

THE CHRISTIAN ADVOCATE.

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Religious Communications.

LECTURES ON THE SHORTER CATECHISM OF THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY OF DIVINES—ADDRESSED TO YOUTH.

LECTURE XXXIX.

(Continued from p. 100.)

II. IDOLATRY, as well as Atheism, is prohibited in the first commandment, according to that part of the answer before us, which says, that this precept "forbids the giving that worship and glory to any other which is due to God alone." We have already, indeed, shown that idolatry is *interpretative* atheism, by the decision of the apostle Paul, who affirms that the Ephesians, the noted and zealous worshippers of the heathen goddess Diana, "were atheists in the world," till their conversion to Christianity.

We may give a definition of idolatry in the very words of divine inspiration—It is, "to worship and serve the creature more [or rather*] than the Creator." It is of two kinds, *gross* or *palpable*, and *mental* or *secret*.

1. Gross or palpable idolatry is the rendering of *open* and *avowed* worship, or religious homage, to some creature. This was, and is, the great and leading sin of the

* *Rather*, is in this place the marginal and correct translation of the original word *magis*.

heathen world. It began very early. Some writers of character are of the opinion that it existed before the flood; and that this is intimated in the passage (Gen. vi. 2) which speaks of the sons of God contracting marriages with the daughters of men. However this might be, we learn from the distinct statement of Holy Scripture, that shortly after the general deluge, idolatry was so prevalent that the family of Abraham were worshippers of idols in Chaldea, till he was called to remove out of that country. The great design of God in the calling of Abraham doubtless was, to preserve in the world the knowledge of the true God. Yet his posterity manifested a proneness to idolatry that seems astonishing. Their making and worshipping a golden calf, even when the thunderings and lightnings of Sinai were before their eyes, was a memorable instance of this propensity: And although it does not appear that they ever had idols of their own invention, yet when settled in the land of Canaan, they, first or last, adopted almost all the idols of the neighbouring countries. It was their captivity in Babylon that eventually cured them of this propensity.

In every other nation of antiquity, except the Hebrew, the grossest idolatry was practised, and that continually. It was so far from being prevented or diminished by hu-

the evil to which they are strongly inclined by their corrupted nature. But, if "in our flesh dwelleth no good thing," if of ourselves we, absolutely, can do nothing that is [spiritually] good; we can, in the mean time, "do all things in Christ, who strengthens us." This is the case with those whom we call regenerated, or children of God by Jesus Christ. "When you were dead in trespasses and sins," says Paul to the Ephesians, "wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience. God hath quickened you together with Christ, by whose grace ye are saved. He has abolished the enmity of the flesh, that we might be new men." God having compassion on miserable man, miserable by his own fault, revealed himself to him in his word; and because it was impossible for sinners to draw near to God, it pleased God to come down to them, that he might teach them those things which belong to their eternal interests. As they could not call upon his name and believe in him, since they knew him not, and had never heard him speak, he sent them messengers, that they might speak on his part, and in his name. "Faith comes by hearing;" but that the word may not be a dead letter, he accompanies it with his Holy Spirit, who renders it living and efficacious, a "two-edged sword" to slay the "old man," a "hammer" to break our hearts of stone, "a consuming fire" to destroy the pollutions of sin, in a word, "the power of God unto salvation; to every one that believes."

(To be continued.)

FOR THE CHRISTIAN ADVOCATE.

CHRISTIAN OLD AGE.

The prayer of the Psalmist is touching: "Cast me not off in the

time of old age; forsake me not when my strength faileth." Amidst the vigour and buoyancy of youth, we take little forethought of the days when despondency and feebleness, and the decays of the human fabric, give tokens that "man goeth to his long home." Most of us secretly wish for old age, but it is without any distinct view of the pains, the sorrows, and the temptations of that gloomy descent into the valley of the shadow of death. Hence arises the neglect with which the aged are sometimes treated by those who, seeking only their own present pleasure, leave to the loneliness of his grief the poor sinking friend—nay, sometimes the tender and affectionate parent.

Respect for old age was insisted on by the heathen moralists, with a zeal and constancy which may condemn the ingratitude and inattention of many professed Christians. The hoary head was honoured by every external indication of reverence; the youth was accounted infamous who failed to render this affectionate homage. Every classical scholar is familiar with the anecdote, which records the applause extorted from the young men of Athens, by the Spartan superiority in this virtue. The relics of antiquity do not furnish a more delightful morsel than the exquisite dialogue of the Roman Orator on this subject: and if a heathen acknowledged the duty of leaving something which might alleviate the sorrows of the aged, a Christian may surely spend a few moments not unprofitably in examining the same subject, as illustrated by the gospel.

