

The Danger of Evil Company :

A

SERMON,

PREACHED

IN WEST SPRINGFIELD,

MARCH 30th, 1823.

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“ Forsake the foolish, and live ; and go in the way of understanding.”

Prov. IX. 6.

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1823.

SERMON.

I. CORINTHIANS, XV. 33.

Evil communications corrupt good manners.

NOTHING is so valuable to man as his character. This is proverbial, even in regard to the present life. Strip him of every thing else, and leave him with a good conscience, and what will probably attend it, a fair reputation, and all that you do will be comparatively harmless. You may have wounded his sensibility, or overcome his resolution, or clouded his worldly prospects; but he has that, which, in the end, will be likely to place him above the power of malice. His character is a broad shield, which the sting of detraction, and even the barbed arrows of adversity, can never effectually penetrate. Be his circumstances what they may, the fact that he has a good conscience and a good cha-

racter, may justly render him contented and fearless.

But, if the character which is formed here, be important in its relation to our present existence, it is infinitely more so, as it stands connected with eternity. This life is the only period of our probation. It is a school, in which we are training for an immortal existence. Every moral action of our lives, will exert an influence upon us, either in heaven or hell; and the sum of these actions will decide the complexion of our characters, and of course, of our eternal destiny.

If these remarks be just, then it clearly follows that there is no part of our conduct, which ought to be considered unimportant. The least departure from duty, the least violation of conscience, may be a seed, which will produce a harvest of everlasting woe. It may be the germ of a sinful habit. It may be the first of a progressive series of wicked actions, which will extend through eternity. It may prove the outer door to the temple of vice; and he who enters it, may reasonably expect to be led on, till he has explored all its scenes of pollution and darkness, and till he finally sacrifices his immortal soul on the fiery altar of confirmed profligacy.

Perhaps there is no influence which is so uniform, and so powerful, in the formation of character, as that of *example*. This results from the fact that we are creatures of imitation; there is a principle in our nature, which leads us, instinctively, and from our earliest childhood, to copy the manners of those with whom we associate. This, to a great extent, is involuntary; insomuch that persons have often unconsciously contracted peculiarities of character, which, when they were reminded of them, they could instantly trace to the example of some friend. I do not here inquire, whether we are more likely, from our constitution, to imitate good or bad examples; but only speak of the general influence of example, of whatever kind, founded on the fact, that we are naturally imitative beings.

The considerations at which I have now just hinted, viz. that with the characters which we form here, must be connected, not only our present, but eternal condition, and that there is no influence more powerful, in forming these characters, than that of example;—these considerations, I think, must prepare you suitably to estimate the subject to which I am about to call your attention; I mean the DANGER OF EVIL COMPANY. It is a sub-

ject which, in a greater or less degree, concerns us all; its claims upon the attention of the *young* can hardly be over-rated. I hope, therefore, my young friends, that *you*, particularly, will be serious and attentive, while it is now discussed in your hearing. I wish each one of you to hear for himself; and to let conscience make a faithful and honest application; and it is my earnest prayer to God, and I doubt not that it is the prayer of your parents who are here among you, that you may so hear, and so apply, that this discourse shall prove the means of making you better and happier, through eternity.

That evil company *has* a corrupting and dangerous influence, is a fact, so well understood, and so universally acknowledged, that it would be quite superfluous to enter into any direct proof of it. The wisest man in the world has long ago said, that "*a companion of fools shall be destroyed;*" and we have all seen the assertion verified in instances almost innumerable. It will be more to our purpose, therefore, to attempt to shew you the *process* by which evil example operates; or to notice the different *principles* which it brings into action, in corrupting the morals, degrading the character, and ruining the soul.

