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18-9-27

THE
VIRGINIA

RELIGIOUS MAGAZINE.

VOL. II.]

JULY 1806.

[NO. IV.

LIFE OF JUSTIN THE MARTYR, CONCLUDED.

That the vulgar made Gods of the most brutish objects such as dogs, cats, wolves, goats, hawks, dragons, beetles, crocodiles, &c. &c.

This zeal in the cause of christianity, set a keener edge upon the malice and rage of his enemies, particularly that of the philosopher Crescens. He finding it impracticable to confute Justin by force of argument, determined to foil him by force of the secular arm. Marcus Antoninus the Emperor, was not more remarkable for his attachment to philosophy than to the most rigid superstition. He had been, from his youth, educated in the Salian College, and had there gone through all its offices in his own person. His opinions of the christians were, that their resolute and undaunted firmness in death, arose from mere stubbornness and obstinacy, rather than from a judicious and deliberate consideration of principles or expectations. Crescens found means to ingratiate himself into his favor, and soured his mind against Justin. Indeed the Emperor had been forewarned of this by Justin himself, having been publicly told by him, that Crescens, or some other of their titular philosophers, would lay snares to undermine, torment and perhaps crucify him.

He had given great offence to Crescens by the closeness of his arguments, and the severity of his reproofs for his wickedly and ungenerously traducing the Christians as atheistical and irreligious. Justin had told him, ' that he talked about

ESSAYS, MORAL AND RELIGIOUS.



FOR THE VIRGINIA RELIGIOUS MAGAZINE.

A series of letters on the tendency of religion to promote the happiness of mankind in the present world.

PHILANDER TO POLITUS, LETTER IV.

SIR,

It affords me much pleasure to find that your prejudices against a life of piety are wearing away. Let me, however, again remind you that mere reasoning can never give you a complete idea of the sweetness of devotion. It must be experienced, or it cannot be adequately understood. My aim in writing these letters is at once to convince your understanding of the happy tendency of piety, and to excite your heart to an earnest and persevering pursuit of it. With these views I proceed in the discussion before us.

My second argument is that piety saves us from the thralldom of vicious appetites and passions, the great sources of misery to mankind.

That much the greater part of the evils of life spring from our irregular and criminal propensities is not a point of abstruse speculation, but of indisputable fact. The passions which govern men are indeed very various; and some of them more manifestly criminal and more rapidly ruinous than others. But who is there, destitute of the love and fear of God, that is not subjected to the tyranny of at least some one unreasonable propensity, by which his tranquility is often disturbed, and his enjoyments more or less embittered? Who has not observed and lamented the dreadful consequences of unbridled passions, both to their subjects and to others connected with them? And what but the commanding energy of religious affection can restore and preserve order in the soul? Let us select a few instances by way of illustration.

Observe the victim of habitual drunkenness. Without the means of gratifying his depraved appetite, he is miserable beyond expression. And what a train of evils does its gratification produce! time wasted, quarrels fomented, reason prostrated, fortune neglected or squandered, friends disgusted and lost; the whole character degraded below that of the beasts that perish, the dearest connexions reduced to want and beggary, and the body hastened to an untimely grave, as well as the soul to eternal destruction. 'Who hath wo? (says the wise man;) who hath sorrow? who hath contentions? who hath babbling? who hath wounds without cause? who hath redness of eyes? They that tarry long at the wine; they that go to seek mixed wine.' For whatever temporary gratification it may afford, 'at the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder.' The fear of God is the best preservative against this insinuating and destructive vice; and almost without exception the only deliverer from its power. And will any rational man deny the superiority in point of happiness of him who lives temperately over him who is under bondage to the intoxicating bowl? The drunkard himself does not deny it in the hour of sober reflection.