I loathe the unfeeling flippancy of the young man, who, with a contemptuous sneer, neglects the mournful complaints of his elders, as the result of imaginary pains, and unreasonable melancholy. Old age is sometimes characterized by asperity and moroseness; but who can look for the fruits of youth from

the blighted and withered trunk? We have seen the venerable father sinking apace, without compassion, without attendance, without the ordinary charities of life, though surrounded by those who derived from him their being. The hands which for long years laboured for their support, are now tremulous and inefficient; the brightness of the eye has gone out; the sight, the hearing, the intellect, have all become enfeebled; pain and helplessness are daily increasing, and the poor old man is treated with the neglect, but not the affection, which children experience. Is it strange that he sometimes feels himself a burden to his own family, that he almost suspects that his departure would be welcomed, that he fails to preserve that sweetness of temper which he once exhibited?

The afflictions of old age are not imaginary. The hilarity even of robust manhood in its glory is speedily quenched, when a painful malady exhausts the strength, relaxes the sinews, and prohibits muscular exertion. And though it be but for a week or a month, the prisoner sighs for enlargement. What then is the situation of the man whose limbs are scarcely adequate to the offices of ordinary motion, whose body is weighed down, whose joints are rigid, whose step is tottering, whose language is almost unintelligible; and who knows that in this world there is no deliverance, and that he must lose, day by day, some portion of the scanty remnant of strength which is allowed him? The recreations of youth are forbidden pleasures. The book which he may endeavour to solace his hours of forlorn desertion, presents a confused glimmering of hieroglyphics, for the eloquent eye has sunk into deadness. These are trials which call into requisition all the accumulated experience, and the enlarged graces, of three score years and ten.

There are indeed some instances of those who pass through life without much sickness or pain, who mount the horse, or ply the early walk, or even guide the plough, with the elasticity of former days, and who enjoy a florid old age, and rather fade away than die. But these are rare exceptions, and are pointed out as singularities in nature. Instead of this, we commonly behold an emaciated and decrepit form, the prey of disease, tried with daily suffering and nightly disquietude. The organs of sense become obtuse, if not incompetent to perform their functions; and often some disorder which has made occasional inroads in former days, seems to seat itself in the system, and take possession, not without a host of subsidiary pains, which increase as the sands of life run low. The taste for pleasures and amusement has taken its flight with the capacity for enjoyment, and a dreary waste is presented even in the exuberance of this world's comforts. The man who in this situation has not piety, has nothing, and the soul either corrodes with discontent, or sinks into a sleepy hebetude.

Whither now shall the decayed sufferer look for sympathy? He can number but one or two of his early associates, and alas! their condition is as pitiable as his own. He has outlived a generation, and he wonders that he remains in life. The texture of the body has become hard; but this is only the emblem of that petrification of the inner man, which refuses new impressions, and cannot be warmed and opened to fresh enjoyment. So have I seen the dismantled trunk of the once sturdy oak, standing alone among the relics of the forest, and unpitied only because it cannot feel.

The aged man is often cut off from the social circle, though he sits in the midst of it. He cannot keep pace with the rapid march of

novelties, which pass like a moving pageant before the gaze of others. Is it marvellous then that his thoughts stray among the recollections of former days, when he was young; that he speaks of better times, and looks with suspicion upon those things which pass around him? Perhaps his sight, or his hearing, or both, are impaired. In vain then does he strive to catch some dismembered hints of what seems so much to interest the group around his fire-side. He hears the sound of mirth, but is ignorant of the occasion. If he makes inquiries, he is deemed obtrusive and vexatious. If he meekly sits in silence, he is sullen and dissatisfied.

Such are the trials of many, and with all these distresses we need not wonder that they become less cheerful than before. The springs of life are dried up. Without, all is uncongenial; within, there is a sense of many ailments and many sorrows. Over these things the mind will brood, and the countenance, as a faithful index, become sour and gloomy, while a heavy cloud seems to gather with increasing blackness. Now, if to this is added the neglect of friends and relatives, the cup of sorrow already overflows. And this is not unfrequent. The aged grand-parent is often to be seen in some solitary corner of the family assemblage, silent and unnoticed, as the old pictures which frown or smile unheeded from the walls. He is fed and clothed, and his physical comfort is sometimes studiously regarded; but it is not for his sake that you observe the bustle of preparation; it is not for his gratification that the topic of discourse is introduced. And if now and then appealed to, for some ancient date or narrative, he is bewildered in the mazes of thought, memory fails to do its office, and the mortifying conviction that mind as well as body is preparing for a great change, comes

home to his troubled heart with additional poignancy.

To the aged believer, it is painful to find that his ability to engage in active labour is diminished; and this is made more distressing by the reflection that he has not taken advantage of more favourable seasons. It would be well, if the young would here consider their latter end, and lay up in store matter for comfortable retrospect. The aged can tell them that a life of carelessness ensures an old age of remorse.

