

“believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation, but is passed from death to life,” John v. 24.

Let them that are so delivered, spend their days on earth in praise and cheerful obedience; and, when they die, let them not shrink away from death, nor be afraid to take it by the cold hand, it can do them no harm. Yea, let them close their dying lips with—*Thanks be to God for Jesus Christ.*

SERMON XXXIII.

Of the Aggravation of the Sin, and Punishment of Unbelief under the light of the Gospel.

JOHN iii. 19.

And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.

OUT of the foregoing verse it was fully proved in our last sermon, that all christless and unregenerate men are no better than dead men, being *condemned already*. Our Saviour proceeds in this verse to aggravate the misery of those that refuse and despise him; yet farther, and to let them know, that those who remain in unbelief and the state of unregeneracy, must expect some greater and sorer wrath than other men; not only a simple condemnation, but an aggravated and peculiar condemnation, “This is the condemnation, that light is come,” &c.

In the words we find these three parts.

1. The aggravation of sin by the abuse of gospel-light, “Light is come,” &c.

2. The aggravation of misery, in proportion to that abuse of light, “This is the condemnation.”

3. The cause and occasion, drawing men into this sin and misery, “Because their deeds were evil.”

First, We have here the aggravation of sin by the abuse of gospel-light, “Light is come.” By light we are to understand the knowledge, discovery, and manifestation of Christ, and redemption by him in the gospel. He is the Sun of righteousness that arises in the gospel upon the nations, Mal. iv. 1. When he came in the flesh, then did “the day spring from on high visit us,” Luke i. 78. And the light may be said to come two ways; either,

First, In the means by which it is conveyed to us; or, *Secondly*,

in the efficacy of it upon our minds, when it actually shines in our souls. Light may come among a people in the means, and yet they actually remain in darkness all the while. As it is in nature; the sun may be up and a very glorious morning far advanced, whilst many thousands are drowning upon their beds with their curtains drawn about them. Light in the *means*, we may call *potential light*. Light in the *mind*, we may call *actual light*. It is but seldom that light comes in the means, and continues long among men, but some light must needs actually shine into their souls also; but this actual light is twofold.

1. Common, and intellectual only, to *conviction*; or,

2. Special and efficacious light, bringing the soul to Christ by real *conversion*, called, in 1 Cor. iv. 6.—God “shining into the “heart.”

Wherever light comes, in this last sense, it is impossible that such men should prefer darkness before it: But it may come in the means, yea, it may actually shine into the consciences of men by those means, and convince them of their sins, and yet men may hate it, and chuse darkness rather than light. And this is the sense of this place, light was come in the gospel-dispensation among them, yea, it had shined into many of their consciences, galled and reprov'd them for sin, but they hated it, and had rather be without such a troublesome inmate. In a word, by the coming of light, we are here to understand a more clear and open manifestation of Christ by the gospel than ever was made to the world before: For we are not to think that there was no light in the world till Christ came, and the gospel was published in the world by the apostles' ministry. For Abraham saw Christ's day, John viii. 56. and all the faithful before Christ saw the promises, i. e. their accomplishment in Christ, afar off, Heb. xi. 13. For it was with Christ, the Sun of righteousness, as it is with the natural sun, “which illuminates the hemisphere before it actually rises or “shews its body above the horizon*,” but when it rises and shews itself, the light is much clearer; so it was in this case. The greater therefore was their sin that rebelled against it, and preferred darkness to light; this was their sin, with its fearful aggravation.

Secondly, In a most just proportion to this sin, we have here the aggravated condemnation of them who sinned against such clear gospel-light: “This is the condemnation,” this is the judgment of all judgments, the greatest and most intolerable judgment; a severer sentence of condemnation than ever did pass against any others that sinned in the times of ignorance and darkness: they

* *Sol nondum conspectus, illuminat orbem.*

that live and die impenitent and unregenerate, how few soever the means of salvation have been which they have enjoyed, must be condemned: yea, the Pagan world, who have no more but natural light to help them, will be condemned by that light; but "this is the condemnation," i. e. such sinning as this is the cause of the greatest condemnation and sorest punishment, as it is called, Heb. x. 19.

