Peter insinuates to us that men are very liable to suffer by this means, and that sufferings of this kind do not become saints. 'If any man suffer, let him not suffer as a thief, or as a busy body in other men's matters.'

Let us therefore study to be quiet and to do our own business, and this will keep us from thrusting ourselves into the business of other men.

Ver. 18, 19. The apostle forbids all that kind of jesting, which is not convenient. A jest is not in every case unlawful; but it is unwise and wicked, under pretence of jesting, to expose our friends and neighbours to scorn, or to say something that will inflame their passions, and kindle up strife and contention. It is still worse to deceive and flatter them into something that will prove hurtful to their interests, or prejudicial to their souls, and then to pretend that we were only amusing ourselves with a little harmless diversion! No diversion is harmless that puts an honest man to the blush, or wounds his spirit or his interests. He that sports himself in this rude and unchristian manner, is like a real or pretended madman, that amuses himself with casting about at random firebrands, and arrows, and other instruments of death.

Let those that would be wits at the expence of friendship and charity, consider in what class of men Solomon so justly places them, and be ashamed. He counts them not only fools but madmen, and ranks them with the worst kind of madmen, in the height of their rage.

But may not a man use freedoms with a friend? Yes. But such freedoms only as cement friendship, and not those freedoms that turn a friend into an enemy.

To carry on a scheme of imposition, under the mask of friendship, is the worst kind of wickedness, and places a man in the same black list with Joab and Judas. There are some men with whom it is safer to be at variance than to possess their friendship. From such friends may the good Lord deliver us; for open enemies are far less dangerous.

Ver. 20. A tale bearer is one who tells stories that ought not to be told, whether true or false, whether fairly or unfairly represented; and the worst kind of tale bearers are those who tell their stories to those who are most likely to be provoked by them, and at the same time do not wish to be mentioned as authors of the story, or witnesses in it.

There is sometimes a propriety in telling secret stories; and Gedaliah lost his life by carrying his contempt of this mean vice to excess; but the most part of those that carry tales of their neighbours are to be numbered not only with the basest, but with the most pernicious of mankind. They are serpents in the way, and adders in the path; they are firebrands kindled from hell, that kindle a fire

among men, which spreads from one to another, till parishes and counties are in danger of being set on fire.

He that listens to tale-bearers, is like a man that sees a house ready to be set on fire, and uses no means to prevent it. He that turns an angry countenance to the back-biter, is the friend of mankind, who carries water to quench the burning.

It were happy for society if such pernicious members could be banished from it, for they are like madmen that cast around firebrands; but as we live in a world where such incendiaries are still going about, we should do what we can to prevent them from carrying any coals from our own houses, or fetching them within our walls.

Tale bearers little consider the evil they are doing, and the extent of that mischief which may be justly charged upon them, or the misery they are heaping up for themselves, for they shall (unless pardon interpose) be cast into a deep pit, and a fiery furnace, from whence they shall never get out*.

Contentious men are the brethren and friends of the tale bearers, and merit the same censure and condemnation.

Ver. 21. Men of proud, and passionate, and selfish spirits, give scope to their corrupt dispositions in kindling strife and debate, which seem to be as agreeable to them as a fire to one who is ready to perish with cold. We ought to avoid the society of such persons. If we are cast into their company, it is absolutely necessary for us to keep a strict guard over our hearts and our tongues; for their provoking or seducing words, have the same tendency to kindle strife, as burning coals have to kindle dry wood into a flame. The conflagration that was raised by Korah, and that which was kindled by Sheba the son of Bichri, soon spread itself through all the armies of Israel.

Let none who calls himself a Christian give any! occasion to call him a contentious man, for Christ in the prince of peace; his gospel is the gospel of peace, and all that believe it in truth are the sons and the lovers of peace; but the lovers of strife are children of the wicked one.

Ver. 22. This proverb was inserted by Solomon himself, chap. 18:8. but the men of Hezekiah annex it to the former proverbs about contention; for they wished if possible to banish tale-bearing, that grand engine of mischief, out of the world.

Ver. 23. Every thing that glitters is not precious metal. You may sometimes observe a piece of metal that you take to be silver, and yet, when you examine it, there is nothing but a thin surface of silver dross, which conceals a worthless piece of potsherd below it. Like to this is a wicked disposition concealed under the mask of a tongue that flames with holy zeal, or burns with professions of the most ardent friendship.

The Pharisees, in the time of our Lord's humbled state, were men of this disposition, and therefore he compares them to whited sepulchres. They were enemies to all goodness, and yet their zeal for religion was so great that Christ himself was a profane person, if their testimony was of any worth. These abominable hypocrites are a smoke in God's nostrils, a fire that burneth all the day.

There are some that practise the like hypocrisy towards their fellow men, and they are the most dangerous members of society that can be found in the world. Absalom was a perfect master in both these kinds of hypocrisy, and therefore his name will be infamous whilst the world stands*. Against those who cover their malignity with professions of kindness, we are warned in the following verses.

Ver. 24, 25. A passionate man is dangerous; but, if you are on your guard, the danger will soon be over; the malicious man is far worse, and much more dangerous, for his hatred ferments in his heart, and his head is, in the mean time, projecting methods for wreaking it in such a manner as will be safest to himself, and most stunning to its object. He is not like the dog that barks before it bites, otherwise you might stand to your own defence; but he is a dog that fawns upon you, and, when you are never dreaming of it; falls upon you, and inflicts an unexpected and dangerous wound. Solomon warns you that your safety lies in refusing to trust him, even when he makes the largest professions of friendship. When he speaketh fair, believe him not, although he should swear to the truth of all he says. If you have any reason, from your knowledge of a man's disposition, or from his former behaviour, to think that he is one of this stamp, and capable of such wicked conduct, his ardent professions of love should rather confirm than remove your suspicions of him; for the darkest designs are always covered under the greatest shows of virtue and friendship. You may as safely believe the devil himself as one that joins malignity of heart with flattery and caresses, for he is a man after the devil's own heart His character is a compound of all those vices of the blackest and the meanest kind, that make a consummate villain, and render a man a disgrace to human nature, by his exact resemblance to those infernal fiends who are to be dreaded equally for their malice and subtilty. Abner and Amasa lost their lives by believing a man of this character.

But the providence of God will not always bear with such abominable wretches.

Ver. 26. He is ashamed or afraid to discover his malice, but God shall bring it to light in the view of all men, and make him the object of universal abhorrence. This is often done by his own agency, for malice ordinarily discovers itself sooner or later. When Saul could not destroy David by the hands of the Philistines, or by his javelin in private, his hatred became too violent to be smothered by his prudence. Sometimes God, by a strange train of providences, exposes the wicked purposes of men's hearts, and if it continues hid through the whole course of this life, there is a day that will declare it. Let us never harbour any thing in our minds that we would be ashamed if all the world should know it; for all the world shall certainly know it, in the day when the secrets of hearts shall be judged; for,

God will not only discover, but punish the malignity of men; for,

Ver. 27. "Whatsoever ye would that others should do unto you, do ye even so to them," says our Lord, "for this is the law and the prophets." But if neither Moses, nor the prophets, nor Christ himself, can prevail upon us to observe this golden rule, our own

interest may be expected to work us to a compliance with it; for the mischief that we do to others, must at last recoil upon ourselves, with a heavy aggravation of remorse and self-condemnation attending it. When Haman was hanged on his own gallows, his miserable end must have been attended with anguish and self-reflections a thousand times more grievous than any thing that Mordecai could have felt if Haman's malice had been accomplished on him.

Here is encouragement for the faith and patience of the saints. Here is ground for the highest praise to the righteousness of God*.

Ver. 28. It might be expected that when a man has wronged his neighbour, by his lies or flatteries, he would be filled with remorse, and try to make some reparation; but the loss is, that he judges of other men from himself; he does not believe that there is enough of generosity in any man to forgive him, and therefore persists in his hatred. It is not easy for us to forgive the injuries we receive; but it is far more difficult to forgive the injuries we do.

Flatterers are the worst kind of liars, and the most likely to be believed, because self-love favours their deceits. Flatterers are commonly men that intend to betray with a kiss; but, although they should only design to gain our favour by their fair speeches, yet they are very pernicious, because they are the friends of our pride, which is the worst of our bosom enemies.

CHAPTER 27

Ver. 1. In God we live, and have our being; but we too often forget this important truth, and speak, and act, and think, as if we lived, and moved, and had our being in ourselves. We boast of what we will do, or of what we shall enjoy at the distance of days, and months, and years. This presumption is forbidden in this and in many places of Scripture; and a reason is given for the prohibition that every person must acknowledge to be a true and good one, that we cannot tell what a day may bring forth; for every new day brings forth the accomplishment of some decree of the Most High; but these decrees are written in a sealed book, and no man can loose the seals, nor open the book, nor read what is written therein.

We know that the sun will rise to-morrow; but we cannot tell whether he will rise to us, or to our survivors. We can guess what the weather will be; but we cannot say whether we shall be rich or poor, sick or in health, left in the possession of our friends, or bereaved of them that are dearest to our hearts. In the morning Haman went forth from his magnificent palace, expecting to be gratified before the evening came with the blood of his hated enemy, which would have been sweeter to him than wine; but, before the evening came, he was hanged like a dog, and went to the place appointed for him.

We ought to boast of nothing; for what is our life but a vapour? What are our bags of gold but a glittering nothing? What are our honours but a puff of wind? Or what are our earthly hopes, when their basis is a shadow that fleeth away, and never returneth? But the hopes that are founded upon the rock of ages can never fail us, and the believer in Christ can, upon solid ground, triumph in the expectation of eternal joys, and unfading crowns. He boasts not of himself, but glories in the Lord, whose promises are more stable than the everlasting hills, or the pillars of heaven.

The same reason that should check our boasting of to-morrow, may preserve us from desponding fears. It may be stormy weather to-day; but storms do not last all the year. We are filled and tormented with fears of some impending evil; but we often give ourselves real pain by the prospect of calamities that never were appointed to us by the providence of God. This is now the spring of the year, (1785,) and within the last twelvemonth, the country has been three times alarmed with anxious fears, all of which have been most agreeably disappointed.

Ver. 2. For a man to search his own glory is no glory; and when a man publishes his own praises, it is a sign that he has none else to do it for him, and that there is only one fool in the world, and no wise man that knows his merit. Suppose a man has really done some good things, yet when he boasts of them, he destroys all their credit; for no man will think himself obliged to praise the man that has face enough to publish his own praises; and every one will believe that he did those actions which are the subject of his talk, not from any principle of love to God or man, but merely with a view to his own honour. The Pharisees had but a poor reward for their alms and prayers, in the praise of men, but the vain boaster has a poorer reward, for he is his own paymaster, and must be content to want the praise of other men as well as of God.

But we ought to do those things which deserve praise. Our hands, and not our tongues, must be employed to publish our worth, and thus we shall comply with the precept*, and follow the example of our Lord. He had a good title to praise himself, for he was not a mere man, yet his right to bear testimony to himself was excepted against by his enemies; but he could appeal to his works, which bare witness continually on his behalf, and published his praise through the world, in spite of all the rage and cunning of his adversaries.

In some cases a man is at liberty, and has a call to speak to his own praise; but these cases are few. When Paul was laid under a necessity of this kind, he often reminds us that he speaks like a fool; and blames the Corinthians that they had reduced him to this necessity, by neglecting to interpose in the behalf of his injured character; for although we must be very cautious how we praise ourselves, yet when we are called to speak in the praise of another man, we are not only at greater liberty, but may expose ourselves to just blame by unseasonable silence.

Ver. 3, 4. The wrath of a wise man is sometimes very heavy. If David had not been prevented, he would have massacred the whole family of Nabal; but the grace of God, and a principle of conscience and charity, disposed him to calm his resentment at Abigail's

remonstrances. A wise man endeavours to live under the influence of that meekness so strongly recommended, and so wonderfully exemplified by our Lord; but a fool has no government over his passions, and it is better to meet a bear bereaved of her whelps, than a fool in his folly; for his wrath is heavier than the sand of the sea, it is fiercer than the rage of tigers, it is more stubborn and inflexible than the rocks. May we never come within the reach of a fool when his passions are roused; for they must be gratified and satiated if they should bring him to a gibbet. May we ever possess our souls in patience and calmness; for boisterous passions are a whirlwind in the soul, that threaten to rend it in a thousand pieces.

But terrible as wrath is, envy is a great deal worse. Envy is the grief that a man feels for the prosperity of another person; it is a compound of pride and malice it derives misery to a man from his neighbour's happiness. The blessings and mercies of God are turned by it into curses; and the life of another man is the envious man's death. As the devil fell by pride, so he wrought the fall of man by his envy; and when envy takes possession of a man, it makes him a devil to his neighbours. The envious man is far blacker than the passionate man; for the outrageous behaviour of an angry person sounds an alarm to his neighbour to be on his guard; but the envious man conceals his malignity, till he has a fit opportunity to strike a mortal blow without danger of missing his aim. The one is a dog, that barks before he bites, the other is an adder in the grass, that stings the traveller when he is dreading no hurt; for the malice of the envious man is generally unsuspected, because no occasion was given for it. It is the good and happiness of the envied object that excites his malignity, and he does not so much as pretend (unless he adds lying to envy,) that he has received any provocation. Anger may generally be appeased; but envy is the vice of a dark and hellish spirit, that has not the least spark of generosity to give any hope of pacifying it. The only way you can take to soothe envy is to be miserable; for it makes a man such a perfect devil, that evil is his only good.

The fall of man, the murder of Abel, the slavery of Joseph, the persecutions of David, the crucifixion of our Lord, are monuments of the rage of envy, and the danger incurred by being objects of it. But the curse of the serpent, the miserable end of Saul, the horrors that pursued Cain, the desolations of Jerusalem, and the torments prepared for devils, are terrible proofs that envy is infinitely worse for the person that harbours it, than for the innocent object of it.

Ver. 5. There are two qualities very requisite in a friend, love and faithfulness; the last as necessary as the first to make our friendships really beneficial to us. There are some that love us with sincerity and warmth, and yet want the courage that is necessary to make them faithful in reproofing us when we deserve to be reproofed; But reproof, although it should be severe and cutting, is better than love which does not discover itself in needful rebukes. A true friend will not disclose our faults to the world, but he will not justify them to save our credit; for virtue is the soul of true friendship, and must not be entrenched upon, out of regard to our dearest friends; and therefore that friend is to be valued, who makes his reproofs as public as our faults are, and who does not spare to tell us roundly to our faces, wherein we have erred; for he gives good evidence that he esteems our real welfare above his own interest in our regard. A friend that loves, but is afraid to reprove us when we deserve it, does not discover a very high esteem of our sense and temper; for he seems to think us incapable of bearing reproof, and rather chooses to enjoy our smiles than to do us an essential service. Our Lord loved his Apostles with a tender regard; and with admirable prudence and kindness he rebuked them when they spoke or behaved amiss. He would never suffer sin upon them, and yet he reproofed them in such a manner as to increase and not diminish their love to himself. Let us learn, from this proverb, to exercise the fidelity of friendship to those whom we love, and to thank our friends when they discover the sincerity of their regard in their concern for our souls. We ought to value honesty above politeness, and to excuse a little, defect in the last quality, for the sake of the first.

Ver. 6. Friends are not to be loved chiefly on account of the pleasure they give us, although nothing earthly is more pleasant than a true friend. Their integrity and faithfulness is their most valuable quality, and they will sometimes have occasion for them, by speaking to us things that are a great deal more useful than pleasant. David esteemed a friend that would wound and smite him to his profit, as much as a wise man values a chirurgeon that makes needful but painful incisions in his flesh, for the restoration of his lost health. Abishai, who discovered such zeal for his honour, was not dearer to him than Nathan the prophet, who reproofed him, in the plainest manner, for the murder of Uriah*.

All men allow that the kisses of an enemy are deceitful and detestable. "An enemy speaketh sweetly with his lips, but in his heart he imagineth how to throw thee into a pit: he will weep with his eyes, but if he find opportunity, he will not be satisfied with blood. If adversity come upon thee, thou shalt find him there first, and though he pretend to help thee, yet shall he undermine thee†." The caresses of an enemy are very base and dangerous; but it deserves to be considered whether we have not a greater quantity of revenge than generosity in our temper, when we hate the kisses of an enemy more than we value the wounds of a friend. If we value the image of Christ, it is certain that faithful reprovers express a friendship that resembles his love to his people to a greater degree than those who withhold from us this plainest token of real regard.

Ver. 7. The poor generally reckon the rich a great deal happier than themselves, because they are clothed in fine apparel, and dwell in elegant houses, and feed upon the richest dainties; but the envy and discontent of poor men is very ill founded, for the rich, being accustomed to these things, receive no more gratification from them than the poor derive from their homely fare, and mean raiment, and poor accommodations; or, if the sight of a well furnished room, and of fine paintings, could give any considerable pleasure to those that are accustomed to see them, the poor might enjoy as much pleasure by looking at the verdant clothing of the earth; and the glorious canopy of heaven.

The man that fares sumptuously every day, has no more relish for honey and wine than the poor man has for bread and water, for he seldom experienceth hunger, and so he wants the best sauce that any food can have; or, if he denies himself so far as to be hungry,

he puts a force upon himself, because he has the means of gratification always at hand, and therefore it costs him more pain to prepare himself for relishing his ordinary food, than it costs the man to whom necessity renders abstinence habitual, and hunger easy to be endured.

When a man's appetite is excited by hunger and labour, every kind of food is welcome and pleasant to him, and whilst the rich are exposed to weariness and listlessness in their abundance, the poor have strong excitements to be cheerful and thankful although scanty meals are all they can afford.

The children of Israel loathed the manna, although it was bread given them immediately from God, and was called the food of angels. They wished to be in Canaan, and eat common bread in the sweat of their brows; for the plenty of manna made them to despise it. If we have fulness of bread, we ought to be cautious lest we despise the mercies of God, and the giver of them.

We ought especially to be on our guard against despising our spiritual privileges, which we enjoy in so great abundance without molestation. Estates have been given in former days for a few leaves of the Bible, and gospel ordinances were attended at the hazard of life; for those that know what spiritual hunger means, will break through stone walls for the bread of life; but those who are full in their own apprehension, will despise the riches of divine goodness, and God will send them empty away.

Ver. 8. When a bird wanders from her nest, and flies about at random, she is in danger of becoming the prey of the fowler, or the hawk; and when a man abides not at home, when he ought to be employed in his business, or when he leaves his calling without a sufficient reason, he exposes himself to great inconveniences, and sometimes to dangers. He loses his good name, and his estate is likely to go to ruin; he learns habits of idleness and dissipation, and gets into company that may very probably corrupt his morals.

Let every man abide with God in that calling wherewith he is called, endeavouring to perform the duties of it conscientiously, that the doctrine of God our Saviour may be adorned. God assigns to every one of us our station in life, and we ought to keep it till the call of Providence warrant us to make a change in it. When our health, or the necessities of our families, or a well-grounded respect of doing greater service to God, or some other important consideration, will justify our change of place, we come not under the censure of the wise man, nor do we run the risk that others do who wantonly and causelessly change their place. We are safe in following Providence, although it is dangerous to run before it, or to attempt to set ourselves free from it, as Jonah did, who sought to flee from the presence of the Lord by wandering from his place, but soon found that the way of duty is the only way of safety and comfort.

Paul joins with Solomon in testifying against those that abide not in their place to fulfil the duties of it*.

Ver. 9. Ointments and perfumes diffuse their fragrant odours around, by which men's spirits are refreshed, and their hearts cheered; but the sweetness of a well chosen friend cheers the soul better than the sweetest flowers, or the most precious odours prepared by the art of the apothecary. His amiable virtues, and his affectionate fondness beaming from his eyes, and breathing in his words and actions, make him the joy of our hearts, and diffuse the sweetest sensations of delight into our bosom.

Friends are at all times useful. They give a relish to the pleasures of life, and their society makes the labours of it delightful; but at the times when we need advice, or meet with perplexities, the advantage of their friendship is best understood. Other men often give us such advice as suits their own interest or humour; they cannot, at least, enter into our interests, and judge what advice is most proper to be given to us, so well as the friends of our bosom, who are acquainted with our business and our dispositions, and whose fidelity will dispose them to give us advice, according to the best of their understanding. In many cases advice is necessary for us, as Solomon frequently tells us; for a man perplexed with difficulties, or surprised by some unexpected accident, is not so well qualified to judge what is fit to be done, as another person would be that has no superior degree of wisdom, but has the advantage of more composure and sedateness. To have a bosom friend at such a time to take a share of our sorrows, to direct our behaviour, to assist us in our time of need, is a great relief to the mind, and a restorative to the disquieted heart.

We ought to value a wise and faithful friend more than gold and silver; for how small a part do they contribute of our comfort in life, in comparison with our friends who turn even our days of sorrow into joy, and lighten our heaviest burdens?

If we expect the pleasures of friendship in their full extent, let us remember that our friends have the same claims upon us, and the same grounds for them, that we have on the other side, and we ought to take the same pleasure in giving as in receiving happiness. For this end we must be furnished, not only with an honest and a feeling heart, but with such a measure of wisdom as will qualify us for conversing with our friends to our mutual improvement, and for giving them counsel in the time of their perplexity. He that hath friends must show himself friendly, and must continue to do so till the end of his life.

Ver. 10. Clothes and houses are valued for being new, but old friends, like old wine, are entitled to the greatest share of our esteem, and we must not forsake them when they give us no good reason for it. To exchange an old friend for a new is to betray a fickle disposition, unfit and unworthy to enjoy the blessings of friendship. Some persons cool in their friendships through an instability of mind, and can give no reason for it but their own humour; others are no less unfit to taste the pleasures of a cordial and lasting friendship, because they are so peevish that they can bear with no manly freedoms, or so credulous that they give ear to every whisper, and so unforgiving that they cannot love those by whom they think they have been offended. The son of Sirach gives us a good advice on this point, "Admonish a friend; it may be he hath not done it, and if he have done it, that he do it no more. Admonish thy friend; it may be he hath not said it, and if he have, that he speak it not again. Admonish a friend; for many times it is a slander, and believe not every tale. There is one that slippeth in his speech, but not from his heart, and who is he that hath not offended with his tongue*?"

The faults that we ourselves have been guilty of towards our friends are more likely than any thing to cool our affections to them, through an apprehension that they must stick in their breasts; but if we can forgive the trivial offences of our friends, why may we not

believe that they can forgive ours also? Do we imagine that all generosity is confined to ourselves? Let us hear what the same wise author says on this point. "Whoso casteth a stone at the birds frayeth them away; and he that upbraideth his friend, breaketh friendship. Though thou drewest thy sword at thy friend, yet despair not, for there may be a returning to favour. If thou hast opened thy mouth against thy friend, fear not, for there may be a reconciliation, except for upbraiding or pride, or disclosing of secrets, or a treacherous wound; for, for these things every friend will depart*." But those who are capable of such unpardonable faults were never fit for being friends to any man.

If the faults of our friends, or the differences that may take place between them and us, will not justify us in giving up with them; it is a scandalous thing to desert them in the time of their distress, when they have most need of our friendship. A brother is born for adversity, and a friend loveth at all times; and he is no genuine friend who proves to us in our time of calamity like a broken tooth or a foot out of joint. "A friend cannot be known in prosperity, and an enemy cannot be hidden in adversity†."

We must not forsake our own friend, for that would be to forsake our second self; and we must not forsake our father's friend, for that would make us guilty of a double ingratitude of the basest sort that we can practise towards men. Our father's friends, if they are honest, are the best possessions that they can leave us, and if Naboth would not sell, for any price, the inheritance left him by his fathers, but kept it in spite of an Ahab and a Jezebel, till he was stoned, shall we show such irreverence to the memory of our fathers, as to give up, without any price, the most precious possessions which they have bequeathed to us. Solomon carried on his father's friendly intercourse with Hiram, and spared a traitor to his crown and dignity, because he had shared with his father in all his afflictions. Rehoboam would have been a wiser and happier man, if he had followed the example and precept of his father.

Trust in our friends is a duty which we owe them, as well as fidelity, and our confidence will be made to appear in the use we make of their kindness in the time of our distress. The house of a constant and warm friend is then preferable to that of a cold and inconstant brother. Brethren by birth, have, for the most part, less attachment to one another than those friends who single out one another, not from accident, or relation of kindred, but from the harmony of their minds, and their mutual kind affections. Greater acts of heroism have been performed by those who have been knit by such voluntary and endearing ties, than by any kind of relations for one another. There is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother, and we do him honour by placing an entire confidence in him when we need his assistance. At his house we shall meet with a more cordial reception than we can expect from a brother, and shall hear none of those upbraidings which the unfortunate too often hear in the houses of their near relations. When David's brethren of the tribe of Judah proved treacherous, his gallant friend, the son of his great enemy, maintained his cause against his own father, when he was persecuted by him for the sake of Jonathan himself.