But it would be both a tedious and a painful attempt, to depict the various trials to which the human race are subject, in this season of feebleness and disquietude. It will be more useful to glance at the temptations to which old age is liable. For the enemy of souls, so far from remitting his malicious endeavours when the weary traveller has nearly accomplished his journey, often sharpens his most annoying shafts, and redoubles his overwhelming attacks, at this last stage of human progress. Knowing that his time is short, he grows more virulent in his enmity. If he cannot destroy, he will not fail to harass and dishearten; if he despairs of seducing the heavy laden pilgrim from his path, he will render it a way of snares, and conflicts, and alarms. Have we not beheld the man of hoary hairs sometimes yielding, even when the premonitions of death were frequent, to sins of which, in days of strength, he had never been suspected? The season of youthful passion has long since passed away, and the gratifications of sense are no longer sought. The reign of fiery anger and manly ambition has departed with the summer of life. But there are latent germs of sin, which seem by some spiritual anomaly, to swell forth into action in the clouded winter of old age. A heathen has remarked the absurdity of growing in our love for wealth, as our need of it was every day becoming less.

But neither gentile ethics nor evangelical precepts have succeeded, in opening the close hand of avarice, or teaching the departing miser to relinquish his grasp of the world. The power of divine grace is demanded, as that alone which can exclude this idolatry, by setting the affections and expectations upon heavenly things, and cherishing the charitable emotions of the soul.

The aged man seldom receives new impressions. You plead in vain with that heart which has for many years resisted the tender appeals of imploring misery. The fountains of compassion sometimes cease to flow, because their gentle gush has been obstructed. It is the law of our constitution, that the feelings which we neglect to bring into operation become almost extinct, and the habit of the soul is changed by the encouraged selfishness, to which the valetudinarian, whether young or old, is ever tempted. The man, then, who would resist and conquer this apathy in whatever way exhibited, must labour to cherish and even augment the exercise of every charitable feeling. Though his infirmities increase, let not his active piety be on the wane. He cannot now seek out in person the suffering poor, or the mourning widow. Let him lead the young of his domestick circle into these edifying scenes, by making them his almoners. Let him withdraw his thoughts from his own distresses, and devise means for alleviating the sorrows of others. He cannot be the leader in the benevolent enterprises of the day, but he can aid their councils, he can from a distance cheer their youthful agents, he can recount their successes. Such was the old age of the pious Scott, whose labours, though they became the labours of the fire-side, ceased only with his powers. Such was the serene decline of our own Boudinot, and of many whose names are withheld, only because they must not be of-

fended by the praise which all are ready to render except themselves.

There is reason to believe that the mental imbecility of age is hastened, in most cases, by inaction. The instances are numerous, in which this eclipse has been immediately consequent upon the sudden dereliction of former labours: and it would surely be a blessing to the world, if we could by any means secure the gentle beams of a declining luminary, even for a few more hours.

We have said that the sorrows of the aged man are many, and we may add that unless he is watchful over his heart, a spirit of peevishness and asperity will gain a place in his bosom. Instead of the sweet and complying temper of the gospel, we sometimes witness the growth of a morose and querulous disposition. Instead of gentle remonstrance, or encouragement, you hear daily comparisons between the past and the present time; you are told how far the simplicity, and the honesty, and the piety of the olden time surpassed what is witnessed now; how "there were giants in those days," when the present generation was unborn; and would be led to believe, if you could yield implicit faith, that the world and the church are in the "sear and yellow leaf." Now all this may be excused; since the old man has been, from the days of Nestor, "*laudator temporis acti*;" but when we discover a disposition to carp at every variation in opinion, a discontent and restlessness which are increased by the happiness of others, a gathering frown when the exhilaration of childhood is exhibited; when we observe a temper dissatisfied and hard to please, rejecting the proffered kindness, and rebuking the smile of congratulation, we are constrained to acknowledge that there must be a lamentable deficiency in Christian kindness.

To all this the troubled minds of the aged are tempted. For a re-

medy, we need only propose the assiduous and persevering culture of benevolent and tender feelings, a culture which must be commenced in days of strength, or it will be impracticable or futile in the evening of life. So far is this obliquity of temper from being an inseparable concomitant of old age, that I am cheered even now with the acquaintance of a Christian friend, whose bland and paternal manners are the daily recommendation of the religion which he professes. The smile of satisfaction and good will plays upon his features, and the very children of the neighbouring houses run out to shake the hand of good old Father——. The smallest attentions seem to excite feelings of gratitude in his aged breast; and the cheerfulness of the fireside circle, instead of being chilled, receives new animation from his discourse.

