

SERMON XVII.

BY THE REV. JOHN OAKES.

WHEREIN IS A MIDDLE WORLDLY CONDITION MOST ELIGIBLE ?

Remove far from me vanity and lies : give me neither poverty nor riches ; feed me with food convenient for me : lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the Lord ? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain.—Proverbs xxx. 8, 9.

My text presents you with a short, yet very pithy, prayer of Agur, concerning whom we have no other account than what the Holy Ghost gives in verse 1 : “The words of Agur the son of Jakeh, even the prophecy : the man spake unto Ithiel, even unto Ithiel and Ucal.” The Jewish rabbins would make each of these names to import some great mysteries ; an account of which I do not think to be of such importance, as to trouble myself or you to search after ; but will content myself with the most vulgar interpretation ; namely, that this Agur was a person contemporary with Solomon, one eminent for his wisdom ; and that the other two before-mentioned were his disciples, to whom in the following instructions he applies himself.

In the second and third verses, you have his humble acknowledgment of the meanness of his own natural abilities ; and that whatever wisdom he had attained to, it was not the product of his own industry, but *donum desuper*, “a gift from above :” “Surely I am more brutish than any man, and have not the understanding of a man. I neither learned wisdom, nor have the knowledge of the Holy.”

In the following verses you have a short, yet very significant, confession of his faith ; and that with respect to God, and Christ the Son of God ; displaying some of his most glorious perfections, by which he [is] infinitely exalted above, as well as distinguished from, all his creatures : “Who hath ascended up into heaven, or descended ? who hath gathered the wind in his fists ? who hath bound the waters in a garment ? who hath established all the ends of the earth ? what is his name, and what is his son’s name, if thou canst tell ?” (Verse 4.) Next followeth an excellent encomium of God’s word, that transcript of the divine will, which, saith the apostle, is able to make us “wise unto salvation :” (2 Tim. iii. 15 :) “Every word of God is pure : he is a shield unto them that put their trust in him.” (Prov. xxx. 5.)

The application of these instructions you have in verse 6 : “Add thou not unto his words, lest he reprove thee, and thou be found a liar.” Thus have I given you a brief account of this excellent sermon. I have not now leisure to acquaint you either with the

importance of the matter, or the method here used ; but shall proceed to the prayer that followeth this sermon.

In the verse before my text, you have, first, the preface : “ Two things have I required of thee ; deny me them not before I die.” (Verse 7.) In which you have,

1. *The sum of his requests* : “ Two things.” David goes to God with his single request : “ One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after.” (Psalm xxvii. 4.) Not but that David, and Agur too, doubtless, had many things to ask of God, upon whom they depended for whatever they had in hand or in hope ; but that “ one,” or these “ two ” requests, must either be supposed to lie uppermost upon their hearts at this time, or else that they were such petitions as were comprehensive of all things substantially good and necessary. What these two requests are, and how large and extensive, might appear, if I had time to give you an account of them in their due latitude.

2. You may observe *the object to whom he directs his prayer*,—namely, to God : “ Two things have I required of thee ; ” who, for our encouragement in our addresses to him, hath ascribed to himself that title,—to be a God “ hearing prayer.” (Psalm lxxv. 2.)

3. You have *the manner of his address*.—Expressive both of his *faith* and *fergency*,—two necessary ingredients to an acceptable prayer.

(1.) “ Two things have I required of thee : ” there is his *faith*. To “ require ” is more than barely to request ; it imports a looking and a longing for a thing with expectation of receiving what is asked. This is the language of faith, and the freedom that Christ hath purchased for his people in their approaches to the throne of grace : “ In whom we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of Him.” (Eph. iii. 12.)

(2.) His *fergency* : “ Deny me not ; ” importing that holy courage,—laying hold on God, as not willing to let him go without a blessing.

4. You have *his constancy and perseverance in this duty* : “ Deny me not before I die.” As if he had said, “ I intend not to give over calling upon thy name whilst I have breath ; I will give thee no rest ; I will never take thy seeming delays for denials.”

Here are many profitable instructions that might hence be collected, did not the present design of this exercise hasten me to step forward to the words of my text ; where you have these two more general parts :—

I. *The requests,—the things pleaded for at the hands of God.*

II. *The arguments for the enforcing [of] these requests.*

I. *The things pleaded for*.—Their *number* you heard in the foregoing words : “ Two things.” Here we are acquainted with their *nature* :—

1. “ Remove far from me vanity and lies.” This petition did primarily respect his inward man, the concerns of his soul. Whenever we are sending dispatches to heaven, spiritual and eternal things should always have the pre-eminence. The things [which] he depre-

cates are "vanity and lies;" by which (as is conceived) we are to understand those sinful soul-maladies under which he groaned, and unto which by nature we are wholly addicted and enslaved.* This, then, in short, is expressive of the breathings of his soul after a freedom from the damning and domineering power of his indwelling lusts; that his sins might be pardoned, that his conscience might be purged, that all might be removed far from him that kept him at a distance from, and interrupted him in his communion with, God. But,

2. That request in which I am at present concerned especially to give you an account of, is the next; which doth more immediately respect his outward man, and the temporal enjoyments of this transitory life. These are also the gifts of God; and though they are the blessings of the footstool, mercies of an inferior rank, yet, as our Saviour tells us, such things as, during our abode in this lower world, our "heavenly Father knows that we have need of." (Matt. vi. 32.) The request is this: "Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me:" which, though made up of several sentences, yet is it but one single request.

According to the order observed in my text, we must consider,

(1.) *Somewhat that he deprecates and declines*: namely, poverty and riches.

(2.) *Something for which he supplicates*: namely, "Feed me with food convenient for me."

(1.) *The things [which] he deprecates* are the two extremes of a worldly condition;—*poverty* on the left hand, *riches* on the right.

(i.) *Poverty*.—I suppose you all know, at least in the notion, what that means; namely, a negation or privation of such things as God in the ordinary course of his providence hath made necessary for the support of our outward man, or for our comfortable subsistence in this world and in that station in which God hath set us. Such as are destitute of necessary supplies for the satisfying of the cravings of nature, these we reckon to be truly poor. Such as want clothes to cover their nakedness, bread to satisfy their hunger, that are reduced to an absolute dependence, under God, upon the charity of others for their daily bread,—see how they are described: "They cause the naked to lodge without clothing, they have no covering in the cold. They are wet with the showers of the mountains, and embrace the rock for want of a shelter:" (Job xxiv. 7, 8:)—these are poor indeed, that have not a bed to lie on, nor a house to hide their heads in. This is poverty in the lowest degree; and yet thus low did our blessed Saviour stoop; of whom it is said, "He became poor, that we through his poverty might be rich." (2 Cor. viii. 9.) "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head." (Matt. viii. 20.) Those stars also of the first magnitude, "of whom the world was not worthy," were "destitute, afflicted, tormented." (Heb. xi. 37, 38.) Thus you see

* *Peccata omnia complectitur sub nominibus vanitatis et mendacii.*—JUNIUS. "He includes all sins under the names of 'vanity and lies.'"—EDIT.

what this poverty is ; and had this good man made a full period here, "Give me not poverty," I question not but every one in this assembly would readily have subjoined his hearty "Amen."