If we must not forsake our own and our father's friend, shall we ever forsake our own God, and the God of our pious father, who is infinitely the best of friends, and disdains not to call us by the endearing name of friends to himself*.

Ver. 11. Wise children are not only the joy but the crown of their parents. Foolish children are their disgrace as well as their torment. How unnatural are those children that bring grief and dishonour on those to whom they are under obligations that can never be cancelled!

As is the mother, so is her daughter, was a very ancient proverb*. As some vices, like some diseases, run in the blood, the father will be liable to the suspicion of those vices which disgrace his son, or if his character is so clear that there is no room for this, yet it will be judged that the father is in part accessory to his son's faults, by neglecting his education, by imprudent rigour, or foolish indulgence, or by carelessness in the example which he set before him. Although men are frequently guilty of great injustice, by making a whole family accountable for the behaviour of those who are the blemishes of it, yet there is often too much reason for concluding that some neglect or mismanagement of the father has afforded scope for the irregularities of his family. David was justly chargeable on this account, in his behaviour towards the three eldest of his sons, of whom we have any particular account. God himself ordered that the harlot who imposed herself as virgin upon an husband, should be stoned before the door of her father's house†; and under the New Testament none are to be admitted into holy offices, that have disorderly children, because a man must be unfit to rule the house of God that cannot rule his own house.

Parents ought to inculcate wisdom on their children for their own credit, as well as the benefit of their children‡.

Ver. 12, 13. These instructions were already given us by Solomon*. Perhaps there is a new motive to enforce them implied in the connection of them with the foregoing verse; that the wisdom by which men are preserved from these mischiefs will tend to the comfort and honour of our parents, and if we are so foolish as to run into needless dangers, or to ruin our substance by our connection with strangers or harlots, the comfort of our parents will be ruined, and their credit impaired, as well as our own. If we are wise, we are wise for ourselves, and if we are foolish, we alone must bear it; and yet by consulting our own happiness, we give happiness to those whom we ought to love, and by our own voluntary misery we bring down sorrow and dishonour upon those grey hairs and hoary heads which are well entitled to our reverence.

Ver. 14. We cannot tell whether morning levees were in use among the Israelites in Solomon's time, as they afterwards were among some other nations. If they were, there is no doubt that persons who wished to thrust themselves into favour with their superiors would take the opportunity to appear among the first to pay their court.

The blessing or praising of one's friends is not here absolutely condemned. When praises and blessings are a proper expression of gratitude, when they are a probable means of exciting to virtuous conduct, when they are needful to vindicate a character unjustly attacked, and when they are needful to revive a spirit overwhelmed with a false humility and groundless terrors, they deserve no

blame*.

But he that blesses and praises his friend in high swelling words, and seeks opportunities for that purpose, letting no time pass, however unseasonable, for loading with commendations the person whose friendship he affects, is to be suspected of flattery and base designs, and therefore his blessings shall be counted for a curse either to his friend, or to himself, or to both.

If his friend is wise, he will be as much displeased with these blessings as if they were curses; for they are an evidence that the fulsome flatterer has a very mean opinion of the person whom he hopes to gratify by such methods, and that he looks upon him to be a man so weak and self-conceited as to swallow gross flattery without knowing it.

If those whose favour is thus solicited have their judgments so much biassed by self-conceit as to relish it, every one of their vices is strengthened, their pride in particular is swelled, and their character is ruined by it, for all men will look upon them to be fools overrun with vanity and self-esteem.

Such flatteries will be a curse to those that utter them; for they are guilty of spreading a net for their neighbour's feet, and whether they are entangled or not, the crime is the same.

Ver. 15, 16. "The contentions of a wife," saith Solomon, in one of his former proverbs, "are a continual dropping." He goes farther in this passage, and tells us that they are like a continual dropping in a very rainy day. When a man is exposed to the weather in a very rainy day, he finds his situation very unpleasant, only he has this great comfort that an house is not far distant, and therefore he will soon find a shelter; but how much is the man to be pitied who is joined for life to a contentious wife! His ears must be stunned, and the whole time of his life, for ought he knows, embittered by clamour and noise beating constantly upon him like a tempest. He may sometimes obtain a respite, by absence from his house; but a man cannot be always from home without leaving behind him the means of his subsistence, and his beloved children, and every thing dear to him; and when he is in the field, or in the house of some friend, yet the noise he has heard, and is still doomed to hear within his own walls, rings constantly in his ears.

But may not a man subdue the haughty spirit of a vexatious wife? He may as soon tame the fierce spirit of a lion. The grace of God, and nothing of less power, can do this great work. May he not then conceal his dishonour from the world? He may as soon shackle the wind, and command it to blow where he pleases, or hinder the ointment which is poured on his right hand (which, is almost constantly in motion) from spreading its fragrance through the whole room where he sits. The clamours of an imperious wife will be heard, not only in the house, but in the street, and through every corner of the town. It is impossible to force into her so much sense, as to make her regard either her own honour, or the credit of her husband; for if she had the least degree of common understanding, or if she were capable of receiving any advice, she could never bear the thought of being the scourge and torment of that man to whom she is bound by every motive of duty and interest to be a comfort and a crown.

The uninspired sages of ancient days concur with Solomon in condemning the behaviour of bad wives with great severity. "I had rather," says the son of Sirach, "dwell with a lion and a dragon, than to keep house with a wicked woman. An evil wife is a yoke shaken to and fro, he that hath hold of her, is as though he held a scorpion. A loud crying woman, and a scold, shall be sought out to drive away the enemies*," And nothing better can be said of a tyrannical husband. If a king deserves to be branded with the most odious names when he oppresses his subjects, what words can paint the baseness of that man who tyrannizes over the wife of his bosom, his other self.

We wish for comfort in our various relations; but to obtain it, we must in the first place mind the duties of them, and endeavour to be a comfort to those with whom we are connected.

Ver. 17. When iron tools were blunt, it seems they used to be whetted and sharpened by files or some other instrument of iron. In like manner, when the heart is dull, and the countenance overcast with melancholy, the pleasing society of a friend infused gladness and new life into the heart, and scatters the gloom that sat upon the countenance.

"A faithful friend is a strong defence, and he that hath found such an one, hath found a treasure. Nothing doth countervail a faithful friend, and his excellency is invaluable. A faithful friend is the medicine of life"†. The intercourses of friendship cheer the spirit, brighten the understanding, and inspire us with alacrity and vigour for every useful employment of the mind. If we are dejected with grief, their kind attentions, and seasonable discourse, have a happy effect in alleviating our distress, and softening our sorrows. They keep the soul from sinking into despondency, and enliven it with hopes of better days.

What reason have we to be thankful that this evil world affords some that are qualified to afford such pleasure and advantage to us; but in choosing our friends, we ought to consider religion, as one thing necessary to be regarded, for that alone, attended with the blessing of God, will effectually serve all these valuable purposes, and others of equal importance. A religious friend will be of great use to animate our souls in the service of God, to assist us in combating the difficulties that meet us in our Christian course, and to warm our souls with holy zeal. "They that fear the Lord shall find him. Whoso feareth the Lord shall direct his friendship aright; for as he is, so shall his neighbour be also*."

Ver. 18. It is the business of a servant to wait on his master with respect, to obey his orders with cheerfulness and fidelity, to promote his interest and happiness by all proper means, and to prevent, as far as he can, every thing that may tend to his prejudice.

But perhaps those who are in this humble station may think that they have very little encouragement to perform the duties of it, because the meanness of their condition places them below the hope of any valuable reward. In answer to this, the Spirit of God tells them that they shall have a very good and honourable reward for their service however mean. Who planteth a vineyard and eateth not of the fruit, or who takes care of the fig trees, and is not allowed to share in their delicious product? And if the care of fig trees be thus recompensed, shall not that servant be honoured who shows a zeal for every thing that concerns the comfort and

interest of his master? Certainly: he will be re-pected by all wise men who know him; his master especially will show him that respect which his fidelity. deserves, and will find occasions perhaps to serve him more than he expected. Servants are indeed often unnoticed by their masters, when the time of their service is over; but that is owing, perhaps, as much to the want of merit in the servants, as the want of gratitude in their masters.

Masters are bound by the law of God, to behave not only justly, but kindly, towards honest servants; but if they should prove ungrateful, there is a master and Lord in heaven, who shall recompense with divine liberality those servants that performed their duty, not as eye servants, but as the servants of Christ, adorning the doctrine of God their Saviour by the religious performance of their duty to men*.

Ver. 19. The water is nature's looking glass, in which we discern our faces; and the face which is seen in the water has a resemblance, though not an exact and perfect image of that face which looks into it. So likewise there is a resemblance in one man's soul to another. As God hath fashioned the bodies of men like one another, so the soul of every man has the like faculties and passions, and none of the human race is born a brute or an angel. There is, indeed, a difference of faces, although in water that difference is not well discerned, and there is likewise a natural difference in the tempers and understandings of men. And yet none of us have reason to be proud or insolent, for we are but men, and our neighbours are men also. Some of them have miserably disgraced the human nature, but they have only improved upon that corruption of human nature which is common to them and to us, and instead of triumphing over them, we ought to mourn over the ruins of our condition, and to adore that mercy which has kept us from sinking down, by our natural weight of corruption, to the same deplorable depth of wickedness. When the holy martyr Bradford heard of any person that had been guilty of an atrocious act of guilt, he used to strike his hand upon his breast, and say, "here is the seed of all that wickedness."

There is a mighty change made upon the heart by the grace of God creating it anew in Christ Jesus. But the saints will not boast on this account, for they well know what they once were, and who made them to differ from others, and from their former selves. They still feel the body of death within themselves, and heartily sympathize with them who are yet nothing but flesh.

As the corrupt heart in one man is like to the same heart in another man, so there is a resemblance in one Christian to another. There is a difference between Christians, as there is a difference of stature and feature and understanding among men. But there are the same outlines of character among all real Christians, so that the representations made of the hearts of David, and Paul, and other good men, in Scripture, are of great use to us, not only to direct our course of life, but to assist us in searching our own hearts. We have not the same degrees of faith in Christ, and love to God, and delight in his word, as these holy men; but if we are true saints, the same dispositions, though with less vigour, will rule in our lives, for every Christian has the same sanctifying Spirit, though his operations in all are not equally signal*.

Ver. 20. Although heart answereth to heart, yet there are such varieties in the hearts of men, that we cannot search out the secret workings of the hearts of our fellow men, and it is a happy thing that we cannot do it; but because it is of importance to us to know in some degree the thoughts, and wishes, and designs of others, we have some means of discovering them. They can inform us by their tongues what is in their hearts, and when they think proper, for reasons of their own, to dissemble with their tongues, their eyes often betray them, for in the eyes love, and anger, and envy, and desire, often paint themselves so visibly, that they cannot but be perceived in spite of every endeavour to conceal them.

One of the many things in which men agree with one another is the insatiableness of the desires of the heart, (which are discovered in the eyes.) The invisible world is never full of souls, and the grave is never satiated with the carcasses of men. After the innumerable millions that have been buried in death, they are still crying, give, give, and will continue their importunate demands till that day when death and hell are to be cast into the lake of fire and brimstone. The heart of the sons of men is equally clamorous for something to satisfy it. They enlarge their desires as hell, and cannot be satisfied. If you should give them a world, they will weep for another world. They think if they had this and the other object of their wishes they would be happy; but they find that the gratification of their desires, is but like drink to one in a dropsy, which does not allay, but increase his thirst.

The improvement of this truth is taught by Solomon himself, at great length, in the book of Ecclesiastes. The insatiableness of men's desires is one of the arguments by which he proves the vanity of the world, and the unsatisfactory nature of its richest enjoyments. Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever, and he will never be happy till his heart is suited to his end. To seek happiness in this world, is to seek the living among the dead. It is to seek to be happy in opposition to the irreversible determination of the author of happiness, who framed our souls with such large and boundless desires that they never can be filled, but by him that filleth all in all. The only way of being happy is to comply with the gracious invitation of our Redeemer, "If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink*."

Ver. 21. The fining pot tries silver, and the furnace discovers whether gold be genuine and pure, so praise bestowed upon a man, discovers the reigning temper of his mind. If a wise and humble man is praised, he will not be thereby elevated in his own mind. If the praise conferred upon him is not just, he will not think himself warranted to lay any stress upon it, for it is an evidence of pride when a man despises undeserved reproaches, and yet piques himself on commendations which are equally groundless, and therefore equally vain; and if it is a piece of meanness to be dejected by the one, it is a piece of vanity to be puffed up by the other. But if a wise man is commended upon good grounds, he does not consider himself as entitled to the chief praise of those good qualities which he is possessed of, or those good actions which he hath performed, because it is God alone that makes him to differ from other men, and every thing that is of him, and through him, ought to be ascribed to him*.

When a bad man is praised for those qualities that he has, or those actions that he has done, he spoils all their value and credit by the greediness with which he swallows the commendations; he does not ascribe the praise of them to God, but like Herod wishes to appropriate all the glory to himself, or if he gives it to God, he does it only in words and professions, like the self-conceited Pharisee. But when a fool receives praise that is founded only on falsehood, or on flattering misconstructions of his actions, he is so fond of every thing that tends to his own advancement, whether right or wrong, that he is well pleased; and as if other people knew him better than himself, he can prevail on himself to believe every thing they are pleased to say in his favour. Darkness will be light, and vice will be virtue in his eyes, when it serves to nourish his self-esteem.

There is one good effect which may arise out of undeserved commendations to a wise man. They will be a motive to him to deserve them, that men may not run into mistakes by their good opinion of him; but praise ought to be administered with great caution to the best of men, for as it discovers some men to be nothing but dross, so it shews good men to have too much dross in their composition. The compliments of the ambassadors of Babylon were prejudicial to no less a man than Hezekiah. But to Herod the praise of men proved pernicious.

Ver. 22. How deplorably perverse are the hearts of fallen men! Let favour be shewed to the wicked, yet will they not learn righteousness; in the land of uprightness they will deal unjustly, and will not behold the majesty of the Lord. Let them be afflicted, and bruised, and crushed under the judgments of God, or punishments inflicted by the hand of men, as wheat is bruised in a mortar, or between the upper and nether millstones, yet they will refuse to part with their folly. Pharaoh was broken by the terrible plagues which God inflicted upon him, and sometimes he confessed his folly, and promised amendment, and yet he returned to his folly, like the dog to his vomit, till he was utterly destroyed; for when God fights against a man he will be sure to overcome. Ahaz had the sermons of the prince of the later prophets to enforce the language of the rod, Isaiah preached with celestial eloquence. God smote him with a succession of the most alarming judgments, yet in the time of his distress did Ahaz sin more and more against the Lord. This was that king Ahaz; and multitudes walk in his paths, refusing to receive correction, and thereby exposing themselves to tenfold condemnation.

To what purpose then serves the rod for the fool's back? Does not the rod of correction drive foolishness away from the heart? It does when the blessing of God accompanies it, and it must be used with a dependence upon him that has appointed it. Without the concurrence of divine grace, the rod will not drive away folly from the hearts of young persons, and far less from the hearts of those in whom corruption receives double strength, from the superadded force of custom*.

The judgments of God against sinners tend greatly to aggravate sin, when they have not a reforming effect; and therefore when they are in the earth, we ought to pour out fervent supplications to God that he may subdue, by his almighty grace, the stubbornness of the hearts of men, and make them to learn righteousness.

If we are under the rod, let us consider the design of it, and the intolerable load of guilt which we must contract by continuing unhumbled; and under a sense of the hardness and instability of our spirits, let us turn unto the Lord with those supplications which God himself puts into our mouths*.

Ver. 23. To the precepts so often given us about diligence in the business of our calling, some will object that they have plenty of servants to manage their affairs, and they have no occasion to toil their own bodies, or fatigue their minds with them. But Solomon tells them that they may soon come to poverty, if they will not take the trouble of minding their own affairs, and inspecting their servants. Every man ought to be acquainted with the state of his own business, and look to it with his own eyes.

I am in affluent circumstances, you will perhaps say. But if you will not mind your business you may soon be as poor as Lazarus.

Ver. 24. You have not the riches of a crowned head, but if you had, they might be wasted and scattered by carelessness, which has often turned princes into beggars or bankrupts. Although there was never a richer king than Solomon, yet he was sensible of the necessity of attending to his affairs, and acquired a part of his reputation for wisdom from the management of his domestic concerns.

Solomon tells us in another place, that the instability and uncertainty of earthly things, after all our care, is a motive to draw off our hearts from them, and to fix our eyes upon nobler objects; but he tells us, in this place, that the perishing nature of earthly things is likewise a reason for bestowing a moderate and lawful share of our attention upon our temporal interests. Let us do what we can, the world cannot be secured to us, and therefore we must choose a more durable portion; but by the blessing of God upon our honest labours, we may in most cases expect to enjoy a competency of earthly blessings; whereas negligence in our earthly business will in all probability reduce us to those straits which would embitter our days, and those shifts which would prejudice our credit and our consciences.

God's bounty is a great encouragement to our industry.

Ver. 25. God has given us great testimonies of his goodness, in giving us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons. By his kind providence the springing of the earth is blessed, and the mountains are covered with herbage, which may be gathered for the use of those beasts that serve for the use of man. Does God stretch out his hand with blessings, and shall man, ungratefully and foolishly despise the bounty, and lose the benefit of it by his own neglect and sloth? If God puts a price into our hands, to get either heavenly wisdom or the needful blessings of life, we are fools if we have not heart to employ it for the intended purpose. The valleys and the mountains, which rejoice and sing to God, cry out against sluggish men. The necessity and advantage of industry and care are very visible;

Ver. 26, 27. By industry you shall have clothing, and food, and rent for your fields, or money to buy new possessions. You shall not perhaps be able to procure the luxuries of life, but these are not to be sought after; you shall have a comfortable maintenance for yourselves and your families; your maid servants shall have plenty of that food that is proper and convenient for them. On the other side, if you neglect your business, you bring want not only upon yourselves, but upon those for whom you are bound to provide. "If a man provide not for those of his own house, he is worse than an infidel," or even a robber in the Arabian desert*.

But how does our Lord say, "Labour not for the meat that perisheth, but for that which endureth unto everlasting life?" His meaning is, that we are to labour in the first and chief place, for that enduring bread. If we must not be careless about our bodies, and the interests of this life, which passes away like a cloud, what care can be too great about our everlasting interests†?

If men must look well to the state of their flocks and herds, they are guilty of insufferable negligence who have some of Christ's flock committed to their care, as masters, or parents, or teachers, or pastors, and yet thoughtlessly suffer them to perish‡.

CHAPTER 28

Ver. 1. The wicked are so desperately hardened that they have no fear of the most horrible dangers, at least they have not such an apprehension of them, as to flee to that sure and only refuge which Divine grace has provided. At the same time they are so wretched that they are never in security, and are liable to the most distressing terrors, when there is no reason for them. The Syrians that besieged Samaria heard the noise of chariots and horsemen, which threw them into such a panic that they fled away, and left their bread and clothes behind them. In like manner, sinners are liable to terrors which sometimes encompass them like waters, when no reason can be given for them; for the objects which ought to alarm transgressors, and have a tremendous reality in them, are not the things that take hold of their minds. They are like madmen who fear not a drawn sword, but tremble at the shaking of a leaf, as if it were a devil ready to hurry them away to the bottomless pit. No passion is more tormenting than fear, and a sense of guilt producing it. It was a punishment threatened against the people of Israel, if they revolted from God, that they should flee before their pursuing enemies; but it is a sign of the utmost wretchedness, when men flee away through terror when there are no enemies, but such as are conjured up by a timorous fancy.

Sinners have great reason after all to fear, even when the objects of their fear are mere fancies. God is angry with them every day, and their anxious alarms are a part of the punishment of their sins*. They cannot expect tranquillity and happiness of mind but in Christ, by whom we are delivered from the guilt of sin, and enjoy that peace which passeth all understanding. Those who are justified by his righteousness, and led in the paths of righteousness by his Spirit, are bold as a lion, the most courageous of creatures upon earth; for they are delivered from all danger of condemnation; they are at peace with God, and a league is made for their safety with the stones of the field, and the beasts of the earth, and the serpents of the dust. They may have many enemies, but God is their friend, and no weapon formed against them shall prosper. They may meet with adversities and deaths, but they shall meet with nothing to separate them from the love of God, with nothing that was not designed for them by an all wise and gracious providence, with nothing but what shall contribute to their good.

The righteous are sometimes timorous like doves, but they have reason to be bold as lions; they have that spirit which is a spirit of power; they are partakers of those graces which have a native tendency to expel tormenting fears, and to produce quietness and assurance for ever. Their natural constitution, their remaining corruptions, their unhappy falls, their numerous enemies, may counteract their principles of holy courage, but they are commanded to be always strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus; and the day is coming when every fear shall vanish away, and be succeeded by eternal triumphs.

What effect righteousness has to produce boldness, and to banish fear, appears from the history of the elders who obtained a good report through faith†, and of the apostles and first Christians, who triumphed in the midst of daily deaths, and in the face of bloody tyrants; nor have later ages been destitute of testimonies to the truth of this proverb. Martyrs have rejoiced in flames, as if they had been beds of roses; and Christians on a death bed have often said, "O death, where is thy victory! Thanks be unto God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Ver. 2. The providence of God suffereth not a sparrow to fall unnoticed to the ground; how much less is it to be supposed that the affairs of men, and of societies consisting of millions of men, are unobserved by the great God, whose kingdom ruleth over all.

We often rejoice, and often mourn, when we observe the occurrences of public governments, but we attend too little to the justice of God concerned in them. When frequent changes happen in the administration by the deaths of princes, or by those revolutions which seat a new family on the throne, God is carrying on his purposes of mercy or judgment; and although the same princes continue sitting on the throne, when the ministry is in a fluctuating state, and public measures continually changing, we may see the justice of Providence, and the provocations of the land calling down that vengeance which is executed in the miseries brought upon a land by these means. For the transgressions of Israel and Judah we find many princes, sometimes cut off in a very short space of time; and even the good Josiah was removed from an earthly to a heavenly kingdom, to make way for that punishment which was due to the guilt of the land*.

But a man of wisdom and piety is a great national blessing. A private man of such a character may sometimes be a happy instrument of rescuing a nation from destruction, or establishing its peace and happiness*. But a prince furnished with skill to govern

a nation, and with religion to govern himself, is an inestimable gift of God. His wise choice of counsellors and magistrates, his good example, his just and vigorous administration, the countenance he gives to virtue, and the checks he gives to wickedness, concur to establish the land in peace and prosperity, and the blessing of God attends his government.

The history of the good kings of Judah, and of almost all the good kings with which any nation has been blessed, are confirmations of this truth. Lord, give thy judgments to our king, and thy righteousness to the king's son.

Ver. 3. One would naturally think that poor men, though exalted to high stations, would, through their knowledge of the heart, and experience of the hardships of a poor man, look down with tenderness upon the poor, and use their newly acquired authority for the protection of those who are left in that state out of which they were raised; but experience tells us that the worst of all oppressors have ordinarily been the poor, when they were advanced to rule. The poor that oppress the poor, are like a sweeping inundation that carries every thing along with it, and scarcely leaves any thing in the ground to be the seed of a future crop.

When poor men are exalted to power, their new dignity too often turns their brain. They know not themselves, and they cannot be expected to know their former brethren.

Their experience of the hardships of poverty meeting with a selfish heart, disposes them to guard against its return, by oppressing those below them, and dragging every thing into their own possession, that they may set their nest on high, and be delivered from the power of evil. It is therefore very improper to place the poor in stations where they may have an opportunity to enrich themselves at the expense of others, unless they are well known to be men, like Joseph, of inflexible integrity. Those that might behave well in private stations, are often tyrants when temptation and opportunity concur to make them so; and history is full of the mischiefs which arise from the unwise neglect of the instruction given to nations and kings in this text.

How lovely is the character of our Redeemer! He made himself poor for our sakes, and he is now exalted to an heavenly throne; but his heart is not exalted above those poor men on earth, whom he vouchsafes to call his brethren. He knows the heart of a poor man, and he will deliver the needy when he crieth, the poor also, and him that hath no helper.

Ver. 4. Sinners not only destroy their own souls, but contribute to the ruin of other men, by praising their wicked courses, and encouraging them in sin. No wicked man wishes to be called wicked, and therefore he puts false colours upon his own and other men's sins, baptizing them with the names of those virtues to which they seem to have most resemblance. Drunkenness is called good fellowship, covetousness is called prudence and frugality, courage in sin is called bravery, and peevishness has the name of honesty and plain dealing. If no good quality can be found to put a gloss upon their sins, then the wicked will flatter one another by praising them for good qualities to which they have no shadow of a title, and at the same time extenuating their faults, as if they had no proportion to their good qualities. To forsake the law of God is a very bad thing; but to take pleasure in those that do the same, and to strengthen their hands in wickedness, is to walk in the ways of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin.

