PART FIFTH.

The Means of Repentance.

IN entering on this part of our subject, a formidable objection may be started, and even grounded on what hath already been discoursed, against treating upon the means of repentance at all. It hath been observed, that repentance is the gift of God to us, the purchase of Christ for us, and the work of the Holy Spirit in us: “How then,” it will be objected, “can we do anything towards it? If it please God to bestow it upon us, we shall repent, without difficulty or labour: if not, our labour will be altogether to no pur­pose.” It is indeed a certain truth, that repentance is the gift of God, as it has been proved from plain Scriptural testimonies: but it is equally true, and capable of the same proof, that we must diligently labour for it. Nor is there any inconsistency betwixt these distinct views of the subject: they only appear inconsistent to our dark and narrow apprehensions. Upon a si­milar occasion, the Truth, the Word, and the Wisdom of God saith, “LABOUR not for the meat that perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of Man shall GIVE you.” John vi. 27. Christ will give it most freely, but you must labour for it most diligently. Thus the harvest is the gift of God, who giveth seed to the sower; who giveth rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, and causeth the earth to yield her increase; yet must the husbandman labour. In both temporal and spi­ritual concerns, God gives not to the slothful, but to the diligent; and his bounty does not supersede, but encourage our activity.

He works in us, that we may work out our own salvation; he hath ap­pointed means, and commanded us to use them. Obedience is our duty. We ought to use the means, and trust in the Lord to render them effectual; but not to depend on them, or rest in them. They who seriously desire to repent and turn to God, will manifest their sincerity by thus using every proper means with diligence and perseverance: nor shall their labour be in vain; “for every one that asketh receiveth, and he that seeketh findeth, and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.” But negligence will detect hypocrites, and justify God in their condemnation. Something then must be done in order to our being made partakers of repentance: not under the no­tion of merit, as if we made the purchase: for it is the gift of God: not under the notion of efficacious operation; for it is the work of divine grace: but in order to evidence our integrity in purposing repentance; and that we may be found waiting upon God in the way of his appointment. And though the means will not affect the end without efficacious grace; yet they are quite as much calculated to produce the effect, as medicines are to remove sickness, or agriculture to procure the crop,—both of which are rendered effectual only by the divine blessing.

1. Then, “Consider your ways” as David did: “I thought on my ways, and turned my feet into thy testimonies.” Psalm cxix. 59. Are you now desirous truly to repent? Retire frequently into your chamber, shun the hurry and dissipation of a crowd, and court solitude, that you may recollect yourselves, and seriously commune with your own heart. There minutely review your whole past life: with exactness survey your thoughts, words, and actions, ever since the dawn of reason, or from the beginning of recollec­tion. Ask yourselves seriously such questions as these: What have you been scheming, intending, pursuing, all your days? What hath been the standard of your judgment, and rule of your conduct: the opinion of men, or the word of God: the fashions of the world, or the example of Christ? What have your affections been fixed on? Have you given God, or the world, your heart: I mean your warmest desires, and most devoted attachment? Have you intentionally been pleasing God, or yourselves? Have you been seeking his glory in everything; or your own ease, interest, gratification, and honour? In what have your time and money been most cheerfully ex­pended? In works of piety and charity; or in gratifying your sensuality, pride, and ambition. Have you been laying up, or aiming to lay up, trea­sures in heaven, or on earth? Have you improved health, prosperity, abili­ties, and influence, in promoting the glory of God, the interests of piety, and the good of men? Or have you done no good, but mischief, with them? Hath God been the delightful subject of your meditations and conversation: or have you willingly and habitually forgotten him, and regarded religious thoughts and converse as insipid and irksome? Hath the sweet work of prayer and praise, the worship of God, and hearing and reading his word, been your pleasure, or your task? Have you been out of your element when thus employed, and found more charms, and experienced more satisfaction in licentious company or dissipated mirth? Have you habitually reverenced the sacred name of God, hallowed his Sabbaths, and frequented his sanctuary with reverence and devotion? Or have you taken his name in vain,**[[1]](#footnote-1)** de­spised his ordinances, polluted his Sabbaths, or mocked him with an hypo­critical worship?

What have your imaginations been? pure and heavenly, or lewd, ambi­tious, envious, covetous, revengeful, and abominable? What has your dis­course been? edifying, serious, and candid; or profane, polluted, trifling, slanderous, and dissembling? What have your tempers been? meek, peace­able, and kind; or turbulent, contentious and overbearing? Have you be­haved, as the word of God directs, in relative life, as parents, children, hus­bands, wives, masters, and servants? Has equity, disinterestedness, and kindness; or selfishness, covetousness and fraud, directed your worldly business? Have you in sobriety, chastity, and temperance, governed your appetites and passions?