Contemplate next the man of pleasure, the votary of sensual indulgence. The miseries which flow from lawless lust are much like those of drunkenness, but more speedy and more extensive. Those principles of human nature which attract the sexes to each other produce, when exalted by sentiment, and governed by virtue, the purest felicity of the present life. But how large a portion of the wretchedness of mankind may be traced to their perversion as its cause! The debauchee makes great sacrifices and pays dearly, even now, for his transient, insipid and guilty gratifications. He is the victim of anxious cares and terrors, the destroyer of his own health of body and strength of mind, the seducer often and betrayer of unsuspecting weakness, the author of shame and anguish to himself and others. 'Marriage, (says the Apostle,) is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled; but whoremongers and

adulterers God will judge.' And he does often judge them, even in this world, with punishments exemplarily terrible. 'The end of a strange woman is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged. Her feet go down to death; her steps take hold on hell.' From this gulph of iniquity and ruin religion has power to preserve the young, surrounded with temptation; and even to deliver the wretch who is thus plunging into destruction temporal and eternal. And is not that chastity which the gospel enjoins, that honorable love on which the Almighty smiles, infinitely more happy than a life of wandering debauchery? How much do the slaves of forbidden pleasure mistake the road to true felicity!

Turn your eye now for a moment to the gaming table, that infatuating resort, where time is murdered, and fortunes are ruined by the arts of fraud. Mark the features of the groupe. Some are exulting in the gains of iniquity, while others are frantick with grief and resentment. And those who now triumph are soon, in their turn, to be made the prey of superior skill in this trade of deception. It requires, I think, no great discernment to see that the life of a gamester is the very reverse of peace and happiness. So obvious, indeed, and so numerous are the evils produced by this shameful propensity, to individuals, to families, and to the community, that laws have been enacted to restrain it, (though alas! too seldom executed,) in every civilized nation. Who will compare the short-lived triumph of the gamester, covered with baseness and infamy which he cannot hide even from himself, with the tranquility of the good and upright man who enjoys the fruits of his honest industry with the blessing of his God?

I wish it could be said with truth that those vices, and others of the like nature and tendencies, were very rare amongst mankind. But alas, it is far otherwise. Their subjects are numerous; and the misery they produce incalculable. At the same time there are many other domineering passions, which though more subtle and more slow in their

operation, are not less hateful to God, nor less injurious to human happiness.

Is it possible the covetous man can be happy, whose whole soul is devoted to the acquisition of riches; who sacrifices every pleasure, and almost every moral principle, to an object which, while he approaches it, seems forever increasing its dimensions and its distance? Does not experience prove that 'he who loveth silver is never satisfied with silver nor he that loveth abundance with increase? such a character is even proverbial for foolish labour and restless anxiety. His days are spent in care! his nights in watching. Disappointments and losses often plunge him into the deepest distress. Enslaved to the idolatry of gold, the covetous man is a stranger to the pleasures of a benevolent heart, and to the sweet charities of social life. His mind loses those manly sentiments and feelings which adorn human nature; and he becomes callous to every other gratification but the gloomy one of brooding over his heaps of wealth, which he fears to lose, and has not a heart to enjoy. The wise king of Israel draws an exquisite picture of such a character, which we often see exemplified in our days. 'There is one alone, and there is not a second; yea, he hath neither child nor brother: yet there is no end of all his labour: neither is his eye satisfied with riches; neither saith he, for whom do I labour and bereave my soul of good? This is also vanity; yea, it is a sore travail.' Now from this fruitless vanity, this sore travail, religion saves her disciple, by giving him a right estimation of this world, and fixing his highest affection on God and things above. The Christian is no longer under bondage to worldly passions. He feels himself but a pilgrim here; his eternal home and inheritance are in heaven.