I. The danger of associating with wicked companions commences in the fact that *it renders vice familiar*. I know it has been fashionable to say, in the language of a distinguished poet, that

“Vice is a monster of so frightful mien,
“That to be hated, needs but to be seen;”

and on this principle, some have gone so far as to justify the most profane and licentious exhibitions of the stage; and have soberly contended that those splendid scenes of impiety, decked out with all that is most attractive and provoking to the sensual appetites, are fitted, indirectly, to nourish good affections, and lead to a virtuous life. The fundamental error in this kind of philosophy is, that it overlooks the melancholy fact that man is a being of depraved inclinations; and the moment you bring him in contact with vice, you place by his side a companion, to whom his arms and his heart involuntarily fly open. However you will account for the *fact*, all experience proves that there is a tendency in human nature to go astray; and that while nothing more than the absence of restraint is necessary to the formation of evil habits, a habit of virtue and piety is always the result of fixed resolution, and severe effort. If, then, the state of the heart, naturally, be such, as to render it most sensible to the solicitations of vice, you will

easily perceive how this consideration operates to invest all needless intercourse with evil company with great danger. You may apply fire to materials which are exposed to the frost and damps of winter, and you will find it difficult to produce a flame; but, if you bring it in contact with some highly inflammable substance, you will see a blaze, or hear an explosion, in an instant. In like manner, if all our inclinations were originally *on the side of virtue*, the danger from being familiar with vice might be comparatively small; but the case becomes greatly changed, when it is recollected that we have within us *evil* propensities which are ready to kindle, as soon as the torch of temptation is applied to them.

I am aware that the circumstances of our present condition must sometimes, *necessarily*, lead us to witness scenes of wickedness; but this, so far as it is unavoidable, is to be considered as a providential calamity; as constituting part of our trial, and as making a loud demand for our vigilant activity and resistance. But, in a large part of the instances in which persons, and especially, young persons are the witnesses of vice, it is, not because providence places them in the way of it in the course of their duty, but because they are prompted by inclination. Now let me say, that those of

you who have yielded so far to curiosity, or any other principle, as to place yourselves voluntarily, and deliberately in the way of vice—I care not what kind it is—have unconsciously entered into a league with it. The fatal poison is already in your hand; and if the almighty arm of God does not wrest it from you, believe me, *you are ruined*.

II. It is the tendency of mixing with bad associates to *benumb and finally destroy the moral sense*. By the *moral sense*, you will understand me to mean that faculty or principle of action, partly of an intellectual and partly of a moral character, by which we discern the difference between right and wrong, and approve the one and condemn the other. In some, I suppose, this faculty is originally more delicate and active than in others; but in all, it is an essential part of the human constitution, and is indispensable to moral agency. It is easy to see that in the formation of our character, much will depend upon our cultivating, or neglecting to cultivate it; and of course, whatever contributes to render our moral perception less accurate, or our moral sensibility less keen, must proportionably put in jeopardy our virtue. Now, let me ask, whether the voice of universal experience does not decide, that mingling in evil company, and witness-

sing evil examples, *has* this unhappy tendency? Have not even persons of an established principle of piety, who have been called, in the course of providence, to mingle much in scenes of wickedness, found it exceedingly difficult to maintain that high and awful sense of the evil of sin which they wished to cultivate; and have they not been obliged to fortify themselves against this deadening influence, by a double degree of watchfulness and prayer? But, perhaps, there are some before me who can bear testimony on this subject from experience. Can you not remember the time when some particular vice, say that of profane swearing, or gambling, or drunkenness, seemed to you to be clothed with dishonour;—when you could hardly look upon its miserable victim without an aching heart? But, it may be, that you have since frequently been in vicious company; and the sounds of blasphemy, and the riot and loathsomeness of intemperance may have become familiar to you; and has not this familiarity destroyed, in a great degree, the dishonour which you once felt on witnessing them? Nay, are there not some among you who can now *commit*, without much remorse, sins, the very *thought* of which would once have made you tremble? Look back, O young man, and see how far you have already fallen towards the gulf of profligacy

and ruin ; and then, in the light of your past experience, and over the ruins of a good conscience, look forward and prophesy concerning your future doom!

The extinction of the moral sense is usually very *gradual* ; and the progress of its decline is often marked, with great accuracy, by the conduct. Every one knows, that conscience is originally one of the most active and powerful of all the inhabitants of the human breast ; and that she will never yield up her authority, till she has sustained a severe struggle. There is nothing, perhaps, in which this conflict is more clearly marked, than in the progress of a young man, who has had a pious education, towards a habit of *profaneness*. Though he has been accustomed, occasionally, to hear the language of cursing from others, the impressions of his childhood are too strong to allow him *immediately* to copy it. At length, in an evil hour, he summons resolution enough to make the awful experiment of uttering an oath ; but his faltering tongue and blushing cheek proclaim, that there is a commotion and a remonstrance within. Conscience rouses up all her energies, and thunders out a rebuke, which almost puts him into the attitude of consternation. Perhaps, his early resolutions to reverence the name and authority of God, come

