

SERMONS,
PREACHED
IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF
HIGH WYCOMBE.

BY
THE REV. CHARLES BRADLEY,
VICAR OF GLASBURY, BRECKNOCKSHIRE; AND MINISTER OF
ST. JAMES'S CHAPEL, CLAPHAM, SURREY.

THE NINTH EDITION.

VOL. I.

LONDON: :
PRINTED FOR HAMILTON, ADAMS, AND CO.
PATERNOSTER-ROW.

1833.

SERMON VII.

THE HUMILITY OF ST. PAUL.

EPHESIANS iii. 8.

Less than the least of all saints.

THE man who has left us this record of himself, was one of the holiest and most exalted saints that ever graced the Christian church. He seems to have entered more into the spirit of his Master, than any of his followers, and to have received from him more abundant honour. And yet in the midst of his attainments, even while standing on the eminence to which divine mercy had raised him, we find this distinguished apostle humbling himself in the dust. He who has been for ages the delight and admiration of the church, here styles himself “less than the least of all saints;” and as though even this were too honourable a name for him to bear, we see him, in another place, abasing himself still more; he deems himself unworthy to be called an apostle, and takes this as his more appropriate title, “The chief of sinners.”

This deep humility in a saint of this exalted eminence, may well excite our admiration; but let not admiration be its only fruit. It invites us to go and sit at his feet, and learn of him. It calls upon us to be more “meek and lowly in heart to have a more abiding sense of our meanness, unworthiness, and guilt; to walk more humbly with our God.

With these objects in view, let us enquire, first, in what the humility of Saint Paul consisted; and, secondly, by what means that spirit of self-abasement which reigned in him, may be habitually maintained in our own hearts.

I. *In what did the humility of Saint Paul consist? How did it manifest itself?* The slightest acquaintance with his character leaves us no room to suspect that it consisted in words only. There is such an appearance of simplicity and honesty in his writings, that they give us at once a full conviction that the humility which appears in his language, was to be found also in his heart and life. A reference to his writings will consequently be just as satisfactory, as a reference to his history, and perhaps as instructive.

1. We cannot take even the most hasty glance at the writings of this apostle, without at once noticing *the entire submission of his mind to the gospel of Christ*, the simple and hearty reception which he gave to every divine truth.

He had naturally just the same proud heart that we have, and hated the humiliating doctrines connected with the cross of Christ, as much as we hate them. Nay, they were more offensive to him than they are to us. They were opposed, not only to those common workings of pride which we all feel, but to a multitude

of prejudices peculiar to himself, or to the age and country in which he lived. He was a Jew, he was a scholar of Gamaliel, he was a man of strong intellectual powers; and yet all the prejudices of the Jew, all the pride of the scholar, and all the dictates of worldly wisdom, were torn out of his heart; and the once proud and haughty Saul is seen sitting at the feet of the carpenter's son, humble and teachable as a little child. Read his epistles to the Romans and Galatians, brethren, and see how low the grace of God can humble the proudest mind. We do not find him endeavouring, in these epistles, to accommodate the doctrines of the gospel to his former opinions, reducing and qualifying them to make them square with the feelings of the Jew or the pride of the philosopher; he receives them, in all their humiliating force, with simplicity and godly sincerity. Every imagination, "every high thing" which had so long exalted itself in his mind "against the knowledge of God," seems to be utterly cast down, and every thought brought "into captivity to the obedience of Christ."

This entire submission of the mind to God is no common attainment. It is no trifling change of heart, no common humility, that will lead a man to it. We love to bring the declarations of God to the standard of our corrupt reason before we receive them. If they are opposed to this standard, we too often endeavour to wrest them from their meaning; and when they will not bear to be thus misinterpreted, we do not hesitate to disbelieve and reject them. Thousands who seem as though they could have triumphed over the depravity of the flesh, have fallen a sacrifice to the corruption of their understandings, and the pride of their own foolish minds.

