

INSTITUTES

OF

THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION.

BOOK THIRD.

THE MODE OF OBTAINING THE GRACE OF CHRIST. THE BENEFITS IT CONFERS, AND THE EFFECTS RESULTING FROM IT.

CHAPTER XII.

NECESSITY OF CONTEMPLATING THE JUDGMENT-SEAT OF GOD, IN ORDER TO BE SERIOUSLY CONVINCED OF THE DOCTRINE OF GRATUITOUS JUSTIFICATION.

The divisions of this chapter are,—I. A consideration of the righteousness of God overturns the righteousness of works, as is plain from passages of Scripture, and the confession and example of the saints, sec. 1-3. II. The same effect produced by a serious examination of the conscience, and a constant citation to the divine tribunal, sec. 4 and 5. III. Hence arises, in the hearts of the godly, not hypocrisy, or a vain opinion of merit, but true humility. This illustrated by the authority of Scripture and the example of the Publican, sec. 6, 7. IV. Conclusion—arrogance and security must be discarded, every man throwing an impediment in the way of the divine goodness in proportion as he trusts to himself.

Sections.

1. Source of error on the subject of Justification. Sophists speak as if the question were to be discussed before some human tribunal. It relates to the majesty and justice of God. Hence nothing accepted without absolute perfection. Passages confirming this doctrine. If we descend to the righteousness of the Law, the curse immediately appears.
2. Source of hypocritical confidence. Illustrated by a simile. Exhortation. Testimony of Job, David, and Paul.
3. Confession of Augustine and Bernard.
4. Another engine overthrowing the righteousness of works, viz., a serious examination of the conscience, and a comparison between the perfection of God and the imperfection of man.
5. How it is that we so indulge this imaginary opinion of our own works. The proper remedy to be found in a consideration of the majesty of God and our own misery. A description of this misery.
6. Christian humility consists in laying aside the imaginary idea of our own righteousness, and trusting entirely to the mercy of God, apprehended by faith in Christ. This humility described. Proved by passages of Scripture.
7. The parable of the Publican explained.

8. Arrogance, security, and self-confidence, must be renounced. General rule, or summary of the above doctrine.

1. ALTHOUGH the perfect truth of the above doctrine is proved by clear passages of Scripture, yet we cannot clearly see how necessary it is, before we bring distinctly into view the foundations on which the whole discussion ought to rest. First, then, let us remember that the righteousness which we are considering is not that of a human, but of a heavenly tribunal; and so beware of employing our own little standard to measure the perfection which is to satisfy the justice of God. It is strange with what rashness and presumption this is commonly defined. Nay, we see that none talk more confidently, or, so to speak, more blusteringly, of the righteousness of works, than those whose diseases are most palpable, and blemishes most apparent. This they do because they reflect not on the righteousness of Christ, which, if they had the slightest perception of it, they would never treat with so much insult. It is certainly undervalued, if not recognised to be so perfect that nothing can be accepted that is not in every respect entire and absolute, and tainted by no impurity; such indeed as never has been, and never will be, found in man. It is easy for any man, within the precincts of the schools, to talk of the sufficiency of works for justification; but when we come into the presence of God there must be a truce to such talk. The matter is there discussed in earnest, and is no longer a theatrical logomachy. Hither must we turn our minds if we would inquire to any purpose concerning true righteousness; the question must be, How shall we answer the heavenly Judge when he calls us to account? Let us contemplate that Judge, not as our own unaided intellect conceives of him, but as he is portrayed to us in Scripture, (see especially the Book of Job,) with a brightness which obscures the stars, a strength which melts the mountains, an anger which shakes the earth, a wisdom which takes the wise in their own craftiness, a purity before which all things become impure, a righteousness to which not even angels are equal, (so far is it from making the guilty innocent,) a vengeance which once kindled burns to the lowest hell, (Exod. xxxiv. 7; Nahum i. 3; Deut. xxxii. 22.) Let Him, I say, sit in judgment on the actions of men, and who will feel secure in sisting [staying] himself before his throne? "Who among us," says the prophet, "shall dwell with the devouring fire? who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings? He that walketh righteously, and speaketh uprightly," &c., (Isaiah xxxiii. 14, 15.) Let whoso will come forth. Nay, the answer shows that no man can. For, on the other hand, we hear the dreadful voice: "If thou, Lord, shouldst mark our iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?" (Ps. cxxx. 3.) All must immediately perish, as Job declares, "Shall mortal man be more just than God? shall a man be more pure than his Maker? Behold, he put no trust in