thronging upon his remembrance;—or, perhaps, the instructions of other days, enforced by parental affection, rise up before him;—or, it may be, that the image of a departed parent, who had trained him up in the way that he should go, haunts his busy and agitated mind, and reproaches him with filial ingratitude. He resolves that the dreadful privilege of taking the name of his God in vain, has been purchased at too great expence; and that he will not venture to repeat an experiment that has been so fruitful in remorse and agony. But, presently, he is heard to drop another oath—and another; and in each successive instance, the conflict with conscience becomes less severe, till, at length, this faithful reprover is silenced, and he blasphemes his maker's name without remorse, and almost without his own observation. When I see an ingenuous youth taking the first steps in this path of death;—when I see his countenance change, and hear his voice falter, and the embarrassment and awkwardness of his manner tell me that conscience is uttering her remonstrances, at the very moment when the language of profaneness is upon his lips, I say to myself, ‘poor young man, little do you know what disgrace and wretchedness you are treasuring up for yourself.’ I regard him as having set his face like a flint towards the world of

perdition; and I read on his character, in dark and ominous letters, "THE GLORY IS DEPARTED."

It is important here to be observed, that the effect of any particular vice in destroying the moral sense, is *universal*; that is, by being familiar with any one sin, the mind gradually contracts a degree of insensibility to the guilt of all others. For instance, if you indulge in profaneness, the sin of licentiousness, or of drunkenness, as an offence committed against God, will not appear to you in its native odiousness; for this plain reason, that by indulging in sin of any kind, you lose your regard for God's authority. There is also such an intimate connection between different vices, that it is exceedingly difficult to be devoted to one, without being, in a greater or less degree, the slave of more. Remember, therefore, that in frequenting the company of the vicious, you expose yourselves, not only to the particular vices which you may happen to witness *in them*, but to any others to which subsequent temptations may invite you; because, when you have once cast off the fear of God, your heart will be open to every bad impression, and will be a soil, in which every kind of sin will flourish luxuriantly.

III. It is another effect of associating with evil company, that *it checks the operation of the principle of shame, or renders one regardless of the opinion of the world.* This, too, is part of our original constitution; and is so essential and active a principle, that the absence of it is always taken as a decisive indication of confirmed profligacy; insomuch that there is hardly a more striking epitome of a thoroughly depraved character, than that he is *without shame.* Though some higher principle than a regard to the opinion of the world is necessary to constitute an action good in the sight of God, or to be the foundation of a religious life; and though this principle, like every other, is liable to abuse, and needs to be properly restrained and regulated; still, no doubt, it was intended by providence to impose a check upon our vicious inclinations: and so essential is its operation to the welfare, and I may say, the existence of society, that if all those evil propensities, which are now kept in check by a regard to the opinion of the world, were allowed to operate freely, it is probable that all the opposition which human laws could make to the vices of men, would be no more than the weakest mound of earth set to defy the angry torrent, as it comes rushing from the mountains. If, then, this prin-

ciple be so important to the preservation of virtue in the community, and, of course, to the virtue of each individual, surely, any thing which has a tendency to extinguish it, is greatly to be deprecated; and that this is the direct tendency of evil company, must be obvious to every one. Here, again, I appeal directly to the consciences of those, if there be any such before me, whose experience renders them the most competent judges. When you first associated with those who took the name of God in vain, would not the thought of *your* ever being heard to utter the same language, have crimsoned *your* cheek with shame? But after a while, did not this peculiar sensibility to the opinion of the world so far wear off, that when none but your sinful companions were present, you ventured a profane expression; and even after you could swear fearlessly in *their* presence, was it not a considerable time before you could feel willing to hazard an oath in the hearing of your serious friends? And when, after taking the name of God in vain, you have sometimes turned your face, and been unexpectedly met by the reproving countenance of some pious friend, have you not been awed into confusion by the majesty of virtue; and felt that you had done an act, which, in the estimation of that good man, would cover you with