(ii.) The other extreme is *riches* : "Neither poverty nor riches." Now as "poverty" speaketh penury and scarcity, so "riches" speak plenty and superfluity, when God causes "waters of a full cup to be wrung out to" us. (Psalm lxxiii. 10.) It is remarkable what you find by way of encouragement to a cheerful communicating to the necessities of the indigent : "Give, and it shall be given unto you." You shall be no losers by your charity. That is somewhat agreeable with that of Solomon : "Cast thy bread upon the waters : for thou shalt find it after many days." (Eccles. xi. 1.) But that is not all ; there is an insurance of great advantage ; namely, "Good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom." (Luke vi. 38.) Giving is one of the best ways for thriving. But that which I quote this place for is, to decipher out to you what is meant by "riches," namely, a plentiful portion of these worldly accommodations ; not only enough for necessity, but for superfluity : though, as I shall show you, this must be considered with a distinction ; that which may denominate one man rich, may be but a mean or poor estate for another. He would be but a poor prince that should have no larger a revenue than a rich peasant.

Thus you see what this good man declines : he would not have poverty nor riches, if left to his choice ; he would not lie so low as the poor, nor yet sit so high as the rich ; he would not go naked, or be clad with rags, nor yet so sumptuous as to go in robes.

(2.) Next follows *the positive part of his request*.—He would neither have poverty nor riches. What, then ? Why, says he, "Feed me with food convenient for me." Which request is not to be restrained, as if it were only a petition for a supply for the belly ; but as including all temporal and worldly necessities, as that request in the Lord's Prayer : "Give us this day our daily bread." (Matt. vi. 11.) But it is not the quality or particular kind of temporal blessings that we are so much concerned to inquire after, as the quantity,—how much he begs of the things of this world. Now the consideration of what hath been said of the two extremes, poverty and riches, both which he declines, will be a sure guide to lead us into the true meaning of his request ; which must certainly be this :—"Neither poverty nor riches !' what, then ?" Why, a middle portion ; such a condition allotted him by Divine Providence, that might fall between both those extremes : "food convenient," (so we translate it,) a competent or convenient allowance ; so much of this world as might raise him above contempt, and yet not so much but that he might still be kept below envy ; statute-bread,—so much as the law of nature, necessity, and conveniency allows for the enabling him to discharge his duty in the place wherein God hath set him : *quicquid ad victum et vitam fovendam et tuendam est necessarium.**

II. We should next consider *the arguments upon which he grounds this choice* : "Lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the

* "Whatever is necessary to subsistence and to cherish and preserve life."—EDIT.

Lord? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain."

These reasons, though they differ in their nature and manner of expression, yet they centre in one and the same thing. Why not poverty nor riches? Why a middle condition between both? The reason is, *because such a condition is in itself most subservient to God's glory, and our own spiritual and eternal welfare.*—It is possible a poor estate may be best for some, and a plentiful estate for others. These may be the conditions in which some may bring most honour to God, and most promote the welfare of their better part; but this is accidentally: otherwise, in itself a middle estate is the most suitable to the carrying-on these high and noble ends.

I should now give a more particular account of the several arguments here specified: I will be brief.

1. Let us a little examine his plea *against riches*; which he declines upon a double account:—

(1.) "Not riches! why?" "Lest I be full, and deny thee." As if he had said, "Being filled and every way furnished with variety of creature-enjoyments, swimming in a sea of plenty, and swelled with a fond conceit of my own self-sufficiency and independency upon any on earth, I should also be induced to disown my dependency on the God of heaven." This, one would think, is a strange consequence, highly irrational,—that a multitude of benefits should be a means to make us unmindful of, and disrespectful to, our great Benefactor; but so it happeneth through the depravity of our nature, that the better and more bountiful God is to us, the worse and more forgetful are we prone to be of God; according to that of the prophet: "According to their pasture, so were they filled; they were filled, and their heart was exalted; therefore have they forgotten me."* (Hosea xiii. 6.) Nothing is more ordinary than to lose a sense of God in a crowd of creature-enjoyments; as appears by those cautions of old: "When thou shalt have eaten and be full, then beware lest thou forget the Lord, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage." (Deut. vi. 11, 12; viii. 10—14.) Here is the first evil consequence,—*atheism in heart.*

(2.) Next follow *irreligion and profaneness in life*: "And say, Who is the Lord?" *Quid mihi cum illo?* "What have I to do with God?" † It is below great men, it suits not with their honours, to be found upon their knees to God in prayer: "Through the pride of their countenance they will not seek after God." (Psalm x. 4.)

2. His argument *against poverty*: "Or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain." Here also is a double evil that attends poverty:—

(1.) *A temptation to theft.*—"Necessity," according to the proverb, "hath no law;" but doubtless it holds not in this. "Better

* *Deum irritant confidenter ob summam felicitatem quam largitur iis.*—MERCERUS. "They presumptuously provoke God on account of the supreme felicity which he bestows upon them."—EDIT. † *Quorsum orarem, aut sacra frequentarem?*—MERCERUS. "To what purpose should I pray, or offer repeated sacrifices?"—EDIT.

starve than steal," better undergo the greatest suffering than commit the least sin. God hath said, "Thou shalt not steal;" (Exod. xx. 15;) the obligation of which precept extends itself to poor as well as rich. This "stealing" does include all injurious defrauding of others, either more openly or clandestinely.

(2.) The second evil is, *taking the name of God in vain*.—Which, in the letter, is a plain violation of the third command, and is of large extent. Here, as is conceived, is mainly intended the sin of perjury, or swearing falsely; to which sin poverty exposes those that are necessitous; either for the purging of themselves, when accused for their theft, or as hired by others for the condemning of the innocent.

—*Quid non mortalia pectora cogis,
Auri sacra fames?*—VIRGILII *Æneis*, iii. 56.*

Having thus given you a short account of the word, namely, the requests, and the several arguments with which they are backed,—you may readily conclude [that] they would afford many useful instructions. But that which is most agreeable to the scope of the whole, and best suits with my present purpose and the design of this exercise, I shall give you in this single proposition :

OBSERVATION.

That a middle estate or condition in the world, upon rational and religious grounds, is most eligible for a man, as such, with respect to this life; or for a Christian, as such, designing the happiness of another life

Before I come to a particular discussion and resolution of the case propounded, I shall premise a few particulars for the better opening this petition of Agur, and the main matter in hand.

PROPOSITIONS.

