SERMONS,

PREACHED

IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF

HIGH WYCOMBE.

BY

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SERMON XIX.

THE PRAYER OF DAVID FOR SELF-KNOWLEDGE.

Psalm cxxxix. 23, 24.

*Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there be any wicked way in me; and lead me in the way everlasting.*

None but a man of heartfelt piety could have written this prayer; and he among ourselves, who can feelingly offer it up to heaven, is not far from the kingdom of God. He is at least in earnest in his religious profession, and has learnt, what thousands who deem themselves Christians never have learnt, but what we all must learn before our souls can be saved—the exceeding deceitful­ness of the human heart, its ignorance and wick­edness. May that blessed Spirit who put this petition into David’s mind, put it this day into our minds; teach every one of us thus to pray, and keep us thus praying all the days of our life!

I. The first inference to be drawn from the psalmist’s prayer is this oft-repeated but most important truth—*True religion has its seat in the heart;* it is an inward thing; a principle dwelling in the mind, and ruling over the whole inner man.

Now this is a truth which we are all willing to acknowledge; indeed we must acknowledge it or directly contradict the Bible; but there are few of us, who heartily believe it, and still fewer who are aware of its importance. Many of us, when off our guard, openly declare that it matters not what a man thinks and feels, so that his life is right. We pray indeed at church that God would “make clean our hearts within us,” but when we are afterwards told of the guilt of those unclean, envious, and proud thoughts which so often de­file our hearts, that they are sinful in their nature and ruinous in their consequences, what do we say? We immediately show that we meant no­thing by our prayer, and contend that there can be no sin in such momentary, shadowy things as thoughts; that they do no one any harm, and that none but an enthusiast would attach any im­portance to them.

Others among us perceive the absurdity of this language, its opposition to common sense as well as to the declarations of the scripture; and yet we are really adopting the same principle, or one very much like it. If we do not make religion consist in a few decencies and a round of forms, we represent it as consisting in that which is little or nothing better, the reception of a favourite creed, the upholding of a system of doctrines. These men have acquired, it may be, some knowledge of the gospel, but it is confined to their under­standings only; clear perhaps as far as it goes, as the rays of the sun, but cold and powerless as the light of the moon. They can speculate, they can dispute, but this is all; they cannot feel, they cannot love, they cannot pray. They are contro­versialists, but they are not Christians.

Others again seem to have admitted something like religion into their imaginations. It interests them. It elevates their minds by the grandeur of the objects which it brings before them, and de­lights them by its loveliness. But then these very men can lay aside the religious book they have been reading, or leave the religious society they have been joining, and forget all that has so deeply interested them; be as worldly-minded as though eternity were a dream, and as eager in the pursuit of sensual gratifications, as though they could satisfy the soul and last for ever.

It is not thus however with a man when his religion is real. He has not only “a name to live,” but he lives. There is a consistency in his cha­racter. The gospel does not merely touch, it pervades him. It not only enlightens his under­standing, but shines into his heart; not only delights his imagination, but captivates his affec­tions. All the faculties of his soul are called into exercise by the things of eternity, are all con­cerned in his religion, and all regulated by it. It softens and purifies his heart; it lifts up his affec­tions to things above; it makes his conscience tender, and his thoughts humble, peaceful, and holy; it holds the reins of his imagination, and while it draws it away from sinful objects, it ele­vates it to high and heavenly things. In fact, like the leaven hidden in the meal, it “leavens the whole lump,” changes the whole man, and makes him “a new creature” in Christ Jesus.

II. Hence we may observe, secondly, that *the truly religious man is anxious to know the real state of his heart.*

This anxiety is very visible in the prayer be­fore us. David had evidently been searching and trying his own heart, and it was his desire to be thoroughly acquainted with it, which led him so earnestly to beseech God to search and try it also.

But the heart, brethren, is a book which few of us like to study. It is one which requires close and serious thought, and thought is one of those things which our careless minds most hate. Besides, it is a book which teaches many hum­bling and mortifying lessons, and we do not wish to be mortified and humbled. We love the false­hood which exalts, better than we love the truth which abases us. True religion however begins with thoughtfulness. It turns the eyes of a man inward upon himself. It causes him to commune with his own heart, and to make “diligent search” into his own spirit. True, he may find this self­-examination painful and humiliating, but this makes no matter to him. He feels that he has the salvation of an immortal soul at stake, and he is not to lose that soul for the sake of being kept easy in his follies and proud in his sins.

