

THE  
RIGHT TEMPER  
FOR  
A STUDENT OF GOD'S WORD.

BY  
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EVERY one must have observed that very different degrees of success attend the studies of those engaged in inquiring into sacred things. Nor is this difference always decided by natural talents, nor by literary acquirements. Wholly sanctified to the glory of God, these are truly important; but relied upon, they augur but a splendid failure. The history of the Church abounds in mournful illustrations of the danger of leaning on these things, and of forgetting the necessity of other and higher qualifications.

That the study of religious truth, conducted in a wrong temper, will be productive of little or no profit, is a truth commonly admitted by serious people. Sure-

ly the Scriptures so teach. Moreover, a wrong temper is itself criminal, and should be avoided, if it were no hindrance to one's progress in knowledge. The want of a right temper produces more miscarriages in the lives of students of Scripture than all other things united. The whole history of religious studies does not tell us of one, who kept his heart with excessive diligence. The reason is that out of it are the issues of life.

There is reason for believing that many fail in their studies because of the power of *prejudice*. Nothing is more opposed to docility, or to our advancement in learning, than a state of mind fore-armed against the truth. Impartiality, essential to high success, is difficult of attainment. Prejudices are judgments for or against things proposed to our minds without investigation, or at least without sufficient foundation. They result from education, from temperament, from sectarianism, or from some sin indulged. Even when prejudices are in favour of the truth, they have no saving efficacy. Sanctification is not through the strength of our prejudices, but through the belief of the truth. Prejudices against the truth often prove fatal, overriding strong convictions, and causing the entire and sometimes the bitter rejection of doctrines essential to salvation. When one is in such a state that he will not examine evidence and truth with a good degree of impartiality, it is certain that he will go astray. When men come to God's word, not to be taught, but to teach, not to learn the mind of the Spirit, but to find some way of supporting error, or of evading unwelcome truths; when with avidity they seize any thing favouring their dogmas, but carefully avoid whatever wars

against their preconceived opinions, they effectually exclude themselves from the high way to any large attainments. The light that is in them thus becomes darkness. Except so far as sanctified, the human mind is enmity against God, against his nature, his will, his word; so that "the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." Some indulge prejudices against particular books of Scripture, and others against particular doctrines of God's word. Such are often found following vain and wild notions. One says: "The Scripture is so penned that they, who have a mind to know, may know; they who have a mind to wrangle, may take occasion enough of offence, and justly perish by the rebellion of their own minds; for God never intended to satisfy men of stubborn and perverse spirits." Richard Baxter says: "Fame and tradition, education and the country's vote, do become the ordinary parents of many lies; and folly maketh us to fasten so fearlessly in our first apprehensions, that they keep open the door to abundance more falsehoods; and it must be clear teachers, or great, impartial studies of a self-denying mind, with a great blessing of God, that must deliver us from prejudice, and deceive us." It requires no humility, no faith, no grace of any kind, to be an earnest partisan of any dogma or sect. Whatever our education may have been, we will find it no easy task to eradicate prejudices. It is a great mercy when God enables us to lay aside "foretaken opinions," and to sit down with prevailing candour to the study of God's truth.

Such are the weakness of the human mind and its liability to err that nothing is more reasonable than unaffected *modesty* in every theologian. The greatest proficient in every branch of knowledge have been tenderly conscious of their own weakness and liability to err. The books are full of commendations of this virtue in all the walks of life. Bruyère has well expressed the views of many when he says: "Modesty is to merit, as shades to figures in a picture, giving it strength and beauty." This is true. But modesty is not a mere ornament. It is of essential use in the conduct of our studies. It should therefore be unfeigned. The Scriptures lay great stress on this matter. "Seest thou a man wise in his own conceit? there is more hope of a fool than of him." "Trust in the Lord with all thy heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and He shall direct thy paths." Our Lord chiefly refers to this modest estimate of ourselves, when he says: "Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, shall in no wise enter therein." He, who is grossly ignorant of his own faults and deficiencies, who greatly over-estimates his abilities and attainments, will hardly advance in any thing good or great. He, who has real piety and much knowledge of himself, must be lowly, far removed from flippant self-conceit.