PROPOSITION I. *That God hath the absolute disposal of all men as to their estates and conditions in the world.*—"The rich and the poor meet together: the Lord is the Maker of them all." (Prov. xxii. 2.) He is not only the Creator of their persons, but the Orderer and Framer of their conditions. Agur's prayer was bottomed upon this faith,—that poverty was God's gift as well as riches. This lesson Job had well learned, which was one great means by which he attained that equanimity in his different state, and learned so well how to abound and how to be in want: "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." (Job i. 21.) Though both poverty and riches may be handed to us by various means, yet still all things come under a divine disposure. Creatures do good or evil as ministers of God's will, and not as merely acted by their own. (Isai. xli. 23.) Riches, as truly as grace and glory, are the gifts of God, without whose blessing all our endeavours after them will be to no purpose. (Prov. x. 22.) Poverty, also, is the gift of God; by what visible ways soever it overtakes us, God is the principal agent; and his hand is to be acknowledged

* "O sacred hunger of pernicious gold,
What bands of faith can impious lucre hold?"—DRYDEN'S Translation.

in taking from us, as well as in giving to us. Admit, that wicked men, the sons of violence, are let loose upon us to the spoiling [of] our goods; yet God is to be eyed: "Who gave Jacob for a spoil, and Israel to the robbers? Did not the Lord, he against whom we have sinned?" (Isai. xlii. 24.) Nay, when men's estates become a sacrifice to their own lusts, their pride and prodigality, their profuseness and debauchery; yet even here God is to be owned, who in a way of righteous judgment gives up men to be devoured by their own corruptions.

PROP. II. *God, in his various dispensations of the good and evil things of this world, acts not only as an absolute Sovereign, but according to the rules of his own most infinite wisdom, and as best suits, and may be most subservient to, his own purpose,—what may most conduce to his own glory, and the good and weal of his own people.*—"O Lord, how manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all:" (Psalm civ. 24:) which works of God are not to be limited to those of creation, but also of providence. Hence we are not to understand Agur's prayer as if he did take upon himself, or by his example [did] encourage us, to direct or dictate to God, how he should order out his condition for him in the world absolutely: that had been high presumption. No; it must therefore be understood with submission to divine wisdom and good pleasure.

PROP. III. *No outward condition in the world that men can be brought into, hath any influence upon God, so as to render us more or less acceptable to him.*—Are we never so poor and low, "as poor as Job," as we proverbially speak? This may lessen our respect amongst men, who in this respect are too prone to judge of things according to outward appearance,—a crime severely censured by the apostle: "If there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; and ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?" (James ii. 2—4.) Hospinian reports [of] the dogs that kept Vulcan's temple, (the same which others say of the Bohemian curs,) that they would fawn upon one in fine clothes, but fly upon one in rags. But whatever influence these things may have upon men, they have none upon God: "Will he esteem thy riches? No, not gold, nor all the forces of strength." (Job xxxvi. 19.) It is not titles of honour, nor bags of gold, that will bribe Him who is the Judge of all the earth: none of these will avail "in the day of wrath." (Prov. xi. 4.) And as riches will not help, so neither will our poverty hinder, our acceptance with, or our finding favour from, God.

PROP. IV. *One and the same condition in the world is not alike desirable or eligible to all men under all circumstances, nor to the same men at several times, or as placed by God in several stations.*—A poor and mean condition may be best and most desirable for some men under some circumstances. Some are naturally so addicted to pride, to be puffed up by a confluence of creature-enjoyments; or

are so prone to malice and revenge, to tread and trample upon all over whom they can get advantage; that it is even best for them, and others too, when such "cursed cows have short horns." Solomon tells us, "There is a sore evil which I have seen under the sun, namely, riches kept for the owners thereof to their hurt." (Eccles. v. 13.) Many men have an estate thrown in upon them, that they had better have been without, proving to the hurt of themselves and others. It had been well for Hazaël, Benhadad's servant, if he had kept his station, and never ascended the throne of his master; as the prophet intimated to him. (2 Kings viii. 12, 13.) Those venomous lusts might have been so far stifled in the embryo, as never to have come abroad to have done so much mischief in the world, nor brought that ruin at last upon himself, had they not been cherished by the warm sunshine and hot gleams of those prosperous advancements to which he was exalted by his being king of Syria.

On the other hand, a rich, plentiful, and prosperous condition may be best for some; those whose hearts are enlarged with spiritual endowments, and so well poised and balanced by grace, that they thereby are not only able to manage a prosperous gale with humility and without the hazard of being overset with self-conceit of themselves, but be very helpful and beneficial thereby unto others, "making friends of the mammon of unrighteousness," (Luke xvi. 9,) and as God's stewards distributing the talents with which they are entrusted according to the will of their Lord, to whom they are shortly to give up their account. When greatness and goodness meet together in the same person, it carries much of the resemblance of God, who is *Optimus Maximus*.*

But, further, one and the same condition is not always best for one and the same person; as he may stand in a different station, or be under different circumstances. Hence that of the apostle: "Let the brother of low degree rejoice in that he is exalted: but the rich, in that he is made low." (James i. 9, 10.) Poverty and riches come both from God; and I question not but some men who have been rich, have had more cause to bless God that, of rich, they have been made poor, than others have, who, of poor, have become rich. O, how many have cried out, *Perissem nisi perissem!* †

These things being premised, I will come more directly to the observation; which, with these fore-mentioned provisoes, stands firm:—*that a middle worldly condition* (that which, you have heard, lies between those two extremes,—poverty and riches,—expressed here by "food convenient") *is in itself, upon rational and religious grounds, most eligible to a man, as such, as respecting this life; or a Christian, as such, with respect to the happiness of another life.*

In the handling of this point, I shall speak to two things briefly:—

I. Somewhat a little more particularly, *for the explication of the subject of this proposition; namely, what this middle worldly condition is, or wherein it consists.*

* "Of all beings the Best and Greatest."—EDIT. † "I myself should have been eternally lost, had not all my property perished."—EDIT.

II. I shall then show you *wherein, or upon what ground, this may be adjudged the most eligible and desirable estate, both for a man, as such, or for a Christian, as such.*

III. And so conclude the whole with a little *application.*

I. *For the determination of the subject of this proposition.*—Where, indeed, the greatest difficulty lies. This “food convenient,” which, as you have heard, is of the same importance with “daily bread,” denoting a competency of outward good things,—this middle state between poverty and riches must be considered with a threefold respect.

1. With respect to a man's *personal and private capacity*; as a single person.

2. With respect unto a man's *relative capacity*; as he may be concerned to take care for others, as well as make provision for himself.

3. With respect unto a man's *being placed in a higher or more public station*; as magistracy or ministry.

Now that proportion of these outward things which may be looked upon as a competency for one, will not be so esteemed for all, under these various considerations:—

1. Consider a man in his *private and personal capacity.*—And so a lesser quantity of the things of this life may be looked upon as a competency; so much as will afford him food and raiment. This was that which Jacob did desire of God; upon the account of which, he did more strictly oblige himself to the Lord in a way of gratitude: “Jacob vowed a vow, saying, If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, so that I come again to my father's house in peace; then shall the Lord be my God.” (Gen. xxviii. 20, 21.)