Now what do we know of this enquiring, this self-searching spirit? What have we felt and are still feeling of it? Are we heartily convinced that God requireth “truth in the inward parts,” and that he must dwell and reign within us, before he will deem us his people, or call himself our God? Under this conviction, are we longing for “a clean heart and a right spirit;” and are we often anxiously enquiring whether our hearts are clean and our spirits right? Are we often bringing our faith, our hope, our love, all our seeming graces, to the touchstone of the Bible? What kind of books, of sermons, of friends, do we most love? those which lull our fears to rest, and make us well satisfied with ourselves? or those which pierce our consciences, strip us of our fancied righteousness, drive us from all our refuges of lies, and send us to our closets dissatisfied, hum­bled, and praying? In a word, are we men of an inward, enquiring, and soul-subduing religion; or men who are content with the form, and care nothing about the power, of godliness?

III. If we can bear to press home to ourselves such questions as these, we shall be able to go a step farther. We shall see the truth of a third observation suggested to us by the text—*The sin­cere Christian is not conscious of having within his heart any one cherished sin.*

This is strongly intimated in the psalmist’s prayer. His words imply that if there were any wicked way in him, any evil disposition habitually indulged, he could not be walking in the way everlasting. Not that he meant to speak of him­self or of any other man, as wholly free from sin­ful thoughts and desires, for on other occasions we hear him confessing that there was much sin within him, and bitterly lamenting it. But it is one thing to have iniquity entering the breast, and another thing to harbour it and have it reign­ing there. Saint Paul felt a sinful “law in his members,” but he felt it as “warring against the law of his mind,” as opposed to the habitual frame of his soul, to that holy and heavenly principle which made him “delight in the law of God after the inward man,” and enabled him to “walk, not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.”

Every Christian also feels the same warfare within. Sin tempts and harasses him, and some­times brings him into captivity, but it cannot hold him in bondage; it cannot make him quietly sub­mit to its hated laws. It overcomes and degrades him for an hour, but we soon see the prisoner struggling with his vile oppressor, and bursting its bonds. Trampling his lusts underneath his feet, we hear him exclaim, “I thank God through Jesus Christ my Lord.”

Again, brethren, let us turn to ourselves. Are we thus overcoming inward sin? Our lives may be blameless, but this is not the point. Is there no wicked way within us, in our hearts, in our thoughts? Notwithstanding all our remaining corruptions, can we say with humble confidence, that there is not one sinful disposition which we are habitually indulging, not one evil temper which we are suffering to reign over us? If we cannot say this, our profession of religion is, at the best, very suspicious. It may satisfy the world, it may satisfy ourselves, but there is reason to fear that it will not satisfy God; that our hearts must even yet be renewed, that a work must be begun there, to which we are at present entire strangers, or that our souls will be lost.

Does this appear to any of us a hard saying? We say not these things of ourselves, for the scripture also says the same. “Whosoever abideth in God, sinneth not. Whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him.” “He that committeth sin, is of the devil.” “Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin, for his seed remaineth in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.” To what conclusion then does this plain and strong language bring us? With­out carrying it as far as it might be carried, it surely warrants us to say that no man is justified in deeming himself a Christian, unless when he is exercising holy dispositions, or, at least, mourning over the want of them. He may be a Christian at other times, but, let his past experience have been what it may, he is running a fearful risk in considering himself such. The station he should take is the very lowest he can find at the footstool of a pardoning Jesus, and the lan­guage which becomes him there, is not that of the boaster, “I thank thee that I am not as other men are;” but that of the suppliant who smote on his breast and said, “God be merciful to me a sinner.”

IV. But though the text intimates that the Christian is not aware of having any sin prevail­ing within him, it implies, fourthly, that *he often suspects himself of some undetected iniquity.*

The solicitude which David expresses for di­vine teaching, proves that he distrusted his own enquiries; that he found them ineffectual or, at best, not altogether satisfactory. He rejoiced in the testimony of his conscience, but he would not confide in it. He was conscious of the in­tegrity of his heart, but he was conscious also of its exceeding deceitfulness; and hence he manifests no proud self-confidence, but a godly jealousy over himself. He seems to say here, as he says in another place, “Who can understand his errors? Cleanse thou me from my secret faults.”

Now mankind in general have none of this self­-distrust. They are well satisfied with themselves, and imagine that God is well satisfied with them also. If they think at all of the state of their heart, they think of it with little concern, and examine it with little interest. Strangers to its depraved and treacherous nature, they imagine that it is even less sinful than their life, and per­suade themselves that, on the whole, they have greater cause to rejoice in its goodness, than to lament its wickedness; that their inward state is better than their outward conduct, their motives and intentions better than their actions. At any rate, they trust that they cannot have been de­ceiving themselves all their life long; and though they have the Bible in their hands and every page of it utterly condemns them, they are determined to live and die regarding themselves as safe, par­doned Christians.

The real disciples of Christ however are men of another spirit. They are backward to think the least evil of others, but ever ready to think much evil of themselves. They suspect themselves when no one else suspects them, and are often tempted to deem themselves accursed, while others regard them as peculiarly blessed, by their God. Look at the disciples in their last affecting interview with their beloved Lord. He tells them that one of them shall betray him, and instead of every man looking around to find the traitor in his brother, he seeks him in himself. “*They* were exceeding sorrowful, and began every one of them to say unto him, Lord, is it I?”