his servants; and his angels he charged with folly: How much less in them that dwell in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust, which are crushed before the moth? They are destroyed from morning to evening,” (Job iv. 17-20.) Again, “Behold, he putteth no trust in his saints; yea, the heavens are not clean in his sight. How much more abominable and filthy is man, which drinketh iniquity like water?” (Job xv. 15, 16.) I confess, indeed, that in the Book of Job reference is made to a righteousness of a more exalted description than the observance of the Law. It is of importance to attend to this distinction; for even could a man satisfy the Law, he could not stand the scrutiny of that righteousness which transcends all our thoughts. Hence, although Job was not conscious of offending, he is still dumb with astonishment, because he sees that God could not be appeased even by the sanctity of angels, were their works weighed in that supreme balance. But to advert no farther to this righteousness, which is incomprehensible, I only say, that if our life is brought to the standard of the written law, we are lethargic indeed if we are not filled with dread at the many maledictions which God has employed for the purpose of arousing us, and among others, the following general one: “Cursed be he that confirmeth not all the words of this law to do them,” (Deut. xxvii. 26.) In short, the whole discussion of this subject will be insipid and frivolous, unless we sist [stay] ourselves before the heavenly Judge, and anxious for our acquittal, voluntarily humble ourselves, confessing our nothingness.

2. Thus, then, must we raise our eyes that we may learn to tremble instead of vainly exulting. It is easy, indeed, when the comparison is made among men, for every one to plume himself on some quality which* others ought not to despise; but when we rise to God that confidence instantly falls and dies away. The case of the soul with regard to God is very analogous to that of the body in regard to the visible firmament. The bodily eye, while employed in surveying adjacent objects, is pleased with its own perspicacity; but when directed to the sun, being dazzled and overwhelmed by the refulgence, it becomes no less convinced of its weakness than it formerly was of its power in viewing inferior objects. Therefore, lest we deceive ourselves by vain confidence, let us recollect that even though we deem ourselves equal or superior to other men, this is nothing to God, by whose judgment the decision must be given. But if our presumption cannot be tamed by these considerations, he will answer us as he did the Pharisees, “Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts: for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God,” (Luke xvi. 15.) Go now and make a proud boast of your righteousness among men, while God in heaven abhors it. But what are the feelings of the servants of God, of those who are truly taught by his Spirit? “Enter not into judgment with thy servant; for in thy sight shall no man liv-

ing be justified,” (Ps. cxliii. 2.) Another, though in a sense somewhat different, says, “How should man be just with God? If he will contend with him he cannot answer him one of a thousand,” (Job ix. 2, 3.) Here we are plainly told what the righteousness of God is, namely, a righteousness which no human works can satisfy, which charges us with a thousand sins, while not one sin can be excused. Of this righteousness Paul, that chosen vessel of God, had formed a just idea, when he declared, “I know nothing by myself, yet am I not hereby justified,” (1 Cor. iv. 4.)

3. Such examples exist not in the sacred volume only; all pious writers show that their sentiment was the same. Thus, Augustine says, “Of all pious men groaning under this burden of corruptible flesh, and the infirmities of this life, the only hope is, that we have one Mediator Jesus Christ the righteous, and that he intercedes for our sins,” (August. ad Bonif. Lib. iii. c. 5.) What do we hear? If this is their only hope, where is their confidence in works? When he says *only*, he leaves no other. Bernard says, “And, indeed, where have the infirm firm security and safe rest, but in the wounds of the Saviour? Hold it then the more securely, the more powerful he is to save. The world frowns, the body presses, the devil lays snares: I fall not, because I am founded on a firm rock. I have sinned a grievous sin: conscience is troubled, but it shall not be overwhelmed, for I will remember the wounds of the Lord.” He afterwards concludes, ^a My merit, therefore, is the compassion of the Lord; plainly I am not devoid of merit so long as he is not devoid of commiseration. But if the mercies of the Lord are many, equally many are my merits. Shall I sing of my own righteousness? O Lord, I will make mention of thy righteousness alone. That righteousness is mine also, being made mine by God,” (Bernard, Serm. 61, in Cantic.) Again, in another passage, “Man’s whole merit is to place his whole hope in him who makes the whole man safe,” (in Psal. Qui Habitat. Serm. 15.) In like manner, reserving peace to himself, he leaves the glory to God: ^a Let thy glory remain unimpaired: it is well with me if I have peace; I altogether abjure boasting, lest if I should usurp what is not mine, I lose also what is offered,” (Serm. 13, in Cantic.) He says still more plainly in another place: “Why is the Church solicitous about merits? God purposely supplies her with a firmer and more secure ground of boasting. There is no reason for asking by what merits may we hope for blessings, especially when you hear in the prophet, ‘Thus saith the Lord God, I do not this for your sakes, O house of Israel, but for mine holy name’s sake,’ (Ezek. xxxvi. 22, 32.) It is sufficient for merit to know that merits suffice not; but as it is sufficient for merit not to presume on merit, so to be without merits is sufficient for condemnation,” (Bernard, Serm. 68.) The free use of the term merits for good works must be pardoned to custom. Bernard’s purpose was to alarm hypocrites, who turned the grace of God into licentiousness, as he shortly after

explains: “Happy the church which neither wants merit without presumption, nor presumption without merit. It has ground to presume, but not merit. It has merit, merit to deserve, not presume. Is not the absence of presumption itself a merit? He, therefore, to whom the many mercies of the Lord furnish ample grounds of boasting, presumes the more securely that he presumes not,” (Bernard, Serm. 68.)