2. The writings of Saint Paul prove the greatness of his humility by showing us, secondly, that *the highest spiritual attainments could not make him forget his meanness and guilt.*

There are indeed some professors of the gospel risen up in our day, who would object to such a test of humility as this. They seem to regard it as the very perfection of religion to forget their iniquities, and to look upon themselves as spotless in the sight of God. But mark the difference between such professors and this humble Paul. He knew as much of the fulness of redemption as any of us, and had tasted as much of the savour of the grace of Christ. He had been taken up too into the third heaven, and beheld there glorious revelations which had never been beheld before by mortal eye; and heard there words which it is not lawful or possible for a man to utter. And yet what was his language? What, in the midst of these attainments and honours, was his opinion of himself? Did he forget his sins? Never. Throughout every period of his life, his guilt seems as present to his mind, as at the hour of his conversion. "I was," he says, "a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious." And lest we should suppose that he thought only of his former iniquities, he says, "I am the chief of sinners." "I am carnal, sold under sin."

The fact is, that an enlarged view of the mercies of God in Christ Jesus must

humble the soul, must remind it continually, not only of its former guilt, but of its present vileness. The Christian is always the lowest in his own esteem, when his hope in divine grace is the highest. He is always the poorest in himself, when he sees himself the most rich in Christ.

3. The sense which the apostle had of his own sinfulness, did not however prevent him from seeing and acknowledging what divine grace had done for his soul, and what it had enabled him to do for God. He sometimes mentions these things in his writings, but he never mentions them without affording us another proof of his lowliness of heart—*a marked anxiety to give all the glory of all his labours and attainments to God*. We never find him taking any part of the praise to himself, but always expressly disclaiming it. He seems afraid of ascribing something to his own merit or power, and of robbing his Saviour of his honour. Lest the glory of Jesus should be lessened, he takes the crown of excellency off his own head, and, like the angels in heaven, he casts it down before the throne of the Lamb, as though he were unwilling, as well as unworthy, to wear the meanest crown in his presence. Thus we find him saying of himself in his first epistle to the Corinthians, “I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God: but by the grace of God I am what I am; and his grace which was bestowed upon me, was not in vain, but I laboured more abundantly than they all;” and then he adds, as though he had said too much, “Yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.”

4. The humility of Saint Paul was manifested also in *the low opinion which he had of himself when compared with his Christian brethren*. He speaks not, in the text, the unmeaning language of compliment, but the language of godly sincerity. The apostle wrote as he felt. His lowliness of mind had really taught him to esteem others better than himself. When he takes a view of his own character, he seems to find in himself nothing but infirmity and sin; but when he looks at others, all their failings are out of his sight, and he sees only their excellencies.

This spirit of charity was the natural result of the apostle’s humility. The man who walks humbly with his God, will always be distinguished by it; he will always deem his own guilt peculiarly aggravated, and greater than that of any of his brethren. The reason is obvious. He sees the iniquity which dwells in his own heart, while the corruptions that are struggling in the hearts of others, are hidden from his view. He has an intimate knowledge of the sins of his own life, but a remote and slight view of the sinful conduct of others. A wounded man feels the pain of his own wound, while he can only guess at the pain of his suffering neighbour. Hence we find, that true humility, while it brings to light our own sins, is ever sure to cover a multitude of the sins of others. The man who is the most sensible of his own failings, will always be heard to talk the least of the failings of others. It is the proud man, the proud professor of the gospel, who is the reviling man, the censorious professor. Pride takes a pleasure in bringing to light the infirmities of others, that itself may be exalted; while

humility delights in contemplating their excellencies, that it may be cast down by them still lower, and be led to imitate their graces.

5. The humility of Saint Paul consisted, lastly, in *his simple dependence upon Christ*.

If ever man had anything in himself, in which he might safely hope, it was surely this apostle. Read the account he gives us of himself before his conversion. "Circumcised," he says, "the eighth day; of the stock of Israel; of the tribe of Benjamin; a Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless."