The practice of sin is praise to evil-doers. Our example is of itself an encouragement to those who are like us in their behaviour; and when those who have fallen into sin through temptation, and resolve to reform, see others continuing in the practice of iniquity, they will be emboldened to go on in the same path; they see that they are no worse than other men.

Of all sinners, those that have left off to be wise and to do good are the most pernicious enemies to holiness, and give the most effectual encouragement to sin. The language of their practice is, we have tasted of the new wine of religion, and we find that the old wine of the pleasures of sin is better. Why should I leave my present practices, says the wicked man, to take the yoke of religion on my neck; others have tried it, and they find they are not able to bear it, and have been obliged to shake it off. They that forsake the law, are living infections to all around them, and little consider what loads of guilt, their own and other men's, lie upon them.

But they that keep the law contend with sinners; for they love God, and hate every thing that provokes and dishonours him. God promised Abraham to be a friend to his friends, and an enemy to his enemies. All the children of Abraham are heirs of this promise, and can they forbear to hate those that hate God, and to be grieved with those that rise up against him? But their hatred to them that hate God has no ill-will to their persons in it. They wish well to their best interests, and are zealous against their sins for the mischief which they do to their souls, as well as the provocation they give to God. Those that keep the law are in very different stations, and have very different degrees of influence. Magistrates and ministers, parents and masters, if they have a zeal for God, contend each in their places against sin; but even those pious persons that are in the meanest rank of life have an opportunity of striving against it, by their practice and prayers, and in many cases by their admonitions.

God is well pleased with those that rise up for him against the workers of iniquity. Great were the honours bestowed on the tribe of Levi for their impartial zeal against sin*. Yet we must remember that we ought to strive against sin with God's weapons, and in our proper ranks, under the banner of him that was manifested to destroy the works of the devil, and in the imitation of that example which he left us, that we might follow his steps.

Ver. 5. Evil men may have great talents, and much learning, but they understand not judgment, and therefore they cannot be said to understand any thing that is worth the knowing. Their corrupt affections spread a dark cloud over their judgments, that they cannot understand the way of wisdom and holiness. Their eyes are disordered and darkened by the malignant influence of sin, and therefore their whole course of life is full of darkness. It is true, they know their duty in many cases better than they practise it; but the knowledge which they have is at best a learned ignorance, for they are unacquainted with the necessity and excellency of doing their duty, and with those means that would be effectual for enabling and disposing them to do it.

The understandings of sinners are perverse as well as their will. Some error is mingled with the knowledge they have, which, unknown to others, and undiscerned by themselves, misleads them continually. They cannot receive the things of the Spirit of God,

but their minds and hearts are both sensual, and therefore there is no judgment in their goings*.

They that know not judgment, know nothing at all; they are more brutish in their knowledge than the stork, and the crane, and the swallow†. But they that seek the Lord know judgment, and therefore they know every thing that is needful to be known by them. They are acquainted with the method of salvation, and with the way of being holy and happy. And what knowledge can be compared with this? All the things that we can desire, all the things that are accounted precious on earth, are but loss and dung, compared with the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord, and of the way of salvation through his blood, and of being conformed to him in his death and life.

The persons blessed with this excellent knowledge, are those that seek the Lord. They are set in opposition to evil men; for they are all wicked who call not upon the name of the Lord, and who do not seek his favour as their chief happiness; but they that seek the Lord with the desire of their souls, are haters of evil, and lovers of goodness, and have their portion with the saints. Perhaps they dare not say that they have found him whom their souls love, but their desires shall not be always disappointed; for those relishes which the Spirit of God has excited in their souls shall be gratified in due time.

They that seek the Lord search the Scriptures, and make them the subject of their meditation; and God blesseth their diligence by giving them wisdom through his statutes. They pray with great fervency for the promised spirit, and God gives the Holy Spirit to them that ask him: this spirit is a spirit of wisdom and revelation to them, leading them into all necessary truth; and therefore the spiritual man is said to judge all things. If he is sometimes at a loss to know his duty in particular cases, yet he has sure promises to plead with God, and to encourage his own soul in the hope that God will be pleased to reveal those things that he knows not unto him*.

Ver. 6. We had the sense of this proverb in the beginning of the 19th chapter; but it is here repeated because of the important instruction contained in it. Gold and silver glitter in our eyes, and dazzle our sight to such a degree, that a rich sinner appears more respectable than a saint in rags; and the fatal consequence is, that men labour rather to be rich than holy. To direct our practice aright, it is necessary to have our unreasonable judgments of things corrected, and to esteem the poorest saint above the most prosperous transgressor. Uprightness is so valuable in itself, that it gives a lustre to the possessors of it beyond what all the dignity and wealth of the world can do; but double-mindedness and insincerity are so vile, that they stain the glory of the highest man on earth. Let us therefore choose the portion of God's people, however mean they are, and pray that we may not have our portion with the men of the world, although their bellies should be filled with God's hidden treasure*.

Ver. 7. Let us suppose that two men have each of them a son. The son of the first is polished in his manners, has his understanding adorned with every liberal science, and is placed in a way of life, wherein he has the prospect of making a large fortune; but, after all, wants the grace of God, and has no deep impressions of religion: the other man's son has none of these advantages, but is so deeply impressed with a sense of religion, that he shews a respect in his behaviour to all God's commandments. Which of the two parents has most comfort and credit in his son? Solomon would answer,—the second, because he is a wise son.

This wisdom will make a young man to choose good company, and to avoid the society of riotous persons, and every thing that might reflect disgrace upon himself or his father; but he that is unrestrained by a principle of religion, is in great danger of associating himself with riotous and dissolute companions. And he that is a companion of riotous persons, shameth his father, for he will soon imitate those whose company he loves; or, if he preserves himself from their vices, (which can scarcely be expected,) he at least exposes himself to suspicions, and loses his character.

Do you wish to have credit in your children? Let your first and great care be to train them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord; for the wisdom in a son whereby he honours his father, lies mainly in keeping the law. Do you wish to give comfort to your parents, and to reflect honour upon them? Let religion be your great business, and choose for your companions those that fear the Lord. But have no fellowship with dissipated youths. Let not their mirth and humour allure you into their company; for you may as soon touch pitch and not be defiled, as have fellowship with bad men, without being in a lesser or greater degree corrupted.

Ver. 8. The reason why men grind the faces of their poor neighbours, by usury and unjust gain, is, that they expect to make themselves rich by such means. The reason why men are averse from pitying the poor is, that they fear poverty will be the consequence. These hopes and fears are equally groundless. Solomon, in many places of this book, teaches us, that oppression and unmercifulness is the surest road to poverty, and that liberality to the poor is the surest and shortest road to riches; because God maketh men rich or poor at his pleasure, and by his secret methods of providence makes the money of the wicked to find its way into the purses of the righteous and merciful. This is a truth which experience often verifies. If it is not constantly, it is generally the case, and when things appear to be otherwise ordered, we ought to acquiesce in the sovereignty of God, and to believe that his word has, or will have, its accomplishment, though in a manner as yet unknown to us. Job was reduced to extreme poverty, after all his wonderful acts of generosity to the poor*, and never expected to enjoy any more happiness in this world, yet he never doubted of this truth. Though he heap up silver as the dust, and prepare raiment as the clay;—he may prepare it, but the just shall put it on, and the innocent shall divide the silver†.

Let us not be afraid of bringing poverty upon ourselves by well-doing. Do we not see multitudes of men endeavouring vainly to enrich themselves by unjustifiable means? Do these men trust to the dictates of the devil and the flesh, and shall we refuse our confidence to the God of truth? These men are the stewards of merciful men. They squeeze the poor to bring money into their own pockets, but God will distraint upon them, and bring their unjust gains into the possession of them that are good in his sight*.

Ver. 9. If a subject refuses to grant the requests of his prince, which have the force of commands in them, what face can that subject have to appear with his own requests before his royal master, or what hopes can he entertain that they shall be granted? How

strange then is it that sinners can expect any favour at the hand of the King of heaven, when they are provoking him to anger every day to his face!

The law of God signifies the whole revelation of his mind, concerning our faith and practice. When we reject the salvation revealed in the gospel, we are guilty of the most ungrateful disobedience to God, and by refusing an interest in Christ, we render all our prayers unacceptable and abominable to God, who hears no prayers but those which are presented in the name of Christ. When we live in a wilful disobedience to any of God's commandments, we declare all our professions to be insincere, and our faith to be a dead faith, and therefore we only impose upon ourselves, and we cannot impose on the hearer of prayer, if we hope that any of our requests will be acceptable to him. If we have the genuine and living faith of God's people, and trust in God as the hearer of our prayers, we will surely hear what the Lord God will say unto us, and regard every one of his precepts as the apple of our eye.

When the wise man tells us that even the prayer of the sinner is an abomination, he plainly insinuates, that no act of devotion or charity can find acceptance from such a person. He that disobeys the law of God may be in some cases liberal to the poor, and in many things he may gain the praise of men, but every thing that he does is detestable to God, who sees how corrupt his principles and views are. Such a man is without Christ, and can have no happy intercourse with God. His heart is under the reigning power of sin, and the best thing that he does is sinful; he is a rebel to God, and God is an enemy to him for his wicked works.*

Ver. 10. He that digs a pit for any man shall fall into it†. How then can they escape who dig a pit for the favourites of God, or by their artful persuasions, and deceitful misrepresentations, seduce the people of God into those pits which have been digged for them by others? The Lord is the protector of the righteous, and the avenger of the injuries that are done to them by violence or deceit. Their enemies are considered by Christ as his own enemies; and he must reign till he hath put all enemies under his feet.

Those who contrive and execute mischievous designs against the righteous, are contriving mischiefs for themselves, and drawing a sword out of its scabbard to be sheathed in their own bowels‡; for every event in the world is over-ruled by a righteous providence. They may indeed meet with success at first, for the righteous falleth sometimes into the pits prepared for him, but they have no reason to triumph; for if the righteous should fall seven times in a day, yet he has an Almighty helper present with him, who will not suffer him to perish, but will raise him up, and put him in possession of all those good things which are promised by that faithfulness which never could deceive. The wicked man may soon bring abundance of mischief upon himself, by his malignity to those whom God supports; but he can bring no evil upon them, that shall not be made to work together with other things for their good, and he shall not be able to keep from them any of those good things which are the sure portion of the heirs of God. Earth and hell may rage against the righteous—all the force and cunning of the old serpent and his seed may be exerted against them; but they have constant encouragement to trust in God, and have no reason to despond, for God withdraweth not his eyes from the righteous, but with kings are they on the throne. Yea, he doth establish them for ever, and they are exalted*.

Ver. 11. Riches are good in themselves, and are very useful in the hands of a wise and good man; but the greatest part of rich men, in the judgment of Solomon and of Christ, are the worse men for their riches; because they are a means of making them more proud and self-conceited than they would otherwise be. They think themselves men of greater abilities than poor men, because; they attribute their wealth to their own skill in business; or, if they possess it by inheritance, they take to themselves airs of importance, as if they were men of a superior species to the rest of the human race. The respect which is shewed them by discretion, and the court paid them by flattery, they consider as a tribute of praise to their great merit.

The poor that hath understanding sees through the weakness and folly of his rich neighbour that boasts of his wisdom, and despises him, not so much for his want of sense, as for his groundless pretensions to it. No man would make himself the object of laughter, if he would be content with his due; but when one exacts more respect than he is entitled to, he loses that respect which he would otherwise have.

Let rich men consider, that much of that regard which they think is paid to themselves, is in reality paid to their purses; and that a horse, might, with as much justice, be valued according to the splendour of its trappings, as a man by the extent of his possessions. Let them take care lest they expose themselves to the censure and scorn of their inferiors, by exacting respect, and, what is worst of all, lest they make the gifts of providence an instrument of their own destruction, by turning them into nourishment to their vanity, and obstacles in their way to the kingdom of heaven. Paul enjoins Timothy to charge the rich not to trust in riches; pointing out to us that rich men are too much disposed to trust in riches, and that trust in riches is a very dangerous vice.

Ver. 12. When righteous men are exalted to power in a nation, the state of it is happy and honourable; for they punish wickedness, and encourage virtue; they protect the liberty and property of their inferiors; and all men rejoice in their administration.

But when the wicked enjoy the places of power, no man thinks himself sure of his life and property. Villains may rejoice, because their crimes are countenanced, but honest men run into corners to hide themselves; for many are oppressed, and all the rest are afraid. Such was the situation of our own country an hundred and fifty years ago. Let us bless God that things are now on a very different footing: and let us pray that our judges may be always peace, and our exactors righteousness.

How valuable is a righteous man! If he is not a blessing to all around him, the reason is because the sphere of his influence is narrow. How much is wickedness to be abhorred! It is the ruin of a man's own soul, and it makes him a plague to all that are connected with him. Bad men themselves hate wickedness, when they find it pointed against themselves; and tyrants have been execrated by all nations.

Ver. 13. Sin is the source of misery and ruin: It has turned angels into devils, and peopled the regions of horror with those that once

dwelt in the abodes of perfect bliss. It has brought misery and woe into our world, that might have been a lower heaven, if we had not revolted from God, and destroyed ourselves by our iniquity.

But, blessed be the Lord, our condition is not desperate, like that of the angels who kept not their first habitation. God looked upon our race with an eye of compassion, and provided us effectual relief. The Son of God is our great atonement, and we are called to the enjoyment of pardon through faith in his blood. Under a deep sense of our guilt and danger, we are warranted to claim salvation from sin and wrath from that mercy that reigns through righteousness unto eternal life, by Jesus Christ our Lord.

But such is the folly of many sinners, that they would rather hide their sins from their own eyes, and, if possible, from the eyes of God, than receive mercy under the character of sinners. They will allow themselves to be sinners, but they will not confess their sins; or, if they cannot altogether deny them, they endeavour to save their honour, or rather their pride, to the ruin of their souls, by excusing and extenuating them, or by transferring, like our first parents, the blame of them to others. How foolish is it for those that pine away under a mortal disease to conceal it from the knowledge of the world, rather than seek a cure from the physician?

Those who cover their sins shall not prosper; for it is impossible to cover them from the eye of our Judge, and to endeavour to shelter ourselves under coverings that are not of his spirit, is an additional provocation to the eyes of his glory. If we would judge ourselves we should not be judged; but if we cover our sins with excuses, and will not suffer ourselves to be sensible of our absolute need of sovereign mercy, how can we expect to share in that salvation, which is bestowed on men to the praise of the glory of the grace of God? If we will not acknowledge our disease, we refuse to the physician the praise of a cure.

There are some who expose themselves to the censure of this text, by hiding their sins from men, when providence, by bringing them to light, calls for a public confession as one evidence of repentance. Such persons think it would be a dishonour to them to confess their faults; but the dishonour lay in committing them, and confession, with other proofs of repentance, is the only possible means of wiping it away. They stand upon a false point of honour, and expose themselves to disgrace and misery; for they shall not prosper, because they refuse to give glory to God by taking shame to themselves*.

Those that hide their sins shall not prosper, because they reject that mercy without which they must be miserable. They prefer their own fig-leaf coverings to that covering of sin by pardoning mercy which is the ground of blessedness to the guilty†. But if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Under the law, the offerer of an atoning sacrifice was appointed to lay his hands upon the head of the victim, as a token of the translation of his guilt unto his sacrifice. In like manner, we are to confess our sin, with a dependence on that blessed sacrifice which takes away the sin of the world, claiming the pardon of our iniquities through the Messiah, whose soul was made an offering for sin; and through him all that believe are justified from all things from which they could not be justified by the law of Moses.

But what shall we say of those who confess their sins, like Pharaoh, and again return to the practice of them? These persons are not partakers of mercy, for their confessions were never sincere. They were never produced by a genuine humiliation, nor mingled with faith in the atonement, and therefore they are not accompanied with reformation. They are provocations to God, because he is mocked and insulted by such deceitful professions. But he that confesseth and forsaketh his sins shall have mercy. It was divine mercy that wrought in him such a happy temper. The sincerity of his repentance is an evidence of his interest in the blessings of saving mercy. That mercy which he has already experienced shall still follow him, till he is crowned with loving-kindnesses and mercies*.

Ver. 14. "The righteous is bold as a lion," says the wise man. How then does he pronounce a blessing upon the man that feareth alway? Christian courage is very consistent with an holy and child-like fear of God, although it is opposite to that slavish and dispiriting fear which often possesseth the hearts of the children of disobedience.

The believer in Christ trusts in God as a father; but his confidence is mingled with a deep veneration of the holy name of God, which makes him to dread the thoughts of sinning against him more than death, and to tremble at the word of God, lest he should break any of its precepts, or deserve the execution of any of its threatenings, or seem to come short, through unbelief, of any of its promises. Paul was a triumphant believer, who feared neither men nor devils, and reckoned himself perfectly secure against every charge that might be produced against him; and yet he lived in the constant exercise of holy fear, which disposed him to bring down his body, and keep it in subjection, lest when he had preached the gospel to others, he himself should be a castaway.

He is not an unhappy but a blessed man whose heart is continually governed by this fear. It has a happy influence upon his soul, to guard it from the temptations of satan and the world, and to keep it close to the Redeemer. It tends not to obstruct, but to promote the exercise of faith, and hope, and joy in the Lord. Thus fear is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, and a blessed means of establishing the heart in the love of God. It is a happy sign of an interest in the everlasting covenant of mercy, and in that special favour of God which is the source of all our joys*. Josiah's heart was made tender by this fear; and judgment could not light upon that land where he reigned, till he was removed out of it to a better kingdom.

But wretched is the man who is not afraid to sin against his maker and judge. His heart is hard as the nether millstone. He thinks himself a man of courage, but his courage is the bravery of an infernal fiend. He is not impressed with the awful authority of God, nor melted with the astonishing declarations of his mercy, nor terrified at the tremendous thunders of the threatening law. Shall such a man escape the vengeance which he defies? or, in other words, is he stronger than the Lord?

Let Pharaoh's ruin in the Red Sea, and the destruction of Israel in the desert, and the misery of that nation which rejected our Saviour, be considered by stupid sinners, that they may judge whether a man can harden himself against God and prosper. Wherefore, as the Holy Ghost saith, "to-day, if ye will hear the voice of Christ, harden not your hearts†." Do you find your hearts

stubborn and insensible, after all God's dealings with you by his word and providence; put them into the hand of God, that he may take away from you the hearts of stone, and give you hearts of flesh*.

Ver. 15. The lion and the bear are two of the fiercest kinds of animals; but they are doubly dreadful when the one is roaring, and the other ranging about for prey, seeking in the rage of hunger whom they may devour. No less dreadful is a tyrant who spreads desolation and terror through the country, by oppressing his poor subjects. He is a general enemy; but his cruelty is felt most by the poor, who have no means of resistance in their power, and who can least bear his exactions.

Oppressors are called benefactors by their slavish flatterers, but they are called wild beasts in Scripture. The fiercest of animals, at the time when they surpass themselves in fierceness, are used by Solomon as emblems of their savage nature. But these emblems were insufficient to represent the monstrous barbarities that have been often exercised by those that were at the head of the Roman empire in its pagan or antichristian state; and, therefore, Daniel and John represent them under the figure of monsters more dreadful than any that were ever beheld by the eyes of men†. The language of inspiration could not furnish out more terrible images for the devil himself, than those which have been used to represent the wickedness of tyrannical and persecuting powers.

We ought to be thankful for the wounds that have been given to the beast with seven heads and ten horns, and for the civil and religious liberties which we enjoy; and to pray with fervency, that those nations which groan under the oppressions of civil or spiritual tyranny, may be rescued from their bondage, by that great king of whom it was promised, that he would judge the poor and needy, and break in pieces their oppressors.

Ver. 16. Those princes are cursed with a blind mind as well as an iron heart who oppress their subjects; for otherwise they could not, for the gratification of a senseless lust of having, make themselves the plague and curse, the abhorrence and execration of thousands and millions, and expose themselves to those plots from men, and that vengeance from heaven, which seldom suffer a tyrant to fill a throne for many years.

Want of understanding is the root of covetousness in any man, especially in a sovereign prince, whose proper treasure lies in the breasts of his subjects. A wise prince not only abstains from oppressive exactions, but hates covetousness, and would far rather deny himself the pleasures and splendours of royalty, than impose excessive burdens on his subjects. Happy is the prince who is possessed of this disposition. He shall live and reign for many years. He has a throne in the heart of every subject; and there is not one in his dominions, who has any sense of gratitude and generosity, that will not venture his life in his defence.

Ver. 17. As he that digs a pit falls into it, so the murderer of his neighbour is his own murderer, God commands his blood to be shed by men, and his providence seldom suffers a murderer to escape. The pit of destruction is prepared for him, and he is driven to it by vengeance which will not suffer a murderer to live.

Let no man conceal the destroyer of his fellow-men; let no man plead for him; let no man solicit a pardon for him; let no man do any thing to hinder his just punishment; but let every man contribute his endeavours to bring the assassin to the gibbet. Whatever have been his merits in other respects, whatever excuses he may plead for his crime, whatever connections you may have with him by relation or friendship, you make yourselves sharers in his guilt, if you help him to escape justice. The land is defiled with blood, if the murderer (when he can be found, and the crime can be proven,) escapes unpunished; how deeply then must they be defiled, who stay him from fleeing to the pit! Justifying the wicked is a crime of the same nature with condemning the righteous; and saving the life of a murderer has the same relation to the guilt of slaying the innocent.

Is God so severe in his laws and providence against murderers; let us give no indulgence to any of those passions or dispositions, that lead to such a black and atrocious crime. Hatred and wrath do not always end in blood, but blood commonly begins with hatred and wrath. These malignant passions are viewed as murder by the holy eyes of God; and the man who indulges them has committed murder already in his heart*.

Ver. 18. He that walketh uprightly walketh surely. But may he not stumble and fall into calamity? Solomon never meant to deny that he may; but although he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down. He shall be preserved and rescued by the power of God, who looketh upon the upright with complacency, and glorifies his power and faithfulness by the salvations which he bestows on them. The upright are exposed to the same calamities with, other men, and sometimes they meet with special hardships and dangers for the sake of their uprightness; but if they should die for the sake of a good conscience, they are safe, for Christ hath assured us, that he who loses his life for bearing an upright testimony for the sake of Christ shall save it.

The double-minded man expects safety from his pliable temper. He is not like the inflexible oak, but like the pliant osier, which bends with every wind, and therefore he thinks that no tempest shall blow him down; but God hath said it, and his word will stand that he shall fall at once. His arts may succeed for a time to spin out an infamous life, or to preserve his property and credit; but the ruin which he endeavours to avoid, shall seize upon him when he is not expecting it, and to his great mortification, he shall find himself ruined by those very arts which he employed for his security. He is cast into a net by his own feet, and he walketh upon a snare, and his destruction, when it comes, shall be complete and irremediable. It may be delayed for a time, but when it comes it shall not need to rise up the second time*.

Ver. 19. We must seek from God our daily bread, but we must not expect to have it rained down like manna from the clouds without any labour of our own. Let us join industry to our dependence upon God, and we shall have bread enough for ourselves and our families, and something to give to the poor.

But the man that loves idle company has no relish for the business of his calling; he learns habits of idleness and dissipation, which will soon bring him to poverty. He behaves as if he were hungering and thirsting after poverty, and he shall soon be filled with that

which he is so eagerly seeking after*.

Ver. 20. He is a faithful man that prefers his duty and his conscience to his interests, and would rather suffer poverty and disgrace a thousand times, than obtain riches as the reward of iniquitous compliance with the wicked, or any violation of his duty to God or man. Covetousness is absolutely inconsistent with faithfulness; for when men are more eagerly solicitous to be rich, than to be approved of God, their ruling passion will on some occasions hurry them over the belly of their consciences to iniquity; and by a course of bad actions their consciences will be hardened, and they will be reconciled to every thing, however unfair and unjustifiable, that promises to put money in their pockets. As the men that love God with a supreme affection will displease their dearest friends, and mortify their most eager desires rather than offend God, so those that are determined to be rich will venture on every danger, and displease all the world and God himself, rather than want that shining metal which darkens the splendour of every other excellency in their eyes.

The faithful man, like Job, shall abound with blessings, for men will bless him, by applauding his integrity, and by prayers in his behalf; and the blessing is not causeless, but shall come upon him. His faithfulness, when it is a fruit of the spirit†, is an evidence that he is blessed of God, and an heir of blessings of the richest kind.

But the man that loads himself with guilt, by endeavouring to lade himself with thick clay, shall be heavy laden with well-earned curses, that shall sink him deep in perdition and destruction*.

Ver. 21. When judges are first perverted from integrity, it is owing to some powerful temptation addressed to them, which they think irresistible; at the same time, they think that they will never transgress the rules of justice for any paltry consideration. If justice is to be violated, said Julius Cæsar, it is to be violated for the sake of empire. Few of the covetous or ambitious hold their integrity at such a high price, but they must have some valuable consideration in exchange for their conscience and honesty. Some will sell justice for an estate or a title, that would scorn to barter it away for a trifle of money, or to sell their souls at such a pitiful price as that which Judas Iscariot had for his master.