There is no passion more universal amongst mankind than pride. It is that spirit by which 'men think more highly of themselves than they ought to think,' and treat with negligence and contempt those whom they account their inferiours. It was probably the first sin that entered into God's

creation; and certainly made a principal part of that transgression by which our first parents involved themselves and their posterity in ruin. Every man condemns it; yet every man cherishes it in his bosom, until it is banished by the spirit of devotion. It would be easy to show the absurdity of pride, and how peculiarly odious it is in the sight of God. But I am at present principally concerned with its tendency to the unhappiness of its subject. And this is indeed very great. Mankind take pleasure in wounding and mortifying a proud spirit; and its morbid and excessive sensibility exposes it to be pained by the slightest affronts. Besides, as pride dislikes to own a superior, or even an equal, and as there are so many of this temper, it must evidently be a source of endless feuds and contentions. Hence the wise man observes, 'only by pride cometh contention; yea, pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.' Perhaps there are no pangs so exquisitely keen as those of wounded and fallen pride. And I think the providence of God often seems to fix especial marks of his displeasure upon this impious passion. 'Better is it,' therefore, 'to be of an humble spirit with the lowly, than to divide the spoil with the proud.' The humble spirit is a spirit of peace and quietness. While 'God resists the proud, he gives grace' of every kind 'to the humble.' He who thrusts not himself forward into the general contest for preeminence will escape its sollicitudes and disappointments. He who 'walks humbly with his God' will not find his happiness much affected by the neglect or the disesteem of men. Now this happy temper is an essential part of genuine piety. The whole gospel of Christ is calculated to make us meek and lowly: humility is the leading characteristic of a Christian.

Very nearly allied to pride is ambition: by which I do not mean the thirst of political power merely; but also that universal restlessness and discontent of mankind with the stations and circumstances in which divine providence has placed them, and their painful struggles to imitate and outdo their neighbors in a thousand things which have no connexion

with the real wants or substantial happiness of human life. This Spirit has often been made the theme of wit and ridicule; but it is not to be rectified by satire. It pervades every rank and every situation; and is certainly a fruitful source of unhappiness. It fills the mind with envy, a feeling as painful as it is abominable. From this busy and endless turmoil the pious man escapes. Feeling himself an heir of immortal glory, he looks with a just indifference on the frivolous and fleeting distinctions of worldly wealth, magnificence and power. 'I have learned,' said once a poor, despised, persecuted disciple of Christ, who had formerly moved in a very different sphere; 'I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.'

Once more: how general amongst men is the spirit of revenge on the reception of an injury: a disposition unhappy in itself, and calculated to aggravate and to multiply injuries without end. What extensive and dreadful calamities have often arisen from trifles, which a forbearing and forgiving spirit would have suffered to die away at the beginning, but which impatient resentment fanned into a flame. He who cherishes malice in his heart may possibly make its object miserable; but he inevitably makes himself so, whether his malice be gratified or not. The Author of our frame has ordained that our malevolent passions should carry a part of their punishment in their very exercise; and that the infliction of vengeance, so eagerly desired, should speedily recoil in bitterness on the revengeful. Now our holy religion absolutely destroys the source of all these evils. It requires us most carefully 'to follow peace with all men'; to forbear from every sentiment of malice and retaliation of injuries; 'to pray for enemies', and 'to overcome evil with good'. And the injunctions are enforced by a motive impressive to the mind beyond all comparison. 'Be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you'.

With these brief illustrations I must dismiss this part of the subject. You will pursue it in your own reflections as far as you please. And the more you consider it the more highly will you value the gospel of Christ, which delivers us from all these 'vanities and vexations of spirit, by withdrawing our hearts from every excessive attachment to this world, and fixing them upon a treasure pure, perfect, and everlasting, reserved for us in heaven.

A third argument to prove the happy tendency of piety, is the pleasure of an approving conscience, contrasted with the misery of conscious guilt.