And what had he to boast of after divine grace had brought him to a knowledge of the gospel? If we would obtain an answer to this enquiry, we must not refer merely to his journeyings and labours in the cause of Christ, to his "weariness and painfulness," his "watchings and fastings," his "hunger and thirst," his "cold and nakedness:" we must ascend into heaven, and count the number of those rejoicing saints who, through his means, have been saved from destruction; we must estimate the glory which their redemption will for ever throw around the throne of Jehovah. When we have done this, we shall know something of what Saint Paul had to lean on. And yet what is it that we find him actually depending on, actually hoping in? His graces as a Christian? His labours as an apostle? His success as a minister? He seems to shrink from the very thought. We find in him the most simple trust, the most undivided reliance, on the free mercy of his Saviour. He seeks the salvation of his soul, as though he were indeed the greatest of sinners, the vilest of the children of men.

The source of this simple reliance on Christ must be sought for in that humility, in that deep and abiding sense of his own unworthiness, which the Holy Spirit had lodged in the apostle's heart. This was the one great reason why all the powers of his mind, and all the strength of his body, were employed in making known the salvation of the cross; this was the reason why he endeavoured with so much fear and trembling to secure it for himself—he felt, more perhaps than any other sinner ever felt, his wretchedness, his helplessness, without it. It was this, which made him so cheerfully "suffer the loss of all things, that he might win Christ." It was this, which made him so anxious to renounce all confidence in his own righteousness, and seek so earnestly that righteousness which is through the faith of Christ. It was this, which made him glory so much in the cross of Jesus, and desire so ardently to be found in him.

Without this deep conviction of the guilt and helplessness of our state, and that humility of spirit which flows from it, all that Christ has done and suffered for sinners will profit us nothing. Our proud hearts will never stoop to accept his terms of salvation. We shall either scoff at his gospel, and openly trample upon the blood which gives efficacy to its promises, or we shall corrupt and disfigure it. We shall not love it in its simplicity. In one shape or other, self will

be introduced into it, and made the ground of our confidence. We may have too much knowledge of the scriptures to think of purchasing the glories of heaven by the decency of our conduct, or the benevolence of our hearts, or the usefulness of our lives; but we may place the same self-righteous dependence in fancied excellencies of another kind, that our brethren around us are placing in these. We may rest our hope of acceptance with God on our faith, our knowledge of the gospel, our convictions of sin, our frames and feelings, or even on our pretended humility; and as effectually ruin our souls, as though we hoped for salvation from our almsgiving and prayers. Nothing but a heartfelt sense of our sinfulness and wretchedness will lead us to the cross of Jesus, and keep us near it. Dependence on Christ must flow from humility of heart. If we are destitute of the one, we shall be destitute also of the other. We must know our need and danger, before we shall seek a remedy or look around for help. It is the sick man, who applies to a physician; it is the man who feels that he cannot heal himself, that lets his physician do with him whatsoever he will; it is the man who feels the pain of his sickness the most severely, that goes to his physician the most frequently.

II. These then are some of the marks of true humility, which may be traced in the character of Saint Paul. Other proofs of the lowliness of his mind might be mentioned, but we must proceed to enquire, secondly, *by what means that spirit of self-abasement which reigned in his heart, may be habitually maintained in our own.*

But in making this enquiry and others of a similar nature, let us never forget that we have no power in ourselves to do anything as of ourselves. We are not able to plant a single grace in our hearts; and when any spiritual seed has been planted there, we have no power to keep it alive, and cause it to bring forth fruit. Every grace is the gift of God, his free gift, a gift as freely bestowed, as the rain that comes down from heaven. If then we imagine that we can humble our own proud hearts by our own strength, we shall be disappointed. That pride which is the curse of our nature, has struck its roots too deeply within us, for any human arm to pluck it thence.

But though we are thus impotent in ourselves, the Holy Spirit generally works his purposes of grace by the use of means, and through these means he allows, yea, he commands us to seek his grace. He has thus given us ample encouragement to endeavour to stretch forth the withered arm. His invitations and commands afford us the strongest assurance, that he is at this very moment seated on a throne of grace, waiting there to be gracious, and ready to pour down his richest spiritual gifts on the head of every praying sinner. Are we then earnestly desiring a more humble frame of mind? "Let us lift up our eyes to those everlasting hills from whence cometh our help." Let us seek it of God; and entreat him to bestow it on us through those means and channels in which his

servant Paul obtained it, and through which he is hourly bestowing it on a thousand seeking hearts.

