

T H E

AMERICAN PREACHER;

O R, A

COLLECTION OF SERMONS

FROM SOME OF THE

MOST EMINENT PREACHERS,

NOW LIVING,

IN THE UNITED STATES,

O F

DIFFERENT DENOMINATIONS

IN THE

CHRISTIAN CHURCH.

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NEVER BEFORE PUBLISHED.

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# S E R M O N    I I.

MAN IN HIS NATURAL STATE.

B Y

JOHN WITHERSPOON, D. D. L. L. D.

Col. N. C. P.

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R E V.    iiii.    17.

*Because thou sayest I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.*

**I**N order to preach the Gospel with success, it is necessary that we should begin, by establishing the great and fundamental truths, on which all the rest are built, and to which they constantly refer. Nay, it is necessary, that we should often look back to these, and see that we be not off the foundation, or that it be not weakly, or imperfectly laid. Of this sort, I take the guilt, misery, and weakness of our nature to be; and therefore have chosen the words now read, as the subject of discourse, in which the spirit of God reproves the sufficiency, and self-righteousness of the church of Laodicea.

*Because thou sayest I am rich, and increased in goods, &c.* I suppose you will all easily understand, that the words are figurative, and are spoken entirely, with a view to the spiritual state of that Church. In this light, let us consider what is precisely their meaning.

We may either suppose, that this charge is brought against the church of Laodicea, because there were many there, under the profession of the Gospel, who were notwithstanding, still in a natural unrenewed state—strangers to the power of Religion; of which, their being thus unhumbled, and insensible of their guilt, and misery, was the evidence; and for which, the remedy is prescribed, in the following words: *I counsel thee to buy of me gold, tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich, and white raiment that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eye salve, that thou mayest see.*

Or we may suppose, that this reproof, was in a great measure applicable to them all, in general; believers and unbelievers; the best of them, being exceedingly prone to trust in themselves, that they were righteous; instead of that humble dependance on the merit, and grace of their Redeemer, which ought not only to be the refuge of the sinner, but the confidence of the saint. And there is no question, that this is a proper caution to professing Christians in every age, to beware of splitting on the rock of self-sufficiency.

But as this disposition reigns in the heart of every one, that is yet at a distance from God—is the foundation of their security and impenitence, and is what they must be brought off from, before they can be reconciled to God; it is for their benefit, that I chiefly design this discourse, though it may also be useful, and shall be in part applied to the children of God. It is an affecting thought; when pursued to its consequences; yet alas! it is unquestionably true, that in every assembly, *such as this*, of professing Christians, there are not a few; who are in *the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity*, under the wrath of God, and liable to the condemning sentence of his law; and at the same time; that the far greatest part of them are ignorant of it, and know not, that they are *wretched, and poor, and blind, and naked*.

In discoursing farther upon this subject therefore, I shall

I. Endeavor to prove and illustrate this truth: that all mankind are by nature in a state of sin and misery, under the bondage of corruption, and liable to the wrath of God.

II. I shall briefly shew you, that being brought to a lively sense, and genuine conviction of this, is the first, and a necessary step, to the saving knowledge of God, in Christ---And in the *last place*, shall make some practical improvement of the subject.

I. In the first place then, I am to prove and illustrate this truth ; that all mankind are by nature in a state of sin and misery, under the bondage of corruption, and liable to the wrath of God. What is said in this passage of the Laodiceans, is universally true, of the posterity of Adam. Unless an inward and essential change has been wrought upon them by the grace of God ; they are *wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked*. It is also true of them, as well as the Laodiceans, that they know it not ; but vainly presume themselves to be rich, and increased with goods, and to have need of nothing. If these two things are jointly true of many of you my hearers, there is nothing in which you can have so great a concern : therefore, let me earnestly beseech your most serious attention, to what shall be said : as the success of this conviction is necessary, to your understanding, or profiting by any other part of divine truth, as I shall afterwards shew you.