But there is great danger in yielding to any temptation, however great; for besides that it is the sign of a corrupt heart, the conscience that is once violated, will, in time, be prostituted and debauched, and the most trifling temptation will become a sufficient motive for the greatest iniquities. The second step in wickedness will not raise such a conflict in the soul as the first, and the third will be easier than the second; and the most detestable villanies will appear less horrible to a man hackneyed in iniquity, than the slightest deviations from justice once did to the same person. He that would not transgress without the offer of thousands, will at length transgress for a piece of bread; and he that once refused a whole estate, if he suffer himself at last to be perverted, will become so degenerate, that he will sell the righteous for a few pieces of silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes.

Oppose the beginnings of sin, and give no place to the devil. If he can prevail upon you to comply now and then with his temptation, he will expect to bring you by degrees into such a compliant humour, that he will have no occasion to put himself to the trouble of tempting you at all.

Ver. 22. They that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare. An evil eye is one of the products of a heart governed by the love of riches. A man of this temper is so tenacious, that every thing he can catch sticks to his fingers, and he cannot look with a bountiful eye upon the distresses of the poor, or stretch forth his hands for their relief. It is an eye sore to him to see any man prospering but himself, or to behold any fish coming into the net of his best friend. He is so thoroughly immersed in selfishness, that he can hear no good news, except of some profitable bargain for himself, or of some deceased friend, who has left him a sum of money.

Such a man shall be baffled in all his labours, and all his hopes will be disappointed; for poverty shall come upon him. He lies under the curse of God; and since it is the blessing of God that maketh rich, poverty must be the fruit of his curse. He makes both God and men his enemies; and if either the injustice of the one, or the just vengeance of the other can rifle his stores, he must be reduced to want.

The covetous man will not believe that poverty is coming upon him, for he imagines that he is taking the most effectual way to become rich; but it will bring upon him so much the greater distress and pain that he was not expecting it. Those calamities, which are afflicting if they are expected, are shocking when they were unlooked for. Saints themselves find great difficulty in bearing sudden reverses of fortune; but what a terrible impression must they make upon wicked men, who have none of those consolations that mitigate every distress to the people of God!

If the covetous man does not feel the assaults of poverty whilst he lives, death will turn him out naked and stript of every thing, to another world. His sins alone shall cleave to him, and the curses which he was collecting to himself in greater quantities than gold, shall cleave to him through eternal ages.

Ver. 23. A desire of enjoying the good graces of our friends and neighbours, is the reason that we are so averse to give them faithful admonitions when they do amiss, and so ready to flatter them with our tongues. But is the neglect of faithful reproof, or a fair and flattering tongue, the true way of gaining the favour of our friends? By no means; God has declared otherwise, and God turns the hearts of men at his pleasure. If our ways please the Lord, we have reason to hope that he will turn the hearts of our enemies to love us; but if they displease him, he will make those to become our enemies whose favour we courted by unworthy means.

Flattery may gain us a transient flow of kindness, and faithful reproof may excite a temporary disgust; for the unbridled self-love of men makes them unwilling to hear any reflection on their own conduct, and disposes them to swallow down their own praise, without examining whether it is just or not. But the force of truth and reason will in time appear, and flattery will render the person that

presented it odious, when the bad effects of it are found by bitter experience. On the other side, the faithful reprovor is still esteemed, when he is not loved so well as formerly; and in time it will be found that his faithfulness will procure him a greater measure of that good-will and friendship which he seemed to forfeit. If we wish to enjoy a permanent interest in any man's love, we should make it our first point to secure his esteem by deserving it.

But, that we may experience the truth of this proverb, we ought to administer needful reproofs in a friendly manner; for if we behave like enemies in doing the office of a friend, we must not think it strange if we are taken for enemies.

Ver. 24. Some graceless youths imagine there is little harm in robbing their fathers; and would take it very much amiss if you should class them with common thieves, for applying to their own use their father's money, without his knowledge or consent. They say in their hearts, that they are guilty of no transgression; but the corruption of their principles is no extenuation of the badness of their practice. In the judgment of God they are to be ranked with the worst sort of villains, for they are guilty of violating, in a gross manner, the strongest bonds of nature. They waste the estate, and wound the spirit of one whom they are bound to love and honour, by the greatest benefits that one man can receive from another. And their relation to their parents is not an extenuation, but a grievous aggravation of their crime.

Parents should take care not to tempt their children to this sort of behavior, either by withholding from them what is meet, or by foolishly indulging them in expences which they may find themselves afterwards obliged to restrain.

To say that we did not look upon a thing to be a transgression, will be no just excuse for any piece of conduct that we might have known to be criminal. It will only shew us to be so depraved, that even our minds and our consciences are defiled.

Ver. 25. Only by pride cometh contention, and pride never comes without contention. The proud man has an high opinion of his own merit, and cannot bear with those who have not the same respect for him, that he has for himself. When he finds a man that does not cringe to him, or submit implicitly to his opinions, he is instantly alarmed as if an attack were made on his honour, and by his angry words and overbearing behaviour kindles up the fire of contention.

The proud man trusts in himself, and not in the Lord. He that trusts in the Lord is not high-minded and insolent. He has a low opinion of himself, and although he is not careless about his own reputation, yet he trusts God with his honour, as well as all his other concerns; believing that if his righteousness should be eclipsed, God will in due time bring it forth to the light. The weapons he uses for the support of his character, are the meekness and gentleness of Christ; and the consequence is, that he lives at peace, and rather pacifies than stirs up strife.

The proud are much to be pitied, for they have a poor wretched life. They can scarcely enjoy one day's tranquillity, because there are never wanting some to mortify their pride, and cross their ambition. But they that trust in the Lord enjoy an inward tranquillity and outward peace. The God whom they trust takes care of all their concerns, so that every thing which they do shall prosper; or if any thing happens to cross their wishes, they know that it is agreeable to the appointment of God whose will they prefer to their own. Their souls are like a watered garden, and like a well of water, whose waters fail not, for they are refreshed with the manifestations of the love of God, and the communications of his grace, and their hopes are full of immortality. O Lord God of Hosts, blessed is the man that trusteth in thee! But miserable are the proud, and they that trust in their own hearts.

Ver. 26. We must not trust our own prudence, even about our worldly business, without acknowledging God in it, for it is a piece of folly to neglect him in whom we live and move, and whose blessing is absolutely necessary for our daily labours, and our daily bread.

It is still more foolish to trust our own hearts in our spiritual concerns; and yet we are guilty of this folly in a thousand instances. When we consult with our own judgment what worship we ought to give to God, instead of consulting with implicit submission of heart the oracles of God, who best knows what service will please himself—when we form our apprehensions about the doctrines of religion, without searching the Scriptures, and supplicating God to send forth his light and truth to direct and fix our judgments—when we try some other way of salvation than the way revealed in the gospel—when we form resolutions in our own strength, or persuade ourselves that we are able to keep them in opposition to temptation—when we endeavour to purify our own hearts, by closely applying to them moral persuasions, or even divine truths, without a sense of our absolute need of Christ as our sanctification:—In all these cases, and in many others, we are chargeable with this folly; and how gross the folly is may appear upon a slight examination of it. If any cheat had deceived us an hundred times, we would certainly deserve the character of fools if we trusted him any more; and we are great strangers at home, if we are not sensible that it has been the common practice of our hearts to impose falsehoods on us from our youth up. The idolatrous heathens and Roman Catholics, the falls of saints, and the general wickedness of mankind, might be adduced as proofs of the danger and folly of this carnal confidence.

The only way of walking wisely is to have no confidence in ourselves, but to trust in the Lord with all our hearts, and to follow his counsels whithersoever they lead us. They that trust in their own hearts lean upon a broken reed, which will soon fail under them, and they will fall into mischief. Those that trust in the Lord and walk wisely, may fall into calamities and temptations; but, for their comfort, they have a sure promise of deliverance. Their distresses are the trial of their faith, and they shall end in joy and happiness*.

Ver. 27. Look upon the distresses of the poor, and your hearts will be melted into tenderness. If the sight does not affect your hearts, listen to their complaints and petitions; if you disregard the voice of the poor, hear the voice of God commanding you to give to the poor. Do you grudge to give a little at the command of him that gave you all? God has answered every objection against his precepts in his promises. He condescends to assure you that you shall be no losers but great gainers, by a cheerful compliance with his will.

The poor cannot recompence you, but God will do it liberally. Are you afraid of bringing poverty upon yourself by your bounty? Many have been ruined by withholding, never any by giving according to the will of God. Giving to the poor is the best preventive of poverty, for it is putting your money into the bank of heaven, which can never forfeit credit. The best securities on earth will not hinder your money from making wings and fleeing away. But he that giveth to the poor lendeth to the Lord, and shall surely receive it again when he needs it, with abundant increase.

The uncharitable man hides his eyes from the poor, lest his eyes should melt his hard heart, and tempt him to sin against his god, the unrighteous mammon. He is as much afraid of any thing that might excite him to goodness, as a saint is of temptations to sin*. But shall he save his money by his unrighteous withholding? Will this procure him the blessing of God, which maketh rich? He can expect nothing but curses as his reward. The curse of him that is ready to perish shall come upon him. The curse of God is upon his hardened soul, and upon his basket and his store. He is miserable upon earth, in the hatred of God and men, and he takes the way to be cursed at the last day, and to secure himself an abode in that place where judgment without mercy shall be executed upon them that show no mercy.

Ver. 28. The reign of wicked princes is a general calamity, more dreadful than war and pestilence. Those that are not cut off, or stripped of their property, live in continual terror, because they know not how soon the overflowing scourge may reach themselves. These enemies of mankind are like ranging bears, or roaring lions whilst they live, and when they die their end is no more regretted than the death of a mad dog; for it is a deliverance to the nation, and a blessing to the church. The righteous are then freed from their restraints, and take courage to themselves, to support and spread the interests of religion and virtue. It is well known what happiness was caused by the death of Ahaz in the kingdom of Judah, and how Christianity was advanced in the Roman empire by the death of Julian; and how the death of Queen Mary of England, and the abdication of James 2. tended to the restoration of happiness and religion in our own island.

How wretched are wicked rulers! They are hated whilst they live above the ground, and the curses of a nation pursue them to their long homes. They are accountable for the wickedness of thousands whom they draw or drive into sin; and they lie down in the dust loaded with innumerable iniquities of other men. The mercy, as well as the justice of God, is engaged to chase them out of the world; and those who are perverted by their influence upon earth will load them with execrations through eternity.

CHAPTER 29

Ver. 1. Asa, king of Judah, was a good man, and yet when he was reproved by a prophet, he stormed instead of repenting. This piece of history shews us that we must not despair of reforming those that depart from the path of duty, although they are not reclaimed by the first admonition. Perhaps they may relent at the second or third admonition, and then we are richly recompensed for our trouble*.

But woe to that man that is stubborn and obstinate after many reproofs. He despises a merciful appointment of God for his recovery, and tramples upon precious pearls†. He refuses to bow before the Lord, and he shall be dashed in pieces like a potter's vessel. He perhaps designs to reform at some other time; but he is hardened in sin, and puts off his intended repentance till judgment comes upon him unexpectedly, and he is ruined for ever. The reproofs which he received will then be like hot thunderbolts to him, and the remembrance of them will feed the worm that never dieth.

All of us meet with many reproofs from God. The warnings of his word, and the addresses made to sinners by the ministers of Christ; the kind advices of ministers and friends, the crosses which providence brings upon men in the way of sin, and even the favours which are showered down from heaven upon transgressors, are admonitions to them to leave the ways of sin; and how shall they escape the most aggravated condemnation who continue impenitent? All God's dealings with them are aggravations of their guilt, and they are not to expect that the day of God's patience will continue for ever, or that he will strive with them for so long a space as he did with the old world. To day, O sinners, if ye will hear the voice of God, harden not your hearts as in the provocation. Those that fell in the wilderness are ensamples unto you; your guilt will be heavier than theirs if you harden your hearts, when such a monument of vengeance is placed before your eyes in the word of God. The oath of God still stands in force against those that always err in heart, and refuse to know God's ways; and unless God can lie, they shall never enter into his rest.

Ver. 2. Like the ointment that was poured upon the head of Aaron, and flowed down to the skirts of his garments, is the administration of a wise and pious prince. He diffuses peace and happiness around him. He is blessed, and he is a blessing to thousands.

But the people groan under the oppression of a wicked prince, and all the comfort they have is, that he is not immortal, and that either a kind providence will cut him off, or some provoked stroke of violence will rid the world of such an intolerable burden. Let us bless God for the establishment of our happy constitution of government, by which princes are at liberty to do much good, and have their hands bound up, in a great measure, from mischief, if they were disposed to do it; and let us rejoice in that blessed administration of grace, under which it is promised that the mountains shall bring forth peace to the people, and the little hills by righteousness.

Ver. 3. It is not the youth who has got much knowledge; it is not he that complies with the precepts of wisdom in many instances, but

he that loves wisdom, and takes more pleasure in it than in all the delights of sense, that is truly a wise son, and gives joy to the hearts of his parents; and he that loves wisdom will regard the happiness of his parents as his own, and he will have no greater joy than in giving them pleasure.

The love of wisdom will be a preservative from those dissolute courses to which young men are too much disposed*. But he that follows them discovers himself to be under the reigning power of folly. He spends his father's substance, and grieves the hearts of those who are the means of his existence. There are indeed stronger motives than the loss of substance, but this is a consideration fitted to work on the minds of the thoughtless, unless they are so deeply plunged in sensuality as to be almost beyond hope of recovery. The everlasting world is at a distance, and, therefore, it appears to young men a piece of superfluity to think much about it at present, but poverty, and the unhappiness of those that love you, are miseries that follow hard upon a dissolute course of life. You are double fools, fools for time and fools for eternity, if neither present nor eternal punishment can convince you of the danger of lewdness and bad company†.

Ver. 4. Would you practise integrity, take heed and beware of covetousness; for the love of gifts is sufficient to pervert even a king from the paths of judgment.

The prince that hateth covetousness shall prolong his days; but that is not all his happiness. He has the pleasure of seeing millions made happy by his means, and rejoicing under the shadow of his government. He establishes a land, and bears up the pillars of it: for religion and righteousness, which are the safety and honour of a nation, are effectually promoted and encouraged by him. His authority and influence, his example, and his proper choice of inferior magistrates, are unspeakable advantages to his people, and a race yet unborn shall rise up and call him blessed*.

But the fountains of justice are poisoned, and the pillars of it subverted by a prince that is too fond of money. He perverts law into oppression, and makes his subjects unhappy. He destroys the foundations of his own throne, and plunges himself and his people into inexpressible miseries. He brings down the judgments of God upon a land, and is himself one of the greatest judgments that an angry God can inflict upon a nation.

Ver. 5. Solomon was a great enemy to flattery. He tells us that the flatterer worketh ruin†; that he is as bad as the man that curses his friend‡; and here he illustrates the mischief which he does, by comparing him to a fowler that catches the unwary birds with his net. The flatterer sometimes intends to ensnare the person whom he praises, and to persuade him to serve the flatterer's interest to his own damage. You are a man of a generous and friendly disposition, says the fawning hypocrite, and I am sure that you will serve me in this matter. Such arguments win upon a man's vanity, and seduce him to do himself the greatest hurt, or to expose himself to very great dangers that he may not disappoint the expectations that are formed of him. Many have been cheated into poverty, and many have been cozened into sin and hell by such artifices.

But although the flatterer has no other selfish design but to insinuate himself into the friendship of the person whom he caresses, he may be justly said to spread a net for his feet, by betraying him into the hands of his worst enemy. We all flatter ourselves; and our self-flattery makes the praises of other flatterers welcome, and these gratify and feed our pride, so that we are in double danger of falling into the condemnation of the devil.

If flattery be a net, we ought to be on our guard against it, and to keep a suspicious eye upon those that praise us to our faces. Birds are silly animals, and there is no wonder that they suffer themselves to be caught in the snare of the fowler; and yet when they find themselves fast in the snare, they flutter, and use every possible effort to escape. Men are like silly birds when they are caught in this net, and they are sillier than birds, when, after all, they make the flatterer welcome to their houses, and his fair words welcome to their ears.

Ver. 6. Wicked men are ensnared, either when they are seduced to sin, or when they are involved in miseries from which they cannot deliver themselves, and in both these senses they find a snare in their transgression. One act of sin makes way for another act, and the second for a third; and the repetition of many sinful acts produces a settled habit, which gains an irresistible power over the soul, so that the sinner who meant to repent after he had indulged himself for a time in the pleasures of sin, finds himself quite indisposed to put his resolutions in practice, and walks on in his trespasses till destruction comes upon him without remedy. Besides this, one kind of sin prepares the way for another that is worse, because the natural effect of sin is to stupify the understanding, and harden the heart; and he that entered into the way of the ungodly, proceeds, in the next place, to stand in the counsel of the wicked, and then sits down in the seat of the scorner.

Wicked men find the thorns and snares of inevitable and irremediable calamity in the way of sin, and this will make them at last to curse themselves for their folly, in drinking down the delights of sin, which they find, too late, to be sugared poison. They think that they walk at liberty, because they have broken the bands of the Lord, and cast away his cords from them, but they will groan at the last, when they find themselves entangled in the cords of their own sins.

But the righteous are free from these snares, and cannot but sing and rejoice, and praise the name of the Lord, when they think of that sovereign grace which hath delivered them, like a roe from the hunter, and a bird from the snare of the fowler. They walk in a safe way, and the sins and miseries which others meet in the way of destruction, excite at once their sorrow for the miserable creatures that expose themselves to such tremendous dangers, and their joy at their own happiness in escaping them all*.

The way of sin is broad: the way of holiness is narrow; but those have reason to mourn that are travelling to the gibbet, although their path should be strewed with flowers. And those have reason to sing and rejoice who are walking over a rugged path to take possession of a throne.

Ver. 7. The wise man does not say that a righteous judge will countenance a poor man in his cause, for that would be to respect persons in judgment, and to consider his poverty rather than his cause; but he tells us that a righteous man will endeavour so to investigate and manage the cause of a poor man in judgment, that he shall not lose it, for his inability to defend himself. Such a man was Job. The cause which he knew not he searched out. He delivered the needy when he cried, the poor also, and him that had none to help him. He broke the jaws of the wicked, and plucked the spoil from his teeth. Thus he put on righteousness as a breast plate, and his judgment was as a robe and a diadem. All just magistrates will endeavour to follow the example of that venerable prince, for this is one article of the commission which they have from the great king who entrusts them with this power. Lawyers, and people in every station, as opportunity offers, are bound to testify their righteousness and charity in like manner, as far as it consists with the station in which they are placed*.

But the wicked regardeth not to know the cause of the poor. It is the person that he regards and not the cause. He considers which of the two parties will give him most money, and passes such a decision, if he dares, as he thinks will tend most to his own interest; or, if he is not yet so far gone in the ways of sin as to pervert justice in the most open manner, yet he will not be at the trouble of searching out the cause of a man that has no money to pay for it, and if his sentence should happen to be right, he is entitled to no thanks for it.

Let judges remember that they must give an account of every act of their administration to him by whom kings reign. Let the poor that suffer oppression comfort their souls by considering the grace of the Redeemer's administration. He shall spare the poor and needy, and he shall save the souls of the needy. He shall redeem them from deceit and violence, and precious shall their blood be in his sight.

Ver. 8*. The proud in heart stir up strife; and the fire which they kindle is not confined within the narrow circle of their own immediate connections, but often spreads with fury through every part of the city where they dwell. They are public incendiaries, that must have every thing done in their own way, or, if their pride and honour is not gratified, they excite universal disorder, drawing over as many as they can to their own party, by all the methods of fraud and villainy, and provoking other men by their conduct, till there is a kind of civil war raised within the bowels of that society to which they belong, and the city or country is in great danger of destruction.

These proud and scornful men are the bane of the place where they live; but divine providence has scattered some wise men through many places, who counteract their mischiefs, and by prudent management, keep under or extinguish the flames of contention; to such persons, the places where they dwell are under the greatest obligations, and they ought to be respected as much as the haughty and insolent deserve to be abhorred.

There is another sense in which this proverb is verified. Men that despise God and goodness, and laugh at instruction and admonition, kindle the wrath of God against the country to which they belong; for they not only provoke the displeasure of God against themselves, but their example corrupts their neighbours, and those that do not follow their pernicious ways are in a lesser degree sharers in their guilt, when they do not mourn for the abominations of the land, nor bear a proper testimony against them, and thus the whole community is involved in guilt, and exposed to punishment*.

But wise and holy men turn away wrath by their fervent prayers, and by the success with which their endeavours are sometimes blessed, to stem the torrent of corruption. Such men stand like Moses in the gap, and prevent the execution of deserved indignation, and they justly deserve that glorious character of the chariots and horsemen of the nation. The wicked may call them the troublers of the land, but that is no strange thing, for Ahab reproached Elijah in such words.

The holy seed are the substance and strength of a land. The wicked of a land are its most dangerous enemies. Have we any love for our native country? Let us discover our patriotism by endeavouring to turn away wrath. If this cannot be done, it may be we shall be hid in the day of the Lord's anger; and it is certain that we shall in no wise lose our reward.

Ver. 9. They that keep the law contend with the wicked; and prudence must direct us in what manner we should contend with them. Men have very different dispositions; some must be addressed with severe and sharp reproofs, that they may feel the iniquity of their conduct, but others are to be addressed in the language of mildness and gentleness, and will be won to goodness, although they could not be driven to it*.

We find that the prophets sometimes thundered, and sometimes wept, and sometimes allured men by the language of love to repentance. God, who is well acquainted with all the springs of conduct in human nature, taught them to deal with men in these various ways; but experience proved how generally this proverb agreed with the temper of foolish men; for the prophets seldom had much success in their exhortations, though diversified with all that wisdom and prudence in which God abounded towards men. The forerunner of our Lord, who was greater than the former prophets, lamented unto the people of his generation, and yet they did not mourn. Our Lord himself piped unto them, and the people wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth. But they only wondered and did not generally repent.

Let us endeavour to turn sinners to the wisdom of the just by all the prudent methods competent to our station. If we do not succeed in our charitable endeavours, our reward is with the Lord, and obstinate sinners must give an account to the Judge of the living and the dead.

This proverb teaches us to avoid all personal contentions with foolish men; for whether we are angry at them, or endeavour by gentle means to reason or laugh them out of their folly, they will give us no rest, but behave in such a manner as may throw us off our guard, and deprive us of the possession of our own souls. When conscience and charity do not oblige us to enter into disputes

with them for their own good, it is best to let them alone, except when the object of strife is sufficient to compensate our loss of peace.

The last words of the verse are by some interpreters understood of the fool, who is so intractable, that he either storms against the wise man that contends with him, or laughs him to scorn, and treats him with contempt. If we enter into dispute, we ought to behave with temper. Fury and scorn are the fool's weapons of warfare, but a wise man scorns to make use of them. As he wishes to do all things with charity, so he can carry on a necessary dispute, either about religion, or property, or any thing else that will justify a dispute, with that meekness of wisdom which becometh saints. The enemies of our Lord were remarkable examples of the fool's method of managing disputes. Our Lord himself is the great example whom Christians are to imitate in this and in every other point.

Ver. 10. "If the world hate you," says our Lord to his disciples, "ye know that it hated me before it hated you." If God's people are conformed unto Christ in suffering the hatred of men, they need not think it a strange thing, nor suffer themselves to be dispirited on that account. There are some men whose hatred is better than their love, and such are the haters of the upright. They are blood-thirsty men, the successors of those who have been drunk with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. Every man that hates his brother in his heart is a murderer, and those are murderers of the worst kind who hate men for that which is good. They are the true children of him that was a murderer from the beginning; for the just are of an opposite disposition. They seek his soul, (or care for it, as the word is translated*,) and it is a comfort to the upright to consider who they are that hate, and who they are that love them, and care for their welfare.

"Hereby know we the children of God and the children of the devil. Whosoever doth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother;" and he that loveth his brother will be zealous for his welfare, and will endeavour to screen him from the malice of the wicked. It is the duty of all men, and the disposition of the just, to deliver them that are drawn unto death, and those that are ready to be slain. Justice is not a lazy inactive virtue; it does not rest satisfied with doing no evil, but it will dispose men to do good, and to prevent evil to the utmost of their power.

Do we profess to be just? We must remember that love is a debt which we owe to men, and especially to the upright; and that we must love, not in word and in tongue, but in deed and in truth.

Ver. 11. There are many people who boast of their honesty in telling what they think, and concealing nothing that comes into their mind. Such persons may call themselves by any honourable names they please, but Solomon calls them fools. Some things come into our minds that we should never speak, but suppress the very thought of them; and other things may be very fit to be spoken at a fit season, and yet very improper to be spoken at present.