1. One of these means must immediately occur to our minds; it is this—*a frequent remembrance of our former iniquities, and an abiding sense of our present corruptions.*

This consciousness of guilt was not only one of the effects of Saint Paul's humility, it was the principal root from which it sprung. In the midst of his greatness, he remembered Saul of Tarsus, and was humbled. He thought of the infirmities which still cleaved to him, and was constrained to abase himself before his God.

We are much inclined to turn away from this contemplation of our sinfulness. It is humiliating, it is painful to us, and we endeavour to persuade ourselves that it is unnecessary. Because God has graciously promised to deal with us as though he remembered our iniquities no more, we are tempted to think that he has really forgotten them, and that we need no longer have them in remembrance. Here however we err. The redeemed and sanctified servant of God has just as much need to have a lively sense of his transgressions, as the most hardened and defiled sinner. Any system of religion, brethren, which tends in the least degree to make the soul regard itself in any other light than as altogether vile and sinful, is not the religion of the Bible. It may seem on the first view to magnify the Saviour, but it will most surely lower our conceptions of him. It may appear calculated to bring comfort to the soul, but it is much more calculated to bring to it perplexity, conceit, and pride. The simple gospel of Christ, while it exalts the Holy One of Israel in the very highest degree, sinks the sinner, even the converted sinner, to the very lowest. Who ever thought more highly of Christ, than Paul? and who ever thought more lowly of himself?

However high your attainments in religion may be, look therefore, with this great apostle, “to the rock, whence ye were hewn; and to the hole of the pit, whence ye were digged.” Think of the many hours, and days, and years, you once spent in the service of the world and Satan. Perhaps too you can remember the time, when you treated religion with derision. It opposed your sinful practices, and you hated it; it wounded your pride, and you scorned it. You delighted in pouring contempt on the gospel of Christ, and on all who appeared to you really attached to it. Think too of the sins by which you have been defiled since you began to seek heavenly things. Has your conduct during the latter years of your life been always “such as becometh the gospel of Christ?” Have you always walked as “children of the light?” Alas, no! Into how many outward iniquities have some of us fallen, and of how many inward transgressions are we all conscious! A disgraceful catalogue of sins might easily be enumerated, that would make us appear hateful to ourselves; and if our sins are objects of abhorrence to ourselves, what must they be to that holy Being, in whose sight the heavens are not clean? He has seen them; he remembers them all. He has “set

our misdeeds before him, and our secret sins in the light of his countenance.” Let this reflection lead us also to remember our iniquities. Let it influence us to strive daily to discover our own imperfections, what is amiss in us and wherein we are defective. Let us think more of what we want, than of what we have attained. Instead of being ready to pride ourselves on our knowledge and goodness, let us rather sit down and mourn that we are still so ignorant, still so corrupt. Remember, my Christian brethren, what you once were; remember what you still are, notwithstanding all that divine grace has done for you: and if you can then find cause for pride and boasting, “Your spot is not the spot of my children,” saith the Lord.

2. If we would habitually maintain an humble frame of mind, *we must have a lively sense of the freeness and fulness of divine mercy*, of that mercy which God has bestowed upon us through his Son.

Saint Paul had tasted of this mercy. It had enriched his soul, and made him the most zealous preacher of its glad tidings, that ever graced the church of God. He seems to have had deeper and more enlarged views of its unsearchable riches, than any other saint; and yet never was any man more humble than he.

Nothing indeed softens and humbles the heart, like a sense of pardoning mercy and redeeming grace. The Christian can sometimes think of his manifold iniquities, and be but little affected by the remembrance; but a thought of the love of Jesus towards his guilty soul generally touches and abases him. It was pardoning mercy, that made the poor woman who had been a sinner, fall down at the feet of her Saviour and weep. It was mercy, that made David exclaim, “Who am I, O Lord God, and what is mine house, that thou hast brought me hitherto?” It is mercy, that still makes the heart of many a sinner lowly and contrite.