The proof of the truth here asserted, can be only of two kinds. 1. From scripture, which is the testimony of God declaring it. 2. From the visible state of the world, and our own experience, finding it to be so.

I. That all mankind are by nature in a state of sin and misery, appears from the express, and repeated testimony of the word of God. And this testimony we have, not only in particular passages, carrying the truth, but in the strain and spirit of

the whole, and the several dispensations of Divine Providence there recorded; which are all of them, built upon this supposition, and intended to remedy this universal evil.

See what God declares: Gen. vi. 5. *And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart, was only evil continually. And again, the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth.* We may take the psalmist David's testimony of himself, as a sample, of the rest of mankind; and indeed he plainly intimates, that it is a common calamity. *Who can understand his errors? Cleanse thou me from secret faults. Behold! I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.*

We may take also the testimony of the Apostle Paul, in his epistle to the Romans, which is the more full to our present purpose: that as he had never been at Rome, he is there laying the foundation of religion in general, and the Christian dispensation in particular, by a clear, and explicit proof, of the need the world had of a Saviour, from its universal corruption and depravity. See then what he says---*What then? Are we better than they? No, in no wise, for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin. As it is written, there is none righteous, no not one.* And again---*Now we know that what things soever the law saith: it saith to them who under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may be-*

*come guilty, before God.---For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.*

You may also see, that the Apostle traces this disorder, to its very source---*Wherefore as by one man, sin entered into the world, and death by sin: and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.*

I shall add but one express scripture testimony more.---*And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins.*

But besides the particular passages of scripture, positively declaring this truth, the whole frame and contexture of the scriptures, and all the dispensations of Divine Providence recorded in them, are a proof of the same thing. Man is every where considered as in a fallen and sinful state. Every thing that is prescribed to him, and every thing that is done for him, goes upon that supposition. It is not one man, or a few men, that are in scripture called to repentance, but all without exception. Now repentance is only the duty of a sinner. An innocent person cannot repent; he has nothing to grieve for in his heart, or to forsake in his life. It is also proper to observe, that one of the scripture characters of God is, *Merciful and gracious, slow to anger, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin.* Now, he could not be to us a forgiving God, and there would be no need that he should be revealed under that character, unless we were sinners, that stood in need of pardon. Mercy, indeed, is the distinguishing attribute of God, and this can only

have respect to offenders. All the other perfections of God, might be exercised towards pure and holy creatures; but mercy, only towards sinners. He might be a good, holy, just, wise, powerful God, to persons in a state of innocence, but he can shew mercy, only to the guilty.

Do not the dispensations of God's Providence, shew the same thing? He sent the flood, as a testimony of the wickedness of the world, and for the punishment of a guilty race. Remember also the sacrifices, which were appointed, and accepted by God from the beginning of the world. Sacrifices are for atonement, and expiation. They are plainly a substitution in the room of a forfeited life. It is doing violence to common sense, to make them any thing else. The whole Jewish œconomy, which had in it so many sacrifices, so many offerings, so many washings and purifications, does plainly suppose, the person using them, to be infected with sin, or moral pollution. Had not this been the case, they had been extremely absurd, and improper.

But the strongest testimony of all, that God hath given to the guilt, and corruption of mankind, is his sending his own Son into the world, to redeem them by the sacrifice of himself---To what purpose redeem them, if they were not in bondage? Why so costly an expiation, if our lives had not been forfeited to Divine Justice? But that it was for this purpose, that Christ came into the world,

is so plain, from the whole of the scriptures, that I shall select but one passage out of many, to prove it---*Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation, through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness, for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God.*

What is said already on this head, is a full proof from scripture, that man is now, by nature, in a state of sin; that he is also, in consequence of that, in a state of misery, and liable to the wrath of God, is proved by many of the same passages, and by many others---*For the wrath of God is revealed from Heaven against all ungodliness, and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness---For the wages of sin is death, &c.* But I need not multiply passages to this purpose; for in all God's dispensations, the deserved punishment of sinners, is as evident, as their sinfulness itself. It is indeed fully proved, from the essential perfections of God, particularly his holiness and justice. He is of purer eyes, than that he can behold iniquity. *Evil cannot dwell with him, nor fools, that is, sinners, stand in his sight.*

