

CHAPTER XV.

OF REPENTANCE UNTO LIFE.

Section I.—Repentance unto life is an evangelical grace, the doctrine whereof is to be preached by every minister of the gospel, as well as that of faith in Christ.

Section II.—By it a sinner, out of the sight and sense, not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, as contrary to the holy nature and righteous law of God, and upon the apprehension of his mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, so grieves for, and hates his sins, as to turn from them all unto God, purposing and endeavouring to walk with him in all the ways of his commandments.

EXPOSITION.

The repentance described in this chapter is called *repentance unto life*, because it is inseparably connected with the enjoyment of eternal life, and to distinguish it from the sorrow of the world, which worketh death. It is styled a grace, because it is the free *gift* of God, and is wrought in the heart by the operation of his Spirit. "Then hath God also to the Gentiles *granted*, repentance unto life."—Acts xi. 18. "Turn thou me, and I shall be turned; surely after that I was turned, I repented. Jer. xxxi. 18,19. This repentance is also denominated an *evangelical* grace, to distinguish it from *legal* repentance. The latter flows from a dread of Godly wrath; the former, from faith in God's mercy. In the latter, the sinner is chiefly affected with the punishment to which his sin exposes him; in the former, he mourns for his sin as offensive and dishonouring to God. Cain and Judas repented, but it was on account of the consequences of sin to themselves; whereas the true penitent mourns after a godly sort, with a godly sorrow, or a sorrow which directly regards God.—2 Cor. vii. 9,10.

That the doctrine of repentance is to be preached by every minister of the gospel, as well as that of faith in Christ, is asserted in opposition to a gross heresy of the Antinomians, who maintain that repentance ought not to be preached by any minister of the gospel; alleging that it leads us away from Christ, and proves most hurtful and dangerous. How opposite is such a sentiment to the example and command of Christ himself! He preached the doctrine of repentance to those who attended his public ministry. "Repent," said he, "and believe the gospel."—Mark i. 15 And in the instructions which he delivered to the apostles, when he commis-

sioned them to preach the gospel, it was expressly enjoined that "repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations."—Luke xxiv. 47. The apostles, accordingly, inculcated the necessity of repentance both on Jews and Gentiles.—Acts ii. 38, iii. 19, xiv. 15. The apostle Paul speaks of "repentance from dead works" as one of the first principles of the doctrine of Christ; and, when giving a summary of his doctrine before the elders of Ephesus, he comprehends the whole under the two great articles of repentance and faith: "Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance towards God, and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ."—Heb. vi. 1, Acts xx. 21.

A *sinner* is the only subject capable of repentance. Christ "came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance;" and he intimated that "just men need no repentance." But "all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." Repentance, therefore, must be universally necessary. "God now commandeth all men everywhere to repent;" and Jesus Christ, the faithful and true witness, has solemnly declared "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish."—Acts xvii. 30; Luke xiii. 3.

1. True repentance springs from *a sight and sense* of sin. All men will readily acknowledge, in general terms, that they are sinners; but no man can have a clear sight and a feeling sense of his sins, until the Holy Spirit becomes his teacher. It is his work to convince of sin.—John xvi. 8. This he does by means of the law; for "by the law is the knowledge of sin."—Rom. iii. 20. When the Spirit enlightens the mind of the sinner to discern the purity, spirituality, and vast extent of the divine law, he sees sin to be "exceeding sinful." He views it as not only dangerous, but as odious in itself, on account of its contrariety to the holy nature and righteous law of God.