4. Thus, indeed, it is. Aroused consciences, when they have to do with God, feel this to be the only asylum in which they can breathe safely. For if the stars which shine most brightly by night lose their brightness on the appearance of the sun, what think we will be the case with the highest purity of man when contrasted with the purity of God? For the scrutiny will be most strict, penetrating to the most hidden thoughts of the heart. As Paul says, it “will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the heart,” (1 Cor. iv. 5;) will compel the reluctant and dissembling conscience to bring forward every thing, even things which have now escaped our memory. The devil, aware of all the iniquities which he has induced us to perpetrate, will appear as accuser; the external show of good works, the only thing now considered, will then be of no avail; the only thing demanded will be the true intent of the will. Hence hypocrisy, not only that by which a man, though consciously guilty before God, affects to make an ostentatious display before man, but that by which each imposes upon himself before God, (so prone are we to soothe and flatter ourselves,) will fall confounded, how much soever it may now swell with pride and presumption. Those who do not turn their thoughts to this scene may be able for the moment calmly and complacently to rear up a righteousness for themselves; but this the judgment of God will immediately overthrow, just as great wealth amassed in a dream vanishes the moment we awake. Those who, as in the presence of God, inquire seriously into the true standard of righteousness, will certainly find that all the works of men, if estimated by their own worth, are nothing but vileness and pollution, that what is commonly deemed justice is with God mere iniquity; what is deemed integrity is pollution; what deemed glory is ignominy.

5. Let us not decline to descend from this contemplation of the divine perfection, to look into ourselves without flattery or blind self-love. It is not strange that we are so deluded in this matter, seeing none of us can avoid that pestilential self-indulgence, which, as Scripture proclaims, is naturally inherent in all: “Every way of a man is right in his own eyes,” says Solomon, (Prov. xxi. 2.) And again, “All the ways of a man are clean in his own eyes,” (Prov. xvi. 2.) What then? does this hallucination excuse him? No, indeed, as Solomon immediately adds, “The Lord weigheth the spirits;” that is, while man flatters himself by wearing an external mask of righteousness, the Lord weighs the hidden impurity of the heart in his balance.

Seeing, therefore, that nothing is gained by such flattery, let us not voluntarily delude ourselves to our own destruction. To examine ourselves properly, our conscience must be called to the judgment-seat of God. His light is necessary to disclose the secret recesses of wickedness which otherwise lie too deeply hid. Then only shall we clearly perceive what the value of our works is; that man, so far from being just before God, is but rottenness and a worm, abominable and vain, drinking in “iniquity like water.” For “who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? not one,” (Job xiv. 5.) Then we shall experience the truth of what Job said of himself: “If I justify myself, mine own mouth shall condemn me: if I say I am perfect, it shall prove me perverse,” (Job ix. 20.) Nor does the complaint which the prophet made concerning Israel apply to one age only. It is true of every age, that “all we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way,” (Isaiah liii. 6.) Indeed, he there comprehends all to whom the gift of redemption was to come. And the strictness of the examination ought to be continued until it have completely alarmed us, and in that way prepared us for receiving the grace of Christ. For he is deceived who thinks himself capable of enjoying it, until he have laid aside all loftiness of mind. There is a well-known declaration, “God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble,” (1 Pet. v. 5.)

6. But what means is there of humbling us if we do not make way for the mercy of God by our utter indigence and destitution? For I call it not humility, so long as we think there is any good remaining in us. Those who have joined together the two things, to think humbly of ourselves before God and yet hold our own righteousness in some estimation, have hitherto taught a pernicious hypocrisy. For if we confess to God contrary to what we feel, we wickedly lie to him; but we cannot feel as we ought without seeing that every thing like a ground of boasting is completely crushed. Therefore, when you hear from the prophet, “thou wilt save the afflicted people; but wilt bring down high looks,” (Ps. xviii. 27,) consider, first, that there is no access to salvation unless all pride is laid aside and true humility embraced; secondly, that that humility is not a kind of moderation by which you yield to God some article of your right, (thus men are called humble in regard to each other when they neither conduct themselves haughtily nor insult over other, though they may still entertain some consciousness of their own excellence,) but that it is the unfeigned submission of a mind overwhelmed by a serious conviction of its want and misery. Such is the description every where given by the word of God. When in Zephaniah the Lord speaks thus, “I will take away out of the midst of thee them that rejoice in thy pride, and thou shalt no more be haughty because of my holy mountain. I will also leave in the midst of thee an afflicted and poor people, and they shall trust in the name of the Lord,” (Zeph. iii. 11, 12,) does he not