Thirdly, The cause and occasion, drawing men into this sin and misery, "because their deeds are evil," i. e. the convincing light of truth put a great deal of vigour and activity into their consciences, which they could not endure. The accusations and condemnations of conscience are very irksome and troublesome things to men: To avoid this, they are willing to be ignorant. An enlightened conscience gives an interruption also unto men in their sinful courses and pleasures; they cannot sin at so easy a rate in the light as they did in darkness; and this made them hate the light as a very troublesome thing to them. Thus you see what was the sin, what the punishment, and what the cause of both.

Hence the Observation is,

Doct. That the greater and clearer the light is, under which the impenitent and unregenerate do live in this world, by so much greater and heavier will their condemnation and misery be in the world to come.

Mat. xi. 21, 22. "Wo unto thee Chorazin, wo unto thee Bethsaida; for if the mighty works which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes: But I say unto you, it shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment than for you." Two things require explication in the doctrinal part of this point, viz.

1. How light puts a deeper guilt and aggravation into sin.

2. Why sin so aggravated, makes men liable to greater condemnation.

First, We will enquire into the grounds and reasons why greater light, greatens and aggravates, proportionably, the sins that are committed under it, and it will appear that it doth so, upon divers accounts.

First, All light (especially evangelical light) is a great preservative from sin, and an excellent means to prevent it: It is the property of light to inform the judgment, and rectify the mistakes and errors of it; and thereby to give check to the affections in the pursuit of sinful designs and courses: It is a plain case, that many men

would never do as they do, if their understandings were better informed. I Cor. ii. 8. "Which none of the princes of the world knew; for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." It was want of light and better information which drew them under that horrid and unparalleled guilt. Our Saviour also supposes, in the place before cited, that if Tyre and Sidon had enjoyed the same light and means of grace that Chorazin and Bethsaida did, they would never have been so sinful as they were: light discovers danger, and thereby overawes and stops men from proceeding farther in those parts and courses that will run them into it.

Secondly, Sinning under and against the light, supposes and involves in it a greater contempt and despite of God's authority, than sinning in ignorance and darkness doth. Every man that breaks the law of God, doth not in the same degree, despise and slight the authority of the law-maker: But when a man hath light to discover the evil and danger of what he doth, and yet will dare to do it, what is this but the treading of God's authority under foot? The casting of his word behind our backs? Wilful sinning is a despiteful sinning against God, Heb. x. 26. it argues a low and vile esteem of the law of God, which is reverend and holy; and by so much the more it maketh sin to be exceeding sinful.

Thirdly, Sinning under and against the light, admits not of those excuses and pleas to extenuate the offence, which sins of pure ignorance do. Those that live without the sound of the gospel may say, Lord, we never heard of Christ, and the great redemption wrought by him; if we had, we would never have lived and acted as we did: and therefore Christ saith, John xv. 22. "If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin, but now they have no cloak for their sin."

The meaning is, that if the gospel-light had not shined among them, their sin had not been of that deep guilt that now it is: For now it is foul and heinous, by reason of the light under and against which it is committed, that they have no pretence or excuse to extenuate or mitigate it.

Fourthly, Evangelical light is a very rich favour and mercy of God to men; one of the choicest gifts bestowed upon the nations of the world; and therefore it is said, Psal. cxlvii. 19, 20. "He sheweth his word unto Jacob, and his statutes and his judgments unto Israel: He hath not dealt so with any nation; and as for his judgments they have not known them." Other nations have corn and wine, gold and silver, abundance of earthly delights and pleasures; but they have not a beam of heavenly light shining upon them. We may account this mercy small; but God who is best able to value the worth of it, accounts it great, Hos. viii. 12.

“I have written unto them the great things of my law.” Christ reckoned Capernaum to be exalted unto heaven by the ministry of the gospel in that place. Now the greater the mercy is which the light of truth brings with it, by so much the more horrid and heinous must the abusing and despising of it be.