2. True repentance flows from an apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ to such as are penitent. Had we reason to regard God as an inexorable judge, we might, like Adam, attempt to flee from his presence, and escape the sword of his avenging justice; but never would we return to him as sincere penitents. Blessed be God! we have the firmest grounds on which to rest our faith of his pardoning mercy. He has proclaimed his name as "The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, forgiving iniquity, and transgression, and sin."—Exod. xxxiv. 6, 7. The wicked is invited to "forsake his way, and return unto the Lord," encouraged by the assurance that "he will have mercy upon him, and will abundantly pardon."—Isa. lv. 7. "Jesus Christ is set forth to be a propitiation, through faith in his blood;" "through his name is preached unto us the forgiveness of sins;" and we are assured, "that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins."—Rom. iii. 25; Acts xiii. 38, x. 43. Now, it is an apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, by faith, that melts the heart into penitential sorrow for sin. Of so generous a nature is evangelical repentance, that the penitent soul is

never so deeply humbled and grieved for sin, as when it has reason to hope that a gracious God has freely forgiven it. This generous temper is assigned to the true penitent in the Sacred Scriptures: "Thou shalt remember, and be confounded, and never open thy mouth any more, because of thy shame, when I am pacified toward thee, for all that thou hast done, saith the Lord God."—Ezek. xvi. 63.

With regard to the order of faith and repentance, it may be remarked, that we can form no conception of a moment of time when the one exists in the soul separate from the other. In point of time, then, faith and repentance necessarily accompany each other; but in the order of nature, faith must precede repentance. Evangelical repentance is a turning from sin to God; but there can be no turning to God, except through Christ; and no coming to Christ, but by believing in him.—John xiv. 6, vi. 35. Besides, evangelical repentance flows from love to God; but the exercise of unfeigned love to him proceeds from the exercise of true faith.—1 Tim. i. 5. Add to this, it is only by looking on Him whom we have pierced, that we can mourn after a godly sort, according to that remarkable promise: "They shall look on me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him."—Zech xii. 10. There is, indeed, a conviction of the person's guilt and misery, accompanied with a kind of sorrow for sin, and resolutions to forsake it, because it exposes him to everlasting punishment, which, in the nature of things, must precede the exercise of faith in Christ; but this is very different from evangelical repentance. [Boston's Miscellany Questions, Quest. 3; Colqhoun's View of Saving Faith, p. 303; Wilson's (of London) Sermons, p. 390; Anderson's (of America) Precious Truth, p. 180; Black's Sermons, p. 87.]

3. True repentance includes grief, or deep contrition and godly sorrow for sin. There is a false sorrow, which many mistake for the genuine. Many are grieved for their sin, merely on account of the punishment it is like to bring upon themselves; and those who are most deeply affected with this kind of sorrow, if they succeed in allaying their fears, often return to a course of sinning with greater freedom and impetuosity than before. But the sorrow of a true penitent is for sin as committed against God—as rebellion against his rightful authority—as a violation of his holy law, and as a most base, ungrateful return for all his goodness.—Ps. li. 4.

4. True repentance includes hatred of sin, not only as that which exposes us to death, but as hateful in itself, as the abominable thing, which God hates, and as that which renders us vile and loathsome in his sight. If this hatred of sin is genuine, it will lead us to loathe and abhor ourselves, and it will extend to all sin in ourselves and others.—Job xiii. 6; Ezek. xxxvi. 31; Jer. xxxi. 19; Ps. cxix. 128, 136.

5. True repentance includes a turning from sin unto God with a sincere purpose, and endeavour to walk with him in all the ways of his commandments. This is the

crowning act and the grand test of genuine repentance. Paul preached both to Jews and Gentiles "that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance."—Acts xxvi. 20. True penitents forsake sin, with a firm resolution to have no more to do with idols. They are converted from the love as well as from the practice of sin. They particularly guard against those sins to which they were formerly most addicted, and before whose influence they are most ready to fall.—Ps. xviii. 23. They assiduously watch against all occasions of sin, and earnestly long for complete deliverance from it. They return to God as their rightful Lord and Master, resolving, in dependence upon his grace, to "serve him in holiness and righteousness all the days of their lives." They form a steady and unshaken purpose in their hearts, and sedulously endeavour, by watchfulness and diligence, in the constant use of all means, to avoid all sin, and to practise universal holiness. It is not meant that true penitents have attained to sinless perfection; for "there is no man that liveth and sinneth not." They will, therefore, find occasion every day for the renewed exercise of repentance. All tears will not be wiped from their eyes until all sin is perfectly removed their souls.