This “if” is not to be understood as importing his diffidence, or any distrust in God's providence. This could not be, when he had so lately received a gracious promise of divine protection and provision: “Behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest,” &c. (Verse 15.) Much less is it to be looked upon as a condition, as if he would indent with God upon these terms, or otherwise that he would quit his interest in God, and throw off his service. No such matter; but only a note of order or inference, whereby, from the consideration of God's care to be taken of him, he should thence bind himself more firmly to him in ways of faith and obedience. But that which I make use of this place for, is to illustrate this competency that he had in his eye as to worldly matters: “food and raiment.” He tells us not what kind of food; he speaks not a word of delicacies or varieties, to please his palate. So raiment; not gorgeous apparel, no silks nor satins. Only “food and raiment,” such as might be wholesome and convenient for the cravings of nature, and that might cover his nakedness, and secure him from the injuries of the weather. And truly a little of this world will serve here: grace and nature will be contented with a little. With this the apostle consents: “Having food and raiment,

let us be therewith content." (1 Tim. vi. 8.) *Τροφήν, ου τρυφήν · σκεπασματα, ου κοσμηματα*, as Isidore speaks: "'Food,' not sweetmeats; 'raiment,' though without ornament." And, indeed, food and raiment is all upon the matter [that] this world affords: * other things are but superfluous, tending more to delight than necessity; which, without spiritual wisdom, prove great hinderances, rather than helps, to a happy eternity. Now, wherein a competency lies here, is obvious to every capacity.

2. We will consider a man with respect to his *relative* capacity; one whom the law of God and nature hath obliged to take care of, and make provision for, himself and others too.—Thus parents, masters, and heads of families, and these of different sizes, call for a distinct consideration as to the stating of a competency for them. The apostle hath put a black brand upon those who are *αστοργοι*, "without natural affection." † (Rom. i. 31.) And elsewhere it is represented as monstrous: "If any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel." (1 Tim. v. 8.) In this case a larger quantity of worldly accommodations is requisite to constitute a mediocrity, than there is for a single person; so much as is necessary for the present comfortable subsistence of a man and his house, nay, so much as is convenient for a future necessary provision for children that may survive their parents, whereby they may be preserved from a necessary dependence upon the charity of others. (2 Cor. xii. 14.)

3. Lastly. We must consider a man as placed by God in a *public* capacity, whether of magistracy or ministry.—And in this case, also, more is requisite to constitute a middle state, than for those whom Providence hath set in a lower orb. The rule by which a mediocrity in such a capacity must be determined is, so much as may be necessary to discharge those offices and great trusts to which they are called. Magistrates, especially chief magistrates, such as have the care of kingdoms and commonwealths upon them,—it is supposed, a liberal share is necessary for them; and that for the keeping up [of] that external grandeur that belongs to their places, and to defray the charges of that great work incumbent upon them; which cannot be done but by many hands, which must be not only employed, but rewarded by them. And for ministers, whom God hath called to that honourable work of winning souls, in order to which they are enjoined to "give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine," and "to meditate upon these things, and give themselves wholly to them, that their profiting may appear to all;" (1 Tim. iv. 13, 15;) so much is supposed to be necessary for a competency for them, as may free them from worldly distractions, and that they be not necessitated to "serve tables." (Acts vi. 2, 4.)

Yet doth not this either justify magistrates in the unreasonable exactions or oppressions of their people, peeling and polling them, for

* *Cibus et potus sunt divitiæ Christianorum.*—HIERONYMUS. "Meat and drink are the only earthly riches that Christians seek."—EDIT. † *Erperites charitatis vel nativæ pietatis.*—SCULTETUS. "Devoid of love or natural piety."—EDIT.

the maintaining of their pride and luxury, contrary both to divine precept and pattern. The *precept* you have, Deut. xvii. 16, 17 : " He shall not multiply horses to himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt to the end that he should multiply horses. Neither shall he multiply wives to himself, that his heart turn not away : neither shall he greatly multiply to himself silver and gold." And for a *pattern*, take good Nehemiah : " The former governors that had been before me were chargeable unto the people, and had taken of them bread and wine, beside forty shekels of silver ; yea, even their servants bare rule over the people : but so did not I, because of the fear of God." (Neh. v. 15.)

Neither will this vindicate ministers, by what titles soever they are dignified or distinguished, to be " greedy of filthy lucre, or covetous ;" * not grasping at worldly wealth, exalting themselves with external pomp and grandeur, who are to be examples of humility, meekness, and lowliness to the flocks over which God hath made them overseers. Thus to " lord it over God's heritage," (1 Peter v. 3.) with high-swelling titles and a train of attendants, may suit well enough with the ministers of antichrist, " who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped ;" (2 Thess. ii. 4 ;) but is very unbecoming those who profess themselves to be the servants of a meek and a lowly Jesus.

II. Having thus showed you in what respects we are to judge of a mediocrity, or middle worldly condition, I proceed to show you *wherein this condition is the most eligible and desirable, and this both upon rational and religious grounds.*—Only one thing remember,—that when I am recommending a middle state in the world, it must be supposed that there is no worldly condition that can be proposed as so desirable but what hath its adherent vanities : as hath excellently been declared in this Morning Exercise from another subject : " Seeing there be many things that increase vanity, what is man the better ? For who knoweth what is good for man in this life, all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow ?" † (Eccles. vi. 11, 12.)

To which let me add further, Neither is there any condition so formidable, but what may, by the grace of God influencing the heart, be improved for holy and happy purposes. And yet, so far as seems suitable to sound reason, as also scripture-revelation, a middle worldly estate is most eligible ; and that,

1. For a man, considered as such, *with respect to his short passage through this world.*—Still this is to be understood with submission to divine pleasure. Let us look upon man as a creature placed by God to act a part upon the stage of this world for a few years, and then to have his *exit* ; and thus think upon him abstracted from all considerations of a future state. Could it be supposed that those expressions of Solomon were to be construed in the epicure's or atheist's sense,—that " that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts ; even one thing befalleth them : as the one dieth, so dieth the other ; yea, they have all one breath ; so that a man hath no pre-eminence above a beast : for all

* 1 Tim. iii. 3: *Αφιλαργυρον*, "Not a lover of silver."

† See Sermon I. in this volume.—EDIT.

is vanity. All go unto one place ; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again ;" (Eccles. iii. 19, 20 ;)—this were good news to those wretches that spend their precious time in the contempt of God and neglect of their souls, if the words were to be understood without a limitation. But the following verse spoils all their mirth : " Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth ? " (verse 21 :) a clear testimony of the immortality and surviving of the soul in a future state. But suppose man as making a short thoroughfare from the womb to the tomb ; and so a middle condition is most eligible ; and that,

(1.) With respect to his *mind*.

(2.) With respect to his *body*.

(1.) With respect to the *mind*, a middle state is most eligible, as tending to a greater sedateness and tranquillity, and freeing it from many distractions, and manifold anxieties, that are the natural concomitants of both the fore-mentioned extremes of poverty and riches.