The truth is, the Christian finds it exceedingly difficult to know himself. Many who have long taken counsel with their soul, have had sorrow in their heart daily, for they have remained still doubtful of their present state, and perplexed with apprehensions concerning their future safety. They have either come to no conclusion at all, or they have formed a wrong one. This difficulty in judging of our state does not arise from any ob­scurity in the account which the scriptures give us of the Christian. His character is traced there in the plainest terms and is easy to be understood. It is however by no means so easy to determine whe­ther our own character corresponds with it. We see something in ourselves like it, but we see a great deal more very unlike it. The best of our actions, the brightest of our graces, the most holy of our dispositions, the most fervent of our prayers, and the most ardent of our praises, are blended with so much that is evil, that we despair of sepa­rating the one from the other, and are often ready to faint with disquietude and fear.

How then shall we act? The prayer of David will direct us. But we must first notice another truth intimated in it.

V. In the midst of his perplexities, *the sincere Christian has a firm and lively belief that God knows his heart.*

Here again is a truth which none of us profess to doubt, but which many of us altogether discre­dit. We may say that we do not disbelieve it, that we only forget it; but if we really be­lieved it, we should not forget it. It is too so­lemn, too awful a truth to be habitually forgot­ten. The dishonest servant never robs his master before his eyes, for he never ceases to remember that he is in his master’s presence; and yet the man who stands up and tells us that he believes God sees him, will dishonour God daily and hourly to his face without fear or shame.

Appeal to your consciences, brethren. If you really believed that there is a God “to whom all hearts are open, and from whom no secrets are hid;” if you were heartily persuaded that he is every moment watching your thoughts, remem­bering them, and about to bring you into judg­ment for them all; could you have ventured to cherish in your mind many of the thoughts which you have quietly and fearlessly cherished there during the week that is past? Nay, could you have indulged some of the thoughts which you have indulged this very day, and perhaps during the last few minutes, within these walls? You could not. You feel that you could not. The very idea of being seen by God, has made you serious now; and it would have long ago wrought a great and abiding change within you, if you actually believed in his constant presence. The real servant of God does believe it, and acts on his belief. Like David, he knows that “the Lord searcheth the hearts,” and “understandeth the thoughts,” and “compasseth the path,” and is “acquainted with the ways,” of the children of men; and, like David, he is willing to be searched, and prays to be tried, by this omniscient God. Instead of wishing that he could escape his eye, he wishes to be, if possible, more closely observed by him, and offers up a prayer which many around him would tremble to offer up; “Search me, O God, and know my heart*;* try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there be any wicked way in me; and lead me in the way everlasting.”

VI. The believer therefore, when he is dissatis­fied with his own enquiries into the state of his soul, is taught by this prayer that *he must apply to God for self-knowledge and instruction.* It does not imply that the omniscient Jehovah can pos­sibly be ignorant of his heart and thoughts, but it bids him pray that God would make him also thoroughly acquainted with them. It tells him to carry his difficulties and perplexities to a throne of grace, and to wait patiently there for that hea­venly wisdom which will remove them all.

The wisest and most experienced of us know but little of ourselves; but he who sits on his heavenly throne, knows us well. When he was on earth, “he needed not that any should testify of man, for he knew what was in man;” and since he went up to his glory, he has told us that “he searcheth the reins and hearts.” It is plain then that Christ can instruct us; that he can enable us to see ourselves in our true light; that if we are encouraging a presumptuous hope, he can dash it to pieces; that if we are cast down with unnecessary fears, he can chase them away, and cause us, in the midst of our infirmities, to see ourselves his ransomed, justified, and accepted children, and give us that spirit of adoption, which will enable us to cry, “Abba, Father.” That which we see not, he can teach us. He can make us to know our transgression and our sin. He can show us wherein we are right in our judgment of ourselves, and wherein we are wrong; what there is to be brought low in us, and what to be raised up; what we must endeavour to get rid of, and what to obtain. Laying open our hearts, he can dis­cover to us the sin which is lurking there, and, like a worm at the root, secretly marring our com­forts and withering our graces; and, shining on the work of his own hands, he can make visible to us the walls of that spiritual temple which he has begun to raise up for himself within our souls.

Are we willing to sit at the feet of Christ, and to be thus taught of him? Then we may be assured that he will thus teach us. But he must at the same time be taken for our guide as well as for our instructor.

VII. For the text reminds us, lastly, that *he who seeks instruction of God, must be willing to submit himself to his guidance.*

When David prayed for self-knowledge, he did it with a practical object in view, and with a submissive mind. He wished to know himself better, that he might walk more closely with God; and he was ready to receive this knowledge in any way in which it might please the Lord to give it him. “Lead me,” he says, “in the way everlasting.”