Section III.—Although repentance be not to be rested in as any satisfaction for sin, or any cause of the pardon thereof, which is the act of God's free grace in Christ; yet is it of such necessity to all sinners, that none may expect pardon without it.

EXPOSITION.

1. In opposition to the Romanists, who make satisfaction one of the essential parts of repentance, and conceive that certain acts or penances, performed by an offender, constitute a compensation for his transgression, in consideration of which it is forgiven; and also in opposition to Socinians, who deny the atonement for sin by the death of Christ, and maintain that repentance is the only atonement required; our Confession asserts, that repentance is not to be rested in as any satisfaction for sin, or a cause of the pardon thereof. It has already been shown, that it must always be the duty of every sinner to repent; now, the discharge of a present duty can never atone for past crimes. Repentance is never supposed to be a legal ground for remitting the punishment due to crimes committed against a civil State. How unreasonable, then, to suppose that it can form a sufficient ground for the pardon of sin as committed against God! Christ has fully satisfied the justice of God by the sacrifice of himself, and his blood alone cleanseth us from all sin.—1 John i. 7. To us the pardon of sin is wholly gratuitous—"an act of God's free grace in Christ"—and, if it be of grace, then it is no more of works; and, therefore, not by repentance, as a satisfaction for sin.

2. True repentance and pardon are inseparably connected. Though no one is pardoned for his repentance, yet repentance is of such indispensable necessity, that an impenitent sinner cannot be a pardoned sinner. "They are connected in the economy of salvation, not as cause and effect, but to show the consistency of a gratuitous pardon with the interests of holiness. For any government to acquit a criminal, and restore him to society without some evidence of a change of disposition, would be little else than granting him a license to commit crimes with impunity. But if this would be unworthy of a human, how much more of the divine government! God, for the vindication of the honour of the plan of mercy, has so connected pardon with repentance and confession—the expression of repentance—that they are the only certain evidences that we are in a pardoned state; while pardon and repentance are equally the gift of God through Jesus Christ our Lord." [Stevenson on the Office of Christ, p. 244.]

Section IV.—As there is no sin so small but it deserves damnation; so there is no sin so great that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent.

EXPOSITION.

In opposition, on the one hand, to the Church of Rome, which holds that some sins are mortal, and others venial—that is, of so trifling a nature, that they may be expiated by some temporal infliction—our Confession asserts, that "there is no sin so small but it deserves damnation;" and, on the other hand, in opposition to certain Anabaptists, and some others, who have held that if persons, after baptism and grace received, fall into grievous sins, there is no pardon remaining for them, even though they should repent, our Confession asserts, that "there is no sin so great that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent." We admit that a great variety in the degree of guilt attaches to different sins; but we maintain that every sin is worthy of death. Most explicit are the declarations of an inspired apostle: "The wages of sin is death."—Rom. vi. 23. "Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them."—Gal. iii. 10. Both these texts are unquestionably applicable to sin of every kind. The chief of sinners, however, may obtain mercy; and those who, after grace received, have fallen into grievous sins, may truly repent, and obtain forgiveness. David, after his "great transgression," and Peter, after his denial of his Master, repented and were pardoned.—2 Sam. xii. 13; John xxi. 19.

Section V.—Men ought not to content themselves with a general repentance, but it is every man's duty to endeavour to repent of his particular sins, particularly.

EXPOSITION.

No man can reckon up all his sins in order; for "who can understand his errors?" But it is not enough to acknowledge in general terms that we are sinners; we should, by a strict and impartial examination of our hearts and ways, endeavour to obtain a discovery of those particular sins by which we have offended and dishonoured God, and should "mourn, every one for his iniquity." Thus, when David was brought to the exercise of true repentance, he not only acknowledged in general that he had sinned, but he had his eye upon that particular sin by which he had in a special manner dishonoured God: "My sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight."—Ps. li. 3, 4. "I will declare mine iniquity; I will be sorry for my sin."—Ps. xxxviii. 18.