(i.) As for *poverty*, it is obvious to every eye, especially if it be extreme. O, what daily tortures and racking thoughts, what solicitous cares, the mind of man under such circumstances is exposed to ! and that for the getting of such provision as is necessary to satisfy the cravings of nature, whose cries and clamours are loud and troublesome, impatient and querulous. Not a day, nor scarce an hour, but the mind is put upon the contriving an answer to those repeated queries, " What shall I eat ? and what shall I drink ? and wherewith shall I be clothed ? "

Nor, (ii.) Is the mind ever a whit the more at ease, by being brought into the other extreme of *riches*, as, through our folly, we are apt to imagine. " O," says the poor man, " could I but compass such an estate, could I get such a bank of money into my coffers, then I should be satisfied." But, alas ! this is a grand mistake ; for though riches stop the mouth and satisfy the cravings of nature, yet do they open the mouths and enlarge the cravings of so many devouring lusts, that the rich man, where his heart is not renewed by grace, is less at quiet and fuller of disturbance than the poor. Sometimes his pride, sometimes his pleasure, sometimes his covetousness, and sometimes a whole kernel of lusts, are let loose upon him, that eat-out all that comfort and sweetness which otherwise might result from his plentiful enjoyments ; whereas a middle condition in the world, though it is far from giving any true rest to the mind of man, (that being the peculiar property of God, and an interest in him to do,) yet does it free a man much from those disquiets before-mentioned. For though a man in this estate may be supposed to have the same disturbing and devouring lusts, yet are they kept much under a restraint, not having that fuel to feed them which riches afford, and which are of that nature, that the more they are used, the more insatiable they are in their cravings.

(2.) A middle worldly estate to a man, as such, is better than either of the extremes, with respect to the *body* ; and that as it is a condition that hath a greater tendency to its health, and preventing manifold diseases and infirmities to which it is liable whilst in this lower

world. It is true, all sicknesses and bodily distempers, that are either afflictive or destructive to man's body, are at the dispose of God, in whose hands are all our times. (Psalm xxxi. 15.) "He kills, and he makes alive; he wounds, and he heals." (Deut. xxxii. 39.) He says to them, as the centurion to his servants, "Go," and they go; "Come," and they come; "Do this," and they do it. (Matt. viii. 9.) So that our lives and healths have no absolute dependence upon secondary causes. Yet it must be acknowledged, in the ordinary way of his providence, he dispenses the weal or woe of the body by external means.

Now, (i.) As to *poverty*: how many visible hazards do those that are poor run as to their health! and how many ways do bodily infirmities beset them! sometimes through the want of these creature-accommodations that God, in the ordinary way of his providence, hath made necessary for the upholding of the fabric of nature, and repairing its dilapidations, to which it is incident for want of supplies. Little do *you* think, *who* sit down at your well-spread tables, how many of your poor brethren would be glad of your fragments, whose lamp of life dwindles away sometimes for want of oil to feed it; beside excessive heats and colds, contracted by their labours and pains that they are at to fill their bellies, and cover their nakedness; as also unwholesome diet, and many times not enough of that, neither.

(ii.) As to *riches*: these are so far from preventing these bodily infirmities, that commonly they hasten and heighten them, proving temptations, to those who are destitute of God's grace, to sloth and idleness; upon the account of which, the body,—like a standing pool, contracts filth and mud,—so the body gross humours, to its great prejudice. Especially hereby is occasioned intemperance and excess in eating and drinking, which proves not only pernicious to the soul, but also destructive to the health of the body; as Erasmus, speaking of the epicures of his days, makes this remark, *Dum invitant ad cœnam, efferrunt ad sepulchrum*.* How many fresh instances might be produced, wherein it might appear that many have so long drunk healths to others, that they have drunk away their own! whilst a middle worldly condition tends to the preventing many of those evils by which the body, as well as the soul, suffers. But I hasten to the second head of arguments.

2. A middle worldly condition is most eligible to a man as a Christian, and *as designing the happiness of the other world*.—As it is most subservient to the living to God here, and living *with* God hereafter. This, my brethren, if we be in our right minds, is and ought to be the main scope and business of our lives. Hence that worldly condition that may rationally be judged most conducing to that end, is doubtless the most eligible. Now, that a middle state (considering our present circumstances, namely, those internal depravities with which we are infected) is the most desirable, I shall endeavour to evince.

This world, and the time allotted for our abode here, is the time for

* "While they are invited to a sumptuous entertainment, they are borne onward to their graves."—EDIT.

our acquainting ourselves with God, that we may "be at peace," and that all good may come unto us; (Job xxii. 21;) all the good that God hath promised, and that Christ hath purchased. Now, that condition that may afford most helps and fewest hinderances to this great business, is certainly the most eligible condition. I have only this to premise by way of caution,—that there is no condition in the world so well circumstantiated, that can be so dispositive of us to our future happiness, but that, without the almighty and out-stretched arm of Sovereign Grace, we shall still be left in a lost and perishing condition. Yet we do affirm, there are some conditions in the world, that though they are not in the least auxiliary to God,—“who worketh in us both to will and to do,” and that “of his good pleasure,” (Phil. ii. 13.)—yet are they, if wisely managed, advantageous unto us, for our improving those helps by which God is pleased to communicate his grace to us. In this respect, the apostle prefers a single, before a married, condition: “He that is unmarried careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord: but he that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife,” &c. (1 Cor. vii. 32—34.) By which the apostle shows the advantage in some respects that the single person hath, beyond those who are married, in the service of God. So also a middle condition seems to have the advantage of both the fore-mentioned extremes; and this will be more evident, if we consider that there are three things pre-requisite, and necessarily to be minded by us, in order to our future happiness:—

(1.) *A right and orderly entering into the way of salvation by the door of sound regeneration and conversion.*

(2.) *A progress in that way, by a holy and heavenly conversation.*

(3.) *A perseverance in that way of faith and holiness to the end, against all internal or external opposition.*

Now a middle worldly condition appears, both from rational and scripture accounts, to be the most subservient unto all these.

(1.) Such as ever truly design to enter into heaven when they die, must get into the way that leads thither whilst they live. Now every way hath an entrance that leads to it. (Matt. vii. 13, 14.) *The entrance into this way is by the door of regeneration.*—So our blessed Saviour plainly tells us: “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (John iii. 3.) And what this new birth imports, you may find in verse 5: “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” To which I might add many parallel places: “Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt. xviii. 3.) No conversion, no salvation. Now, that condition in the world from whence results the fewest hinderances and the most helps for our entrance in at this strait gate, is doubtless the most eligible; and this a middle state doth.

Beloved, conversion and regeneration is a mighty work, whatever the world think of it. The mind must be enlightened, the conscience

must be awakened, the will must be inclined, the affections must be spiritualized; and the grace by which all these operations must be effected, as it comes from God, so is it ordinarily conveyed to us through those outward means which he hath instituted for that end, on which God requires our constant and conscientious attendance; such as, prayer, reading, and hearing the word read and preached. These are "the posts" of wisdom's gates, where we are bound to wait. (Prov. viii. 34.) These are the healing waters at which we must lie, if ever we expect the cure of our soul-maladies. In a word, these are the ordinary means by which God conveys his Spirit, that unites the soul to Christ, and thence communicateth the first formations of spiritual life. (Gal. iii. 2.)

Now, a middle worldly estate is the most subservient (considering our corrupt state) both as to our attendance upon, and diligent improvement of, these external helps, in order to God's conveying his grace to us.

