

SERMONS

BY THE

REV. JOHN VENN, M. A.

RECTOR OF CLAPHAM.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

THE THIRD EDITION.

LONDON:

PRINTED BY ELLERTON AND HENDERSON,
JOHNSON'S COURT, FLEET STREET:

AND SOLD BY J. HATCHARD, PICCADILLY; AND
RIVINGTONS, ST. PAUL'S CHURCHYARD.

1818.

SERMON XVII.

ON INDECISION IN RELIGION.

1 KINGS xviii. 21.

How long halt ye between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.

THERE are few persons, perhaps indeed there are none, who have renounced the service of God from a deliberate principle. Few intend to forsake God, or directly to oppose his will. But too many do so indirectly, through negligence or indecision. They do not seriously consider who God is, and what he requires. They do not lay to heart their obligations to him. They acknowledge in general, that they ought to pay obedience to him; perhaps they intend it, and even attempt to serve him in some points; but they allow their attention to be occupied, and their resolutions to be frustrated by other objects. They lose sight of God and his laws; and then they indulge their own evil passions, and sin against him. The sense they have of their obligation to serve him is not sufficiently strong to fix them steadily and uniformly in the path of duty. Objections against a strict obedience arise, which they take no pains to combat. They waver in their principles, and still more in their practice. Their whole conduct, as to religion, is indecisive. They halt between two opinions, and thus neither serve God nor follow sin unreservedly.

This was the character of the Ten Tribes of Israel, to whom Elijah addressed the words of my text. That was an unhappy day for the Church on which the Ten Tribes revolted from the kingdom of Judah, and erected a distinct kingdom. The whole religious economy of the Law was founded upon the supposition, that the temple was the centre of worship for all the children of Israel; thither were the tribes to go up. But as the permission of this union in religious service would have tended to bring the kingdoms again under one head, it was the policy of the kings of Israel to introduce variety into the worship. For the dissolute and profane, temples were built to Baal: for the religious part of Israel, altars were erected to Jehovah. Thus the people halted between two opinions. A diversity of religious opinions produced, as it usually does, an unwarrantable species of candour; an indifference about the truth, and a sceptical spirit concerning it. Without denying Jehovah to be God, they inclined to believe Baal to be a god also. They acknowledged Jehovah to be Lord; but they presumed to worship him upon unhallowed altars, and in places unauthorised by his Law. Thus there was no zeal for the honour

of God. Men learned to view, with almost equal regard, the altars of Jehovah and the neighbouring temples of Baal. They neither served Baal nor the Lord heartily, but contented themselves with paying a superficial worship to either. This indifference in religion the prophet justly reprobates. "How long," says he, "will ye halt between two opinions?" Fluctuate no longer in this manner. Baal and Jehovah cannot both be gods. Come therefore to a decision; determine which is truly God. If, upon serious examination, you discover Baal to be the true God, worship him; obey his rites, and with all that zeal which he requires;—but if Jehovah be the true God, then follow him, and him only; worship him with your whole hearts; give yourselves up to him; fulfil all that he has commanded.

If we allow for the present difference of circumstances, how many shall we find among ourselves who are influenced by the same spirit and adopt the same conduct as the Israelites! They do not despise religion; they acknowledge its necessity, and they approve of its precepts. They are shocked at the profane and dissolute part of mankind, and wonder that men dare to act in a manner so contrary to the commands of their Creator. They attend the house of God, and hear with pleasure the preaching of his word; they are to a certain extent religious; but they are far from serving God with their whole heart. Their religion amounts only to a general approbation of what is excellent, a faint desire to be more holy, and a compliance with those precepts of God which cost them little trouble and self-denial. There is nothing decided in their conduct; they halt between two opinions; they attempt to unite the service of God and mammon; they make a compromise between religion and the world; and thus they neither take pains to know the whole of their duty, nor are they solicitous to live up to what they know. They are not at ease in their consciences with respect to their state, and yet they are not so dissatisfied with it as seriously to set about a reformation; but they go on from year to year in a middle course between total negligence and real religion.

I conceive, my brethren, the state which I have described to be very common, and particularly in those places where religion is much insisted on, and where a total neglect of it is therefore generally known to be very wrong. Perhaps there may be some persons of this description in the assembly to which I am now speaking. Do I not address some whose consciences already say to them, "Thou art the man?" Permit me, then, to apply to you the words of the Prophet, "How long will ye halt between two opinions?" If the approbation of men, or if the possession of the things of this world be the only good, then pursue it with your whole heart; but if the Lord be God, and if he demands your entire service, then follow him faithfully and fully.