He prays to be led, and the prayer shows that he felt his need of guidance, and was willing to follow the Lord in whatsoever path or through whatsoever scenes he might conduct him. We often pray for instruction without being mindful of the necessity of this submission. Our suppli­cations are sincere, but we know not what we ask. We forget that the Saviour employs various methods of showing his children their hearts. We expect it to be done by his word; but while we are reading and searching it, he sends us trouble, and makes trouble the means of bringing to light our sinfulness and weakness. He in­structed Israel his people, and Jacob “the lot of his inheritance;” and how? By leading them about for forty years in a wilderness. Affliction, fre­quent and severe affliction, is the school into which prayer often brings a man, and in which he first learns to know himself and his God. It is in the furnace, that the gold is proved, and distinguished from the secret dross.

But the path of tribulation is not the only path which we must be content to enter. If we wish our prayers to be answered, we must be prepared to walk in “the way everlasting.” And what is this way? It is that way of access to the Father, in which the patriarchs and prophets, the glorious company of the apostles and the noble army of martyrs, drew near to him; the way of reconcilia­tion through the blood of his Son. It is that high-way which is called in the scriptures, “The way of holiness.” To expect therefore to know ourselves, while we refuse to know Jesus Christ and him crucified; to expect to obtain wisdom and experience, while we are living careless and worldly lives; to expect to know our election of God, while we are content to have our hearts cold towards him, and are nearly or quite dead in trespasses and sins;—this is to seek the flowers of summer amidst the ice of winter, to look for the activity of life and health in the chambers of the grave.

This then appears to be the substance of the instruction afforded us in the text—the heart is the seat of all real religion; the truly religious man is anxious therefore to know the state of his heart; but though, after diligently examining him­self, he is not conscious of cherishing any known sin, yet he often suspects that some beloved iniquity may be yet lurking undiscovered in his breast; aware of his inability to detect it, but firmly persuaded that God knows all that is in his heart, he applies to him for self-knowledge and instruction, with a desire of submitting him­self entirely to his guidance, ready to welcome any means which he may employ to teach him, and willing to walk in any way which he may mark out for him.

The one great lesson which these things are calculated to leave impressed on our minds, is evidently this—*the necessity and importance of self-examination.*

We live in an age in which we are peculiarly called on to be jealous of ourselves. The reproach of the cross has in some degree ceased among us, and the consequence is, we are surrounded with those who profess to bear it. But the flock of Christ is still a little flock; the way to life is as narrow as ever, the gate as strait, and they that go in thereat, are still few. O who can tell whether we are among these few? When we look into a professing world, how easy does it appear to be a Christian; but how difficult, when we enter our closets and look into the word of God! Which shall in the end prove a deceiver, cannot be doubt­ful. God will be true, and will manifest his truth, though every man should be found a liar. What matters it to me then, that I think myself a Chris­tian? I am not to be my own judge. What matters it to me that my neighbours think me a child of God? I am not to stand at their judg­ment-seat. God is “the Judge of all,” and he will be my Judge, and will try me, not by my own standard, not by the opinions of the world, but by the law and the testimony, by the declarations of his own word. Let me therefore search my heart and try my thoughts by the same rule now, by which I shall be searched and tried hereafter. And what if the Bible should condemn me? Let me not shut my eyes to the truth. What if it should tell me that I must part with my beloved sins, or give up my hope of glory? Is it not better to have iniquity cast out in this world, though it be with bitterness and tears, than to have it torment me for ever in the next? Is it not better to lose a lust, than to lose a soul? to give up the pleasures of sin, than to sacrifice the joys of heaven? Is it not more profitable to cut off a right hand or pluck out a right eye, to have one of my members perish, than to have the whole body cast into hell?

How dreadful, brethren, is the thought—to imagine ourselves Christians, to pass for Chris­tians in the world, to be looking forward for years to the glorious heaven above us as our home, to close our eyes in peace expecting to open them in glory, and yet after all to lift up our eyes in hell being in torments! In temporal things mistakes may sometimes be rectified, errors may be re­trieved, but this error, this mistake, never. Today indeed is a day of salvation. He who has long deceived himself and others, he who is perplexed with doubts and fears, he who till this hour never had a serious thought about his soul, may seek mercy, look unto Jesus, and find it. Tomorrow this day of mercy may end, and the careless, the self-deceiver, and the hypocrite, be lost for ever; their hopes blasted, their fears realized, their un­concern exchanged for “weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth.” “Today then, while it is called today, harden not your hearts.” “Exa­mine yourselves whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves.” “Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the Lord. Let us lift up our heart with our hands unto God in the hea­vens, lest fear and a snare come upon us, deso­lation and destruction.”