(i.) Take a man under that extreme of *poverty*; one that is forced either to beg or earn his daily bread, before he eateth it: and withal consider him as in his natural state, dead in sins and trespasses, and without any serious sense of the inestimable worth of his soul, or weight of eternity. Alas! how easily are such, from the sense of their poverty, drawn either to a total neglect of the means of grace, or to a careless, superficial attendance upon it! Does not experience tell us, that the pinching necessities of the body easily induce them to conclude, that they must have bread for themselves and families? "What!" say they, "we must live; we must not starve;" but consider not in the mean time, that there is a far greater "must" for their souls; that they *must* have their sins pardoned, that God *must* be reconciled, that they *must* have Christ and his grace, and that their natures *must* be changed, and their sins subdued; or else verily they *must* to hell, where they will not be allowed so much as a drop of water to cool their tongues; (Luke xvi. 24;) and, in order to this, that they *must* find time to pray, read and hear God's word; and they *must* meditate, and take pains to acquaint themselves with the matters of their souls. But, alas! the feelings of their bodily wants have got a prepossession, and stand as a strong guard to keep out every such serious thought from entering into their minds; and, if at any time they thrust in upon them, how quickly are they ejected! And the poor man is apt to think, (if he doth not speak it out,) that whatever may be the duty of his "betters," as he calls them, yet he presumes *he* may be excused, and that he hath a sufficient apology to live without minding such matters, having so many worldly cares and concerns upon him. These and such-like are too frequently the prevailing suggestions of those who are under that extreme of poverty.

Well, but then, (ii.) Let us consider the other extreme, and look to the *rich*: and here let me use the words of the prophet: "Therefore I said, Surely these are poor; they are foolish: for they know not the way of the Lord, nor the judgment of their God. I will get

me unto the great men, and will speak unto them; for they have known the way of the Lord, and the judgment of their God." But, alas! see what return is made upon this inquest: why, he tells you, "These have altogether broken the yoke, and burst the bonds." (Jer. v. 4, 5.)

Poverty hath many hinderances, but riches, through the horrible sensuality of man's heart, have more; as our Saviour intimates: "Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God." (Matt. xix. 23, 24.) Not that riches in themselves are any impediment to true and serious godliness; but only by reason of the depravity of our natures, that cleave so fast and are so closely wed'ded to, and lifted up with, things here below; "pride being the worm that naturally breedeth in riches."* It is a hard matter to be high and humble. Great and rich men are easily drawn to a neglect and contempt of the means of grace, and to imagine that it is beneath their grandeur to have the worship of God in their families, or, at best, that it is more proper for their chaplains to manage than themselves. These are too great to be dealt plainly with about the concerns of their souls, and are apt to think [that] Nathan was a little too bold, when he said to king David, "Thou art the man." (2 Sam. xii. 7.) I must profess, when my thoughts have been taken up with such objects, they have been so far from being envied by me, that, of all conditions of men in the world, I have looked upon them as the objects of the greatest pity; I mean, such great and rich ones, whose wealth and honour are employed as a shield to defend them against the faithful monitions of such as are lovers of, and well-wishers to, immortal souls. Hereby their lusts are secured, and their souls exposed to imminent danger.† Besides, how open do they lie to such soul-destroying opinions! namely, that there neither is, nor need [be], any other than an external baptismal regeneration; and that we are all Christians good enough by our natural, and no necessity of any new, birth; and that a little outward reformation will secure us, though we never mind heart-renovation. And if men will not preach and prophesy such smooth things, they shall not by their consent prophesy at all; like those of old, "which say to the seers, See not; and to the prophets, Prophesy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophesy deceits." (Isai. xxx. 10.) In a word: when a sinner is converted, and brought home to God, the heart must be searched and ransacked; his false hopes, and sandy foundations, upon which they are built, must be battered down; pride and self-confidence must be brought low; and a man must become as a little child. (Matt. xviii. 3.) Now, though our hearts are all of us opposite to this work, and nothing short of

* *Vermis divitiarum est superbia.*—AUGUSTINUS. † *Difficile est ut presentibus bonis quis fruatur et futuris, ut de deliciis ad delicias transeat.*—HIERONYMUS. "It is difficult for a man to enjoy both present and future bliss,—to pass from earthly to heavenly pleasures."—EDIT.

Omnipotent Grace can thus bring the heart to stoop, that it may enter in at this strait gate that leads to life; yet greatness and riches in the world, through the corruption of man's nature, do much magnify the opposition that is made against God on this account. But now a middle state in the world is exempted from these additional hinderances; neither hath the flesh nor the devil that advantage to obstruct this work of regeneration, that either of the other extremes has.

(2.) Another requisite to our eternal happiness is *a progress in this way of life, by maintaining a holy and heavenly conversation.*—God hath said, (let who will or dare contradict it,) “Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.” (Heb. xii. 14.) This holiness of heart and life consists in our fiducial dependence upon God's promises, and in a sincere and hearty respect to all God's precepts; in the making the word of God our rule, and the glory of God, with the salvation of our souls, our main and ultimate end; and this in the whole course of our lives and conversations. This is that trade of godliness in which we must be exercising ourselves whilst we live, if we design to be really happy when we die. Now, a middle worldly condition, considering our present case, is the most advantageous, and hath the fewest hinderances, for our driving on with success this trade.

(i.) [Suppose] a man under the extreme of *poverty*, destitute of necessary provisions for the supply of this life; and yet suppose him a godly man: such a supposition may be made; though David tells us, “I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread.” (Psalm xxxvii. 25.) From whence some (though, I judge, upon a mistake) would conclude, that extreme poverty, so as to be reduced to beggary, is a condition that God never exposes his children to. But thus to say, would doubtless be a condemning of the generation of the righteous; (one thing which God abhors;) some of whom in all ages have been brought to such great straits, that they have been necessitated to beg or starve. And we read of some that were *ὑστερουμένοι*, “destitute, afflicted, tormented, of whom” yet “the world was not worthy.” (Heb. xi. 37, 38.) So that I rather approve of that sense of the foregoing text, which confines it either to David's experience in his time, or rather to lay the emphasis of the matter upon the word “forsaken.” When Paul gives us a catalogue of his distresses, he puts in this as an alleviation of his troubles: “Persecuted, but not forsaken;” (2 Cor. iv. 9;) which sense also suits best with the context: “Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the Lord upholdeth him with his hand.” (Psalm xxxvii. 24.)

Now, supposing a child of God under the extreme of poverty, though *de jure* this ought not [to], yet *de facto** it does, prove very prejudicial to this trade of godliness; and this many times several ways: sometimes it does necessitate them to absent themselves from those outward means and those soul-quickening opportunities which others

* “Though of right this ought not, yet it actually does.”—ΕΔΙΤ.

enjoy, whereby their hearts might be kept up warm and lively for God. Are there not many at this day, (whilst you can spare so much time as to come hither in a morning, to gather up this heavenly manna that falls at your doors,) who are forced (poor hearts!) to be hard at their labours, and that to get necessaries for themselves and families? Sometimes (though that is sad, I confess) are they overpowered by temptations to use indirect means for the relieving [of] their wants; which, upon a review, make sad work in their consciences, and set them many degrees back in the way of holiness. Sometimes they are so dispirited with the weight of their burdens, that they are almost totally incapable of doing any thing in their general or particular callings, not knowing how to pray, nor how to work. O the temptations that such poor souls are under to distrust, to murmuring and repining, to unthankfulness and discontent! every [one] of which is very prejudicial to the life of holiness.