Such subjects as God's nature, counsels and government; as man's dependence and freedom, his obligation and destiny; such themes as time and eternity, life and death, sin and holiness, Heaven and hell, are not to be justly understood by the proud and self-sufficient. Let men hear and read, "not to contradict and confute, nor

blindly to believe and take for granted, nor to find talk and discourse, but to weigh and consider." We might almost as well not meditate on divine things at all as to think in the self-sufficiency of a proud heart. If one has a great idea of himself, the presumption is that it is the only great idea he is likely ever to have.

But let not these remarks be misunderstood. Let no one cultivate servility of mind. Contempt for the faculties God has given us is as unfriendly to success as self-conceit. Dr. Taylor of England gave to his students this wholesome advice:

"I. I do solemnly charge you, in the name of the God of truth, and of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and before whose judgment-seat you must in no long time appear, that in all your studies and inquiries of a religious nature, present or future, you do constantly, carefully, impartially, and conscientiously attend to evidence, as it lies in the Holy Scriptures, or in the nature of things, and the dictates of reason; cautiously guarding against the sallies of imagination, and the fallacy of ill-grounded conjecture.

"II. That you admit, embrace, or assent to no principle, or sentiment, by me taught or advanced, but only so far as it shall appear to you to be supported and justified by proper evidence from revelation or the reason of things.

"III. That, if at any time hereafter, any principle or sentiment by me taught or advanced, or by you admitted and embraced, shall upon impartial and faithful examination, appear to you to be dubious or false, you either suspect, or totally reject such principle or sentiment.

"IV. That you keep your mind always open to evi-

dence. That you labour to banish from your breasts all prejudice, prepossession, and party-zeal. That you study to live in peace and love with all your fellow-Christians, and freely allow to others the unalienable rights of judgment and conscience."

If any man would make progress in divinity, let him at all hazards maintain *independence of thought and freedom of inquiry*. It is a miserably jejune interpretation of our Lord's prohibition to call any man master, father, or Rabbi, that He was forbidding us to give literary titles to men eminent for their learning, age, or services. He designed to warn us against blindly following the opinions of men, as many in His day did. We have but one Master, even Christ. Implicit faith is due to the words of God alone. When He speaks, it is the height of wisdom to bow down our souls, and receive every declaration as true. He, who made the mind, has rightful authority over all its powers. But all propositions set forth for our embrace by men, however many, learned or venerable, are fit matter of inquiry, not only as to their import, but as to their accordance with the truth of God. Let every man cautiously settle and firmly hold all his religious principles. The Bible encourages modesty, not servility of mind. Paul says: "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good." Think for yourself. Be firm as a rock; but be not stubborn as a mule. Embrace truth and yield to evidence. David says: "I have *stuck* unto Thy testimonies." In theology merely human authority cannot have too little, as divine authority cannot have too much weight. Lord Bacon well says "Disciples do owe unto masters only a temporary belief, and a suspension of their own judgments, till they are

fully instructed, and not an absolute resignation, or perpetual captivity." The theologian cannot exalt Christ too much. He is King and Prophet. He is God's beloved Son. HEAR HIM. But beware of blindly following any man, any body of men, any school, any Church. In malice be children, but in understanding be men. When a truth is settled, be not easily moved to surrender it, nor even to doubt its truth. And let no one allow himself to be beguiled into a fickleness respecting even the terms of theology. A late writer says: "The progress of language is uttering aloud against 'them that call evil good and good evil, that put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.' And in view of the evils which the use of language can produce by weakening or confounding moral distinctions, does it not become the sober, honest, religious portion of the world, to stick to the old terms by which the indignation of men against sin has been conveyed from of old, instead of diluting the power of truth and blunting the edge of reproof by an inoffensive, but inane word, which circulates in good society?" What is here said of terms to express our ideas of right and wrong is fully applicable to all religious subjects, and particularly to the terminology of the only sacred science known to men.