But I have already exceeded due bounds in this specimen of queries, which you ought with all impartiality to propose to yourselves; allowing conscience, after mature recollection, to return a faithful answer. In short, set the law of God and the example of Christ before your eyes; make diligent search into your secret practices, intentions, and inclinations; steadily view your likeness, and estimate your character in this manner, until you know what manner of persons you are. Shrink not back from that view of self-deformity which will thus be presented to you; but look, and look again, till you “ab­hor yourselves, and repent in dust and ashes.”

The man whose circumstances are embarrassed, may possibly retrieve all, if he have resolution in time to look well into his affairs, and be made sensible how bad they are: but to shrink from this investigation, and to banish re­flection on a disagreeable subject, completes many a man’s ruin. Thus mul­titudes are afraid, or averse, fully to examine their own character, conduct, and state; they flee from reflection, because uneasy and mortifying; and huddle up all in an unexamined obscurity, till they rush blindfold into remediless ruin. But by carefully examining how matters stand betwixt God and our souls, the danger is discovered, the remedy is at hand, and our de­struction happily prevented. Shift not then this business; slur it not over, but go through with it, though disagreeable and mortifying; and you will find yourselves amply recompensed, not only by its subserviency to repent­ance, but to future solid and abiding peace of conscience.

II. Examine your heart and life daily. Nor only say, “What have Idone?” but “What am I now doing?” “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked, who can know it?” And the Lord pro­nounces him a fool who trusteth in his own heart. Men retain their good opinion and confidence concerning themselves, because they remain strangers to their own hearts, for want of daily examination: for the only way to dis­cover a concealed villain, is carefully to watch him. Watch then your own hearts: examine well your own lives; keep before your eyes the requirements of the divine law, as far as known: search the Scriptures daily for further information: review your daily conduct, judging of it by that infallible standard: descend to particulars: to omissions and commissions, words and actions, intentions and imaginations, deficiencies and defilements in duty, and backwardness to it. This will prove of vast importance to self-knowledge, and consequently to self-abasement. Though difficult at first, it will soon become natural and pleasant to the true Christian; it will continually keep the heart humble and watchful, and the conscience tender; and dependence on the mercy of God, through the blood of Christ, for pardon, in continual exercise. This conduct, like well-arranged accounts, will prevent a thousand anxieties and terrors, in times of danger and sickness, and at the hour of death. Grudge not, then, this labour, if you are ambitious to be called dis­ciples of Jesus, and do not “judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life.”

III. Meditate frequently upon such subjects, as tend to excite and increase in the heart, the sense of the heinousness of sin; labouring with your reluctant minds to bring and keep them close to this exercise. Impenitency is greatly the effect of extenuating notions of the malignity of sin; repentance must then flow from a sense of its hatefulness. It is needless to enumerate the various subjects which, duly meditated upon, may have this effect; and it would lead us into repetitions. Such are the majesty and excellency, autho­rity and law, threatenings and judgments of God: his righteous severity against sinning angels, against Adam and his whole posterity, against the in­habitants of the old world, against Sodom and Gomorrah, against the na­tions of Canaan, against the people of Israel, in a variety of instances, espe­cially in the final destruction of Jerusalem, and the continued dispersion of the Jewish nation.—All these, and others too numerous for me to mention, are but forerunners and emblems of that everlasting destruction, with which in a future state all they shall be punished, “who know not God, and obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.” “Now, we know that the judg­ment of God is according unto truth:” these awful instances of his tremen­dous justice show us his judgment of the evil of sin, and what it really de­serves: even *his judgment,* who is LOVE, and “delighteth not in the death of a sinner;” but punishes solely to express his holy hatred of that abomina­ble thing which we lodge in our bosom, and in behalf of which we plead. These things were written on purpose to lead us to judge concerning sin, as God judgeth; and this will surely lead us to unfeigned repentance.