God has implanted in our nature a most important faculty, by which we are led to compare our thoughts, words, and actions with a standard of duty, and to perceive, with conscious pleasure or pain, their agreement or disagreement. This faculty we call conscience, or the moral sense. And its decisions are generally much enforced by the intimate reference they bear to the approbation or disapprobation of God, and to that retribution which we are to receive at his hands in a future world. Conscience is not indeed an infalible guide in matters of right and wrong. There are, however, many points of duty immediately and intuitively evident; and of many others the discovery is almost unavoidable. Hence conscience is never without means to exercise its power. It follows the wicked man wherever he goes; for it is in fact himself. It reproves those dark iniquities which he conceals from every human eye; corrodes his gayest pleasures with the gall of self-condemnation; and turns the down of his pillow into thorns of torture. How often have the pangs of remorse thrown a gloom of darkness and distress over all the glory of the sinner! How often have the apprehensions of divine vengeance rendered life itself an intolerable burden, and prompted the despairing wretch to cast it impiously and violently away! 'the spirit of a man will bear his infirmity! but a wounded spirit' a spirit wounded with guilt and overwhelmed with the wrath of God, 'who can bear'? And though many live in sin without this

lively sensibility or extreme anguish : yet there are few who do not in some degree feel the lashes of guilt. And the few who have their consciences seared, through long and uninterrupted prosperity in the ways of sin, gain nothing by this temporary and fatal security. Sooner or later the awful reality of their situation must be seen and felt. It is literally true, as a general rule, that by the harrassing influence of irregular appetites and passions, the rebukes of conscience, and the terrible prospect of death and judgment, 'the wicked are like the troubled sea when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. There is no peace, saith God, to the wicked.'

The gospel gives peace to the conscience by applying 'the blood of sprinkling' for our pardon, and by leading us to the love and practice of universal righteousness. For this is essentially the prevailing character of every Christian. By these means he is restored to peace with God, and with himself. Conscience is to him no longer an accusing enemy, but a friendly monitor, and a minister of the purest delight. The pious man, though he relies upon nothing but the mercy of God in Christ for eternal life, yet tastes a sacred pleasure in the approbation of God and of his own mind. He covets no extensive theatre for the display of his virtues to applauding multitudes ; but is satisfied with that honour which comes from his heavenly Father and from his own unbribed judgment. Amidst the troubles of life, under the misconstructions of the ignorant and reproaches of the malicious, the simple consciousness that he has done his duty, and approved himself to the great and righteous Judge, bears him up with unshaken fortitude and tranquility. An approving conscience is a continual feast, 'Our rejoicing,' says the Apostle, 'is this, the testimony of our conscience that in simplicity and godly sincerity, by the grace of God, we have had our conversation in the world.' Who that has wisdom to make a right judgment of happiness would exchange the sunshine of his own breast, and the smiles of Heaven, for the empoisoned bowl of sinful pleasure ? Can any thing more fully exhibit the absurdity and

... of sin, than the consideration that it involves the *inner* in a perpetual warfare with himself, as well as with his Creator?

Surely this one argument in favor of a pious and virtuous life, briefly as I have handled it, ought to be deemed sufficient to decide the cause. And here I will close the the present letter, by subscribing myself &c.

PHILANDER.

ORIGINAL LETTERS.

LETTER 7:

nd,

YOUR letter afforded me more pleasure, I dare say, than you expected it would when you wrote it. It not only revived in my mind a recollection of many pleasing occurrences, and gave me a farther evidence of that candor and friendship which you possess in so large a measure, and which is so agreeable to me; but likewise confirmed me in the opinion that you have some serious impressions on your mind about religion. I hope you find your thoughts frequently exercised on a subject, to which, it is possible you may remember, they were once very averse. Your being "more than ever convinced that there is no lasting happiness in this life," I trust was the result of deliberate reflection, and not a hasty conclusion drawn from the circumstance of being separated from your friends, however dear they may be to you, and however desirable their company. For a firm persuasion of this important truth, will have an undoubted tendency to direct your mind, which is continually aspiring after happiness, to seek it in something beyond this life, where it cannot be found but by enjoying the favor of God, and being possessed of true religion. But permit me to ask you, if you possess the same senti-