There is not a more important qualification of a student of divine things than *profound reverence* for all that is sacred. Seriousness is not enough. Solemnity is necessary, and that united with holy fear. He who jests, he who trifles, he who feels no solemn awe may well doubt not only his fitness for the sacred office, but also the reality of his piety. When God was about to call Moses, and make him a great prophet, He first appeared

to him in the burning bush. And when Moses "turned aside to see," God said, "Draw not nigh hither," *q. d.*, remain at a reverential distance; "put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place where thou standest is holy ground." "And Moses hid his face." So let every student do. Divinity is holy ground. "Sanctify the Lord of hosts Himself, and let Him be your fear, and let Him be your dread." "To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word." Two classes of persons commonly show a shocking irreverence for divine things. One is composed of fanatics, the other of the authors or abettors of fundamental heresy. Their tempers led to their errors, and their errors are best supported by their tempers. Too much solemnity and holy reverence cannot be exercised by any who would advance in the knowledge of the truth. In such studies as are essential to the minister of Christ, irreverence is profaneness. God's truth will profit no man who is incurably addicted to levity of mind respecting divine things. Of all dispositions none is more unfriendly to the successful study of religious truth than a fondness for jesting with sacred things. Luther said: "Whom God would destroy, he first permits to sport with Scripture." When Pilate said, "What is truth?" He could not have asked a graver question. But his conduct immediately after showed that he could have asked no question in a less reverent state of mind.

In Jewish Bibles the frontispiece has that saying of Jacob upon his vision of God at Bethel: "How dreadful is this place! This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of Heaven!" Remarking on this,

Owen says, "So ought we to look upon the word with a holy awe and reverence of the presence of God in it."

In his judgment of Scripture, Cranmer says, "I would advise you all, that come to the reading or hearing of this book, which is the word of God, the most precious jewel, the most holy relic that remaineth upon earth, that ye bring with you the fear of God, and that ye do it with all due reverence, and use your knowledge thereof, not to vain glory of frivolous disputation, but to the honour of God, increase of virtue, and edification both of yourselves and others."

It is, I think, Palgrave, who says, "It is of great importance that we should resist the temptation, frequently so strong, of annexing a familiar, facetious, or irreverent idea to a Scripture text or a Scripture name. Nor should we hold ourselves guiltless, though we may have been misled by mere negligence or want of reflection. Every person of good taste will avoid reading a parody or a trevestie of a beautiful poem, because the recollection of the degraded likeness will always obtrude itself upon our memories when we wish to derive pleasure from the contemplation of the original. But how much more urgent is the duty by which we are bound to keep the page of the Bible clear of any impression tending to diminish the feeling of habitual respect and reverence toward our Maker's laws."

Of all the dispositions requisite to success in the study of religious truth, none is more important than a sincere, constant, and ardent *love of truth*. No qualification is before this. He, who loves his own opinions because they are his, or is greatly attached to views which are of high esteem in his sect or party because

they are a Shibboleth, is a candidate for shame and error. Without strong love for the truth no man has ever made any considerable progress in knowledge. It is indispensable. Nothing can compensate for the want of it. It has been a prominent trait of every good man's character. Job says: "I have esteemed the word of His mouth more than my necessary food." David says: "My soul breaketh for the longing it hath unto Thy commandments at all times." "How sweet are Thy words unto my taste! yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth." "I love thy commandments above gold, yea, above fine gold." Solomon says, "Buy the truth, and sell it not." "If thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding; if thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures; then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God." Peter says: "As new born babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby." The love of truth is a sure pledge that God will bless and guide us in our quest after stores of knowledge. When one is ready to "receive the engrafted word with meekness," then it is both easy and pleasant to teach him. This is one of the most pleasing characteristics of those who have been recently and thoroughly regenerated. Genuine young converts greatly love the truth. It is their chief qualification for advancing in discoveries of the way of life and the rule of duty.