IV. Meditate frequently and intensely on the death of Christ. Consider who he was, and what he suffered, and wherefore he suffered. Purposely retire to contemplate this surprising scene; and yield not to weariness or indisposition, till you arrive at some heart-affecting views of a crucified Sa­viour. Superficial speculations may amuse the fancy, and furnish our con­versation; but without deeply examining and well digesting this subject, and being thus established in judgment concerning it, we can never, in ha­bitual experience, reconcile godly sorrow, with abiding peace and joy in the Lord, or humble repentance, with a lively hope of everlasting life. Here that Christian, who turns his eyes from other objects that he may steadfastly look unto Jesus,**[[2]](#footnote-2)** will perceive, that the awful vengeance of God against sin, before considered, proceeds not from want of love to the persons of sinners, but from abhorrence of moral evil—the effect of a perfect view of its infinite malignity: that this judgment and conduct are essential to the most perfect character, and requisite to his glory as moral Governor of the universe. When, therefore, in boundless love, he determined the salvation of sinners, he would “not spare his own Son;” but would sooner deliver him, “in whom his soul delighted,” to the most intense agonies and ignominious death, than leave sin unpunished, or permit his intelligent creatures to remain ig­norant of his infinite hatred of it. For the instruction of the whole universe to eternal ages, in these and other important truths, respecting the divine character, law, and government, did the Son of God “suffer once for sins, the just for the unjust.”

Here likewise the sinner may learn to estimate the worth of his immortal soul; the vanity of this world; the dangerous situation in which he is placed; the difficulty there is in a sinner’s salvation, which cost him, who created and upholds all things by his powerful word, such humiliation and sufferings; the unspeakable love of God, and his willingness to save sinners; seeing “he hath not withheld his only Son from us.” These are lessons eminently con­ducive to repentance; and which can in no other way be learned to such advantage, as by “looking unto Jesus,” and meditating on his sufferings. He, then, who sincerely would repent, must daily retire in contemplation to Gethsemane and Golgotha.

V. *Lastly,* The whole must be rendered effectual by fervent and impor­tunate prayer, without which all other means would be in vain. Whether we read, or meditate, or examine our lives and hearts, or whatever we do, prayer must accompany all; for it is God who takes away the heart of stone, and gives the heart of flesh, and renews us unto repentance; and him we must earnestly supplicate to bestow on us this good and perfect gift. Butalas! it is extremely difficult to prevail upon men to get alone, and on their bended knees, day by day, to beseech the Lord, in the name of Jesus Christ, to work this change in them, and bestow this gift on them. To read, to hear sermons, and other things of a public nature, men may be more easily in­duced. A mere form or task of devotion, may also be reconciled with a self-sufficient and worldly spirit and conduct: but real prayer stands in direct opposition to them all. It is the very language of indigence and dependence, and earnest longings after God and holiness. In order to pray aright, a man must know, in some measure, how vast and various his wants are; he must understand his true interest and happiness; he must supremely value the favour and image of God. No man can truly pray for spiritual blessings, who doth not carefully review his life, explore his heart, and in a measure know his own character; who is not in some degree acquainted with the majesty, holiness, and heart-searching knowledge of God, his own absolute dependence upon him, his relations and obligations to him, and his offences committed against him; and who is not, in a general way at least, instructed in the way of access for sinners to an offended God, through the atoning blood of his Son, and humbly willing to approach in this appointed way. Such a man draws near with reverential fear and deep self-abasement, confessing his unworthiness, and imploring forgiveness; encouraged only by believing apprehensions of the rich mercy of God to sinners through the mediation of Jesus. Conscious also of ignorance, weakness and depravity, in humble sin­cerity and earnest longings, he pleads the promises of the word of God, and implores the teaching, strengthening, sanctifying influence of the Holy Spirit. Faith, repentance, and universal holiness, he longs for, feels his want of, ex­pects, and seeks daily from God in prayer. In all this, his words express, but not fully, the very meaning of his heart. Daily he thus opens and pours out his soul unto God, turning the precepts and promises which he reads or hears from the word of God, into fervent petitions. All his sorrows, anxie­ties, and perplexities he spreads before the Lord, seeking, in every exigency, support, direction, and consolation from him: subjoining continual thanks­givings for mercies received, and intercessions for all around him; and sub­missively referring himself, in every case, to the will and wisdom of his heavenly Father. “Thus is he careful for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, makes his requests known unto God;” “and casts his care upon him, who careth for him.” Such prayer as this cannot be taught by man, but must be the effect of “the pouring out of the Spirit of grace and supplication;” who, communicating divine light to the understanding, and holy dispositions to the heart, excites fervent and spiritual desires in the soul, and teacheth us to pray with “groanings that cannot be uttered.” It is therefore called in the word of God, “praying, in and by the Spirit;” as opposed to a “form of godliness,” or good words spoken with the mouth, without suitable affections and desires in the heart.**[[3]](#footnote-3)** He whose words express more than *he* intends, or heartily desires, prays *form­ally* and hypocritically: he who means all his words express, and more than he can find words to express, evidently prays spiritually, and, though he may not be sensible of it, is assisted in prayer by the Holy Spirit.**[[4]](#footnote-4)**