The fool's thoughts lie at the tip of his tongue; and there is no door at his mouth to keep them in. The thoughts of the wise man lie in his heart; and there is a door upon his tongue, which he keeps close barred, that nothing may get out of his mouth that may prejudice himself, or other men. Some things occur to him, which he will never utter to the wife of his bosom, because they could do no good; other things he thinks proper to be spoken at a fit time, and then he keeps in his thoughts till afterwards. He will never speak against his mind, but he will not always speak his mind; and when he speaks it, he does not think that honesty obliges him to speak all that is in it. Samuel told the elders of Bethlehem a part of his design in coming to their town; but he concealed the principal part of it by divine direction. There is a time to be silent, and a time to speak; there is a time to be silent even from good, because the wicked are before us; there is a time to speak a part of our mind, and a time to declare all that is in our hearts; and the wise man's heart knoweth both time and judgment.

When a fool is in a passion he pours forth all his mind in a torrent of ill language, and speaks words which afterwards cut him to the heart. Does he mean to reprove? he will do it at the most improper season, and inflame with rage the person whom he reproves. He may shew something of the temper of the dove; but he imitates it rather in silliness than harmlessness. The wise man is sensible that it is as much his duty to practise the wisdom of the serpent as the harmlessness of the dove; he will take care what he says, when he finds himself or sees others under the influence of passion, and will abstain from speeches wherewith he can do no good*.

Ver. 12. Great is the account which rulers must give; for they are accountable for thousands of actions which they never committed, and of which it is possible they never heard. Their behaviour has such a mighty influence, that we find, in the history of the kings of Israel and Judah, the nation behaving well or ill according to the example and influence of their sovereign.

If a ruler take pleasure in flattery, the greater part of his servants will be so wicked as to poison him with their fulsome and ill-grounded praises. They will make him glad with their lies, but at the same time they make him more wicked, whilst they are polluting their own hearts, and debauching their consciences, by prostituting themselves to such base means of ingratiating themselves with their prince.

The servants of a ruler are still more wicked, if he hearken to slander and false accusations; for some of them through fear, and others of them to gain his favour, will join in persecuting the innocent, and encouraging that pestilent vermin of a nation, called informers or spies. The reigns of those princes who gave an easy belief to accusations, are stained with the most atrocious crimes. Tiberius Cæsar put to death the greater number of his own privy councillors, by giving ear to lies, and encouraging his servants to be wicked; and it is probable that the worst action that ever was committed since the fall of Adam, the murder of the Prince of life, was occasioned by Pilate's wicked and cowardly regard to the temper of that tyrant, and his fear of being accused as an encourager of treason, if he had suffered our Lord to escape.

It is a mean and unmanly vice in any person to hearken to idle tales, that may very likely turn out to be lies, or misrepresentations of truth. The man that encourages people to tell him what this or the other person says of him, can never live in peace and friendship

with his neighbours; and he makes other people wicked, by the countenance which he affords to slander, and whispering, and evil speaking in all its different kinds.

Ver. 13. The word which we translate deceitful, is not found in any other place of Scripture, and therefore the meaning of it cannot be exactly ascertained. The most ancient interpreters render it creditors; and if we take it in this sense, the meaning of the proverb is the same with that which we have in the second verse of the 22 chapter.

The poor too often look with an envious eye upon the rich, especially those to whom they are in debt, and the creditor looks with an eye of contempt upon his poor debtor. But what has the rich more than the poor, or why should the poor grudge at the riches of another man? The Lord is the maker of them both, and gives them equally the light of understanding. He bestows comfort upon the poor as well as the rich; and although they have not the pleasure of looking at splendid ceilings, and fine furniture in their dwellings, yet the cheerful light of day shines upon his eyelids, and he beholds those wonderful glories of the firmament, which darken the lustre of all earthly pomp.

If the rich man has acquired his fortune by deceit, he has no advantage from it above the poor to put in the balance against that guilt with which he has loaded his soul. The light of life, and reason, and comfort, is granted to the poor, at least as much as to himself. And the light of grace, which is enjoyed by the poor, is hid from his eyes. He cannot think that the poor man is hated by God, because he is not worth so great a sum of money as himself, nor can he flatter himself, unless he is sunk in stupidity, that God loves him because he is worth a thousand a-year. God continues with him the light of life, for his patience and mercy is very great, and he waits for the repentance of sinners; but the impenitent must soon have their eyes closed in darkness, and their souls shut up in the place of utter darkness, when the poor of this world, that were rich in faith, shall no longer meet with the deceitful man, because they are admitted to that world of light into which no deceitful man, without pardoning and converting grace, shall be permitted to enter.

Ver. 14. All kings are anxious to have their thrones established, and their crowns transmitted to the latest posterity. But by what means shall they establish their thrones? By forming alliances, by fortifying their cities, by providing powerful navies, and by supporting great armies? These things may be useful; but good government is the best and surest way of establishing their thrones, for that will secure them the love of their subjects, and render their kingdoms prosperous. And what is of still greater consequence, the blessing of the Lord of hosts will attend that administration, which is managed according to his own directions.

Kings are obliged to do justice to all men; but the God of mercy gives them a special charge of the poor, who are most liable to oppression and insult. The Lord looks down from heaven with an eye of compassion to the poor and needy, and commands the princes and judges of the earth to be very merciful to them, and will not suffer the justice and kindness that is showed them to pass unrewarded.

The poor may expect good at the hands of all that regard the word of God; but if they are treated with scorn by men, they may safely commit themselves unto him that testifies so much kindness to them in his promises and precepts.

Ver. 15. "Though you should bray a fool in a mortar among wheat with a pestle, yet will not his folly depart from him." This is true, especially of old fools that are hardened by a course of foolish conduct. But the rod of correction is a means appointed by God, and often blessed by him, for driving away folly from the hearts of young persons. God never prescribed any vain or unprofitable precepts; and he would not have insisted so much on the duty of correcting children, unless he had designed in general to give a blessing to it.

But the rod of correction is of no use without the concurrence of God, the great and only author of wisdom; those, therefore, who desire the blessing of God to attend it, must administer correction in the manner appointed by him, and he requires reproof to be joined to the rod, that the child who is corrected may be made sensible of the evil for which he is treated with severity. Some parents follow the dictates of their own passion in correcting their children, and strike without mercy, when they use no means to make them sensible that they deserve the rod. They deal worse with their children than shepherds with their dogs, who beat them when they have done something that displeases their masters; but do it in such a manner, or at such a time, that these animals may perceive the fault for which they are punished.

The rod, joined with reproof, is a means of giving wisdom, and of making a child to behave in such a manner that he may be a credit to his parents; but a child left to behave as he pleases, will never, in all probability, be a comfort or an honour either to his father or to his mother. Men are naturally corrupt, and those that are left to follow the propensities of nature will be a grief to their fathers, and bring their mothers to shame. Their mothers deserved much blame for the indulgence so foolishly given them, and when they feel the torment which the bad behaviour of their children cannot fail of giving them, they must see their sin in their punishment.

Ver. 16*. When the pestilence rages in a country, multitudes are infected with the dreadful distemper, and there is no disease more fatal or more infectious than sin. When the generality of men are profane, the restraints of Shame are removed from sin; wicked men gain credit, and they must possess a spirit like that of Noah or Lot, who are untainted by the spreading contagion.

When wicked men possess authority the danger is extreme. The countenance which they give to sin is a dreadful temptation, which few have the resolution and courage to resist. One Obadiah in the court, and seven thousand worshippers of the Lord in the kingdom of Ahab, were more than Elijah dreamed of. The abundance of wickedness in such evil times is very distressing to the eyes of the righteous, but they have the comfortable prospect of seeing the fall of the wicked. God is their enemy, and although he bears with them for a time, yet he has doomed them to destruction. Their iniquity shall come into remembrance with the Lord, and when the measure of it is full, they shall be swept away with the besom of destruction. The righteous shall see their fall and shall rejoice, (not that they entertained hatred to the wicked, for they ardently desired their repentance, but) because their fall is a check to

wickedness, and an evidence that there is a God who reigneth in the earth, and has an invariable love for righteousness*.

Ver. 17. Why does Solomon so often press this duty of correcting children? Because it is a necessary duty; and yet many parents are very averse to the practice of it. When there is a great drought in the ground, it requires many showers to make it fruitful, and when there is a violent aversion to any duty, precept must be upon precept, and line upon line, before we will practise it.

But correcting of children gives great pain to the parent? On the contrary, it gives great pleasure. The pain is transient, the pleasure is lasting. The rod and reproof give wisdom; and how delightful to a parent is wisdom in a child!

But what if a child still continue obstinate? This is not ordinarily the case. Correct like a parent and a friend, and your child will learn at length the duty of a child. Join prayer with your corrections, to that God who has appointed them. He never said to any of the seed of Jacob, seek ye me in vain, and he never appointed useless and unavailing means for any end.

But God is sovereign; perhaps he will not be pleased to communicate wisdom by the rod to my child? Make the trial. If you should be unsuccessful, you shall be free of those tormenting stings of remorse which thousands of parents feel.

Isaac was the beloved son of Abraham, and never did a parent taste such pleasure in a son as the venerable patriarch, except the Virgin Mary; but Abraham did not refuse to sacrifice his son with his own hands, when God gave the order; and shall we refuse to administer a little salutary correction to our children at his command? Abraham never found so much pleasure in his son, as when he shewed that he feared and loved God above his son, in not withholding him from God; and other parents may look for greater or lesser degrees of comfort in their children, as they observe or neglect the commandments of the Lord, about the management of them. Eli honoured his sons above God, and they proved the greatest of his crosses; "for them that honour me," says God, "I will honour, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed."

Ver. 18*. It is a distinguishing mercy to us that God has made known in our land the great things of his law and covenant. There are nations that never heard of the name of a Redeemer, and under the influence of corrupt traditions or false prophets, they are serving those gods that are no gods, with detestable ceremonies, or at least do not worship the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ. They are born, like ourselves, in a sinful and wretched condition, but are left in utter ignorance of that great Saviour in whose name our help lies. They are left naked and exposed to the assaults of their spiritual enemies, who are still walking about seeking whom they may destroy.

Where there is no vision, the light of philosophy cannot supply its place. The Greeks were admirably enlightened by science, and yet Paul tells them, that before the gospel of their salvation was preached among them, they were strangers to the covenant of promise; without God, without Christ, and without hope in the world*.

Blessed be God who made light to arise in darkness to us. Britain was, in ancient days, one of the darkest places of the earth, but through the tender mercies of our God, the day spring from on high visited us. By the cruelty of the Popish clergy, the key of knowledge was almost taken from us in later ages; but through the good hand of our God upon us, we have now great plenty of Bibles and sermons. Let it be our daily prayer, that all the nations of the world who are perishing through lack of knowledge, may be made to share in our privileges.

But what will unimproved privileges avail? He is not the happy man who has a Bible, but the man is blessed who delights in it, and meditates upon it day and night; who believes the doctrines of it, trusts in the Saviour whom it reveals, and respects all the precepts of it in his practice.

"Not every one that saith unto Christ, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that does the will of Christ's heavenly father." If those that sin without the law perish without the law, there must be a deeper perdition, and more intolerable torments for those that despise both law and gospel.

Ver. 19. The Seventy translators apply what is here said to a stubborn servant only; and it is plain, from fact, that Solomon meant this proverb only of such, for there are many hired servants every way equal to their masters in every generous quality, and the character of those servants that must be corrected by blows does by no means belong to them. There have been even slaves who have shewed a noble disposition, and have not only served their masters with fidelity, but performed acts of heroism that might have done honour to any station. But it is very probable, that in Solomon's days, when servants were commonly bond slaves, the greatest part of them had their spirits sunk and debased, so far as to be of the temper here represented.

The loss of liberty is often the destruction of every thing good and noble; and servants that were treated like cattle would need a strict hand to govern them; because words would not be much regarded by those that had neither attachment to their masters, nor any sense of honour.

The proverb teaches us that masters ought to keep up their authority in their families. Without this every thing must be in a state of confusion, and go to ruin, and if they have servants that will not yield obedience, they must either be compelled to do it, or dismissed from the house.

But it teaches us likewise, that methods of severity are not to be used by heads of families, when milder means are sufficient to answer the end. It is only when servants, though they understand the wishes of their masters, will not answer by respectful words and due obedience, that masters are warranted to use harsh methods of dealing with them.

Let servants learn from this passage, how much God is displeased with them, when they are sullen and disobedient to their masters. God commands masters to give unto their servants that which is just and equal; at the same time he gives them commission to support their authority over stubborn servants, by such means as are sufficient to answer the end. If servants are

reproved with sharpness for their faults, they must blame themselves and not their masters. The apostle Peter tells them, that they deserve no thanks, if they are patient, even when they are buffeted for their faults. If they deserve no thanks for their patience under just buffetings, they deserve very great blame when they are impatient of merited reproof.

Ver. 20*. "Seest thou a man wise in his own conceit? there is more hope of a fool than of him." But how shall we know the man that is wise in his own conceit when we see him? This text gives us a sure mark of such a person. When a man speaks rashly and inconsiderately, every thing that strikes his mind, or when he is rash and headstrong in the management of his business, disdainful to take any advice from others, and so confident of his own wisdom and abilities, that he takes little time to consider the most important undertaking, but pushes on in the way that seems best to his own unadvised mind, hoping to command success by his own power, it is evident that he is wise in his own conceit; and he that is wise in his own eyes, is the greatest and most hopeless of fools in Solomon's estimation.

If rashness in the things of this life is a sign of great folly, it is a great deal more dangerous to make too much haste in matters of religion. The Bereans are commended because they candidly examined Paul's doctrine by the Scriptures of the Old Testament. The apostle condemns those that are heady, and joins them with the high minded; and it is certain, that persons of that character have been the authors of those heresies and divisions which have plagued the church of God, and are still the fire-brands of Christian societies.

There is another kind of rashness in religion forbidden by Solomon as a token of great irreverence to God; I mean rashness in vowing or in praying. God is in heaven, and we are upon earth, and therefore our words before him ought to be few and well considered*.

Ver. 21. The greatest part of masters cannot be blamed for too much indulgence to their servants, and yet some err on that side; and Solomon, who wished us to stand perfect and complete in all wisdom, guards us against it. Men must condescend to them of low degree; but they ought at the same time to respect their own place and station, and not to debase it, by such familiarities towards their inferiors as may expose themselves to contempt, and tempt their inferiors to forget their distance. Joab, by the indulgence of David, became such a great man, that he presumed to kill the commander in chief of David's army, at the head of his troops. As an officer in the army would deserve to lose his place, if he did not oblige his soldiers to obey him, so the man shews himself unworthy of his station in the family, or church, or nation, who does not know the authority which God has given him, and uses no care to preserve it.

Servants are taught by this proverb, to respect, as well as to obey their masters. The apostle Peter enjoins servants to obey their masters with all fear, whether their masters are froward, or good and gentle. Whatever condescensions our superiors use in their behaviour towards us, we must not forget our distance, but give fear to whom fear, and honour to whom honour is due. Job was a prince of extraordinary goodness to his servants and all his inferiors, yet he never, till the time of his severe trials, forfeited, or lost any part of that respect which was his due†.

Ver. 22. Solomon has told us already, that the wrathful man stirreth up strife*. His anger pushes him on to bitter contentions, and makes him the incendiary of the place where he lives. But strife is not the only evil produced by anger, for when it is roused to fury, it becomes a fruitful source of every iniquity. We read in the 24th chapter of Leviticus, that a man in his passion cursed the name of the God of Israel, and was stoned for it. David, although he was a meek man in the general course of his life, swore a very rash oath, by the name of the Lord, when he was incensed at Nabal. Railing, and reviling, and backbiting, and evil speaking, and lies, and wars, and duels, and murders, are only a few of the transgressions to which men have been a thousand times tempted by their unbridled anger. He that indulges anger gives place to the devil. He puts that malignant spirit in possession of the throne of his heart, and commits to him the direction of his heart, and tongue, and hands. The wrath of man never works the righteousness of God; it utterly disqualifies him for praying, or doing any other holy action; but it works the will of the devil with both hands earnestly. Many volumes of history might be written in proof of this point; but the evidences of it are every day before our eyes. Cease from anger, and forsake wrath, and let the meekness and gentleness of Christ be still before your eyes.

Ver. 23. Pride raises a man as high as heaven in his own apprehension, but it shall bring him as low as hell. All men are the enemies of the proud, and proud men themselves are the bitterest enemies to one another; for other vices unite men in confederacies and friendships, but pride has often set fathers and sons, husbands and wives, at variance. God is the enemy of the proud, he looks upon them with disdain and abhorrence, and will abase them. Pride itself is the enemy of the proud, and will bring them down from the highest honours to the deepest pit of disgrace. What was it but pride that brought Haman to the gallows, and made angels devils?

But those whose hearts are humble enjoy true and solid honours. The honours of the proud are feathers and wind. They soon fly away and never return; but honour shall uphold the man of an humble spirit. His crown consists, not of such corruptible things as silver and gold, but it is a crown of life and glory which never fades away. He is exalted to safety, and shall reign with angels for ever and ever.

Let us all beware of the devil's first born sin, and learn humility from him who was meek and lowly in heart. There are remainders of pride even in believers, which, if left unmortified, will do them great hurt; for any man's pride (were he as good as Hezekiah) will bring him low, till his spirit be effectually humbled.

Why does the wise man insist so much on this point? Not because he wanted new matter for instructing us, for his soul covered the whole earth, and he filled the world with dark parables*. But because humility is a lesson which we must learn, and yet are very

backward to learn. Our Lord frequently repeats this proverb in other words. "He that exalteth himself shall be abased, and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted."

Ver. 24. Stealing is an abominable crime. It was to be severely punished by the law of God, and is still more severely punished by our own laws. Thieves, and all that are partners with thieves, are haters of their own souls, for they love money more than salvation. They are the enemies of all men; but they are worse enemies to themselves than to those whom they plunder. How poor a recompense do they obtain by their ill-gotten gains, for the mischiefs which they bring upon themselves here, and in another world. There are some who would be afraid to steal, and yet they venture to partake with thieves in their crime, by receiving a part of what is stolen as the price of concealment, or by buying commodities which they have reason to suspect for stolen goods, because they can have them at a low price. If we are but underworkers in any good action, we will not fail to obtain our share of the praise; but we are very unwilling to sustain any blame for dishonourable actions unless we are principal agents. The Scripture however assures us, that men may bring much guilt upon themselves by partaking of other men's sins; and that he who is a partner with a thief is a hater of his own life and soul, as well as the principal thief.

The devil is not content with drawing men to single acts of sin; but he makes one evil thing the preface to another. Julius Cæsar was more celebrated for improving than gaining victories; for he never thought that any thing was done whilst any thing remained undone. The devil is a conqueror of this sort; he makes one transgression a snare for leading the sinner into another; and he that joins with a thief is prepared for lying and perjury. He heareth cursing, (being laid under a curse by the magistrate that puts him on his oath, though he will not conceal any thing he knows about the crime,) and yet he does not make a discovery, and thus he adds to the guilt of stealing the greater guilt of falsehood and concealment, when he is upon his oath.

Those that are under examination upon oath should consider this text. If they swear that they will tell every thing they know about the affair before the judge, or if they are required, by proper authority, to bear witness about a crime which ought to be punished, they are enemies to justice, and haters of their own souls, if they do not give a faithful and honest declaration of the truth. Men may partake of other men's sins, not only by countenancing them, but by refusing to concur in proper endeavours to have them punished, for a warning to others.

Ver. 25. When men are more afraid of offending their fellow men than of sinning against God, they are in great danger of being drawn or driven into some of the worst of sins. It was this fear which made David sometimes to lie, although that good man hated lying. It was the fear of a woman that made Peter to deny his gracious master; and the same passion afterwards induced him to behave in a very unedifying manner at Antioch, that he might not give offence to his bigoted brethren.

If the fear of man has sometimes misled such men as David and Peter, (and we may add, the father of the faithful, and Aaron the priest of the Lord,) how ensnaring must it be to those who are entirely destitute of faith in God. Many are kept by it from performing necessary duties, like those that believed Jesus to be the Christ, and yet durst not confess him, lest they should have been excommunicated. Many are driven to rebel in many things against the light of their judgments, to gratify masters, or parents, or princes, or friends, whom they wish not to displease.

It will be no sufficient excuse for sin that the fear of men led us into the commission of it. Who are we that we should be afraid of men that shall die? Are men more worthy of fear than the Almighty? Was it right in our first parents to obey the devil rather than God? Do we not imitate their conduct when we prefer the pleasing of men to the pleasing of our Maker? If we rather choose to venture on the wrath of God than the wrath of men, can we complain if we have our choice?

The great antidote against the fear of man is confidence in the Lord. The true believer, acting like himself, goes on in the path of duty, without fearing the wrath of men or devils. "The Lord," says he, "is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? The Lord is my helper, what can man do unto me*?" In our tormenting and ensnaring fears, our Lord teaches us to discern the weakness of our faith†.

He that trusteth in the Lord shall be safe from the snares of sin; for his faith is a shield to quench all the fiery darts of temptation. He shall be safe from every danger which timorous men apprehend in the way of duty. He shall find that there is no lion, nor any ravenous beast in the way of holiness; or if there are, that they are chained, and cannot do him any evil which shall not turn out to his advantage in the end‡.

Ver. 26. Confidence in men is no less dangerous than the fear of man, and there is a dreadful curse pronounced upon those who trust in man, and make flesh their arm, and whose heart departeth from the Lord. Princes are the idols of those who are honoured with their friendship; and men in lower stations make idols of those who are most likely to do them any service, and solicit their kindness oftentimes with greater earnestness than the favour of God.

This behaviour proceeds from a secret disbelief of the providence of God. Men seem to think that earthly things are managed by a train of inferior causes, without any superintendency of the Most High. If they have the favour of great men they are happy for this life, whether they have an interest in the favour of God or not.

But we ought to believe and remember this great truth, that every man's judgment cometh from the Lord. It depends upon his sovereign pleasure whether we shall be prosperous or unsuccessful in any particular business; whether we shall be rich or poor; whether we shall enjoy the favour of men, or suffer the effects of their displeasure. Riches, and honours, and friendship, and hatred, are under the controul of the Ruler of the world, and not a hair can fall from our heads, nor can the least addition to our comfort be made, without his pleasure.

A sense of this truth would dispose us to acknowledge God in all our ways; to make our requests in all things known unto him with

fervency of spirit; to thank him with greater cordiality for every happy event, than those who were the instruments of his kindness. It would be a strong antidote against the ensnaring fear of men, and every fleshly confidence. It would keep us from sinking under adversity, and from abusing prosperity into provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.

A persuasion of this truth disposing us to cleave unto God, is the best means of ensuring success in all our undertakings. Esther prayed more earnestly to God than to Ahasuerus for the safety of her nation, and her success is celebrated by the Jews unto this day. Nehemiah acted upon the same principle, when he petitioned his master for the place of his father's sepulchres; the Lord gave him great favour with the king of Persia, and his fame shall live for ever.

All who place that confidence in any creature which is due to the Sovereign of heaven and earth, are reproved by this precept, and directed to expect every thing they want from God as the first cause, although the warrantable means of obtaining our wishes, are not to be neglected*.

Ver. 27. That an unjust man abhors the just, we have already heard†, and find no cause to doubt it. But how can the just abhor the wicked? Christ commands us to love our enemies, although our enemies, in all appearance, must be the enemies of God also; and we are required to love our neighbours as ourselves, although we know that great multitudes of them are unrighteous men. How then will the law of God permit us to hold the unrighteous in abhorrence?

The just man wishes no evil to the wicked, for he would have them all to be saved. Paul could have wished that he was accursed from Christ for his brethren, his kinsmen according to the flesh, although they were the worst enemies of the gospel in the world. But the unjust man is detested by the just, as a rebel against God, although, as a man, he is the object of charity. The just man abhors the sins of the wicked, and shuns their company, and testifies by every regular method against their iniquities, and joins his influence to bring them under the salutary rod of discipline. His abhorrence of them is a part of his conformity to Christ, who exposed hypocrites, and spoke with a voice of thunder against the wickedness of men, and yet called all to repentance, and prayed for the wicked when they were crucifying him.

Hatred to sin in ourselves and other men, is one necessary branch of the Christian temper*. If we are the friends of Christ we shall be determined enemies to that which brought him to a cross.

The proverbs of Solomon, the son of David, are ended.

CHAPTER 30

Ver. 1. Agur was honoured, like Obadiah and Jude, to write a very small portion of the Holy Scripture; but every part of the word of God is precious, however small. The words of Agur are not a prediction of things to come, yet they are called a prophecy or burden, for they were indited by the Holy Ghost, and are profitable for our correction and instruction in righteousness. This prophecy is added to the proverbs of Solomon, because they treat on the same subjects, and are written in a like form. The name of Agur is not given to a distinct book of the Bible, but his memorial shall be everlasting, for he was furnished with that wisdom which is from above.