I. In treating of this subject, I shall first point out the evils of your present state.

These are indeed very various. If your heart is not right with God, however the decency of your conduct may be respected, or what is amiable in your character may be admired, I am constrained to consider you as yet destitute of a truly religious principle. You want the main spring which should move and guide your actions. Two forces operate upon you, which are contrary to each other; and thus the full effect of each is obstructed. You are not honest and sincere; and without honesty and sincerity, what real good can be expected? You receive no full enjoyment from anything you do. Too much enlightened to join in those sinful pleasures in which the profane and dissolute find their happiness, you are excluded from their enjoyments; and on the other hand, you enter too little into the spirit of religion to derive happiness from that source. You desire what you cannot have without contracting guilt; you have no taste for that which you might enjoy. Miserable state! what can be more wretched than to have conscience perpetually disapproving your conduct, and to be consequently doing habitual violence to conscience. Alas! seldom or never are you cheered with its encouraging testimony, that all is well with you—that you have borne a decisive testimony to the Gospel, and faithfully followed the truth. When does it whisper peace to you, in the prospect of illness or death, and say, “Fear not; the Lord whom you have served will be your defence and your comfort?” On the contrary, it so speaks that you choose rather to stifle its voice and to avoid reflection respecting your final state. Nor is it to conscience only that you have done violence; the Spirit of God has been grieved; he will not reside in the heart which gives him no cordial reception; he will not seal those to the day of redemption who halt between two opinions, who serve mammon as well as God, and are unfaithful to the light which has been communicated to them. Look, then, into your condition. What progress have you made in a religious course? Are you not barren and unfruitful in the knowledge of the Lord? Do you not blush to think that there has been in you no evident improvement, perhaps, for years together? Is not even the light you once enjoyed darkened, so that now your feelings are benumbed, and religious truths have lost much of the glory in which at first they appeared? What do you experience of the consolations of the Gospel?—You see others happy in the knowledge of Christ. They possess peace of conscience; they have a hope full of immortality; they walk uprightly with God, and obtain dominion over sin; you see them holy in their lives and happy in their deaths. But when do you enjoy such peace? When do you hold communion with God? When do you, through faith in Christ, rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory?—Do you inquire the reason why they are so much more happy than you? I answer; It is not because they

have more learning, or a better understanding, or passions naturally less corrupt;—it is that their hearts are right with God. Their eye is single, and therefore their whole body is full of light. Your eye is not single; hence all is darkness. You possess neither light nor hope, nor grace nor peace; nor do you derive satisfaction from the world. Your conduct brings neither credit to your religious profession, comfort to yourself, nor glory to God.

Let not those, who thus halt between two opinions, think that I speak too harshly. The danger is, lest they speak too smoothly to themselves. Great evils, it will be allowed, require strong remedies; but the evil of their own case is not seen by them to be great, and therefore they are content that mere palliatives should be administered. I wish to show them that their state is dangerous in proportion as they imagine it to be safe. Were they totally profligate, they might admit the necessity of a total change in their principles; but now they conceive a little amendment to be sufficient, and thus the remedies to which they resort are too weak to do them any good.

Oh! let me convince you, that religion requires the whole heart; and that if your heart be not right with God, your conduct cannot fail to be unworthy of your Christian profession,—your views of religion will probably be cloudy, and your souls comfortless,—you will be strangers to that peace which passeth all understanding, and to that hope which is full of immortality; in a word, you will be wretched and self-condemned without either the spirit or the consolations of religion.

II. What then, it will be said, are we to do? If you ask this question in all seriousness and sincerity, I refer you to the words of the prophet; “How long halt ye between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow him; but if Baal, follow him.”—These words imply, first, that you should deliberately consider; and secondly, that you should act according to the result of that consideration.

1. The prophet requires the children of Israel to reflect whether Baal or Jehovah were God.—In like manner would I exhort you seriously to consider whom you will serve, God or mammon. Our Lord instructed all his disciples to sit down first, and count the cost before they became his disciples. His service was not to be without trials and dangers, and therefore they were to ask themselves beforehand whether they could bear them, and whether they deemed the comforts and hopes he set before them a sufficient compensation. Take this advice. Contemplate, on one hand, all the pleasures and advantages which the world can offer; give them their full value; observe how agreeable they are to your present nature; how gratifying to your corrupt appetites; set before you all the earthly happiness which it is not improbable you may possess; imagine yourself to meet with great success, to enjoy an envied prosperity, to escape disease and calamity, vexation and care, and to live long in

this scene of temporal felicity, not a cloud obscuring the continual sunshine of your life; contrive, as Solomon determined to do, that nothing shall obstruct your happiness; that your pleasures shall be too refined to satiate at once, and that, though you withhold nothing from yourself which your sight desires, yet you will not sin so grossly as to incur either loss of reputation or the accusation of a tormenting conscience. Is not this as much as this world can promise? If it is prudent to give up religion for anything upon earth, it surely may be sacrificed for this. Make, then, the determination. Form a deliberate plan, according to which you shall be free from all religious restraint. Let this life be your portion. Abide by the system you have established, and follow it resolutely and to the end. Cast off the fear of God, regard to a future state, and all apprehension of an hereafter.

But methinks I hear you reply; “This is more than I can do. What would it profit me, if I were to gain the whole world, and lose my own soul? Even were I to have all that I could wish, I must die, I must appear before God. Ah, what can be considered as an equivalent for the loss of the soul!”