But if nothing, however specious or ostentatious, be prayer, which has not in it something of this nature, (as I trust, upon mature examination of the Scriptures, will be found the case:) then evidently the proud, ungodly, and carnal-minded, cannot pray aright. Nor can it be deemed strange, if, when a sinner is *first* seriously impressed with concern for his soul, he hath great reluctance to this spiritual exercise, and knows not how to go about it. For even real Christians, who are arrived at some measure of stability, and have made considerable proficiency in a life of communion with God, meet with considerable difficulty in this grand concern; have need habitually to be humbled for neglects and imperfections; and want continually fresh supplies of divine assistance to excite, teach, and enable them thus to “pray always and not faint.”

Satan also will oppose to the uttermost all his artifices to prevent a sin­ner’s approaching to the throne of grace; well knowing, that in the critical season, when any person is under serious impressions, if he can be prevailed on to neglect prayer, they will soon wear off, and leave the conscience more insensible than before. The business, pleasures, diversions, and society of the world; and that scorn with which ungodly men treat a life of prayer, combine their influence in aid of natural corruption and Satan’s temptation, to keep the poor convinced sinner from the throne of grace. And as if these hindrances were not sufficient, even some, professing serious godliness, (whose intention may be better than their judgment,) extremely increase the difficulty, by strenuously contending, that unconverted persons ought not to pray, or be exhorted to it.**[[5]](#footnote-5)**

Such indeed are the pride and ungodliness of man, that, left to himself, and under Satan’s influence, he never *will* pray in sincerity. Confounding the depraved disinclination with a real want of ability, many thence argue the want of obligation. But this argument, if it prove anything, proves too much; and would consequently repeal the law and abrogate the gospel, and furnish the devil himself with an apology, by making inward depravity a justification of outward rebellion; the desperate wickedness of the life. For certain it is, that man is as much disinclined to keep the whole law, or to repent and believe the gospel, as he is to pray; and will never do either the one or the other, if left to himself, destitute of the influence of divine grace. But doth this indeed justify all our transgressions of the law, and contempt of the gospel?

Again, prayer is an important part of that worship and obedience which the law requires: and it is also the grand means of receiving from Jesus new covenant-blessings. He, then, who prays not, at once breaks the law, and contemns the gospel: “and he that keeps the whole law, and *thus***[[6]](#footnote-6)**offends in one point, is guilty of all.”**[[7]](#footnote-7)** If then a sinner ought not to pray, he is justifiable in breaking the whole law, and equally justifiable in neglecting the salvation of the gospel! In fact, however, our depraved inclinations are in no respect the measure of our duty, but the direct opposite. “The carnal mind is enmity to God; is not subject to *the law of* God, nor indeed *can* be.” The law to which the carnal mind *cannot* be subject, is the measure of our duty. This men *cannot* obey, because of the depravity of their nature, which enhances, instead of extenuating, their guilt. Men ought to love God and one another; having sinned, they ought to repent: they ought to believe and pray, to deny themselves and mortify their lusts: but they do not. What is the reason? They cannot. But in what sense is this true? In fact, because they dislike the service of God, hate his law, reject his authority, despise his gospel, and prefer the gratification of their lusts; and because these hateful dispositions are so predominant in them, that without the inter­position of Omnipotence they are insuperable. Can these hateful dispositions then, be seriously urged as an excuse. Will any dare to urge them at the day of judgment? No; “every mouth will then be stopped, and all the world shall be found guilty before God.” I should not in this place have touched upon this controversial subject, had I not observed how greedily this poison is drunk down, and how fatally it operates, in stupefying the conscience, flatter­ing the pride, and apologizing for the sloth of mankind.

Instead of thus abetting, we should endeavour to counteract these artifices of Satan, and to combat the reluctancy of a sinner’s heart, by showing the absolute necessity of prayer unto salvation; enforcing the invitations to the throne of grace; expatiating on the promises made to all who call upon the Lord; explaining the nature of prayer; directing him in the new and living Way to the throne of grace; answering objections, obviating discouragements, representing prayer as *our* privilege, and unspeakable consolation; and exhorting sinners to draw near, and share our happiness; for we may be assured, that they who are thus excited to pray, will in due time render unto God the praise of “making them to differ.”