disgrace? But you may, for aught I know, have long since bid adieu to all such scruples; and you may be congratulating yourselves upon the victory which you have gained over a prejudice of education; and you may have become so shockingly familiar with "the dialect of hell," that even the presence of the virtuous and good cannot restrain you from it: for all this may be calculated upon, as a regular and legitimate consequence of being often found in the way of sinners. Just so it is with the sin of intemperance. Probably, the greatest drunkard in the community can remember the time, when he would have shuddered at the thought of thus foolishly sacrificing his reputation; and, perhaps, there was hardly ever an instance, in which a man yielded to this kind of temptation, for the first time, that he was not thoroughly ashamed of it, and would turn his head from you when you met him in the street, lest your countenance should reveal to him your pity or contempt. But, by frequently resorting to the company of drunkards, and by repeating a few times the brutish experiment, the flush of shame faded from his cheek, and made way for a still deeper hue of crimson, which proclaims that he is a shameless sot. And so it is with respect to every other bad habit. By frequenting the society of the vicious,

a person very soon comes to consider them as the most important part of the world; and, consequently, his regard for the opinion of the good, and his fear of losing it are gradually diminished and destroyed.

IV. Another sentiment which is brought into operation, in aid of a vicious habit, by associating with wicked companions, is *the dread of being singular*. There is nothing that goes to the heart of a young man like "the world's dread laugh;" or the idea of standing alone; or of being charged with superstitious scruples of conscience; and this is a principle of which the abettors of vice are always sure to avail themselves, in regard to those who are inexperienced. When a young man, whose mind has been stored with good sentiments through the influence of education, falls into their company, it is wonderful to observe how their invention is quickened for devising means for his destruction. They take care not to display to him all the mysteries of iniquity at once, lest it should produce a shock which should drive him from their society. At first, perhaps, he discovers in them nothing more than an excessive cheerfulness; and so far, he thinks they may be imitated without much danger. But, it is not long before he

must take another step; and, if he hesitates and falters now, he sees, on one side, a reproachful frown, and on the other, a contemptuous smile; one, perhaps, charges him with unmanly superstition, and another with the want of independence, or, it may be, that the whole fraternity of them set up one general shout of ridicule. At such a moment as this, I look upon a young man as suspended between life and death; and as the experiment which is now going forward may result, I expect his eternal destiny will be decided. If I could look into his heart at this awful crisis, I should expect to find it in a state of fearful agitation; and if the power of reflection had not deserted him, to find him proposing to himself some such questions as these:—"What step is this which I am now tempted to take? Whither will it conduct me? May it not ruin my character, and ruin my soul? What mean these counsels and warnings of my early youth, that now come knocking at the door of my heart? If I yield, will not the hearts of my pious friends bleed with ten-fold deeper sorrow than if I were to die;—Nay, will it not almost send a pang of agony down into the graves of my departed parents, who dedicated me to God, and, with their dying breath, charged me to beware of a life of sin? But, how can I sus-

tain the anguish of being singular? How can I bear to be thought mean and spiritless, and to hear these shouts of ridicule, and to witness these sneers of contempt? No, I will not submit to this intolerable burden; I will rush headlong into the haunts of sin, and endeavour to stifle conscience, and drown reflection. Cease, then, to trouble me, ye recollections of my early days. Ye pious friends, who have followed me all my life with affectionate wishes and good offices, I can heed you no longer; I will sooner pierce all your hearts with anguish, than to stand alone, and try to stem this torrent of ridicule. And you, too, departed parents! even if I knew I should disturb the repose of your graves, and plant a thorn in that pillow which sustains your head in yonder lowly mansion—I could not bear to be singular. Leave me, therefore, friends; leave me, conscience; leave me, every tender and endearing recollection; leave me, too, ye gloomy forebodings of future misery; and let me sacrifice myself as quietly as I can! I can hazard any thing else, even the eternal burnings of hell; but I cannot, I will not hazard the odium of being singular.” I do believe, my hearers, that many a young man, whose name now stands high on the list of profligacy, if he would honestly tell you his whole experience, would be

obliged to relate the story of some such conflict as this which I have here supposed; and it may be, that there are young persons before me, who can recollect something like it in their own own experience. But, if I *knew* there were such a case, I should hardly think it premature to call upon you to begin, even now, to mourn for the death of an immortal soul.