Is not all this then my brethren, a sufficient proof, from the testimony of God, that man in a natural state, is sinful and miserable? Shall we affirm ourselves to be whole, if he saith we are un-sound? Do we know more than God? Will we not give credit to the fountain of truth? Nor is it any objection to this, that we ourselves know it

not, or are but little sensible of it. One considerable part of the disease, is blindness of understanding: so that we may, and must, till our eyes are opened, be ignorant of our danger---We may think and say, that we are rich, and increased in goods, and have need of nothing, while we are, *wretched and miserable, and blind and naked.*

2. The same thing appears from the visible state of the world, and our own experience. Unbelievers are apt to hear with indifference and neglect, what they are told from scripture testimony, unless otherwise confirmed to them; and it is with the unbeliever we have now to do. Besides, the establishment of this truth, upon other evidence than that of scripture, ought to have a powerful influence, in inducing men to believe the other truths in scripture, that are connected with and founded upon it. I think it therefore, highly proper, to lay before you what evidence we have of our lost state, from the observation of the world, though the scriptures had been silent. I would likewise recommend to all, what shall be said on this subject, to preserve your faith unshaken, and keep you from blasphemous, unbelieving thoughts, if at any time, you should be tempted to them: since, even unenlightened reason, confirms the foundation of divine truth, and nature, and providence conspire, in preaching the Doctrine of Divine Grace.

Now, doth not our experience, as well as the observation of others, shew us, that we are born in

fin, and conceived in iniquity? May we not say from our own knowledge, that the imaginations of the heart of man, are only evil from his youth, and that continually? Is there not a proneness, and tendency to evil, universally to be observed, in mankind? and a backwardness and aversion to that which is good? Is not this apparent even in children, upon the first dawn of reason in their minds, and the first sight of choice or inclination in their hearts? Surely it must be owned, that in that early period, they are at least *comparatively* innocent—If any among us, is without sin, it must be the youngest; *yet folly is bound in the heart of a child.*—How hard is it to guard them from evil, and to inspire them with good dispositions, even by the wisest, and earliest care, in their instruction? And even after the most successful pains, are there not still many remaining blemishes, through the prevalence of corrupt nature, which shew, that the ground-work itself, was faulty? But on the contrary, how easily do men learn, that which is evil? Do they need to be taught? Is it not enough to give them licence? How just is that description in Jeremiah? *They are wise to do evil, but to do good they have no knowledge.* I am far from denying, that men are improved and forwarded in sin, by instruction and example, as well as in that, which is good: but it is plain, they are far apter scholars, in the first, than in the last; which plainly shews, they are more powerfully disposed to it, by nature. Nay, is it not evident, from the universal experi-

ence, and testimony of those, who act from a principle of Religion; that it is extremely difficult, with all the care they can take, to resist the propensity of nature, to the contrary? And that in the best, it often gets the superiority, when they are off their guard? Is not this an evidence of the depravity and corruption of human nature, and its tendency to evil? Are those who hate sin, often overcome by it, and shall those who love it, presume to say, they are free from it?

If any should ask, how I prove that that course of action, to which human nature is inclined is evil, without the assistance of scripture? I answer, from reason; and that many ways—from its pernicious effects on societies, and private persons; from the testimony of the world in general, when others, than themselves, are concerned, and from the testimony of every man's conscience, in his own case. Who is there, that does not often feel in himself, a powerful tendency to what he cannot but in his heart condemn? Is not his conscience God's vicegerent? and doth not natural religion, as well as the religion of Christ, declare him corrupt? So that I may say with the Apostle Paul, not citing the passage as a proof, but as an illustration and description of the character, and state of natural men---*For when the Gentiles which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law: these having not the law, are a law unto themselves, which shew the work of the law written*

*in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts, the mean while, accusing or else excusing one another.*

Thus there is as much light remaining with us since the fall, as to shew, that we are out of the way, but not to bring us back to it again.