We can give no historical account of this wise man; we only know the name of his father, and his two chief disciples, who were doubtless men of credit in their generation; but their names only live in our days, for the current of time swallows up the names of the greatest part of men, and leaves little or nothing but the names of the rest. It is an honour to these men that their names are mentioned in the book of God as the disciples of Agur. If we are diligent learners at the school of Christ, and of those men that were inspired by the Spirit of Christ, although our names be not recorded in this blessed book, yet we may rejoice that they are written in heaven.

In this prophecy, Agur expresses his humble sense of his own ignorance, and tells us what need we have of a divine teacher to explain the glories of God to us. He recommends the word of God to us, and calls us to the exercise of that faith for which we have so sure a foundation in the word of God. He directs us by his own example how to pray. He warns us against several dangerous sins, and makes several instructive observations on the manners of men, and the nature and qualities of many of God's creatures. These are perhaps a summary of what he spoke to Ithiel and Ucal whilst he lived; and although he is now dead he speaks them to us.

Ver. 2. One of the best proofs of wisdom is a sense of our own ignorance and folly. Pythagoras would not suffer himself to be called a wise man, but a lover of wisdom; and Socrates, who far exceeded him in wisdom, said, that he knew nothing, but that he knew nothing. Agur goes still further, and calls himself a brutish man. All men are naturally brutish in respect of spiritual things; and Agur calls himself more brutish than any man. He was well acquainted with the fallen and degenerate condition of men, and deeply affected with his own particular share in it. Man is born like a wild ass's colt; and a humble man is ready to acknowledge that there is none to whom this debasing comparison can be so justly applied as to himself.

But did Agur speak truth, or was he sincere in speaking so humbly of himself? No doubt he uses very strong language, but he was perfectly sincere in it; for he thought about God and eternal things, but felt so much difficulty in understanding them, he found himself naturally so much indisposed to the most important duties, and was filled with such grief at the darkness of his mind, and the perverseness of his heart, that he could not find words strong enough to express his inward sense of his own vileness and darkness.

It is a literal truth concerning the wisest of us, that we are more brutish in relation to the noblest objects that can occupy our minds, than any man is about the affairs of life. Men have retained their wisdom about things of small consequence; but surely every man is brutish in his knowledge of divine things, till his mind is opened by the Holy Spirit to receive the knowledge of them. "Surely there is a vein for the gold, and a place for the silver where they fine it;" and the sons of men have found methods of forcing their way through mountains and rocks, and of binding up floods that they may fetch out these shining metals, and bring out to the light of day the stores of darkness and of the shadow of death. "But where is wisdom to be found, and where is the place of understanding? Man knoweth not the price thereof, neither is it found in the land of the living."

None are so ignorant, and so likely to continue so, as those who are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight. None are so wise, and so likely to increase in wisdom, as the humble souls who are deeply conscious of their folly and ignorance. They will open their mouths, and pant for God's commandments. They will rejoice to hear that Christ is made of God unto us wisdom, and will sit at the feet of Jesus, and receive from him the words of eternal life.

Ver. 3. Perhaps Agur means the same thing with Amos, when he says, "I was not a prophet, neither was I a prophet's son." He was not trained up in the schools of the prophets; but God lays up sound wisdom for the righteous, and dispenses it with or without the ordinary means, as he pleases; for although he has required us to make a conscientious use of these means, yet he has not restricted himself to them in the distributions of his favour.

Paul was of the same humble temper with Agur. He counted himself less than the least of all saints; and Agur accounts himself inferior in divine knowledge to other saints. The spirit of Diotrephes is in those men who court the pre-eminence among the brethren, but the lowly temper of a true saint will dispose us in honour to prefer one another.

When Elihu began to speak, in the dispute carried on between Job and his friends, he prefaces his discourse with high, though just encomiums on the wisdom that God had bestowed on him. Agur introduces his discourse with confessions of his own ignorance; but their situations were very different. Elihu was afraid that his friends would despise him for his youth, and lose the benefit of his speech; Agur thought he had reason to be afraid of the contrary extreme. When Ithiel and Ucal applied to him for instruction, they discovered a high opinion of his understanding. We ought not to affect too great a name for knowledge and learning, nor to encourage men to expect too much from us, lest they should be disappointed to our own shame; or lest they should place too great a dependence upon us, and too little on the Author of wisdom. A good name is valuable, but a great name is dangerous; and a wise man would rather decline than desire it.

"As the fining pot for silver, and the furnace for gold, so is a man to his praise." A fool swells with vain conceit, if he finds his wisdom admired. A wise man is humbled to find how far he falls short of the opinion that is entertained of him. A fool, when he is praised, seeks more praise, for the wind after which he hungers cannot fill him. But a man of Agur's spirit will endeavour to moderate those high opinions that are entertained to his advantage. Herod was destroyed by worms, for the vain joy which he felt in the ungodly applause given to his wisdom and eloquence. Agur is recorded in Scripture as a pattern of humility to those men whose wisdom is admired.

As Agur himself was insufficient to satisfy his friends thirst of knowledge, so he directs them to look above all men for instruction.

Ver. 4. It is just as impossible for men, without divine illumination, to discover God, and to reveal him to their fellow-creatures, as to ascend into heaven, or descend from it; to bind up the waters in a garment, or to gather the winds in their fists, or to establish all the ends of the earth. Has any man ever been able to achieve such wonders? where did he live? what was his name? or what is the name of any man that has the honour to spring from such a wonderful ancestor? If you can tell me the name of such a man as this, or his son, then I will confess that he is possessed of treasures of wisdom sufficient to supply all your wants, and to satisfy all your desires of knowledge.

The God, whose name is beyond our comprehension, and whose Son's name is Wonderful, does all these things. Heaven is his throne, and the clouds are his chariots, and the earth has often felt his awful presence. "He makes a weight for the winds, and weigheth the waters by measure. He hangeth the earth upon nothing. With him is wisdom and strength; he hath counsel and understanding;" and from him, the Father of lights, every ray of useful knowledge comes.

It deserves to be observed that our great Teacher makes use of the truth delivered in this verse to prove his absolute perfection as our instructor*. "No man hath ascended up to heaven," to fetch down the knowledge of God to men, "but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man who is in heaven." He shewed his mission, by issuing forth his commands to the winds and the waves, which instantly obeyed him. He establishes all the ends of the earth, and by him all things in heaven and in earth consist. "He is the Lord our God, who teacheth us to profit; and the Lord God and his Spirit did send him." Let us therefore acknowledge with Agur that we have no knowledge of our own, and wait for his instructions as the earth for the latter rain.

All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are laid up in him, and these treasures are not sealed up, but spread before us in the word of Christ, which we ought to read with an humble dependence on him for his light and truth, that we may learn to set our hope on God.

Ver. 5. There are no superfluities in the Word of God, as we are too ready to imagine. Every word of God is useful and holy, righteous and true. When we hear the words of men, our reason must try them, as the mouth tasteth meat, for any man may be a liar, or deceive us by his own misapprehensions; but the words of God are all worthy of himself. As the power of the Creator shines in all the works of his hands, his inviolable truth and untainted holiness, give dignity and credit to every thing that he speaks; and the

Bible has the same impression of divinity upon it that appears in the sun and the stars.

Because the word of God is very pure, we ought to love it, and to believe it with all our hearts, and to trust in God, as he is revealed to us in it; for it discovers him to be for ever possessed of all those infinite excellencies that make him the proper object of confidence to creatures, of all that mercy and grace, and plenteous redemption, which are sufficient to encourage the confidence of guilty creatures.

Blessed are all they that put their trust in him. The world is full of mischief and miseries sufficient to destroy or embitter our lives, and of invisible enemies, who seek to destroy our souls; but they that trust in the Lord, are completely safe and happy. His mercy is their refuge from condemnation, through that atonement which his word reveals. His power will shield them from every enemy, and they shall be kept in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on him, because they trust in him. "Fear not," said the Lord to Abraham, "I am thy shield, and thine exceeding great reward." All that walk in the steps of the faith of Abraham enjoy the benefit and comfort of this promise. They shall travel in safety through armies of enemies, and at last inherit the better country, where the father of the faithful now dwells.

But our trust must be in the name of the Lord, as it is represented to us in the word of God; the seed and the ground of our faith in him. To alter or to add to it is very dangerous.

Ver. 6. It is strange, but true, that men have been often disposed to add to the words of God, by establishing some rule of faith beside the Scripture, or intruding into the secrets of God, and devising religious doctrines not taught in the Scripture, or means of divine worship, which never came into his mind. Surely such presumption shall be reprov'd and punished by the Most High. Princes would require the blood of those daring subjects that presumed to insert some additions in their laws of grants, and God will add unto them that add to his words, all the plagues contained in the last and most dreadful book of the Scripture.

To add to the true meaning of the Scripture, in order to accommodate its doctrine to our own prejudices or taste, is a sin of the like kind. If we do so, we shall be reprov'd by God, and found liars, by saying that God has taught things which he never taught.

Errors and sin are incident to man in his corrupted state; but we ought to guard against the former as well as the latter, by perusing the Bible with diligence and humility, and praying for that unction from the Holy One, which is truth and is no lie, and will effectually preserve us from every dangerous mistake.

Ver. 7. Agur has taught us faith in God. He now teaches us by his own example, to pray, although he does not mention, by name, the object of prayer. He never dream'd that any person who profess'd to believe the word of God, would think of any other object of prayer than God himself; but, since his days, men have found means to jumble together, in their systems of religion, the most incompatible truths and errors.

Two things comprised the objects of his petitions.—David had one thing that he chiefly desired, and our Lord sums up every necessary request in six petitions. The great blessings that we need from God should be habitually present to our minds, that when we have occasion to appear before the Lord, without time to premeditate, we may, in our requests, present the meditations of our heart in the words of our mouth.

The wisest of the heathens were at a great loss to know what blessings they should ask from God; but God in mercy has instructed us what we should pray for, and hath promised the Spirit to help the infirmities of our understandings and souls, in this duty. When we observe the directions of the Scripture about our prayers, we know that we ask things agreeable to the will of God. The gracious Hearer of Prayer never said unto any of the seed of Jacob, "seek ye me in vain;" and he will not refuse hearing to those prayers that are dictated by his own Spirit.

But when we pray, we must pray in faith, nothing doubting. This holy man used great boldness at the throne of God. He insisted for these two things, and requires them, and pleads against a denial.

The revelations of the New Testament give us greater encouragements than Agur had, to exercise boldness in the presence of God, and to plead with unceasing earnestness till we obtain the blessings that we need.—God sits on a throne of grace, and we have a great High Priest, who is passed into the heavens, and there appears in the presence of God for us. Therefore let us come boldly to the throne of grace. This great High Priest is also our instructor, and teaches us to pray always, and not to faint, assuring us that our importunity shall at length prevail. The most glorious name of any mere man spoken of in the histories of the world, was obtained by such importunate supplications. Jacob wept and made supplication at Bethel; yea, by his strength, he had power with the angel and prevailed, and his name was called Israel, because as a prince he had power with God, and received the blessing for which he wrestled.

Agur prayed to God with proper impressions of his frailty and mortality upon his mind. He spoke like a dying man to the eternal God, and requested that he might enjoy the blessings of God whilst he lived. Spiritual blessings were the grand object of his wishes; and if we duly considered the uncertainty of our lives, and the approaches that death is constantly making to us, we should never ask these blessings with such coldness as if we desired a denial. Thoughts of death would inflame our desires after heavenly things, and moderate our exorbitant desires for the blessings of the present life.

Ver. 8. His first petition is for deliverance from sin. Whether he means particularly the sins usually known by these names, or the sin of idolatry, or sin in general, he no doubt desired freedom from all sin. The best of men need preservation from the worst sins, for they are conscious that they might fall into the deepest mire of iniquity, if God withheld his mercy*. But all kinds of sin may be justly called vanities and lies, because it is empty and unprofitable*, and imposes the most mischievous falsehoods upon men, promising them pleasure and gain, and giving them nothing but disappointment and death. An impression of the unprofitableness and danger

of sin would make us very earnest in our prayers for the removal of it from us. "O Lord, the Gentiles shall come unto thee from the ends of the earth, and shall say, surely our fathers have inherited lies, vanity, and things wherein there is no profit."

The removal of sin includes in it both pardon and sanctification, and therefore the petition may include both the fifth and sixth petition of the Lord's prayer. When God pardons sin, he removes it far from us as the east is from the west, and casts it into the depth of the sea. When he sanctifies a soul, he removes sin from its throne, and gradually drives it out of its residence in the soul. Both these blessings are absolutely necessary for us. They are to be the subject of our most earnest petitions, and we have great encouragement to plead for them, because they are graciously promised in his word; and these rich promises are yea and amen in Christ, who purchased them for us by his blood, and gives us all possible assurance of obtaining them from God.

We are not only to pray for the removal of sin, but for the removal of it at a great distance from us. As God removes it far away in pardon, the soul that abhors sin desires to have it far removed from the heart and life. Our Lord teaches us not only to pray against sin, but against temptation; for there is a strong inclination in the hearts of men to comply with temptations when they are presented to the soul. If a man has a bag of powder in his hands, he will certainly wish to keep at a distance from the fire.

We must seek first the kingdom of God, and the righteousness thereof; but we are not forbidden to seek also those things that are needful for the body. We are forbidden to seek great things for ourselves, but directed to seek daily bread; and accordingly Agur prays for it in these words, "Give me neither poverty nor riches."

Poverty is a very disagreeable thing to all men, and none will wonder that Agur prays against it. Yet our Lord, for our sakes, endured extreme poverty. If Providence should appoint poverty to us as our lot, we ought to be content with that situation in which Christ himself lived among us; yet such is the kindness of God to us that we are warranted to pray against it, as a state of sore temptation.

Had Agur prayed against poverty only, we would have all joined with him; but few men would choose to have him for their chaplain, because to poverty he adds riches, as a thing equally undesirable to him.—Riches are the desire of all men, except those who know the weakness of their own hearts, and believe what our Lord tells us of the danger of riches. Riches are good if they are rightly used, and have been the instrument of much good when they were in the hands of very good and wise men; but there are few even of the saints that have a sufficiency of wisdom and grace, for using, without abusing them. Agur desired to have nothing, however agreeable to the natural and ordinary wishes of men, if it might prove injurious to his soul.

What then would this good man have from God, if he desires neither poverty nor riches? He prays that God would feed him with food convenient for him; bestowing on him whatever was needful for his support and conveniency, and suitable to the station in which he was placed. Having food and raiment, and all that is commonly included under the name of bread in Scripture language, he would be content and thankful, and ask no more.

Agur teaches us, in this account of his prayers, to look upon God as the dispenser of the good things of life, who gives riches or poverty at his pleasure; from whom we receive our food and raiment; on whom we ought to depend for the supply of all our necessities; to whom we should pray for every good thing, and render thanks for every blessing.

We are taught likewise to offer our most fervent petitions for the blessings of God's salvation. Agur did not think that vanity and lies could be removed too far from him; but he thought that poverty might soon be too far removed. How opposite was his spirit to the spirit of the world!

The greatest part of men seek earthly blessings with all the desire of their hearts, and the blessings of salvation with more moderate desires, and only so far as they may consist with the main objects of their affection. But Agur desires outward conveniences for the good of his soul, and only in such a measure as might consist with his best interests.

Ver. 9. He prays for daily bread, that he might not be led into temptation; and for the same reason he prays against riches. If his riches increased, he was afraid that, through the depravity of his nature, they would tempt him to the dangerous sin of luxury, to impiety, presumption and arrogancy. Such are the effects of riches upon men of corrupt minds. According to the pasture of the people of Israel, so were they filled: They were filled, and their heart was exalted. Riches are the gift of God, but they are too often improved to the prejudice of the giver; and those who receive those common gifts in the greatest abundance, are generally the most ungrateful of all men to him from whom every good gift comes. They do not perhaps deny the Lord in words, or say with their tongues who is the Lord? but deeds speak louder than words. When men wilfully transgress the laws of God, they say in effect, "who is the Lord that we should serve him?" When they neglect prayer to God, they say that they are lords, and will come no more unto him. Such was the practical language of a great part of rich men in former ages, and it is the same at this day. "They spend their days in wealth," says Job, "Therefore they say unto God depart from us; what is the Almighty that we should serve him; and what profit shall we have if we pray unto him?"

But are real saints ready to be ensnared into such sins by the influence of riches? Saints have flesh as well as spirit; and riches are a powerful temptation to them as well as other men. It requires more than a Solomon's wisdom and grace to preserve men from the corrupting influence of prosperity. Job was the best as well as the richest man in the East. But where is the saint who has received such rich communications of grace as Job? God grant that we may never be so rich as Job, unless he is pleased to make us as good and upright.

Some persons think they are in no danger of making a bad use of riches, if they could but obtain them, because they feel no disposition to make a bad use of any thing they have; "but he that trusteth in his own heart is a fool." Is there a greater fool in the world than the man that thinks himself wiser than Solomon or Agur, or Christ himself, who tells us, that those who have riches shall hardly enter into the kingdom of God? A wise man will not choose to leave a country of ordinary fertility, for another whose soil is far

richer, but the air very pestilential, although his constitution of body is at present very healthful; nor will he choose to walk in a flowery path where there are secret pits, and where the country is infested with robbers, if he can find another path, that is less pleasant and more safe.

But poverty is not without its temptations also. Pinching necessity may tempt a man to use unlawful shifts for his subsistence, and even to steal. And therefore this wise man prays that he might be kept from poverty as well as riches, for he had no confidence in his own heart, which he knew to be so foolish and treacherous.

But what made him so much afraid of stealing? Did he think he would be disgraced and punished for it? That was not the thing for which he chiefly abhorred stealing; but he knew that this sin brings a great guilt, and a deep stain on the soul, and besides is a snare to the soul, which brings it into the devil's power, and gives him advantage for drawing on men to sins of greater guilt. One sin needs to be supported by another sin, and lying and perjury are the common refuges to which thieves have recourse for screening themselves from shame and punishment*.

Agur abhorred all sin; but the sin of profaning name of the Lord was one of the most dreadful wickedness in his apprehension, because the Lord was his God. He believed in God, and loved him with all his heart, and he earnestly wished to be kept at the utmost distance from every thing that might lead him to dishonour or profane the name of his God.

Ver. 10. Agur teaches us not only to keep a good conscience in the things that relate immediately to the worship and service of God, he joins us, likewise, to exercise ourselves to have a conscience void of offence towards men, not excepting the meanest of them. We must not hurt the meanest slave on earth; for although he is not able to revenge the injury, yet God will do it with severe justice.

As we must do no hurt to a poor servant, so we must not tempt any other person to hurt him. Agur forbids us to accuse him to his master, lest we should expose him to severe treatment at his hands. But is accusing a servant to his master in every case unlawful? Did not Abraham accuse the servants of Abimelech to their master for robbing him of his wells? He did; but there was no danger in that case, for Abraham knew that Abimelech was too selfish a man to punish his servants because they exceeded the bounds of justice in their zeal for his service. There are other cases in which we may lawfully accuse servants to their masters, but they are not common. Men are too ready to take too much liberty in this point; and Agur does not think it necessary to mention the excepted cases, because any man can see them, and most men would take too great a license in applying them to particular cases.

But what is the evil of accusing a servant to his master? It is inhumanity and cruelty. It is adding to the distress which we should rather relieve if it were in our power, (for servants in those days were generally slaves.) It is a sowing of discord in families; and it may provoke the poor man to curse thee. And what if he does? It is his sin to curse me. It is your own sin; or if the sin be his, you are the devil that tempts him to it; and the weight of his curses, aggravated with the guilt of them, may come down from a just God upon your head. You may be found guilty of bringing a false accusation against him; guilty of the poor man's revengeful curses; guilty of his master's tyranny, through the bad opinion of his servant that you infuse into his mind. Men by their indiscreet and sinful conduct, do often bring upon themselves the guilt of many more sins than they ever think about.

Ver. 11. Many of Agur's sayings are better remembered than many other things, by his method of classing his observations into a certain number of particulars. His petitions were two; and his observations on the manners of men, and the qualities of creatures, are four on each subject. He begins at this verse to speak of four sets of men, that deserve a particular remark on account of their extreme wickedness.

"There is a generation of men that curseth their father." It is the disgrace of human nature that ever one man was found that could be guilty of this sin. Will a man curse the instrument of his existence? This is the next degree of guilt to that of cursing the author of it. The prophet Isaiah pronounces a wo upon him that striveth with his Maker, and proceeds next to pronounce a wo against him that saith to his father, "what begettest thou; or to the woman, what hast thou brought forth."

But there is a whole generation of men upon whom this atrocious guilt may be justly charged, and therefore we find a law in the writings of Moses appointing the punishment of it; and the punishment is the same which was to be inflicted on the blasphemers of God himself.

Although men do not expressly make use of their tongues to curse their fathers, yet they are to be ranked with this cursed generation, if they do not bless their mothers. Mothers are to be honoured as well as fathers; and the neglect of duty to parents is criminal, as well as the commission of offences against them.

But perhaps you will say, my mother deserves not to be blessed. Is she not your mother? Then she deserves your good will and tender affection, and prayers; and if you cannot praise her, you have no call to say any thing to her prejudice.

Ver. 12. No man is truly pure unless he is washed from his filthiness; for all men are naturally polluted with sin, and rendered abominable by it; for nothing on earth is comparable to sin for vileness, and no creature on earth is so abominable and filthy as man, who drinketh iniquity like water*.

We cannot be washed from our filthiness but by the blood and Spirit of Christ. The blood of Christ is the fountain opened by God for sin and uncleanness, and it is the Spirit of Christ that applies it to our souls, and purifies our hearts by the faith of it†.

But there are many who are strangers to Christ, and yet reckon themselves pure. They never saw their pollution, because they are unacquainted with the law of God, or with themselves; or they have taken to themselves nitre and much soap, and flattered themselves that they could wash away their own filthiness by it; or they are mistaken about the way of making use of Christ, for the cleansing of their souls; or persuade themselves upon false grounds, that they are cleansed by his grace.

Seest thou a man that is clean in his own eyes, although he is yet impure in the sight of God, there is more hope of a publican or a harlot than of him. He says unto Christ, "Depart from me, for I am not a sinful man." He is covered, like the leviathan, with scales that render him impenetrable by the sharpest pointed arrows. No sinners do worse things than those who do whatsoever is right in their own eyes, (Judges 18. &c.) and none are farther from righteousness than those who are righteous in their own eyes. They are a smoke in God's nostrils, a fire that burneth all the day. Christ found such self-conceited men his greatest enemies whilst he was tabernacled among us, and spoke some parables, and denounced many heavy woes against them.

Let us examine our hearts impartially, lest we should deserve to be classed with this wretched generation, which, we have reason to fear, is more numerous than the generation of them whose hands are clean, and their hearts pure. We all profess to be Christians, but Christ will deny us if we belong to this set of men; for he hath declared, that except he wash us we have no part in him. Men are unwilling to class themselves with the impure, lest their consciences should fly in their faces; but those that falsely pretend to purity are the persons whose consciences shall lash them with greatest severity at last. Why should we seek to cover our nakedness with fig leaves? Why should we exclude ourselves from the fountain, through a pernicious shame of confessing our vileness? The promise of God stands upon record: "I will sprinkle clean water upon you and ye shall be clean." Is it best, sinners, to claim the benefit of this promise, or to allege that you have no need of it? Men are generally ashamed to be thought poor; yet who would not confess himself to be poor, if the king should offer great wealth to every poor man in the town and to none else?

Ver. 13. There is a generation of men that are swelled with pride and vanity, and yet put on the dress of humility. Such are a great number of the generation last mentioned; but God knoweth their hearts; and the fruits of their pride often discover them to men.

But there are some men who seem to be proud even of their pride. They do not hide their sin, but declare it as Sodom; and the shew of their countenances witnesses against them. Agur was surprised how the sons of Adam, who are but worms, should put on such arrogant airs, and behave with so much insolence.

Solomon likewise speaks of this race of men as a generation abhorred by the Lord*. The prophets, in their predictions against Moab, and Ezekiel, in his prophecies against Tyre and Egypt, give us a striking picture of their manners, and a terrible description of the vengeance of God against such insolent despisers of God and men; for God will save the afflicted and lowly people, but will bring down the high looks.

Ver. 14. By these monsters of men, the inspired writer means false accusers, extortioners, oppressors, bloody tyrants, and their wicked instruments, who are the common enemies of men, but plunder and destroy especially the poor and needy, because these cannot resist them.

To what kind of creatures does Agur compare these wretches? Not to lions or tigers, for neither these nor any other kind of animals are so fierce and brutal. These men are brutes with iron teeth, sharp as knives, to cut off, and to destroy. Whilst they grind the faces of the poor, and rob them of their means of subsistence, they do in effect eat the flesh of the poor, and flay their skin from their bones; and they break their bones, and chop them in pieces, as for the pot, and as flesh for the caldron.