V. I shall close the illustration of this subject with one more remark;—and that is, that it is the tendency of evil company *to separate a person from the means of grace*. What, though he may live in the midst of Christian privileges, and almost at the very threshold of the sanctuary;—will he, think you, enter those hallowed courts, where every thing betokens reverence and purity, when his heart loathes the service of his Maker? Will he deliberately place himself in the way of reproof for those very vices to which he has deliberately resolved to yield? Or will he be likely to read the word of God, when he meets his own sentence of condemnation on every page? I do not say, indeed, that the whole extent of this evil will, ordinarily, be realized in the early stages of vice;—on the contrary, I well know that its progress, for the most part, is gradual;—but I *do*

say—and I appeal to the heart of every profligate for the truth of it—that the tendency of vicious company is, *finally*, to form a complete separation from all the means of religion. If he be entirely devoted to the service of sin, it is an absurdity to suppose that he should have either time or relish for the service of God; and, even if he attend upon it with external formality for a while, it will soon become too irksome to be continued. And when the means of grace are once abandoned, I know not whether there be any more decisive symptom of a hard heart, and a reprobate mind. We must not, indeed, venture to limit the power of the Most High; but if there ever be a case which, upon all the principles of human probability, we may pronounce hopeless, and in which our most awful apprehensions may reasonably cluster around the destiny of a fellow mortal, surely it is the case of him who has voluntarily cut himself off from the means of salvation.

1. We see, in the light of this subject, how insidious is vice. From small and almost imperceptible beginnings, it gradually makes its way, till it reduces the whole man to its dominion, and brings into captivity every affection and faculty of the soul. It, first, throws out the bait of pleasure, and flatters its victim on to forbidden ground; then, it makes him the sport of temptation; and does not give

him over, till he is fast bound in the chains of eternal death. In its very nature, it is deceitful ; it is a stranger to all open and honest dealing ; its very element is the region of false appearances, and lying promises, and fatal snares. When it addresses itself to the unwary youth, it puts on a smiling countenance ; and makes fair professions ; and takes care to conceal its hideous features, till, like a serpent, it has entwined him with its deadly folds, and rendered his escape impossible. For instance, how common is it for young persons to yield to the solicitations of sinful companions, from the notion that it discovers great independence of character. But, what sort of independence, I would ask, is that which cannot command resolution enough to resist a few worthless and wicked companions ? What sort of independence is that which had rather put at hazard the interests of an eternity, than to have the sneers of half a dozen vile associates ? The truth is, that the person who acts this part, shews himself to be the greatest coward that walks the earth : he is afraid to encounter the reproaches of those whose censure is the highest praise ; and rather than do it, he deliberately consigns his character and his soul to destruction. Again, how often do young men become *profane*, from the idea that profaneness marks the gentle-

man ; and that occasionally to break out in the language of cursing, gives them a sort of dignity and importance. But let them go out into the street, and see in what kind of characters this vice is to be found in its most frightful perfection ; and, then, say whether they wish to share the honour of profaneness with *such* companions. Let them listen to the poor drunkard who has fallen down in the high-way, and is just waking from his beastly slumber, and they will find him muttering an oath ; cursing the God that made him, or, it may be, the hand which attempted to relieve him. Let them go into the most vulgar circles in society, where not even decency is tolerated, and there they will find profaneness, and vulgarity, and intemperance mingling in the same scene of disgusting riot. And yet they are cheated into the delusion that, at least, an occasional indulgence in this vice makes them more respectable. They are beguiled, as were our first parents by the fatal apple ; and think not of the danger till it is too late to avert it.

2. We learn from this subject how dreadful is the character of a corrupter of others. Every wicked man is more or less chargeable with this, whether he particularly intends it or not ; because it is impossible for him to live in the world, without exerting an influence upon those with whom he

associates; and this influence will receive its complexion altogether from his character. But, there *are* men with whom the business of corrupting others is a profession; who deliberately lay their plans for ruining immortal souls; who seize upon the unwary youth, like the animal upon his prey, and never leave him till they have accomplished his destruction. I know not that there are any such here: I am willing to believe there are none: but, if such a man *has* been providentially sent to the sanctuary this morning, I cannot feel willing that he should go away without a word of warning. And, I am not going to expostulate with you, in regard to the danger, or cruelty, or guilt of your conduct; but only to direct your thoughts to ONE EVENT, which will as certainly overtake you as that there is a God in heaven. You are hastening to the judgment; and, at that awful bar, you will meet every soul that you have helped to destroy; and the blood of each of these souls will be upon your own head. Nay, more; your corrupting influence may be propagated from generation to generation; and thousands whom you may never see in the flesh, may recognize you in the judgment day as their destroyer; and the united curses of all these miserable beings, may be heaped upon you through the ages of a suffering eternity. If your heart has not absolutely receiv-

ed the dark seal of reprobation, or if all the fountains of feeling have not been congealed by the chilling atmosphere of vice, must not the prospect fill you with horror ?

3. The subject supplies an important argument to all in favour of a religious life. It is but too common for persons of vicious character to take shelter under the plea that they injure none but themselves; and, that whatever the consequence of their conduct may be, they alone must bear it. Never was there a greater mistake. The influence of evil example, even where it is not accompanied by a deliberate purpose of corruption, is quick and powerful; it mingles contagion with the whole moral atmosphere in which it operates; and you might as well expect that the winds of heaven would die away at your bidding, or that the great luminary of heaven could exist without pouring forth his enlightening and comforting beams, as to suppose that you may set a vicious example, without exerting a corrupting influence upon others. No wishes, no exertions of yours can prevent it, until human nature is subject to a new set of laws. What a powerful motive is this for a life of virtue and piety! You are acting, not for yourselves alone, but for the world around you; and when we urge *you* to a life of religion, we are pleading in behalf

of the immortal interests of your fellow men. What an argument, also, for the most exemplary circumspection on the part of the professed disciples of Christ! You may have even a living principle of religion, my brethren, which will secure your own salvation; and yet for the want of proper vigilance, you may be betrayed into practices, which will blast the rising germ of youthful promise, and even cause the darkest shades of vice to settle on some heart, which had already begun to throb to the impressions of religion. How tremendous the thought that a friend, by a careless and unedifying example, should be instrumental in destroying his friend, for whom he would have even died! How delightful, on the other hand, is the reflection that by yielding your hearts and lives to the practical and purifying influence of the gospel, you may not only save yourselves, but may meet some in heaven—it may be, the objects of your tenderest affection—who will have been conducted thither by the light of your example!

4. The subject is fitted to remind parents and others who have the charge of youth, of their obligations and responsibility. It is left with you, my friends, under God, to decide in a great measure, the character of the rising generation. You are appointed, by providence, to give the first di-

rection to your children's thoughts: You are the constituted guardians of their morals, and their happiness; and, it is not improbable, that their present character, and eternal destiny may be dependant on the manner in which you discharge your duty towards them. And, in view of all that has now been said, I would, especially, urge you to that branch of your duty, which respects the character of their early companions. You cannot begin your vigilance too soon. No doubt, they are under the influence of example, and have begun to form characters for eternity, much earlier than you are apt to imagine. Choose their companions for them before they are capable of doing it for themselves; and let them not be able to remember the time when they were not afraid to be found in the way of sinners. As they grow into life, endeavour to fill their hearts with good sentiments and good impressions, and in these you may look for the germ of a virtuous character;—nay, from these you may hope there will arise a mighty bulwark, against which the most insidious and formidable attacks of vice will never be able to prevail. I doubt not that the influence of these early impressions has often enabled persons in *advanced life*, to resist temptations, by which they would otherwise have been overcome; and as often haunted the con-

science, not yet entirely deadened by sinful indulgences. Allow me to suggest to you the importance of *never suspending* your watchful attention to your children. It is exceedingly dangerous to let them feel, at an early period, that they have nearly escaped from parental control, and are not accountable to you for what they do. You are to follow them with a watchful eye wherever they go; to check the first symptoms of a wayward disposition; and to impose every barrier which parental affection, or vigilance, or authority can erect, to their mingling in vicious company. Rely on it, if under your immediate eye, or from a deficiency in your watchfulness and attention, they form bad connections, they will almost certainly be ruined; and you will *as certainly* be judged to have been accessory to it. Parents, as you love your children, and wish to see them respectable, and useful and happy, and when they die, that they may be received to heaven, I entreat you not to neglect your duty towards them, and especially to guard them from the contagion of evil example.