But I return from this digression. My fellow-sinners, you must pray or perish.—Your backwardness to pray should humble you, and stir you up to overcome it; especially by crying unto the Lord to incline your heart, by his grace, to love and delight in prayer. Your ignorance should urge you to begin as the disciples did:—“Lord, teach us to pray.” You must not yield to corruption, temptation, or discouragement, but persevere in prayer with all sincerity and earnestness. If you pray aright, you will be very far from trusting in, or boasting of your prayers; for you will perceive much imperfection and defilement in them. But though humbled on that account, you need not despond; your prayers, though broken, faltering, and feeble, (if you mean what you express, and desire what you ask,) shall meet with acceptance through the intercession of Jesus, and be not only answered, but in due season far exceeded. Especially in this way you must seek repent­ance, as the gift of God through Jesus Christ; using the other means with diligence, earnestness, and perseverance; and then you will assuredly be made partaker of “that repentance which is unto salvation, not to be re­pented of.”

1. By taking the name of God in vain, I do not mean, nor does the Bible mean, merely blasphemy, perjury, and profane swearing; but every jest or expression which implies want of reverence to the name of God, his word and sacred things. Almost in all companies, the conversation, even though trifling and polluting, is incessantly interlarded with the words *God, Lord, Christ,* and such like: which are formed into hackneyed phrases, and used as mere expletives to adorn a period, or as notes of admiration, approbation, or indignation. Nothing can more fully discover the degree in which sinful man despises the glorious God, than this general and almost universal practice. Without pleasure, profit, or apparent temptation, in violation of an express command, and in defiance of an awful threatening; that tremendous name which impresses angels with holy awe, and at which devils tremble, is made man’s mere by-word. But when the affronted *Jehovah* shall at last address the sinner, “Wherefore hast thou despised the commandment of the Lord?” and he finds that God will “not hold him guiltless;” his profane trifling will be at an end; and he will be constrained to tremble at the name which he would not reverence.—The inefficacy of much apparent religion, and the worthlessness of much evangelical profession, are demonstrated by their failing to repress this awful profaneness. All true Christians, who worship God in spirit and in truth, are, by that profound veneration which they bear to the Lord, cured effectually of this practice; and they ought to unite in bearing testimony against it, boldly, in all com­panies. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Heb. xii. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Saul, previous to conversion, was a strict Pharisee, who made *long prayers;* yet when the Lord spoke of his conversion to Ananias” he said, with emphasis, “Behold he prayeth.” Before, he might read or repeat long forms, or pray fluently in extemporaneous language but now he feels his indigence, dependence, and unworthiness, and really prays with suitable desires and dispositions. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I am far from thinking that no prayer is accepted, which comes not up to this description; but this is the *nature* of a sinner’s praying for spiritual blessings: to this, in a degree proportioned to the mea­sure of his grace, a believer attains: and every accepted prayer has something in it of the same nature. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. If a man ought not to pray before conversion, he ought to *know,* that is *“be sure”* of his conversion before he prays: for if he be not sure of his conversion he cannot be sure whether he may, and ought to pray, or not. Thus *assurance* springs up in a sinner’s heart all at once; and now having received he may ask; having found he may begin to seek: the door being opened he may begin to knock.—Surely, at first glance, everyone must see this to be absurd and unscriptural, yea, anti-scriptural. Truly all ought to pray, but none will in sincerity, until the Holy Spirit in some degree inclines the heart. Then a man feels an inclination to do that, which before was his duty, though he did it not: frequently he knows not from whence this change proceeds: but is encouraged, by such Scriptures as that before alluded to, (Matth. vii. 7, 8. or Isaiah lv. 6, 7.) “Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way.” Thus he begins to ask and seek: and in consequence to re­ceive and find: in this way giving diligence he makes his calling and election sure; and this statement reconciles all the different views which the Scripture gives us of this matter. The Lord seeking us when lost, and being found of us when we sought him not, inclines us, (though we are not aware whence this inclination comes) to seek him in prayer; and thus we receive all spiritual and eternal blessings in the wayof asking and receiving. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Num. xv. 30, 31. “The soul that doeth ought presumptuously, the same reproacheth the Lord—he hath despised the word of the Lord.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. James ii.. 10, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)