(ii.) Consider the other extreme,—*riches*: suppose a man to be great, and, in the main, good and godly too;—a rarity, but withal a singular blessing to the ages and places in which they live;—alas! how difficult is it for such to thrive in godliness, when they are under the bright rays of worldly prosperity! Do we not too often find, that riches prove to a godly man, what the ivy doth to the oak? which, indeed, may seem to adorn it, and set it forth more speciously to the eye of the beholder; but sucks out that sap and nourishment that should feed and nourish the tree, and, if not timely looked to, may endanger its life. Few, if any, have been the better for their being rich; but too many have been the worse. What temptations are such daily encountering with, to carnal pleasure and sensuality, to sloth and fleshly ease, to pride and ambition! all which, so far as they are indulged, prove to the detriment of serious religion. How apt are such to be flattered! nay, even by good men to be cried-up as none-such in their age, if they speak but now and then a few good words, and show a little countenance to religion! when, upon a strict view, it may be, they have very little (if any thing at all) of the power of godliness: who have given occasion to that unhappy saying, that “a little religion goes a great way with great men;” whereas, in truth, that which might pass for great religion in persons of an inferior condition, should be esteemed but little in those whom God hath fixed in a higher orb, and so are under greater obligations from God, and in a greater capacity of bringing more honour unto God.

(3.) Another requisite to our eternal felicity is, not only a progress, but a *perseverance in the way of faith and holiness to the end, and that against all temptations and oppositions from within or from without*.*—“He that endureth to the end shall be saved;” (Matt. x. 22;) and, “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.” (Rev. ii. 10.) Again: “If any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him.” (Heb. x. 38.) From all which, you may conclude the necessity of perseverance to salvation. Now, though a security from final and total apostasy is the undoubted

* *Finis coronat opus.* “The desired result crowns the labour.”—EDIT.

privilege of God's elect and truly called ones,—such shall be “kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ;” (1 Peter i. 5 ;) yet such may, and many times do, in an hour of temptation, (such an hour as this is in which God hath cast our lot,) fall foully, to the great dishonour of God and discredit of their profession, to the hardening [of] the wicked in their sin, and wounding of their own souls, and to the interrupting [of] their peace and comfortable communion with God. Many Christians may and do fall to the breaking of their bones, and like Eutychus, who “fell from the third loft, and was taken up” for “dead ;” though Paul told them, “Trouble not yourselves ; for his life is in him :” (Acts xx. 9, 10 :) but they shall never fall as Eli did ; of whom it is said, “He fell backward” to the breaking of his neck, and the loss of his life. (1 Sam. iv. 18.) Now a middle condition in the world affords fewer temptations to apostasy than either of the extremes.

As, (i.) *Poverty* : suppose a person truly godly in a poor and low condition in the world, and thence, by consequence, having a necessary dependence upon others for his livelihood. If, now, Providence so ordereth it, that those persons on whom he thus depends prove enemies to God and the power and life of religion, (O that there were no reason for such suppositions !) what temptations are those poor ones under to abate their zeal for God, and first to conceal their profession, and possibly afterwards to deny and disown those ways which, conscience tells them, are the ways of God ! and this in compliance with their masters, fearing else the loss of their favour and worldly advantages enjoyed from them. “I must,” say such poor ones, “if I do not alter my course, expect no more relief ; and then my work will be gone ; I shall have no more credit : and so I had even as good shut up my shop, and shut up my mouth too. Nay, I may fear not only a suspension of what kindness I have received ; but, of a friend, he will become my enemy ; and then how easily may I and mine be crushed !” O my friends ! how cogent such arguments have been of late with many,—to do things contrary to their judgments, and to go against the plain dictates of their own consciences ; to decline their professions, and so to make work for repentance,—may easily be imagined, but not readily, sufficiently be lamented.

(ii.) Let us consider the other extreme,—*riches* : and one would think, at first blush, that these should be a mighty bulwark, and a strong preservative against apostasy ; but constant experience teacheth the contrary. Wealth and honour have been a mighty snare even to the people of God themselves in an hour of temptation. It is a great self, my beloved, that great men are called sometimes to deny for the sake of Christ and his gospel ; and O, how hard is this to be done ! How apt are such to study distinctions, to evade their duty, and palliate their sin, when the performance of the one, and forbearance of the other, may hazard the loss of a great estate ! But now a middle condition in the world does not so violently drive men upon those rocks and quicksands, upon which both the poor and the rich are liable so often to “make shipwreck of faith and a good conscience.”

III. And thus have I given you a brief resolution of the case to be discussed this day ; and having spoken what my time would allow me in the doctrinal part, it remains that I should make a little *application*.

USE.

The first *USE* shall be *by way of caution*.—You have heard [that] a middle *worldly* condition is most desirable, and this upon several rational considerations : have a care that this be not applied by any of you so as to be a rule as to your *spiritual* state and condition in the world. You know, there are two sorts of riches :—there are *earthly* riches ; such as the Holy Ghost calls, “this world’s good :” (1 John iii. 17 :) and there are *heavenly* riches ; such as will be of use in the other world,—a being “rich toward God.” (Luke xii. 21.) Now, my brethren, though a middle estate, as to the world and as to worldly accommodations, be most desirable ; yet you are miserably mistaken, if you think a middle condition as to spiritual things to be so. I confess, the language of many men’s lives, nay, of the lives of professors, speaks to this purpose. I know few, if any, that live as if they were afraid [that] they should be too rich ; but, alas ! how many live as if they were afraid that they should be too godly ; afraid of being “righteous overmuch,” of being too zealous for God ! O sirs, have a care of this ; lay your hands upon your hearts ; inquire into the temper of your souls about this matter. May be, some of you, even in this sense, would not be so miserably poor, but you would willingly have a little grace, a little godliness, if it were only to give you some hopes that you should not go to hell when you die ; and hence are very inquisitive and industrious to find out some marks and signs, and what may be the discoveries of the *least* degree of saving grace ; whilst, in the mean time, they are not (as may be feared) so industrious how to increase their grace, and how to be adding to their spiritual stock, according to that counsel given us : “Giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, and to virtue knowledge,” &c. (2 Peter i. 5.) Are you not afraid [that] you may have too much grace, and be too holy ? Do you not sometimes blame, and at least show a dislike against, those who outstrip you ? and think they are more nice than wise, and too exact and curious in their conversation ; and that a more lax and indifferent carriage would be better ; and that moderation and a middle way would be more commendable ? O, have a care of this lukewarmness,—a being “neither cold nor hot.” (Rev. iii. 15, 16.) Remember, he that thinks he hath grace enough, it is much to be feared [that] he hath none at all. Be you copying out the example of the holy apostle : “Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended : but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” (Phil. iii. 13, 14.) If you say, “What is this to my subject in hand ?” I answer, It is no matter, so [that] it may prove an advantage to thy soul.

But now, then, to make some more pertinent use of what you have heard, I shall direct my application to three sorts of persons ; or to

persons with respect to that threefold condition in the world that my text mentions, and that my discourse has pointed at all along; namely, the poor, the rich, and those of you that are in a middle estate between both; and this by way of counsel and advice to you all.