Section VI.—As every man is bound to make private confession of his sins to God, praying for the pardon thereof, upon which, and the forsaking of them, he shall find mercy: so he that scandalizeth his brother, or the church of Christ, ought to be willing, by a private or public confession and sorrow for his sin, to declare his repentance to those that are offended; who are thereupon to be reconciled to him, and in love to receive him.

EXPOSITION.

In this section we are taught—

1. That every man ought to make private confession of his sins to God. We cannot discover to God anything that was previously concealed from his omniscient eye; but by confessing our sins we give glory to God, as well as take shame to ourselves. Hence Joshua said unto Achan: "My son, give, I pray thee, give glory to the Lord God of Israel, and make confession unto him."—Josh vii 19. To cover our sins is to dishonour God, as if he either did not see, or could not punish them; whereas, to confess our sins is to honour God's holy law, which we have violated—to honour his omniscience, which beheld all our transgressions—to honour his justice, which might have taken vengeance upon them—and to honour his patience and longsuffering, which have forborne to execute the merited punishment.

2. That those who privately confess their sins to God, and forsake them, shall find mercy, though they do not also confess all their sins to a priest. This is amply confirmed by that inspired declaration: "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper; but whose confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy."—Prov. xxviii. 13. The experience of David corresponded to this declaration.—Ps. xxxii. 5. But the Church of Rome holds that the auricular confession of sins to a priest, and his absolution thereupon obtained is the only means appointed by God for the procuring of pardon of all mortal sins committed after baptism. [Some of the grossest corruptions of the Church of Rome respect the doctrine of repentance. According to the tenets avowed in the standards of that church, repentance consists of three acts—confession of sins to a priest, contrition, or attrition, and satisfaction.] For such a confession there is neither example nor command in Scripture. The text on which Romanists chiefly rely (John xx. 23) says nothing of the confession of sins in the ears of a priest; and the ministers of religion can only remit sins declaratively, not authoritatively. They can absolve from the censures of the Church, but not from the guilt of sin, as committed against God. In one place we are enjoined to "confess our faults one to another" (James v. 16); but this confession is mutual, not a confession by the people to the priest. Christians ought to confess their faults to those whom they have injured; but the confession of all their sins in private to a priest, as required by the Church of Rome, is wholly unauthorised by Scripture, and it has been the occasion of flagrant abuse. "Not only is auricular confession productive of much inconvenience to society, by giving the ministers of religion an undue and dangerous influence over the minds of the people in their most secret affairs; but it perverts their notions of the justification of a sinner, and it provides a method of quieting their consciences, which is so easy of access that it encourages them to sin with little fear." [Hill's Lectures in Divinity, pp. 292, 293.]

3. Though Christians are only required to confess their secret sins to God, who seeth in secret, yet, if they have wronged a Christian brother, in his property or good name, they are bound to confess their offence to him, and to make all the reparation in their power for the injury they have done to him; and upon their repentance he is bound to forgive them.—Matt. v. 23, 24; Luke xvii. 3, 4. When Christians fall into public scandal, they should be willing to make more public confession of their offence, that they may openly honour that God by their confession, whom they have openly dishonoured by their conduct; and the Church, upon their repentance, ought in love to receive them, and restore them to all their Christian privileges. The Novatians maintained that such as had fallen into grievous transgressions, especially those who had apostatised from the faith, in a time of persecution, were not to be again received into the bosom of the Church. [Mosheim's Eccl. Hist., cent. But this opinion is contrary both to the precepts and

examples of Scripture. If a man be overtaken in a fault, they who are spiritual are enjoined to restore such a one in the spirit of meekness, considering themselves, lest they also be tempted.—Gal. vi. 1. The Church at Corinth was required to forgive the incestuous person, upon his repentance, and receive him again into communion, lest he should be swallowed up with over much sorrow.—2 Cor. ii. 7, 8.