Fix your thoughts then, brethren, more frequently and more closely on that wonderful love, wherewith the Father has loved you. Think of its beginning in the councils of eternity. Think of its freeness, its greatness, its unchangeableness. Think of that depth of misery from which it has raised you, and of that height of blessedness to which it is gradually lifting you. If such thoughts as these never humble you, write bitter things against yourselves, and deem yourselves strangers to the grace of Christ.

3. The Christian will also find his humility increased *by frequently meditating on the infinite purity and majesty of the living God*.

It is a sight of the divine greatness and holiness, which enables us to see our own meanness and guilt. It is this, that brings to nought the glory of man and stains his honour. It was this, that drew from Isaiah so touching an acknowledgment of his pollution. “Woe is me!” he exclaimed as he saw the Lord sitting on his high and holy throne; “Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.” It was this, that made Job abhor himself,

and repent in dust and ashes. It was this too, which made Saint Paul so conscious of his own imperfections. In his way to Damascus, he saw something of the glory of Christ, and when he was taken up into the third heavens, he undoubtedly saw more of it than it was lawful for him to utter. The effect which the view that had been vouchsafed to him, left upon his mind, may in some degree be seen in the first chapter of his epistle to the Hebrews, and in his epistle to Timothy, where he calls Christ, “The blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords; who only hath immortality; dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see.” If we then would walk humbly with our God, let us set him always before us in his spotless holiness and awful greatness. With the Bible in our hands and a fervent prayer in our hearts, let us endeavour to behold him that is invisible; and even the distant prospect of the divine glory to which our feeble eyes can reach, will constrain us to feel that no flesh can glory in Jehovah’s presence.

4. *A due sense of the great importance of an humble spirit* will also have a tendency to keep us low in our own eyes.

The grace of humility is not a merely ornamental grace, a something which it is desirable, but not absolutely necessary, to possess. It lies at the very root of all true religion. It is the source from which almost every spiritual grace must spring. Where this is wanting, everything is wanting. We may appear very religious and have a high reputation for godliness, but if self-abasement be not the corner-stone of the spiritual temple, if the building rest not on this foundation, it is raised upon the sand. The house may be beautiful and even splendid; it may appear to the spectator firm; but when the rain descends, and the floods come, and the winds blow and beat upon that house, it will assuredly fall, and great will be the fall of it.

Humility too can adorn the house, as well as support it. “The Lord giveth grace to the humble,” and not grace only, but honour and glory. There is no mansion which he loves so well, as a sinner’s humbled heart. Yea, that “high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is holy,” dwells, not only “in the high and holy place,” but “with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.”

Humility also can do much for a man in the present life. It can enable him, as it enabled Saint Paul, “in whatsoever state” he is, “therewith to be content;” it can fill his heart with thankfulness; it can keep him dependent upon his God; it can teach him how to bear the enmity and reproach of a persecuting world; amidst all the ruffling storms of life, it can preserve within his breast a heavenly calm.

5. If we would become more lowly in heart, we must, finally, *look more to Christ than we have hitherto looked to him*. We must look to him for humility. We must regard him as our only Sanctifier, as well as our only Saviour. We

must apply to him to subdue the pride of our hearts, as well as to blot out their sins.

We must look to him also as a bright example of humility. Compared with his self-abasement, the humility of Saint Paul sinks into nothing. As we look on the Babe of Bethlehem; as we behold the Master laying aside his garments, and girding himself, and stooping down to wash his disciples' feet; as we follow the Man of sorrows to the cross, and witness the degradation which he suffered there; the lowly Paul is no longer thought of. We see the Son of God humbling himself in the dust. We see the King of heaven disrobing himself of all his glory, and clothing himself in the mean and wretched garments of fallen man. It was at the feet of Jesus, that the apostle learned how to abase himself; and there also, if we would have our lofty spirits humbled, he sends us. "Let this mind be in you," he says, "which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men; and, being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross."