

THE
BALTIMORE LITERARY
AND
RELIGIOUS MAGAZINE.

VOL. II.

DECEMBER, 1836.

No. 12.

IMPORTUNITY IN PRAYER RECOMMENDED AND ENFORCED;

A SERMON, .

By Rev. Colin M'Iver, Fayetteville, N. C.

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you; for every one that asketh, receiveth; and he that seeketh, findeth; and to him that knocketh, it shall be opened. Or what man is there of you, who if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? or if he ask a fish will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father, which is in heaven, give good things to them that ask him? *Matthew*, vii. 7, 11.

THESE words were spoken by that divine teacher, who "*spake as never man spake.*" They are a part of that most excellent discourse which is emphatically styled, his "*Sermon on the Mount.*" The obvious design of the words to which your attention is at this time particularly directed, is to urge on all those to whom they are addressed, *importunity* in prayer, as essential to success in securing spiritual blessings; and not only as essential to success, but as invariably efficacious in drawing down on the sincere and devout supplicant, every blessing either of a temporal or spiritual nature, which his circumstances require. Whatever we sincerely desire to possess, we are never backward, earnestly to seek; and therefore, we may justly consider the anxiety with which any object is sought, as a sure and infallible test of the value attached to that object. If for instance, we labour under any bodily disease, we are generally very anxious to be restored to health; and very diligent in the use of those means which afford us hope of relief; and in such a case, our anxiety and diligence will be in exact proportion to the value which we attach to health. If, again, we are sensible of our spiritual blindness, and desirous of being instructed in those things which belong to our peace, precisely in proportion as we value this instruction, will be the solicitude with which we seek it; and those who are so infatuated, as to remain indifferent about those things which deeply concern them, deserve to feel the consequences of their criminal indifference. This was the ground of that exhortation which our blessed Lord gave his disciples, in the verse immediately preceding our text. "Give not," said he, "that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you." Having prescribed this, as a rule of action for his disciples in their intercourse with others, he pro-

ceeds, in the words of our text, to assure them, that their Heavenly Father, dealing with his creatures as rational beings, shall dispense his blessings, according to the same rule,—not to those who are careless and indifferent about them, but to those who sensibly feel their need of them; and who therefore seek them, with anxious solicitude, and with earnest importunity. To such characters, he gives a most solemn assurance, that they shall not be disappointed; but that they shall assuredly find the object of their most anxious hopes infallibly secured. “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh, receiveth, and he that seeketh, findeth; and to him that knocketh, it shall be opened. Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then; being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in Heaven, give good things to them that ask him?” In further addressing you from these words, I shall endeavour, in humble reliance on divine grace, 1st, to direct your attention to the value and importance of those blessings, which we are here called on to *ask*, to *seek*, and to *knock* for. 2ndly. To explain what is included in the *asking*, *seeking*, and *knocking*, to which we are here exhorted; and 3dly, to illustrate those arguments by which our Lord enforces this exhortation. First, then, I am to direct your attention to the value and importance of those blessings, which we are here called on to *ask*, to *seek*, and to *knock* for. The blessings here referred to, include every thing that a rational creature destined for an immortality of everlasting happiness, or eternal misery, can esteem desirable; they include every thing which tends to promote our best interest, and to secure our permanent felicity;—even pardon of sin;—reconciliation with God,—and an everlasting residence in God’s presence, where there is fulness of joy; and at his right hand, where there are pleasures forevermore. So valuable and so important are these blessings, that a few moments, separately devoted to the contemplation of each of them, cannot, at present, be an unprofitable employment of our time and attention. To a mind truly conscious of its own frailties, to a heart, deeply sensible of its own pollution, what blessing can be more desirable, than the pardon of sin. By nature, we are all dead in trespasses and in sins; we have lost all claim and title to the favour of God; our carnal minds are enmity against him, and not subject to his law, neither indeed can be; and whilst we remain in this sad condition, we are under his wrath and curse, and so made liable to all the miseries of this life, to death itself, and to the pains of Hell forever. When we are brought duly to feel, this our miserable and lost condition, when our eyes are opened to perceive our awfully dangerous and perishing state, does it not afford us unspeakable relief, to be enabled to lay hold on the pardoning mercy of God, through Jesus our Redeemer, whilst we acknowledge and feel his sovereignty, to take encouragement from the thought, that “there is forgiveness with him, that he may be feared?” Well, then, my brethren, this most desirable, real and inestimable blessing may be obtained, by importunity in prayer, if, in God’s appointed way, we apply for it, we shall assuredly obtain not merely a partial, but a full and free pardon of all sin, whether

original or actual, whether remembered or forgotten, whatever be its character, whatever be its circumstances, whatever be its aggravations; yes, blessed be God, through the Lord Jesus Christ, is preached unto us, the forgiveness of sins; and by him all that believe are justified from all things from which it was not possible for them to be justified by the law of Moses! Is there any earthly enjoyment, that in the view of a penitent prodigal, will bear a comparison with this blessing? Ah, no! In the estimation of him who is truly humbled on account of his sins, all the kingdoms of this world, and all their glory, will sink into utter insignificance, when compared with the pardon of his sins, through the atonement of his Divine Mediator! Intimately connected with this invaluable blessing, is reconciliation with God. This also is attainable by these importunate pleaders with God, who fully obey the injunction in our text. What an exalted idea must it give us of the love of God towards us, guilty; rebellious sinners, to reflect, that "*when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God, by the death of his son:—that from a state of enmity, sinners should be restored to a state of favour and friendship with God; so that now, to those who have an interest in the atonement and intercession of Jesus, "there is no condemnation."*" Surely, no one can estimate the real value of this blessing; nor form an adequate idea of the happiness enjoyed by its conscious possession! O how delightful the thought of securing it! How dismal and heart-rending the thought of being left without it; of being found at the last day, not among the chosen friends, but among the *declared enemies* of Christ! I would then, entreat you, brethren, with all the solicitude of a commissioned messenger of Jesus, to seek this blessing, at a throne of divine grace, with the utmost importunity; and in the language of an inspired apostle, I would exhort you, no longer to remain strangers to God, or enemies to Christ. "Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ; as though God did beseech you by us, we pray you, in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God."

The blessings on which we have been reflecting, constitute the joy and solace of believers here; and there is a happiness in them, which this world can neither give nor take away; but the possession of these furnishes them with the assurance of another, which transcends all description, which eye hath not seen, which ear hath not heard, and to conceive which hath never entered into the heart of man; even an everlasting residence in God's presence, where there is fulness of Joy; and at his right hand, where are pleasures forevermore. This blessing is also in reserve for those who fully comply with the injunction in our text; and is fraught with a felicity, in attempting to describe which, all language sinks, and all imagination fails. These, then, are the blessings, which in the passage now before us, we are called on to *ask*, to *seek*, and to *knock* for. Having had a *faint* view of their value and importance, (for an *adequate* view, is beyond the reach of our limited *vision*,) we proceed now, in the second place, to explain what is included, in the *asking*, *seeking*, and *knocking*, to which we are here exhorted. The words here used, seem to be strongly expressive of importunity; and therefore the least thing essential to this *asking*, *seeking*, and *knocking* must be, that those concerned therein, should be

deeply sensible of their need of the blessings thus sought. With a temper of mind short of this, it cannot be expected, that they will make a suitable or effectual application for those blessings; nor will God confer them upon any to whom he has not previously granted a heart, duly sensible of their value, and perfectly disposed to receive them with joy and gratitude. To a successful application for needed blessings, it is likewise essential, that the applicants should be fully persuaded alike of God's ability, and willingness to grant them, and both ready and willing to receive them on such terms, as God in his infinite mercy, may think proper to prescribe; submitting unreservedly to his authority, and casting themselves entirely on his infinite mercy, through Jesus Christ, whom they must distinctly recognize in all his offices, as their prophet, their priest, and their king; to be ruled, taught and saved by him. Such a state of mind as this, producing a corresponding importunity and fervour in addressing him who is the hearer of prayer, constitutes that temper and disposition, with which the children of God, *ask, seek, and knock* for those inestimable blessings, which have, on this occasion, engaged our attention. Nothing now remains, but, that I endeavour briefly to illustrate those arguments by which our Lord enforces the exhibition contained in our text. On attending to the passage under our consideration; you will perceive, that to the exhortation which it contains, is annexed a promise, that success will be the sure encouragement of an earnest application for needed blessings; and this, not only with reference to those to whom the exhortation was more immediately addressed, but also with reference to all those who faithfully attend to our Lord's injunction, in the words before us. Our blessed Redeemer not only says, "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you;" but he adds, "For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened." This surely is sufficient encouragement. No man who is not deplorably infatuated, could for a moment, hesitate to comply with the injunction before us, under such an encouraging view of the consequence of such compliance. But, as if this were not enough, our Lord condescends to reason with us on the subject; and to assure us, that if even sinful man is moved by paternal feeling towards his offspring; much more will God, who is the very essence of love, attend to the desires and petitions of those who humbly and sincerely approach him with the voice of earnest and important supplication. "Or what man is there of you, said our blessed Redeemer, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in Heaven, give good things to them that ask him?" With what energy do these illustrations address the feelings of our hearts! The appeal which our Lord has here made to the feelings of those who are parents, is so very striking, that every one who heard him must find his heart revolt against a conduct so contrary to parental affection. To heighten the effect, therefore, by furnishing the most encouraging motive for importunity, he adds the emphatical words with which our text concludes; "If ye then, being evil