To what wickednesses are men driven by the cursed love of gold! The horse leech sucks till it bursts. The grave, and the barren womb, and the parched earth, and the fire, can never be satisfied; but the hearts of wicked men are still more insatiable. They are still crying, give, give. Hell is evidently set forth before them, and flaming with tremendous fury; and yet the insatiable lust of having, drags them on to purchase for themselves one of the chief places in that burning lake, by heaping one horrid instance of inhumanity and cruelty upon another. Had Job reigned among this generation of men, he would have broken their jaws, and forced the spoil from their teeth*. But punishments inconceivably more dreadful, are appointed to them by the just Lord, who will not do iniquity, nor suffer it to pass unrevenged.

Ver. 15. Agur had been speaking of the dreadful effects of the lust of covetousness, which still cries, give, give. Some think that he intends, in the two following verses, to represent the insatiable nature of this lust, by comparing it with the most craving and unsatisfied things that men are acquainted with. He does not expressly draw any moral instruction out of the account he gives of the four things that cannot be satisfied, only he teaches us to make observations on the works of God, and the nature of things that we see or hear of. Such observations enlarge our minds, lead us to admire the Creator, and to raise religious meditations in our minds. Besides, the Scripture makes use of such observations to illustrate the important instructions which it gives us about the things that, we are to believe or do.

The horse-leech is a blood-sucker. It will suck the blood of other creatures till it bursts, but covetous men will suck the blood of their fellow-men till they are damned.

It is very usual in the eastern languages to call one thing the son or daughter of another thing, on account of some resemblance or relation in the one to the other. Thus arrows are called the sons of the bow; and the friends which attend a bridegroom, are called his children. In this sense, Agur calls any thing remarkable for its greediness, a daughter of the horse-leech. Covetousness of spiritual and eternal blessings, deserves to be exempted from this humiliating comparison; but an heart set upon earthly treasure, is more like the horse-leech than any of its daughters; for there is no satisfying of a covetous man; with shame he loves, give ye. And if you should give him whole rivers of blood to drink, he will still cry for more; as you see in the example of those tyrants, whom providence in wrath to men, permitted to gratify their lust without restraint*.

Ver. 16. "Hell and destruction" says Solomon, "are never full, so the eyes of man are never satisfied;" but because the invisible world is never full, it is folly to be greedy of earthly things; for the grave will soon receive us, and then what will all earthly treasures avail us? The invisible world keeps its gates wide open for us, and therefore we should be laying up our treasure in another world. If the

grave were full, or if we could make a sure covenant with death, and obtain exemption from its power, we might have some excuse for living as if we were to live always.

The barren womb is unsatisfied in the want of children. Rachel was led into much sin and sorrow by her passionate desire of children. Let others in the like circumstances beware of following her example. Discontentment with our lot, in any part of it, is a tormenting and a dangerous sin.

The earth, when it is parched, can scarcely be satisfied with rain. It gapes for the showers; and although it be well refreshed at present, it will soon thirst for more. This teaches us our entire dependence upon God, who has the key of the clouds in his hand, and could soon make the rain of our land powder and dust, and our earth iron under our feet. As the thirsty land cries for rain, so let our souls thirst not for those blessings that spring from the ground, but for the salvation of the Lord from on high; then will he rain down righteousness upon us*.

The fire is more greedy than any of these things. Lay on fuel as long as you please, it will soon make an end of it, and seek for more. There is a fiercer flame in the corrupt hearts and tongues of men, kindled from hell, and sufficient to set on fire the course of nature†.

Ver. 17. Agur, as well as Solomon, insists much on the respect due from children to their parents. Children that disobey or despise their parents are the kindred of those that curse them, for the one sin is the natural introduction to the other. Such unnatural children were to be punished with death by the law of Moses; and Agur represents the disgrace that attends this death, to affright men from the sin.

The ravenous fowls will pick out their eyes. Let children think of this, and let it be a motive to them, (if better ones are ineffectual,) to respect their parents. If human laws, or the carelessness of magistrates, free disobedient children from this punishment, God suffers them, by the violation of other laws, to bring themselves to the gibbet, or at least will find means to convince offenders by fatal experience, that his laws and threatenings are not vain*.

Ver. 18, 19. An eagle is speedily out of our view when she soars aloft, and no trace of her flight is to be seen. A serpent slides over the rock, without leaving any slime like worms, or feathers like birds. A ship leaves no mark in the waves by which you can discern its track; but the way of a man with one that calls herself a maid, is more indiscernible than all of them together. The companions in lewdness have a thousand arts to draw one another into this abominable sin, and to conceal it when it is committed.

Ver. 20. "Stolen waters are sweet, saith the foolish woman, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant;" and secret bread is so much the more pleasant, because, when it is eaten the theft cannot be found out. She wipes her mouth, and no marks of it are to be seen upon her lips.

The sweetness and the hiddenness of this sin make it very dangerous. Persons commit theft with fear and trembling, and they are often discovered; and the reproofs and punishments they meet with are means of conviction and repentance. But adulterous persons taste a deceitful pleasure in their sin; and they have a thousand ways of concealing their guilt; and so they add one sin to another, and contract those habits which become a second nature to them. The devil entangles them in strong twisted cords of a thousand folds; and they are seldom recovered from his snares. They obtain, by their lying arts, a miserable deliverance from the means of repentance; and by degrees they almost bring themselves to think that they have escaped the watchful eye of God.

Do not imagine that the secrecy of sin is your security from punishment; it is the snare of your souls. By your arts to hide your wickedness you are only hardening your hearts, and twisting thick cords for yourselves, that you may be held fast in sin, and prevented from ever enjoying the liberty of the children of God*.

Ver. 21, 22, 23. Pride is a sin detestable to God; and its effects are such, that even men cannot bear them, especially when it is raised to an high pitch, by a sudden and unexpected rise from a low and despised condition; and therefore a wise man would not wish to be raised by God to a condition much above his present state, unless God would give him grace to bear it with moderation.

When a servant is raised to a throne, or to some high station in the government, he thinks himself almost a god; and unless every one gives him homage he is filled with wrath and revenge. Haman was raised so high by Ahasuerus that he became giddy; and he thought the offence of one man that would not bow the knee to him so grievous, that it required the blood of a whole nation to make atonement for it. Joseph and David were indeed raised by God to high places, and behaved well in them; but God knew their hearts, and gave them such grace that they were still lowly when their condition was high. The greatest tyrants in the world have generally been those that never expected to reign; such as Maximin the Roman emperor, who put to death all that knew him in his low condition, and, amongst the rest, those that had relieved his father and himself, that he might blot out the memory of his former meanness. Servants have not more seeds of pride in their nature than other men; but they are sown in human nature, and are wonderfully cherished when the sunbeams of prosperity shine upon them with extraordinary warmth. Leave men of mean condition where you found them, and they will behave in their station as well as kings. Raise kings to an unexpected height of grandeur, and they will become Nebuchadnezzars and Alexanders.

This observation is of use in the affairs of the church as well as the state; and therefore Paul forbids a novice to be made a ruler in the church, lest, being lifted up with pride, he fall into the condemnation of the devil.

A fool, when he is filled with meat, or furnished with riches sufficient to gratify his vanity and supply his extravagant desires, is another burden of the earth. A fool is troublesome at all times; but there is no bearing of him, when his lust of intemperance or greediness is fully satisfied. It is a blemish in David's character that he once broke out into such a violent rage, that he swore to destroy an innocent family; but we must remember that the provocation was given him by a fool when he was filled with meat. In

ordinary cases David was the meekest of men.

For the like reasons an odious woman is intolerable when she is married. Women of meek and quiet spirits are a lovely part of the human race; but women of fretful spirits and unbridled passions are odious; and when they are married, it would require all the patience of Job, and the meekness of Moses to bear with them. Before marriage their pride was checked by neglect, and covered with the mantle of prudence; but when they come into their new state of life, they throw off every restraint, and their new situation is a means of increasing their vanity and ill nature, till neither their neighbours, nor their servants, nor their husbands, can endure them. If you are wise, when you intend to marry a wife, let her portion be the least part of your concern; but be sure that you know her real temper, and beware of those cheats that are doves in their virgin state, and vultures the week after they are married.

An handmaid that grows rich by the last will of her deceased mistress, or obtains her master in marriage, is another plague to all around her, as we may learn from the example of Hagar the Egyptian. Men should never marry their servant maids unless they are furnished with virtuous qualifications, and particularly with modesty and meekness to an unusual degree.

Ver. 24. God is to be admired in the leviathan and behemoth, and he is no less to be admired in the ant and the locust. The formation of these little creatures, and the instincts which God has given them, appear surprising to the wisest of men. They are not furnished with the noble gift of reason, and yet they have a degree of wisdom which may raise a blush in the cheeks of many who boast of the dignity of their rank in the scale of creatures.

Ver. 25. The strength of ants has been admired by wise men, but their wisdom and industry make them strong; for they are a feeble nation, from the make and size of their bodies. Sluggards make inability to do their duty one of their excuses; but let them go to the ants and locusts, and learn to be ashamed of their frivolous pretences. These puny creatures do wonders by their exertions and perseverance; and men know not their own strength more than their weakness, till they have made a fair trial of it. But as to spiritual things, you will say, the Scripture teaches us that we have no strength at all: that is true, but it teaches you at the same time "to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, because it is God that worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." Are the ants and the conies so strong by the instincts which they receive from their Maker? what will not worm Jacob accomplish, when he goes in the strength of the Lord God?

The ants prepare their meat in the summer, that they may not starve in the rigours of the winter months. How despicable, compared with these insects, are the rational creatures, who suffer the thoughts of an endless duration to be pushed out of their minds by threescore and ten years?

Ver. 26. Perhaps the wise man means some other kind of creatures than those which we call conies. He tells us that weak as they are, they find means to make habitations for themselves in the holes of the rocks, or in rocky ground. As the ants teach sluggards to provide food for themselves, these animals reprove those that are careless about providing proper houses and means of security from dangers. Few of us want due care about houses for accommodating our bodies, but what provision have we made for a dwelling-place to our souls? Do we build upon the sand, or on the everlasting rock? If our place of defence is not the munition of rocks, but some refuge of lies, the conies are wiser than we, according to their kind. The high hills are a refuge for the wild goats, and the rocks for the conies; and has God provided no refuge for our souls? God himself is our refuge and our strength, and those that make him their habitation shall be secured from the fear of evil.

Ver. 27. The locusts, notwithstanding their weakness as individuals, are strong and terrible by their order and agreement. They go forth by bands, and nations tremble, and countries are turned into desolate wildernesses. The prophet Joel speaks of the armies of locusts in the same style which other prophets use when they are speaking of armies of Chaldeans or Persians; and history fully justifies the propriety of his language.

The Saracen enemies of Christianity are compared by John to locusts, for their number and harmony, and the destructive ravages which they were enabled by these means to commit. Shall the enemies of religion join so harmoniously in the service of the devil? and shall we that do not want a king, we that have Christ and not Apollyon for our king, betray his glorious cause by breaking our ranks, and violating that beautiful order which he hath appointed? When the followers of the Redeemer stand fast in one spirit, and with one mind, striving together for the faith of the gospel, every one in his proper station, then the church is terrible as an army with banners; and the locusts that come out of the bottomless pit cannot prevail against her.

Ver. 28. The spider does not say, there are servants in the palace appointed to keep it clear from every nuisance; I shall be slain in the window. She provides herself a dwelling in the houses of the great, as well as in the cottages of the poor, for labour and wisdom conquer every difficulty; but to the sluggish soul every easy thing is impossible.

Does God furnish these despised creatures with wisdom so admirable in their rank of being? We are surely of greater value in his esteem than they are, and he has provided treasures of better wisdom for us. Let us have recourse to him, and he will furnish us with that wisdom which is proper to rational and immortal creatures. Our Lord seems to justify this inference, in the instructions that he draws from the providence of God in clothing the grass of the field, and feeding the fowls of the air*. The locusts and spiders are hateful and mischievous creatures to men, but they are not for that reason useless. Those creatures that we despise and abhor, are a part of the riches of the Creator. They read lectures to us concerning his wisdom; and if they are well considered, they will instruct us in some articles of our duty.

Ver. 29. If an heathen will not believe in Christ, he cannot deny a God; for the invisible things of God are clearly seen in the things that he has made, and in those various endowments which he has bestowed on his creatures. As a garden is rendered pleasant to

the eye by the rich variety of fruits, and herbs, and flowers, which it contains, so to the eye of the mind the world is a beautiful scene, containing such a surprising variety of creatures, every one of them possessing qualities peculiar to itself. Agur had spoken of those creatures that are remarkable for their great wisdom in little bodies, and proceeds to mention some creatures that deserve admiration for their courage and spirit, and the dignity that appears in their motions. "O Lord, how manifold are thy works, in wisdom hast thou made them all, the earth is full of thy riches."

Ver. 30. This celebrated animal is full of courage and fire; and no danger can subdue its valour, or force it to discover any sign of fear. God himself is pleased to use it as an emblem of that majesty and resistless power which he displays in the defence of his injured people*. And Christ our king disdains not to borrow from it one of his glorious titles. Christians are furnished with such strength from their Redeemer, that they are said to be bold as lions; and by the courage of faith the saints have sometimes stopped the mouths of lions, or slain them outright. Wicked men have reason to flee although there is no pursuer, but Christians should learn, in the cause of truth and righteousness, not to turn aside for any adversary, or any suffering; for they shall be more than conquerors through him that loved them.

Ver. 31. A greyhound discovers great agility and life in the chase of its prey, and gives great pleasure to the eyes of the hunter. The word, in the original, properly signifies, some creature that is girt in its loins; some take it to mean a cock, and others an horse; which last animal has the honour to be celebrated by God himself, in the sublimest strains of poetry, and is used by the prophet Zechariah as an emblem of that conquering strength which God conveys into the hearts of those that faithfully fight his battles against the enemies of religion. "The Lord of hosts hath visited his flock, the house of Judah, and hath made them as his goodly horse in the battle." They are weak as sheep in themselves, but furnished with the strength of war horses for maintaining his cause*. An he-goat is an animal so remarkable for its strength and stateliness, when it marches at the head of the flock, that the Macedonian power which crushed the strength of the mighty Persian empire, is represented by it in the book of Daniel; and the prophet Jeremiah calls the delivered captives to imitate the he-goat, by setting an example of vigour and courage to one another, in improving the merciful providence of God; for we ought to go before one another in every good work.

Wonder not at Agur for insisting so long in his little performance, upon the excellencies of the irrational part of the creation. The creation is a volume spread before our eyes, that we may read in it the perfections of the Creator, and the Scripture is a commentary upon some parts of it, which opens our mind to learn instruction from the rest. Great use was made of this volume before the word of God was written, as you find in the book of Job*; and the Almighty was pleased to humble Job for his unguarded complaints, by manifesting his own excellencies in a discourse upon his creatures.

A king against whom there is no rising up, is another of those creatures that are stately in going; for the God who has given courage and strength to lions, has given majesty to kings, and stamped on them such dignity that their subjects are awed by their appearance. Kings should therefore employ their authority and influence for the service of God; and their subjects owe them reverence as well as obedience; they are ministers of God, and are entitled to honour for the sake of their master and their work, and to obedience both for wrath and for conscience sake.

Ver. 32. Pride is a very bad thing when it goes no farther than the thoughts, but it is still worse when it swells and overflows by the lips. If any proud or injurious thought come into our minds, it ought to be immediately checked and suppressed. To discover it by our words is to declare our sin as Sodom, to give indulgence to those passions that ought to be mortified, and to add iniquity to iniquity. Besides, if we do not lay our hand upon our mouth, we shall rouse the pride of other men, and kindle up rage and strife that will not be easily allayed; and thus we shall be accountable not only for our own sin, which is heavy enough of itself, but likewise for those iniquities that we occasion in others, by the temptations which we throw in their way.

Ver. 33. Wrath is not only provoked, but forced by haughty and spiteful words; for such is our weakness, that we are as easily kindled into anger by the angry words that are directed to us, as one coal is kindled by another coal that is burning. We should be meek when our neighbour is angry; but, alas! we have too little of the spirit of Moses, or rather of Jesus; for Moses himself has been provoked to speak unadvisedly with his lips.

As the violent shaking of milk in the churn produceth butter, as the wringing of the nose makes blood to spring forth, so when we tease our neighbours, and set their passions into a ferment by bitter and galling words, we are the authors of strife, and kindle up that destructive and devouring fire, which perhaps cannot be quenched till it has done a thousand times more mischief than we dreamed off. The command of our passions and tongues is an attainment of vast consequence to our happiness and the welfare of our souls. Many of the wise instructions of Solomon and Agur are designed to recommend this point of wisdom to our regard, and to assist us in learning it. Our Lord Jesus recommends it to us as one of the marks of a true Christian, and an evidence of our regard to his example. The apostles Paul and James insist very much upon it; and that love which John is for ever pressing upon us, will sweeten our tempers effectually into that calmness and meekness which are so absolutely necessary to our happiness and usefulness in the world, and will gradually extinguish those seeds of wrath and contention which lie in our corrupted natures. The apostle Peter recommends the calmness and meekness which is here enjoined by motives of irresistible force, the example which Christ left us when he was bearing our sin; the pleasure that God takes in meekness, and the happiness which he graciously confers on those who govern their passions, and their tongues, according to his will. Men of arrogant and outrageous tempers, murmurers and complainers, are condemned by Jude in his short epistle with great severity. The whole scripture testifies loudly against the contentious and ill-natured.

CHAPTER 31

Ver. 1. Women have sometimes enjoyed the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Deborah and Lemuel's mother were honoured to be the composers, under the direction of God, each of them of a chapter in the Bible; and the prophecy of Lemuel's mother will make every woman who governs her life by it an ornament to her sex.

It is the duty of mothers, as well as fathers, to instruct their children. Although Lemuel was a king, yet his mother was directed by God to give him instruction and admonition. Cornelia, the mother of the Gracchi, was renowned for the pleasure she took in the education of her children; and the celebrated Cicero reckons them as much obliged to her for their education as their birth. When a certain Campanian lady was one day shewing that illustrious lady her jewels, and desiring a sight of Cornelia's jewels, she told her that her children were her jewels; and certainly the richest diamonds of Golconda cannot give so much lustre to a lady, as the proper discharge of this duty to her children. Cornelia was an unenlightened heathen, but why should Christian mothers blush in her presence?

If we were as great as kings, it would be a scandal to us to despise the instructions and counsels of a mother. King Lemuel remembered, and wrote the prophecy that his mother taught him, and transmits it to posterity. Whoever he was, we have reason to believe that he practised the instructions which he so much respected. Lemuel shall be for ever held in honour for the respect which he shewed to his mother, and his mother's name will be renowned for her part in forming her son to virtue, and religion, and public usefulness.

Ver. 2. When this venerable lady was instructing her son, her heart was overflowing with inexpressible tenderness of affection to him. Parents often take a very absurd method of expressing their fondness for their children; but when they gratify every one of their humours, and suffer them to live without restraints and admonitions, they do not truly love but hate their children. He that spareth the rod hateth his child. The love of parents to their children is best shewed by doing their utmost endeavours to make them good Christians, and useful to their generation; and for this purpose they ought to dispense their instructions and their reproofs in the language of love, and to let their children see that every thing they say to them is dictated by the warmest affection.

"What, my son? and what, the son of my womb?" This fond mother considered and pondered in her mind what way she should express her tender regard, and she could find no better way of shewing it than by teaching him that wisdom which became his station; for what greater testimony of love can any mother give to the son of her womb?

Every mother loves the son of her womb. If she does not, she is not a mother, but a sister to the ostrich, to which God hath denied understanding. The love of a mother to the son of her womb is so fervent, that God is pleased to use it as an illustration of his own love to his people. Although the love of a mother bears no proportion to it, yet that is one of the best emblems of it which the world can afford.

Lemuel was the son of her vows, as well as of her womb. Every son of the womb should be a son of the mother's vows and prayers. And the instructions of a parent must be joined with prayers for their success; for mothers may plant, and fathers may water, but it is God who giveth the increase. When Monica was shedding tears for her beloved son Augustine, at the time that he was a debauchee, and an heretic, one of her friends told her that the child of so many prayers could not be lost, and perhaps no mother since the days of the Virgin Mary had in the end greater comfort in a son.

Ver. 3. Whoredom, as Solomon tells us, is the ruin of any man; but none are in greater danger of being ruined in their bodies and fortunes by this vice than kings, who have too often the misfortune to want a check or a reprovor, whilst the temptations that lead to sensuality are ever surrounding them. David and Solomon involved themselves in great distress by the love of women; and it is well known, that in later times, the kingdom of Spain was totally ruined, and the Saracens introduced into the possession of it, through the unbridled lust of King Roderick.

Ver. 4. Wine, as well as whoredom, takes away the heart when it is drunk to excess; but other men cannot do so much hurt as kings or magistrates when they are drunk.

Ver. 5. When Nadab and Abihu were destroyed by fire from the Lord, for their unhallowed incense, it is probable they were in liquor; and therefore a law was made on that occasion that priests should drink no wine when they went in before the Lord, lest they should blunder in any part of the sacred service. The more important any man's work is, he is the more obliged to be temperate in all things; and drunkenness, which is a damning sin in any person, is attended with prodigious aggravations in those men that dispense the mysteries of the gospel, or administer the public affairs of the nation. The most oppressive and execrable laws that Scotland was ever plagued with, were made by a parliament called the drunken parliament. Alexander the Great, when he was drunk, killed one of his best friends, who had, on a former occasion, saved his life in battle; and when that prince recovered his judgment he had almost killed himself. His father Philip was less unfortunate. He once forgot the law in his cups, and passed an unrighteous sentence upon a poor widow; but soon recovering his senses, he condemned himself to refund her damages.

Some think that drunkenness is an excuse for the faults that are committed by men under the influence of it. Lemuel's mother, under the influence of the prophetic spirit, was of another mind; and even uninlightened heathens have been sensible how frivolous this excuse is. Zaleucus (I think) made a law among the Locrians, that if any person committed a crime when he was drunk, he should be punished for both crimes; for he did not judge that one crime was a proper excuse for another. If men are mad without any fault

of their own, they are not accountable for their actions; but a voluntary madness has no excuse for itself, and will be no excuse for any thing else.

To pervert judgment in any case is not good. To pervert the judgment of any of the afflicted, is such a complication of injustice and inhumanity, that none but a man who is drunk, or is of a disposition that makes him perpetually like a man in liquor, will be guilty of it. The wise woman knew that her beloved son could never commit this unpardonable iniquity whilst he was sober.

It is not for ministers, or teachers; it is not for parents, or masters, or mistresses, to drink wine to excess, lest they forget their duty and commit some pernicious error, in the discharge of that trust which lies upon them, and corrupt their inferiors by their example.

But is wine useless? Why then did God create the fruit of the vine? It is not useless. Mahomet reproached his Creator, when he prohibited the use of it without restriction. It is useful for the refreshment of any man, when his labours, or the dejection of his mind, or the state of his body requires it. It is peculiarly useful to those that are oppressed with calamity and grief.

Ver. 6, 7. We must not give wine in immoderate quantities to any person, however dejected, for sin is never to be chosen rather than affliction; but wine moderately used is of great use to revive the languishing spirits of the disconsolate; and it may be a piece of as real charity, to bestow this generous liquor upon them, as it is to give bread to the hungry. The Psalmist mentions this among other instances of God's bounty, that he gives not only bread to strengthen us, but likewise wine to cheer our hearts, and oil to make our faces shine. Some of the persons that were present at the crucifixion of our blessed Lord, gave him wine mixed with myrrh to render his sufferings more tolerable to him; but our Lord, who allows and requires us to bestow cordials on those who are ready to faint under their sorrows, refused them in his own severest sufferings, for he was not disposed to decline the bitterest dregs of that cup of sorrow which was put into his hands by his father; but when his people are made partakers of the sufferings of Christ, he puts the cup of consolation into their hands, and calls them to drink of that generous wine which goes down sweetly, and causes the lips of those who are in the deepest distress to sing. "As the sufferings of Christ abound in us," said one that was pressed with affliction above measure, "so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ."

We ought to be followers of Christ in the exercise of compassion to the sorrowful and the distressed. It is devilish to add to the sorrows of the afflicted; but it is Christ-like to wipe away the tears from the eyes of the fatherless and widows, and to deserve the blessings of them that are ready to perish.

Ver. 8, 9. Job was an excellent pattern to all princes. He was eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame, and a father to the poor; and no doubt he was a mouth also to the dumb. Such a prince the mother of Lemuel wishes her son to be. She exhorts him to do judgment and justice to all his people, but to regard with peculiar tenderness those unfortunate men that were in danger of losing their estates or lives, by reason of accusations brought against them. If they were unable, through ignorance, or awkwardness, or fear, to plead their own cause, she would have him to be their advocate, and to plead every thing that truth and equity would allow on their behalf. The appointment of advocates to plead for prisoners at the bar agrees with this instruction; and those who are appointed to this charitable office should open their mouths, and interest themselves in the cause of their distressed clients, with all the warmth that justice can admit, that none may be condemned, unless the evidence against them clearly overbalances every argument that can be adduced on their side.