plainly show who are the humble, viz., those who lie afflicted by a knowledge of their poverty? On the contrary, he describes the proud as rejoicing, (*exultantes*,) such being the mode in which men usually express their delight in prosperity. To the humble, whom he designs to save, he leaves nothing but hope in the Lord. Thus, also, in Isaiah, "To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word," (Isaiah lxvi. 2.) Again, "Thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, 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," (Isaiah lvii. 15.) By the term *contrition*, which you so often hear, understand a wounded heart, which, humbling the individual to the earth, allows him not to rise. With such contrition must your heart be wounded, if you would, according to the declaration of God, be exalted with the humble. If this is not your case, you shall be humbled by the mighty hand of God to your shame and disgrace.

7. Our divine Master, not confining himself to words, has by a parable set before us, as in a picture, a representation of true humility. He brings forward a publican, who standing afar off, and not daring to lift up his eyes to heaven, smites upon his breast, laments aloud, and exclaims, "God be merciful to me a sinner," (Luke xviii. 13.) Let us not suppose that he gives the signs of a fictitious modesty when he dares not come near or lift up his eyes to heaven, but, smiting upon his breast, confesses himself a sinner; let us know that these are the evidences of his internal feeling. With him our Lord contrasts the Pharisee, who thanks God "I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess." In this public confession he admits that the righteousness which he possesses is the gift of God; but because of his confidence that he is righteous, he departs from the presence of God unaccepted and abominated. The publican acknowledging his iniquity is justified. Hence we may see how highly our humility is valued by the Lord: our breast cannot receive his mercy until deprived completely of all opinion of its own worth. When such an opinion is entertained, the door of mercy is shut. That there might be no doubt on this matter, the mission on which Christ was sent into the world by his Father was "to preach good tidings to the meek," "to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn; to appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness," (Isa. lxi. 1-3.) In fulfilment of that mission, the only persons whom he invites to share in his beneficence are the "weary and

heavy laden.” In another passage he says, “I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance,” (Matth. xi. 28; ix. 13.)

8. Therefore, if we would make way for the call of Christ, we must put far from us all arrogance and confidence. The former is produced by a foolish persuasion of self-righteousness, when a man thinks that he has something in himself which deservedly recommends him to God; the latter may exist without any confidence in works.* For many sinners, intoxicated with the pleasures of vice, think not of the judgment of God. Lying stupefied, as it were, by a kind of lethargy, they aspire not to the offered mercy. It is not less necessary to shake off torpor of this description than every kind of confidence in ourselves, in order that we may haste to Christ unencumbered, and while hungry and empty be filled with his blessings. Never shall we have sufficient confidence in him unless utterly distrustful of ourselves; never shall we take courage in him until we first despond of ourselves; never shall we have full consolation in him until we cease to have any in ourselves. When we have entirely discarded all self-confidence, and trust solely in the certainty of his goodness, we are fit to apprehend and obtain the grace of God. “When,” (as Augustine says,) “forgetting our own merits, we embrace the gifts of Christ, because if he should seek for merits in us we should not obtain his gifts,” (August, de Verb. Apost. 8.) With this Bernard admirably accords, comparing the proud, who presume in the least on their merits, to unfaithful servants, who wickedly take the merit of a favour merely passing through them, just as if a wall were to boast of producing the ray which it receives through the window, (Bernard, Sermon. 13, in Cant.) Not to dwell longer here, let us lay down this short but sure and general rule, That he is prepared to reap the fruits of the divine mercy who has thoroughly emptied himself, I say not of righteousness, (he has none,) but of a vain and blustering show of righteousness; for to whatever extent any man rests in himself, to the same extent he impedes the beneficence of God.

* French, “Par arrogance j’enten l’orgueil qui s’engendre d’une foie persuasion de justice, quand l’homme pense avoir quelque chose, dont il merite d’estre agreable à Dieu; par presumption j’enten une nonchalance charnelle, qui peut estre sans aucune fiance des œuvres;”—by arrogance I mean the pride which is engendered by a foolish persuasion of righteousness, when man thinks he has something for which he deserves to be agreeable to God. By presumption I understand a carnal indifference, which may exist without any confidence in works.