know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in Heaven give good gifts unto them that ask him." Observe, brethren, to whom these things are promised; it is *to them that ask him*, that the asking itself might be a ground of encouragement to every supplicant. This encouraging promise is given by him to whom "all power is given in heaven and on earth." Yea, he has repeated this promise again and again: "And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the son." "Verily, verily, I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you." Yes; brethren, rest assured, that if you apply to him, with fervent importunity, for such blessings as you need, you shall not be disappointed. To all such pleaders, the most infallible assurance of success is given, in the promise before us. That promise declares to us, that God is far more ready to give good things to them that ask him, than any human parent is, to give bread to a starving, supplicating child! He is as much more ready, as his goodness transcends that of fallen man, or as his riches exceed our poverty! Surely, human language is incapable of expressing any thing more forcibly. Parents may be destitute of natural affection; paternal kindness may be wearied out by repeated provocations, and often a father must greatly deny himself, while he supplies the wants of his children, yet so strong are the feelings of a parent, that, depraved as men are, few can bear to see their children in distress without relieving them: "How much more," then, "shall your Father which is in Heaven, give good things to them that ask him." But, is there no such thing as asking, and not receiving? Undoubtedly there is; yet none in the sense here evidently intended. A man may ask in vain, when he addresses himself to an idol, or tutelary saint, instead of the living God; he may ask what the Lord hath never promised, or without feeling any need or desire of the mercy that he craves; he may offer proud and hypocritical prayers, he may crave exemption from punishment, whilst he wilfully cleaves to sin; he may ask for temporal and spiritual blessings, without using other proper means of obtaining them; or he may come, in his own name, in contempt of the appointed mediator. A man may seek the world first, and then attend to religion, as far as it consists with his worldly interests and pursuits; he may seek salvation in a way of his own devising, or in a more smooth and flattering method than that of the gospel, or he may begin to seek, when "the master of the house hath risen up, and shut to the door;" nay, a man may knock at mercy's gate when he is in a fright, and leave off, when his fears and apprehensions are vanished. But he who comes as a sinner, to a merciful God, through the divine advocate, for all the blessings of salvation, in sincerity, and with earnest prayer, waiting and persevering as having hope in this way, and none in any other; he who seeks spiritual blessings in the first place, without delay, and in the use of all appointed means, and he who knocks and waits at mercy's gate, as resolved either to find admission, or to perish knocking, will be infallibly sure to succeed. Therefore, dearly beloved brethren, let me exhort you, to approach a throne of grace in God's appointed way, with hearts duly sensible of your wants, and of your absolute dependence on him, who

alone can supply them, that ye may at length receive all the blessings which he hath in reserve for all who love him. "Ask, and it shall be given you, seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth, and he that seeketh findeth, and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. Or what man is there of you, who if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone; or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in Heaven, give good things to them that ask him."

CORRESPONDENCE.

These letters will explain the origin of, and preliminaries, in the discussion on the doctrine of Future Rewards and Punishments, between the Conductors of this Magazine and the Editor of the Universalist paper of this city.

BALTIMORE, Dec. 17, 1835.

To the editor of the Southern Pioneer and Philadelphia Liberalist.

Sir:—There has been put into our hands this evening, a copy of your newspaper, dated the day after to morrow, in which you make some strictures on an article in the No. of the Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine, for the present month. We have reason to know, that you have caused your paper to be sent to us.

The article you take exceptions at, was published as a communication; you notice this fact in your paper—you were no doubt aware that you could have had the author's name on application to him through us. But your whole conduct shows, first, that you desired to make the matter personal with us, and secondly, that you desire a controversy with somebody on the absurd dogmas of your sect.

It is our purpose, Sir, to gratify you, in both respects. We are ready to undertake to prove on the terms stated, in your editorial article sent to us—that the distinguishing doctrines of Universalism are both false in themselves and ruinous to the souls of all who embrace them. Or to be more specific, we will endeavour to prove,

1. That there is, after death, a future state of rewards and punishments.

2. That the estate of those who die in their sins, is eternally miserable, in that future state.

We will discuss these two propositions in the columns of your newspaper, from week to week, on the terms proposed by you.

The favour of an early and categorical answer is requested.

The Conductors of the Balt. Lit. and Rel. Magazine.

BALTIMORE, Dec. 18, 1835.

To the Editors of the Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine.

Gentlemen:—Your note of yesterday was duly received. It is true, as you intimate, that a number of the Southern Pioneer and Philadelphia Liberalist containing strictures on an article which appeared in the Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine for the