It is certain, that charity to the poor, and clemency to the accused, must not interfere with the due administration of justice; for a poor man is not to be countenanced in his cause; but there is less danger of erring in this than in the contrary extreme; and it is the business of princes to take care, that, in the administration of justice, the poor may not suffer by their unacquaintedness with law, or their want of ability to take the benefit of it when they are oppressed, or to defend themselves against their wealthier adversaries.

Our Lord Jesus Christ is at once our king and our advocate. He saves the poor and needy, and breaks their oppressors in pieces. He stands at the right hand of the poor and needy, to save them from those that would condemn their souls. Princes, as they have opportunity, should imitate him by whom kings reign, and princes decree justice.

The mother of Lemuel having instructed him in the virtues of purity and temperance, justice and mercy, proceeds next to instruct him in the choice of a wife. As a bad wife is one of the worst, and a good wife one of the best things in the world, men cannot be too cautious about entering into the relation of marriage, which death only (or what is worse than death) can dissolve. Those who are in public stations have peculiar reason, for their own sakes, and for the sake of their connections, to consider well who those persons are whom they take into such close connexion with themselves. Paul gives directions about the wives of deacons*; and the instructions about the choice of a virtuous wife are here addressed to a king. Although his instructor was his mother, yet she says nothing about high birth, or a large portion, or great alliances; for these things were trifles to her view, compared with virtue. Besides, the spirit of God designed these instructions not merely for kings, but for all that have wives to choose, and for the whole female sex.

The last part of this chapter should be learned with great care by all women. The spirit of God was pleased, in the composition of it, to begin every verse with different letters, according to the order of the alphabet, like the 119th Psalm, which would render it more easy to be retained in the memory.

Ver. 10. Those that wish to have a good wife ought to consider that one who deserves this character is not easily to be found; and therefore they ought to be cautious in their choice, to be well acquainted with the disposition and behaviour of those women who are to be their constant companions through life, and to address fervent supplications for the favour of him from whom alone a prudent wife is to be had. Abraham observed these rules in seeking a wife for his son, only he had no personal acquaintance with Rebecca; but not knowing of any virtuous woman in Canaan, he trusted God to provide him one in the land to which his obedience to God

hindered him from returning.

But why are virtuous women so rarely to be found? Is the female sex more corrupted by the transgression of their first mother than her sons? This cannot be supposed. Solomon found fewer good women than good men; but the experience of a man who conversed too much with the blemishes of their sex, will not establish a general rule. Women were so ill used in ancient times, that it is not to be wondered at if there were few virtuous women to be found. In our times, when the yoke of marriage is become much lighter on the woman, it may be reasonably supposed that it would be no dishonour to the female sex to be compared with the male, and that the virtues in which they are inferior, are abundantly balanced by those more lovely accomplishments in which they excel.

Men have no reason to reflect that virtue is rarely to be found in women. The imputation is not just, if it be meant to state an odious distinction between the sexes; but if it were, the fault lies as much in men as in women. Virtue is not duly esteemed; but riches and beauty are preferred to it. Who can find a wife that will bring a large portion? is the general question. Were the judgment of the princess by whom this character of a good wife was drawn, to be followed by the generality of men, parents would alter in a great measure their plan in educating their children; and women would endeavour to recommend themselves, not by setting off their beauty to advantage, or giving themselves out for great fortunes, but by the practice of religion and of every praiseworthy qualification.

The price of a virtuous woman, is far above rubies and diamonds. Although she has no portion but her clothes, she will be preferred by a wise man to one that is destitute of her qualifications, although she were possessed of all the riches of the east. He is a fool who marries the woman that is dressed in silk and rubies, if he would refuse the same woman in russet.

Ver. 11. She behaves in such a manner as to be above all suspicion of any thing inconsistent with strict virtue. When Cæsar divorced his wife, and was asked the reason of it, he said, that Cæsar's wife ought to be free not only of guilt but of suspicion. All Christians ought to walk so inoffensively, that the adversary that wishes to defame them may find no evil thing to say; but wives in a special manner ought, for the sake of their husbands and themselves, to keep at a great distance from every thing that might sully their character, because it is easily stained and not easily cleared.

Some husbands will suspect their wives, of indiscretions without the least shadow of reason; but such brutes are so rare, that the prophetess takes no notice of them. She takes it for granted, that the husband of the virtuous woman will trust to her fidelity and prudence, when she merits it so well at his hands. To give cause of suspicions is bad in a woman; to suspect without any cause is extremely ungrateful in a man. Confidence in a virtuous wife is a piece of duty to herself, and pleasant to her husband. The harmony of hearts arising from mutual esteem in husband and wife, affords the most delightful pleasure which any thing less than religion can give; and when true piety in them both is added, it makes a kind of heaven upon earth.

The heart of the virtuous woman's husband rejoices not only in his present pleasures, but in his agreeable prospects of future happiness and contentment. He knows that his house is managed with such frugality and prudence, that he can entertain no apprehensions of poverty. He needs not leave his family, and betake himself to a military life, to be enriched by the spoils of war. He is under no temptation to injustice and rapine, to make up any waste in his substance; for every part of it is managed to the best advantage. The virtuous woman does good to the soul of her husband as well as to his body; for her behaviour is a preservation from those temptations to iniquity, by which others, not blessed with the like happy connexions, have been drawn to sin, and to disgrace, and to a gibbet.

Ver. 12. There are some wives who are a constant plague to their husbands, vexing them with their ungodly and perverse behaviour, every day and every hour of their life.

There are others who do some good to their husbands, but at the same time do them so much evil that they cannot with any propriety be called virtuous wives. They take good care of their substance, and will not spend a penny without necessity; but they tease their husbands, and eat the very life out of all their comforts, by perpetual contentions, and by fretting at every trifle and every nothing.

But the virtuous woman doth good and not evil to her husband, and that not only at particular times, but every day. Some wives are like the days of April; at one time they are serene and pleasant, but at other times they are all tempest and fury, and at another time they are like a continual dropping. The virtuous wife is as careful to please her husband, by an even and sweet temper, as she is to manage his affairs with discretion. She is the same to-day, and will be the same to-morrow, that she was yesterday. She is the same twenty or fifty years after marriage, as she was the first month. Neither sickness, nor poverty, nor old age nor even the errors into which her husband may fall in managing the business of his family, will damp her love. The more he needs, the more he enjoys her tender sympathy. If he should sometimes, through the frailty of human nature, be so ungrateful as to speak harshly to her, she will bear with him, and forgive him. When he is dead, she will cherish his memory; and when the relation is loosed by the parting stroke, she will still do him good, by shewing kindness to his children for his sake.

Ver. 13. Some women will rather sit idle whilst they live, than seek wool or flax. If their husbands do not provide them proper materials for their work, they will consider it as a very sufficient excuse for idleness; but the virtuous woman abhors idleness, and loves her duty; and therefore she takes care to provide every necessary material and implement for work, that she may employ her time to the best advantage.

It is not enough for a wife to manage with frugality the fruits of her husband's industry, or to keep her servants at work; the virtuous woman works with her own hands; and it is not a burden but a pleasure to her to work with her hands. When Abraham's wise servant sought a wife for his master's son, he prayed to God to direct him to a woman that would give proof of her virtue, by her

industry and politeness.

Men and women have different tasks assigned them, and each must employ themselves in their proper work. She is not a virtuous woman that neglects the work of a woman, and intrudes herself into her husband's affairs. The good wife employs herself with cheerfulness about her wool and flax, and leaves others to mind their own affairs; at the same time, if there is any thing necessary for the family which cannot be provided at home, she will take proper care that it shall not be wanting.

Ver. 14. She does not contract a mean and narrow habit, by her close application to labour, nor employ her endeavours to amass a heap of useless treasure. She grudges no expense that may contribute to the happiness of her family, but cheerfully exchanges the fruits of her own labour for those necessaries and conveniences that are fetched from distant countries. While slothful wives can scarcely provide necessary clothing for their own families, she provides by her labour and good management, something to sell, that the price may serve for the purchase of other commodities.

By the wise management of providence, distant countries are rendered useful to one another, by the supply of their mutual wants. No country enjoys every advantage; but there is no country where industry will not procure both the commodities which the soil affords, and those which must be fetched from afar. The virtuous woman enjoys the fruit of other people's labour, and the produce of other climates; for divine providence bestows its blessing on her industry, and there is no want of any good thing endured in her house.

Ver. 15. Slothful women will not rise when day is come, but suffer the sun to run a great part of his daily race before they can think of shaking off their slumbers. The virtuous woman often prevents the dawning of the day, for she loves her duty more than her sleep. But it is to be remembered, that in the country where this inspired woman lived, the days and the nights were almost equal through the whole year, so that her meaning is, the virtuous woman rises before six in the morning.

But how is she employed when she is out of bed? David speaks of rising early to praise God; and no doubt the virtuous woman will not neglect her devotions, for she is a woman that fears the Lord; but she does not, under pretence of religion, forget what she owes to her family. She is a good and not a hard steward in the house of her husband, and takes care that none of her servants want their necessary portion of food. It is a happy thing to live under her roof; and her maidens are encouraged by her kindness as well as excited by her example, to perform with cheerfulness the tasks assigned them.

Ver. 16. Some of the female sex will consider every trinket that comes in their way, and spend more money than ever they gained by their work, in purchasing every trifle that can minister to their vanity, or gratify a capricious humour; but the virtuous woman employs her money in useful purchases. She will not, however, buy any thing without considering it, that she may judge whether it is worth the money demanded for it; but when she has considered, she buys; for she is not of a capricious and inconstant humour, like some whose mind changes more quickly than the wind.

What she buys she improves to advantage; for she has abundance of money, the fruit of her labour and good management, and with it she plants a vineyard in the field which she has bought, that her family may be well supplied with the conveniences of life in time to come.

Ver. 17. As rust gathers on metals that are seldom used, so sluggishness of disposition contracts a rust on the powers of the body and mind; and idle persons by degrees realize those excuses for their conduct which were at first mere shams. The virtuous woman is of a very different temper. She declines not any part of her duty through aversion to toil; and by exerting her strength with a cheerful mind, she improves it. Her labours give her health and vigour, and alacrity for new labours; so that she can with great ease and tranquillity go through those businesses which appear impossibilities to other women.

Ver. 18. Notwithstanding her activity, she is never in such a hurry as to do her work in a slight and superficial manner. Her merchandise is known to be good, and brings a ready market and a good price; and her knowledge of this is a sufficient reward of itself for her toils; for when the lazy are perpetually uneasy by their reflections on their own conduct, the consciousness of having done her duty, and the prospect of the advantages arising from it, are a constant source of satisfaction and cheerfulness to the virtuous woman.

She denies not to herself the necessary refreshments of sleep and rest. This would be a piece of vanity*. When the inspired moralist tells us that her candle goeth not out by night, her meaning is, that she never wearies of her labours, nor indulges herself or her maidens in sleep, beyond the call of reason and nature. In this sense Paul speaks of warning people day and night; for no virtuous woman ever laboured so diligently for the good of her family, as the great apostle for the advancement of the kingdom of Christ.

There are some fashionable ladies who keep their candles burning almost the whole night; but they make up for it abundantly, by sleeping away the one half of the day, as if a candle were better than the sun. The virtuous woman rises early in the morning, but she can bear sitting late also, when her business requires it, although she would by no means spend her candles, or her time upon cards.

Ver. 19. Very good employment for a servant maid; but will any lady spoil her white hands, and consume that time which might be employed so much more agreeably, in the vulgar trade of spinning? or did Lemuel's mother expect that his consort would employ herself in such work? Why not? She was to be a woman as well as a queen; and where is the law that forbids queens to be virtuous women, or to make use of their hands for those purposes for which the Creator designed them? At Abraham's desire, Sarah dressed a kid for her guests with her own hands, and Rebekah was so expert in household work, that she could impose upon her husband the flesh of kids for venison caught in the fields. Or if these examples are too ancient and sacred to be imitated by fine

ladies in modern times, Alexander the Great, and Augustus Cæsar, wore clothes that were made by their own sisters; and our amiable queen is pleased to set a royal example of industry to her subjects.

If the female sex must not be idle, although their rank might seem to exempt them from the drudgery of working, how inexcusable is it in men, who boast superior strength, to trifle away their days without doing any thing; especially, considering that their sphere of labour is so much wider, and their opportunities so much greater, of choosing some profession suited to their dispositions. Do they allege that their patrimonies set them above the need of doing any thing? This is the same thing with saying that God has been "so good to them, that they are under no obligation of serving God, by serving their generation according to the will of God.

Ver. 20. Although she is very careful of her family, yet she does not confine her attention to it. She labours with her hands, working that which is good, that she may have to give to him that needeth. Some wives are of such a perverse disposition that they have nothing for the poor, and will even grudge if their husbands bestow a little of the fruits of their labour upon them; but virtuous wives do not think that any thing is lost which is bestowed in works of charity. They would not wish to encourage idleness, by extending their liberality to those impudent beggars who come to their doors when they might be earning their livelihood by some useful employment; but they are kind to those whom they know to be really in want, and unable to work, and will bestow as much, at least, upon them, as some others of their sex bestow upon their own pride and luxury.

The husband of the virtuous woman has no reason to find fault with her for her goodness to the poor; for she is serving her family as well as herself by it, and bringing down the blessing of God upon her labours, which could not be successful without it. They were happy women who had the opportunity to minister unto Christ of their substance; and they enjoy the like happiness who take delight in relieving the distresses of the indigent for Christ's sake. Whatsoever is done unto the least of his brethren, in his name, he considers as if it were done to himself.

Ver. 21. She deserves not the character of a virtuous woman who is not concerned for the happiness and comfort of those who dwell under her roof. Although a virtuous wife attends, in the first place, to the happiness of her husband, as well as her own, and in the next place, to the welfare of her children; yet she extends her care to her servants also, and interests herself in their prosperity. But her kind and feeling temper is not the source of vexation but pleasure. She takes care that every member of her happy family is well fed and well clothed; therefore she is not afraid that any of them will be hurt by the snows and cold of winter.

The care of providing clothes for servants does not come so much within the province of those who keep none but hired servants; yet a virtuous woman will still see to their welfare in every article of importance.

The scarlet clothes that are here spoken of, were not costly and fine ornaments, as they are with us, otherwise it cannot be supposed that all her household would be clothed with them. Some translators make them to signify double garments. Convenience and health are studied by the virtuous woman, far above ornament and fashion.

Ver. 22. Although the virtuous woman is liberal to the poor, yet she is not impoverished. Some have been made poor by selfishness and narrowness; millions have been impoverished by pride and profusion; but none have been impoverished, and many have been enriched, by charity. The virtuous woman after reaching forth her hands to the poor, has enough remaining to provide proper and elegant furniture for her house, and a dress for herself suitable to her station.

There is no part of the character of a virtuous woman that will please some ladies so much as this part of it, which seems to allow some scope for finery. And it is not to be denied, that ornaments of a decent kind may very lawfully be used by those that can afford them; but Isaiah and Zephaniah, Paul and Peter, testify against that vanity of dress which is too much coveted by some of the sex. The adorning recommended to women by the apostles, does not consist in gold, and pearls, and costly array, but in modest apparel, shamefacedness, sobriety and good works, and a meek and quiet mind. And Lemuel's mother says nothing inconsistent with this doctrine. If the virtuous woman has coverings of tapestry for her house, she makes them to herself; if she is clothed with silk (or fine linen, as it may be rendered) and purple, she earns it by her labours and good management. She does not starve her charity by her finery, nor spend upon her dress that which might support a poor family; and she does not reckon herself superior to the duties of a wife, nor exempted by wearing silk and purple, from using her spindle and distaff. From all this it appears, that the inspired writer allows the use of costly array to none but those that can afford it in a full consistency with the duties which they owe to their families, to the poor, and to all men.

Ver. 23. The character drawn in this passage is that of a virtuous woman, who is in such a station of life that her husband has a right to a seat in the gate, among the elders of the land, who meet in that public place to transact public business, or to decide in causes that are brought before them. The wife of such a man may be allowed to wear silk and purple; but she is as careful to have her husband, as herself, dressed in a manner suitable to their rank. A man that sees him in the gate may easily judge that his wife is a virtuous woman. His clothes are decent, though not gaudy; his looks are cheerful; and the happiness which he enjoys at home appears in his face abroad.

Women are for the most part jealous of their husband's honour, and it lies in their power to procure them a great deal of respect; for it is a greater honour to have it said that a man has a virtuous wife, than to be admired for riches and titles. Phocion's wife, when she was asked about her jewels, said that her husband was her jewel; and a man who is married to a virtuous wife has Solomon's warrant to say that he is possessed of a crown.

Ver. 24. It is wonderful to think what industry will accomplish. We think that the virtuous woman has done great things, when she has provided her house and her family with every conveniency: but besides all this, she provides fine linen and girdles for sale; and when other women impoverish their husbands by buying, she enriches her husband by selling those valuable commodities for which there

is a constant demand.

It is only modern pride and laziness which has introduced the idea, that it is inconsistent with the dignity of a fine lady to make profit of her own manufactures. This virtuous woman, although her husband sits among the elders, does not think it a discredit, but an honour to herself, to make fine linen and girdles for sale; and the wise will praise her on account of it.

Ver. 25. "The virtuous woman is clothed with silk and purple*;" but she has much nobler ornaments than any thing of that sort. She possesses a greatness of soul, an inward vigour and resolution of mind, which sets her above all those little and tormenting fears which keep many of her sex in perpetual uneasiness. The strength of her mind displays itself in her behaviour, and gains her universal esteem from men; and she wears those ornaments which are of great price in the sight of God himself.

Those ladies that wear gold and jewels, dazzle the eyes and draw the regard of ordinary understandings; but how much brighter are the ornaments of a meek and quiet spirit, of strength and honour, which are the constant dress of the woman of virtue! Those that wear costly array rejoice for the present, because they think themselves the object of all men's admiration; but they are often preparing future sorrow for themselves by their extravagance, and their neglect of those accomplishments which would gain them respect in old age. The virtuous woman is not only cheerful at present, but she shall rejoice in time to come. It is a pleasure to her to reflect on her past conduct, and when she looks forward, she is not afflicted at the thought of the fading and uncertain nature of all earthly enjoyments; for, besides that she has made all the provision that human wisdom can reach against future contingencies, she can place a quiet confidence in the providence of God, which will not suffer the righteous to be moved. She knows that her beauty must wither by old age; but the regard of her husband, and the esteem of others, is founded upon other motives that will never perish.

The virtuous woman is one that fears the Lord†, and light is sown for such persons, and gladness for the upright in heart.

Ver. 26. As a sandy hill is to the feet of the aged, so is a wife full of words to a quiet man; but the virtuous woman plagues neither her husband nor any other man with her talk. She has learned that silence and subjection which the Apostle Paul recommends to wives. She does not lock up her lips in a sullen silence, but when she speaks it is a pleasure to hear her, for she opens her mouth with wisdom. Besides her other labours already mentioned, she rises in the morning, and finds time to read the Bible, and other instructive books; she meditates and reflects, and receives instruction from what she hears, and prays to the Father of lights; and so she improves daily in knowledge and prudence; and when she opens her mouth, she says nothing but what is well worthy of being heard. She says nothing that savours of levity, or affectation, nothing that is unseasonable, nothing to gain herself the reputation of wit. All her words are expressions of that good sense which adorns her mind, and that virtue which warms her heart, and regulates her conduct.

There are some who gain a character for smartness at the expense of their reputation. They will speak the rudest things without provocation, and applaud themselves for it, as an evidence of their wit and boldness. But the virtuous woman abhors the thought of making any person uneasy, but when there is a necessity for reproving, and even then, she will be as gentle as can possibly consist with the efficacy of her admonitions. Kindness is painted on her countenance, and flows from her tongue; for it possesses the throne of her heart, and gives law to all her words and actions. She is a living explication of that beautiful description of charity which the Spirit of God gives us by the pen of the Apostle Paul*.

Ver. 27. She carefully inspects the behaviour of her maidens and children. She is not idle when she is not working with her hands, but promoting the welfare of her family, by doing the duty of her place as mistress of the house; and her authority cannot fail of being respected in it, when she sets such a noble example of diligence before them.

She will take care that nothing indecent or offensive stain the honour of her family; and when she is served by the labour of her maidens, she will not suffer them to neglect the service of God.

She will be very careful of the behaviour of her children in their tender years, and will not see them trained up in idleness, or indulged in any vanity which may afterwards grow up into a vice. Lying, and Sabbath-breaking, and evil speaking, and corrupt communication, are banished from every place where her influence extends.

Her bread is well earned by her labours; and therefore she eats it with pleasure and appetite, and derives from it health and vigour to her body, and cheerfulness to her mind. The bread of idleness has a very contrary effect; it is eaten without relish, and produces indigestion, and an innumerable train of lingering diseases. He that eats it sins against God, who commands every man to work at his business with quietness, and to eat his own bread.

Ver. 28, 29. Were women to consider their own interest and satisfaction, they would all endeavour to be virtuous. Every person counts it a great happiness to enjoy the esteem of those whom he loves; and the virtuous woman finds herself blessed in the tender affection and high esteem of her dear children, and her dearer husband.

Her children are constant spectators of her virtue, and experience the sweet fruits of it; and they cannot forbear to express their sense of it by pouring out blessings upon her. A mother deserves the tender regard of her children, although she cannot lay claim to the character of a virtuous woman. Alexander the Great, having received a letter from the governor of Macedonia, complaining of his mother's conduct, was sensible of the justice of the complaints, but observed that Antipater did not consider that one tear of a mother would blot out a thousand such letters. If an imperious mother is entitled to respect how can children express sufficient regard to one that is the ornament to them, and a happy instrument in training them up to piety and virtue? If their tongues were silent in her praise, their dress, their cheerfulness, their good behaviour, when they follow her precepts and example, would be a constant encomium on her virtues.

The praises of her husband will be still more delightful to her ears than those of her children. What earthly happiness can a good wife desire, like the affection and approbation of the guide of her youth? and this a virtuous woman can scarcely fail of possessing, for what heart has so much marble in it, as to be able to resist those virtues which every hour appear in his other self? He cannot refrain from bestowing praise on one whom he finds the sweetener of all his cares, his faithful adviser in perplexities, his comforter in every distress, the instrument of a great part of his earthly felicity; his best friend, his unceasing joy, and his brightest crown. No wonder if the experience of such goodness and happiness makes him eloquent in her praise, and draws commendations from his tongue, that must be understood in a restricted sense to make them true. He prefers her to every other wife that ever lived upon earth; and he is sincere in doing it, for she ravishes his heart by the beauties of her mind and conversation. Piety will dispose a man to think meanly of himself, in comparison with other men, but highly of his wife, when he compares her with other women.

Ver. 30. Why is not beauty mentioned in the character of the virtuous woman? Is not beauty a bright ornament to her virtue? But there is no mention made of it in this description, because it is a mean quality in comparison of those which are here enumerated. It is but a flower that fades in a day; and the love produced by it is but a transient passion. When beauty is not sweetened by virtue, the woman that possesses it is but like a sow with a golden jewel in its snout, as Solomon tells us. At the best, beauty cannot secure that love which it raises, for when it becomes familiar to the lover, it palls upon his sight; and sometimes tempts him to curse that enchanting influence which blinded his eyes to more solid qualifications.

But a woman that fears the Lord, whether she has or has not beauty, shall be praised; for true piety is the beauty of the soul, and excels that which lies in complexion and features as much as heaven is higher than the earth, or eternity longer than time.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the most essential part of the virtuous woman's character. It is this which sanctifies every other part of it, and makes her all glorious within. Its praise is not of men but of God; yet the pleasant effects of it, which spread themselves into every part of her behaviour, cannot but excite the admiration of all beholders.

The flowers of poetry have been exhausted in dressing out beauty to the greatest advantage; but this one verse of Scripture is sufficient to give us just notions of its real value. It is indeed a lovely qualification when it is joined with piety and humility, but without them it is a snare and a trap. In choosing a wife, fools will follow their fancy, and the wise will act according to reason and the word of God.

Ver. 31. Her children praise her, her husband praises her; and let every man join to commend her virtues, and to hold her up to public view, that she may be imitated by all her sex. There are multitudes who never fail to trumpet abroad the faults of their neighbours; but it would be much better to conspire in spreading abroad the virtues of those that are an ornament to human nature, and models for the behaviour of all their neighbours.

She is entitled to honour; and if no tongue should give it to her, the works of charity and wisdom, which she is constantly practising, will be a monument to her name. She is praised by all the wise that know her, and she shall have praise of God on the day when the seal shall be set to every character.