Another state of heart very important to every learner is *patience*, producing caution and deliberation. A hasty spirit is wholly unfriendly to sound learning. The minds of many rush with impetuosity toward conclusions. They seem to be impatient of all delay, or to regard it as a derogation from their just estimate of themselves to ask

them to tarry long in the premises of any subject. Yet observation shows that conclusions hastily adopted are often as hastily abandoned. Even if we reach the truth, but in a rash manner, it can hardly be as a pillar of beautiful proportions in our thoughts, nor can we be half so sure that it is truth to be relied on in all exigencies, as if we had reached it by more careful steps. Let reasonable doubts produce uncertainty, and let us suspend our judgments, until time has been given for further prayer and investigation. Such a habit may leave us for a while unsettled about some matters of great interest. Very well. Jesus said: "What thou knowest not now, thou shalt know hereafter." And Paul said: "We know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away."

In all lawful pursuits a *spirit of diligence* is of great importance. Thus spake God of old: "The book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth: but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then shalt thou make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success." The Bereans are commended because they searched the Scriptures *daily*. The great law of acquisition in knowledge is, a little at a time and often repeated. "The hand of the diligent maketh rich." Pious men of old have set us a good example in this respect. One says, "O how love I Thy law! It is my meditation all the day." "Meditation, to the book of revelation, is like the microscope to the book of nature; it is sure to discover new beauties." Many a difficulty is cleared up by diligence, while the slothful finds

himself daily plunged into greater embarrassment on many points. Are not students of God's word of all degrees of culture often tempted to think too high a price, in the way of diligence, toil, and hardship, is exacted of them? But the fact is that after all that is done to arouse them many are but half awake. Let him, who would have religious truth dwell in him richly, spare no pains, but maintain severe habits of thought and inquiry, denying himself all luxuriousness and effeminacy, and subjecting all his powers to a wholesome discipline.

It is no less true that *genuine lively faith* in the divine testimony is essential to any large success in the study of the Scriptures. It is true that a mind without faith will all the time be feeding on forms and losing the substance; it will be gathering shells and losing the kernels of things. All improving theologians "walk by faith." In proportion as any human character has shone illustriously, it has been remarkable for freedom from blind credulity on the one hand, and on the other from carping skepticism.—There never was a truly great, nor any safe mind, that believed without evidence, or refused to believe upon sufficient evidence. One of the greatest perils in the way of any student of religious truth is just here. The principle of faith is as easily vindicated as any other principle of our nature. The right exercise of it is a solemn duty enjoined by God in many ways. He, who does not firmly believe and hold what he has learned of divine truth, will be like a wave of the sea, tossed to and fro, a poor unstable thing.

It is of the utmost importance to every man, that he maintain habits of *just moderation* in his judgment of

divine things. He, whose mind is fond of rank extremes, and who believes that repulsiveness is a mark of truth, will pretty certainly hold and teach error. I am free to say that any view of divine truth, which disinclines those who abound in godly fear and humbleness of mind, to admire and adore, is not safe or true. Even the grand and awful doctrine of the divine sovereignty, when rightly viewed, is well suited to beget thanksgiving and adoration, as we learn from that saying of our Saviour—Matt. xi: 25, 26; Luke x: 21.

If one would become mighty in the Scriptures and rich in the truth, he must have the spirit and delight in the duty of prayer. No act that man can perform is more capable of full vindication before the bar of reason than that he should pray for divine illumination. His intellectual dependence on God is absolute. Left to himself, he must fatally err. How often did David cry, "Teach me Thy statutes;" "Open Thou mine eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of Thy law;" "Give me understanding;" "Incline my heart unto Thy testimonies." The pious Thomas Boston thus lets us into the secret of much of his success in theological studies: "I spread the Hebrew Bible before God, and cried to the Father, that, for the sake of his Son, he would by the Spirit shine on it, into me, give light into, and discover His mind in the word; that He would give me life, health, strength, time and inclination to the study, and a blessing thereon; that He would teach me how to manage that work, and would pity me as to sleep, having been somewhat bereaved of sleep since I was determined to that work." "If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not."