Finally: Let every young person be deeply impressed with the danger of his situation, and avoid the beginning of evil. I cannot suppose that there is a youth before me, who has deliberately made up his mind to resign himself to a vicious habit,

and to persevere in it till he shall enter eternity. But I have reason to fear that there are many with whom this will actually be the case, their resolutions to the contrary, notwithstanding ;—many, who are venturing into the path of sin, with that most idle of all notions, that they shall retreat early enough to save their souls. Alas! with all your advantages, I fear you have not yet learned the slippery and insidious nature of vice. As well might you think to take the deadly viper into your bosom, and render him harmless by flattering words ;—or as well might you drink down the fatal poison, and expect to stop its progress in your system when the blood had curdled at your heart, as to think of being the companion of fools, and yet not be destroyed. If you enter upon a career of vice, and make the wicked your chosen companions, I acknowledge that Omnipotence, in his adorable sovereignty, may pluck you as a brand out of the burning ; but without some special interposition, which you have no right to expect, it is altogether probable that you will be lost for ever. Be assured that your only safety lies in a cordial, and practical, and immediate reception of the gospel of Christ. Every other guide will mislead you ;—this will conduct you safely and cer-

tainly to heaven. Take to yourselves the Christian armour, and you may encounter all your spiritual enemies fearlessly, resolutely, victoriously. The dignity of your character will repel or confound the stratagems of the wicked, and will produce around you a kind of atmosphere in which virtue alone can breathe and act with freedom. The afflictions of life you will not indeed escape; but Religion will shed so much joy over each scene of adversity, that you would hardly wish to avoid it. Conscience, from being a stern accuser, will yield an approving and delightful testimony. The good and virtuous will all be your friends; and the bad will not be your enemies; for there is a majesty in virtue, which even vice cannot fail to discover and reverence. The influence of your example will be like the genial influence of the sun; and will cause the region around you to smile with moral beauty and verdure. You will go down to the grave amidst the grateful remembrances of multitudes; and even the passing stranger in whose heart departed virtue is embalmed, will pause by the side of your tomb-stone, and feel his heart throb with reverence, when he thinks that he is bending over the ashes of a good man. In eternity, you will be admitted to the communion of

angels;—to the embraces of Jesus;—to the vision of God. Who of you, my young friends, is not ready to say, “let this blessed portion be mine!” “Remember,” then, “*your Creator in the days of your youth.*”

And now if such a conclusion would not do violence to all the principles of human calculation, I would fain believe that *all* of you have resolved to set out immediately, and perseveringly on a religious life. But probably there are some here, who have not even thought of forming such a resolution; and, perhaps, others who have formed it, in whose memories it will hereafter exist as only the monument of a broken purpose. I confess that an ominous gloom settles upon my mind, as it ventures forward to explore the path of these persons through the darkness of futurity. I see them going away from this place, unaffected by all which they have heard, and returning to the haunts of sin with as keen a relish as ever. I see them becoming more and more hardened in vice, turning their backs upon religious instruction, and living as if eternity were a dream, and the word of God a fable. At no great distance onward in the path of life, I discover them struggling under the pressure of adversity. I hear them call

to the world for assistance ; but the world turns a deaf ear to their entreaties. I extend my views yet a little farther, and see these same persons lying on the bed of death. I see by the sinking countenance, the fluttering pulse, the faltering accents, that their conflict with the destroyer has commenced. I cast an eye around me to see whether any of their former vicious companions are present to try to sustain them in this awful exigency ; but not one of them is to be seen : their's was the work of destruction, not of consolation. I see them writhing in agonies which are unutterable ; oppressed and appalled by the prospect of an opening retribution, without a hold in the Universe on which to hang a single hope. I hear their lamentations over a mispent life ; their cutting reflections upon their miserable associates ; their agonizing supplications for a longer space for repentance ; and while my eye rests with horror upon the frightful impressions which Despair has made upon the countenance, I witness the ominous change, which tells me that the soul is in eternity. And then, amidst all the wailings of parental tenderness which surround me ; and while my mind is busy in trying to recollect some word or look which might have been a symptom of repent-

ance ;—even then, from that world where “ hope never comes that comes to all,” I seem to hear echoed in groans of unavailing anguish, “ *The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and I am not saved!*”

And is there a youth before me, of whose future lot all this may prove to have been a faithful prediction? Especially, is there one who has been dedicated to God, and had the benefit of a Christian education and parental prayers, in whose experience this complicated wretchedness shall be realized? “ *O Lord God, thou knowest!*”

THE END.