1. *One word to the poor.*

2. *Two words to the rich.*

3. *Three words to you that are in a middle condition betwixt both.*

1. *One word to the poor.*—And this shall be a counselling, comforting, encouraging word. I will not now inquire, how poverty came upon you; whether it be the gift of God,—I mean, whether it came more immediately from the hand of Divine Providence,—or whether it be the effect and result of your own lusts,—of your profuseness and prodigality, of your sloth and idleness, of your gluttony and drunkenness. I will not inquire this at present, but leave it to yourselves to consider; only take it for granted, that poor, very poor you are, and, may be, upon this account despicable in the eyes of others, and miserable in your own. Now, my friends, that which I have to say to you in short is this: Be persuaded that the greatest misery of your present condition is, not (as possibly some of you may be apt to imagine,) that this your condition is pinching hard, and puffs heavy upon your fleshly part, and that, by reason of your poverty, you are the objects of scorn and derision in the world; but, indeed, the greatness of your misery, and the sadness of your condition, lies in this,—that it lays you open (without preventing grace) to many strong temptations to dishonour and neglect God and Christ and your souls, and so makes way for your being miserable in both worlds. May you but obtain wisdom from God to hearken to his calls, to close with his counsels, and accept of the gracious proffers of Christ and salvation by and through him, which proffers are made as freely to you as to any in the world! And then, admit your poverty [to be] continued, nay, increased upon you; yet it will be but for a very little while; and thou, who with Lazarus art forced to lie at the rich man's gate, and glad when thou caust get but the crumbs and fragments that come from his table, shalt be taken into Abraham's bosom, (Luke xvi. 20—22,) and sit down at the right hand of God, where are "rivers of pleasures for evermore;" (Psalm xvi. 11; xxxvi. 8;) and thou shalt "hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on thee, nor any heat;" but "the Lamb shall feed you, and shall lead you unto living fountains of waters; and God shall wipe away all tears from your eyes." (Rev. vii. 16, 17.) For the Lord's sake, think of this. Things here below are but *προσκαιρα*, "for a little season," (2 Cor. iv. 18,) whether they be good or evil; and therefore not worth the minding, in comparison with those eternal things which are just before you.

2. *Two words to you that are rich.*—And,

(1.) The first shall be that which you find, 1 Tim. vi. 17: "Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not high-minded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy." You have little reason to set a higher

estimate upon yourselves, because God by the bounty of his providence hath lifted you up above your brethren; either if you consider who it is that hath "made you to differ," and that you have nothing but what you have received, as the apostle upon another account expreseth it; (1 Cor. vii. 4;) and received it, not as an absolute proprietor, to do with what you have what you list; but, as God's steward, to be laid out in the service of your Lord, who will shortly call you to a strict account, and will say, "Give an account of thy stewardship; for thou mayest be no longer steward;" (Luke xvi. 2;) and that, the more you have, the greater is your debt, and the greater account you have to make. But that is not all: your riches and honours, which you are so apt to admire and dote upon, if God give you not great wisdom in the management of them, will be sad riches, as they will be temptations to you to forget both God and yourselves, and render your salvation more hazardous, as you have heard. And if they should in this sense be for your hurt, you will shortly wish you had rather have been amongst the number of those that beg their bread at your door, than thus, as you do, coach it up and down, and lie upon your beds of ivory, and drink wine in bowls, and health and carouse it with your huffing companions. Read James v. 1—3: "Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you. Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver is cankered; and the rust of them shall be a witness against you, and shall eat your flesh as it were fire. Ye have heaped treasure together for the last days." You that "trust" and pride yourselves in your "uncertain riches," and live in the neglect of God and your souls, apply this to yourselves; for it belongs to you.

(2.) A second word to you that are rich shall be that of Solomon: "Honour the Lord with thy substance, and with the first-fruits of all thine increase." (Prov. iii. 9.) Let it not offend your worships, that I become a humble monitor to you on this account. It is true, I have pointed at some of the inconveniences and evils that do attend, and are incident unto, your high condition; and upon an impartial view, I question not but you will find many more: but yet I must tell you that these are not inseparable concomitants. If God gives you his grace, and once brings you to submit to the conduct of his Spirit, (without which you are undone,) your riches may be so far from being hinderances, that they may become excellent helps and advantages in your way heavenward. O, if God gives you but hearts, how many opportunities may you enjoy for the good of your souls, that others cannot! Nay, how much good may you be instrumental to do to the souls and bodies of others! What influence may your examples of piety have upon others in the places where you live! How may you, even by your riches and greatness, be "a terror unto evil-doers," and a "praise to them that do well!" (Rom. xiii. 3; 1 Peter ii. 14.) Rich and great men, if they be good and gracious, and lay out themselves for God and the good of others, are great blessings of the age. The Lord increase them!

3. Lastly. I have *three words to you that are in a middle worldly condition.*—You have heard that your condition upon many accounts is the most eligible. Then I infer:—

(1.) *See what interpretation you are to make of those providences that have put a check to your endeavours and graspings at great things in the world, and that you have greater reason to take this more kindly from the hand of God than you are aware of.*—My beloved, I have known some that, through an overvaluing of things here below, have been reaching after great matters; and God, in the way of his providence, hath seemed to concur with their ambitious desires, placing them under such circumstances, giving them such a commodious seat, such a promising trade, that they have had a prospect of huge matters in the world, and have reckoned themselves, and said, “Well, in a few years I question not but I shall be a man,” as they sometimes phrase it: but, all on a sudden, some accident or other happens, that blasts all their hopes, and makes them take down their wide sails, that stood ready spread to receive a prosperous gale; and they are fixed, possibly, in a middle state,—neither very poor, nor ever likely to be very rich. And, O how hardly are such disappointments borne! much ado to comport with patience with such providences. Now do but consider what you have heard, and you will find that God was kinder to you than you were to yourselves. Are you sure that if you had not been stopped in your pursuit, it might not have been much, very much to your spiritual and eternal detriment?

(2.) *Hence learn to be wiser for the time to come; moderate your affections to the things of this world.*—“*Seekest thou great things for thyself? Seek them not.*” (Jer. xlv. 5.) If God, in the way of thy calling and honest industry, bless thee in “thy basket and thy store,” bless God for it; and, as you but now heard, labour to honour God with what thou hast; but covet not inordinately these things: “Be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.” (Heb. xiii. 5.)

(3.) *Seeing Providence hath placed you in that condition which is truly most eligible, labour to answer it, and evidence it to be so, by your proficiency and progress in holiness and godliness.*—I suppose thee at present to be in the way of life: if you be not, whatever your condition is, whether in a poor, rich, or middle estate, let me say to thee, as the angel said to Lot, “Escape for thy life; look not behind thee, neither stay thou in all the plain; escape to the mountain,” the Rock Christ Jesus, “lest thou be consumed.” (Gen. xix. 17.) But if thou art got into Christ, then let me say, “As ye have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him: rooted and built up in him, and established in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving.” (Col. ii. 6, 7.) And remember, thou in thy condition hast fewer hinderances and temptations, and more helps and advantages, from the very worldly condition that God hath set thee in. Up, and be doing; and the Lord be with thee!