Your reply is indeed just. Yes; it is a truth which I pray God to engrave in the deepest lines upon your heart. The man is wretched beyond description, whatever be his temporal enjoyments, who has not the blessing of God. “In his favour is life, and at his right hand are pleasures for evermore.” Contemplate Dives and Lazarus, and say whether you do not feel this to be true. Make, then, a fair estimate of what you will both lose and gain by a life devoted to God. Place, on the one side, that loss of some of the pleasures of life and of the favour of the world to which you will be subject; calculate the self-denial you must exercise, the conflict you must sustain; do not delude yourself in respect to any of the sacrifices which must be made; know their full number and weight;—but at the same time estimate, on the other hand, at its true worth, the favour and blessing of your Creator. Take into your account the value of that peace of God which will dwell in your soul, the privileges of his adopted children, the blessedness of drawing nigh to him in fervent prayer, and of enjoying frequent and delightful communion with him. Consider the sweetness of meditation upon his promises accompanied with a humble hope that they are yours. View the felicity of being delivered from the slavery of evil passions, and of enjoying that liberty which is found in the service of God. Think of the light of God’s countenance lifted up upon you, of having the Spirit of God for your Guide and Comforter, and of being partaker of all the benefits purchased by the precious blood of the Son of God shed upon the cross. Think also of being united to all the excellent and faithful in the whole world, and of being partaker of the inheritance of the saints in light. Reflect upon the privilege of having God for your Father, Christ for your Redeemer, the Spirit for your Sanctifier, and heaven for your eternal home. Carry your thoughts beyond this terrestrial scene, and see what God

has laid up for them that love him; a happiness pure as heaven, and durable as eternity. Sum up these various blessings, and then can you halt between two opinions? Can there be ground for a moment's hesitation? By what sorcery are we so bewitched, as not to perceive that God alone is the Source of happiness, and that they are vain who depart from him?

Oh, thou Fountain and Source of all that is truly good! Thou who didst contrive and form the beautiful frame of this earth, with all that ministers to the good of man! Thou who didst create the happiness of the world of spirits, and who diffusest by thy presence unspeakable joy amongst the blessed inhabitants of heaven! Thou Being, full of glory, bliss, and goodness, and who alone communicatest them to others! How art thou injured, when we imagine that thy service is not perfect freedom! Into what intellectual darkness and depravity are we sunk, when we compare Thy service with that of an idol, or of this polluted world! How is it that we do not intuitively perceive that obedience to Thee is the true happiness of man; and that we can have peace in our souls in proportion only as our will is united to thine! Dissipate the mists which cloud our sight, and make us to feel that we are wretched when we depart from Thee!

III. "If then the Lord be God, follow him."—If, my brethren, you are convinced, as I hope you are, and as I am sure you ought to be, that there is no real peace but in God, determine to seek your happiness only in his service. How this should be done, I shall endeavour in some degree to explain.

1. Be persuaded, that *those things in which your corrupt mind promises you pleasure do but deceive you.*—They are all splendid delusions; they are lying vanities. Have you not found that they have already deluded you? How long must you be misled before you will be convinced? How often be disappointed before you are persuaded that the ways of sin are not happiness, but death?

2. Lay it down as a maxim, that *whatever sacrifice for God appears painful, does but appear to be so.*—To suffer for Religion's sake is not so dreadful as you imagine. What though you encounter the frowns of the world; the smiles of God will more than compensate for them. What though self-denial be your lot; yet it carries with it its own reward; and self-indulgence, as you have found, does not give the felicity it promised. Be assured, that God by religion points out the way to happiness, while Satan by sin directs you in the road to misery;—shall you hesitate which path to take?

3. Be persuaded, that *true peace and comfort are only to be enjoyed by those whose hearts are right with God.*—To halt between God and mammon is to possess the comforts of neither, but the pains of both. Give yourself, therefore, up unreservedly to God. Act for him openly and explicitly. Renounce all temporising maxims. Show plainly, that you have cast off the fear

of the world, and the love of it; that you are not ashamed to confess Christ before men, nor unwilling to bear his cross.

4. Remember also, that *you must be consistent*.—Your conduct must be good, as well as your profession bold. Do not parley with any sin. Do not love the things of the world, while you renounce the men of the world. Endeavour not merely to keep within the verge of salvation, but advance into the midst of the Church of Christ. A lukewarm, temporising spirit has been your bane. To combine a little, and only a little, religion with much of the world, has been your fault. Thus you have done the work of the Lord deceitfully. Now be honest and sincere in his service.

5. *Make a stand against whatsoever you know to be wrong*.—Reverence your conscience. One single compliance makes a dreadful inroad upon your peace. It brings darkness and guilt into your soul. “Beloved,” says St. John, “if our conscience condemn us not, then have we confidence towards God.”

6. And lastly, *walk in the Spirit*.—Look to Jesus Christ, the Author and Giver of all spiritual strength. Let all that is past teach you this great truth, that if left to yourself you will either have no religion, or that only from which you will derive a poor lifeless form of godliness without spirit or power. Christ must be all in all to you, and in the power of his Spirit you must trust. Consider, that he is made of God unto us wisdom and righteousness, sanctification and redemption. Severed from him, you can do nothing. Abide therefore in him; pray to him; confide in him; read the promises of his word for the confirmation of your faith. Receive him as your Prophet, Priest, and King; and then you shall know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.