In connexion with this may be mentioned the melancholy which is so common at this time of life. This, in many instances, is but one part of the slow consuming malady which is mainly seated in the bodily frame. A diseased nervous temperament has caused a sympathy of deranged action in the mental functions; and when this is the case, our compassion rather than our counsel is demanded. Yet sometimes in this case, and always in cases of ordinary dejection, the great exciting cause is the continued brooding over real or imaginary calamities. A life of inaction is the nursing mother of gloom and disquietude; and they must be met and overcome by the renewed exercise of faith, and hope, and divine love. The man of God should not suffer the world to say that his comfort decreases, as he draws nearer to his reward. Christian joy should make him cheerful: the expectation of heaven should render him submissive and patient, and his sun should go down in serene brightness, even though clouded before.

A suspicious temper is the last of the snares of Satan, which shall be mentioned. Could the evils already alluded to be avoided, we should have no occasion to dwell upon this: and the means of escape or victory are very much the same. The man who sees around him the activity and fervour of younger persons, and thinks of his own imbecility, begins to imagine that he is a cipher in the world's estimation. He needs more than ever the affectionate assistance of those around him, while they perhaps are ignorant of the extent of his wants. He attributes unintentional neglect to deliberate contempt, and transfers in imagination his own sense of weakness and uselessness to the minds of others. Thus, as he thinks, overlooked, and almost despised, he cherishes a secret chagrin, which at length is expressed with an appearance of irritation which surprises even himself. Let the Christian veteran disdain the thought of giving harbour to such a temper. Let humble submission make him contented with his lot, since in his day he has been observed and honoured. Let mild and equable cheerfulness, in look, gesture and language ensure, as it ever will, the attention and the love of his kindred and friends. Let a view of the glory soon to be revealed, take off his contemplation from the trifles of his few remaining days.

In the conclusion of this essay, I would in a very brief manner, touch upon some of the duties which are referable to the season of old age.

It is the duty of the aged servant, as of every believer, to grow in grace. Instead of becoming remiss, when the crown is almost within reach, the feeble and wearied Christian should strive with renewed alacrity. Now is his salvation nearer than when he believed. Now let his warfare with indwelling corruption be more constant. The call already sounds,

"The bridegroom cometh!" Let his loins be girt, and his lamp burning. His days are nearly expended; now, if ever, is it his duty to redeem the time, to forget the things which are behind, and to reach forth towards those which are before. The warmth of early affections, which is so much mingled with animal heats, is not to be expected; but his are the convictions of experience, the genial glow of confirmed and abiding love, the unshaken trust in that God who has said, "And even to old age am I he, and even to hoary hairs will I carry you."

It is the duty of the aged to exemplify the purity and charity of the gospel. The world is vigilant in its examination of Christian consistency. How lamentable is the exhibition, when the soul of him who for many years has been a pillar in the house of God, becomes less and less affected with the great interests of the church. On the other hand, the faith of all is corroborated when the hoary sire is seen to melt under the impression of divine truth, to breathe forth the charity of the blessed Jesus, to grow in meekness, and contentment, and humility, and zeal for God. It is the duty and the privilege of the "old disciple," to admonish and encourage young believers. The affectionate and sincere remonstrances of the aged seldom give offence. We recognise their claim to experience and practical wisdom, and scarcely a day occurs, in which they have not an opportunity for stimulating the sluggishness, or enlightening the ignorance, or repressing the excess of younger brethren. And then how cheering is it to listen to the narrative of the goodness and faithfulness of our covenant Lord, from one who has made the trial of his love for half a century!

The aged Christian should make it a daily task to withdraw his affections from the world. When a vessel is about to sail, it is time to loosen her moorings; when a journey is about to be ended, the traveller forgets to care for the minute comforts of the equipage, with which he is already weary; when the goal is just in sight, the man who runs must cast off every weight which might encumber him. Let the Christian think only of heaven, when he is at its very gate; let him view the world as the house of his pilgrimage, which contains nothing worthy of his care; and let him count all things but loss, for the excellency of that vision for which faith is to be exchanged.

Finally, old age is eminently the season in which to make hourly preparation for death. He who at the close of life, has correct views of his situation, will feel himself to be waiting on Jordan's bank for the speedy summons. He will examine now, before it is too late, into the reality of that holiness which he has been supposed to have, and without which he cannot see God. With unceasing prayer, he will seek the trial of those eyes which cannot err. He will make provision for the passage, and burnish his arms for the last conflict. This ought to be a season of joyful anticipation; for all the brightest hopes of a wearisome life are now about to be realized, and in the twinkling of an eye, care, and sorrow, and pain, and corruption, are to give place to peace, and purity, and immortal youth.

Such are a few suggestions which I would offer upon a subject less frequently discussed than its importance seems to demand.

S. L. R.