As a serious consideration of the state of the wicked, may shew us our natural impurity: so it hath been long ago discovered, and confessed by many of the ancient heathens, who never heard of the name of Christ, nor knew of the remedy. These, discerning by nature, the perfectly pure, and holy nature of God, and comparing it with the dispositions prevalent in man, could not reconcile them together; but concluded, that a creature, so corrupt, could not come in that condition, out of the hands of its Creator. This difficulty some of them endeavored to solve, by a state of pre-existence; which bears some resemblance to the true solution, given of it in the holy scripture: viz. the apostacy of our first parents; which entailed a corrupted nature upon their posterity, in which, the light of nature, and revealed truth, seem almost wholly, to coincide.

It is to the same thing that I cannot help attributing the practice, that so universally prevailed over the heathen world, before the coming of Christ, *of offering sacrifices*, to appease the wrath of the Deity, supposed to be offended. That the

custom of sacrificing, prevailed very generally, perhaps universally among the heathen nations, at the greatest distance from, and having no correspondence with each other, is a certain and unquestionable fact. Neither do I see to what cause we can ascribe it, unless to one of these two; either an ancient tradition, from the beginning of the world, and spread with the inhabitants, through the several parts of it, as they separated and peopled it; or to the common condition of human nature, which dictated the same thing, to persons, in such distant places.

If the first of these suppositions is embraced, which indeed I suppose to be the truth, it appears that sacrifices were appointed by God to man, in his fallen state, for the pardon of sin, and that they had reference, to the great propitiatory sacrifice of Christ, upon the cross.

If we prefer the last supposition, it would seem as if the consciousness of guilt, had uniformly prompted men in all ages, and nations, to offer up some atonement for their offences. In both cases, it equally serves, to prove the corruption, and sinfulness of human nature.

Now as what hath been said, plainly proves the impurity of man, in his natural state: so his misery and liableness to punishment, may also be proved; both as a natural consequence of his sinfulness, and even, more plainly, by itself. There is not only a considerable degree of actual misery in

the world, but plain prefages of more to follow it in the world to come. Need I take up much time, in enumerating the feveral miseries, and calamities, incident to human life? Are not oppression and injury from one another, poverty, sickness, pain, and death, the plain fruits of sin, and visible tokens of God's displeasure? Man with some marks of superiority and excellence of nature, is even, by means of his superiority, his knowledge, and foresight of his own sufferings, more miserable, than any other of the creatures, that is equally subject to the stroke of death.

To the whole, I shall only subjoin one consideration more, which is applicable to both parts of the argument---I have often thought, that the *natural terror and fear with which men are possess'd, of the presence of God, or any remarkable token of his power, is nothing else, but an indication of guilt, or an apprehension of wrath.*

You may see some incidents in scripture, from which it is natural to conclude; that when God makes any visible manifestation of his glory, or sends any of his Angels or Ministers from Heaven to Earth; those who are present, are filled with the utmost dread and terror.

Thus in the relation given of God's appearance upon Mount Sinai, it is said: *And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, I exceedingly fear and quake,* See another example, in Isaiah---*Then said I, woe*

*is me, for I am undone, because I am a man of unclean lips ; for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts. And in the New Testament, in the Apostle John---And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead.*

And is not this always the case, in all ages, that upon any remarkable appearance of an inhabitant of the other world, or even when any such thing is falsely apprehended the inhabitants of this world are filled with extraordinary terror? What is this do you imagine, but consciousness of guilt, and apprehension of vengeance?

Innocence has no enemy, and it has nothing to fear. We are all in much the same case with Adam, immediately after his first transgression; when he heard God's voice in the garden, *he was afraid, and fled, and hid himself---* We read of no such fear possessing him, while he retained his innocence, but as soon as he had sinned, he began to dread an avenging God.

From all this then, I would conclude, that reason accords with scripture, in saying, that *all have sinned and come short of the glory of God*: that man in a natural state, is *wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind and naked.*