Even great poets often open their works by crying for help from God. Thus Milton says:

“And chiefly Thou, O Spirit, that dost prefer  
Before all temples the upright heart and pure,  
Instruct me, for Thou know’st. . . .  
What in me is dark,  
Illumine; what is low, raise and support.”

From the life of the venerable Thomas Scott it appears that over every passage of Scripture he has lifted up his heart in prayer. The result is a very remarkable commentary, which has been read with profit by millions of people. McCheyne says: “*Turn the Bible into prayer.*” Thus, if you are reading the first Psalm, spread the Bible on the chair before you, and kneel and pray, ‘O Lord, give me the blessedness of the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly. Let me not stand in the way of sinners. Let me not sit in the seat of the scornful.’ This is the best way of learning the meaning of the Bible, and of learning to pray.”

In prayer be not faithless but believing. “The breath of prayer comes from the life of faith.” Let your prayer for light and teaching be fervent. “God hears the heart without words; but he never hears words without the heart.” “Never expect to go to the throne of grace without having some stumbling block thrown in your way;—Satan hates prayer, and always tries to hinder it.”

Bishop Hall, who made such progress in the knowledge of divine things, tells us how he gained by prayer:

“After some whiles meditation, I walk up to my masters and companions, my books; and sitting down amongst them with the best contentment, I dare not reach forth my hand to salute any of them, till I have first looked

up to Heaven, and craved favour of Him to whom all my studies are duly referred; without whom I can neither profit nor labour. After this, after no over great vanity, I call forth those which may best fit my occasions, wherein I am not too scrupulous of age; sometimes I put myself to school to one of these ancients, whom the Church hath honoured with the name of fathers; whose volumes I confess not to open without a secret reverence of their holiness and gravity; sometimes to their later doctors, which want nothing but age to make them classical; always to God’s book:—that day is lost, whereof some hours are not improved in those divine monuments; others I turn over out of choice—these out of duty.”

Let no man forget that religious truth is not merely to fill a niche in his system, nor to furnish the means of entertainment to himself and his friends. It is all intended for practice. It must first be proposed to our minds, then loved, embraced, and finally reduced to practice. Practice makes sure our knowledge in a way that nothing else does. This is true in the exact sciences and in the useful and ornamental arts; above all is it true in regard to divine things. A malicious mind cannot be expected to make rapid progress in an understanding of the boundless mysteries of love. A worldly mind is ill-suited to scan the glories of spiritual things. Practice is not only the life of piety, but it is essential to any sure progress in wisdom. There is no greater folly than that which stalks to hell with the lamp of truth burning before it all the time. Well did David say, “I will keep Thy statutes.” And Jesus Christ has informed us that practice has much to do with progress in learning, when He says: “If any man will do

His will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God." That is a truth illustrated in the life and experience of every converted man. The apostle James also says: "Be ye doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if a man be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: for he beholdeth himself and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed." How can he understand the place charity should occupy in a system of practical theology, who carries grudges and old hatred in his bosom? How can he know the connexion between Christ's poverty and our riches, whose soul is never drawn out to the needy, but trusts in uncertain riches?

Of course the whole spirit and temper of the Biblical student should be evangelical. A mere legalist in theology is as wide of the truth, as he is far from holy living. If Jesus Christ is not the Alpha and the Omega of our theological system, it matters little what else is in it. A "Christless Christianity" is as false in theory as it is powerless in practice. But on this subject I have said so much in writings which are before the public, that it is needless at present to say more.

Whoever thus studies God's word, will become wise unto salvation, and will know more than his teachers; more than the ancients. He shall receive the blessing from the Lord and righteousness from the God of his salvation.