Fifthly, Sinning against the light, argues a love to sin, as sin; to naked sin, without any disguise or cover. It is nothing near so bad for a man through a mistake of judgment, when he thinks that to be lawful, which is indeed sinful; he doth not now close with sin, as sin, but he either closes with it as his duty, or at least his liberty. It is hard for Satan to persuade many men to embrace a naked sin; and therefore he clothes it in the habit of a duty, or liberty, and thereby deceives and draws men to the commission of it. But if a man have light shining into his conscience, and convincing him that the way he is in, is the way of sin, quite contrary to the revealed will of God, stripping the sin naked before the eye of his conscience, so that he hath no cover or excuse, and yet will persist in it; this, I say, argues a soul to be in love with sin, as sin. Now, as for a man to love grace as grace is a solid argument to prove the truth of his grace; so on the contrary for a man to love sin as sin, doth not only argue him to be in the state of sin, but to be in the fore-front, and amongst the highest rank of sinners.

Sixthly, The greater and clearer the light is, under and against which men continue in sin, the more must the consciences of such sinners be supposed to be wasted and violated by such a way of sinning: For this is a sure rule, * that “the greatest violation of conscience, is the greatest sin.” Conscience is a noble and tender part of the soul of man: it is in the soul, as the eye in the body, very sensible of the least injury; and a wound in the conscience is like a blow in the eye: But nothing gives a greater blow to conscience, nothing so much wastes it and destroys it as sins against the light do. This puts a plain force upon the conscience, and gives a dreadful stab to that noble power, God’s vicegerent in the soul. And thus you see the first thing made good, that light puts deep guilt and aggravation into sin.

Secondly, In the next place, let us examine why sin, so aggravated by the light, makes men liable to the greater condemnation: For that it doth so, is beyond all debate or question; else the apostle Peter would not have said of those sinners against light, as he doth, 2 Pet. ii. 21. “that it had been better for them not to have known “the way of righteousness.” Nor would Christ have told the inhabitants of Chorazin or Bethsaida, that it should be more tolera-

* *Maxima violatio conscientie est maximum peccatum.*

ble for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment than for them. There is a twofold reason of this.

1. *Ex parte Dei*, on God's part.

2. *Ex parte peccatoris*, on the sinner's part.

First, *Ex parte Dei*, on God's part, who is the righteous Judge of the whole earth; and will therefore render unto every man according as his work shall be; For shall not the Judge of the whole earth do right? He will judge the world in righteousness, and righteousness requires that difference be made in the punishment of sinners, according to the different degrees of their sins. Now that there are different degrees of sin, is abundantly clear from what we have lately discoursed under the former head; where we have shewed, that the light under which men sin, puts extraordinary aggravations upon their sins, answerable whereunto will the degrees of punishment be awarded by the righteous Judge of heaven and earth. The Gentiles who had no other light but that dim light of nature, will be condemned for disobeying the law of God written upon their hearts: but yet, the greater wrath is reserved for them who sin both against the light of nature, and the light of the gospel also: And therefore it is said, Rom. ii. 9. "Tribulation and anguish upon every soul of man that doth evil; of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile." Impenitent Jews and Gentiles will all be condemned at the bar of God; but with this difference, to the Jew first, i. e. principally and especially, because the light and mercies which he abused and violated were far greater than those bestowed upon the Gentiles, "because unto them were committed the oracles of God." And God hath not dealt with any nation as with that nation. Indeed, in the rewards of obedience, the same reason doth not hold; he that came into the vineyard the last hour of the day, may be equal in reward with him that bare the heat and burthen of the whole day; because the reward is of grace and bounty, not of debt and merit: But it is not so here, justice observes an exact proportion in distributing punishments, according to the degrees, deserts, and measures of sin: And therefore it is said concerning Babylon, Rev. xviii. 7. "How much she hath glorified herself, and lived deliciously; so much torment and sorrow give her."

Secondly, *Ex parte peccatoris*, upon the account of sinners; it must needs be, that the heaviest wrath and most intolerable torments should be the portion of them who have sinned against the clearest light and means of grace: For we find, in the scripture account, that a principal and special part of the torment of the damned, will arise from their own consciences. Mark ix. 44. "Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched." And nothing is more manifest than this, that if conscience be the tormen-

tor of the damned, then sinners against light must needs have the greatest torment. For,

First, The more knowledge any man had in this world, the more was his conscience violated and abused here by sinning against it: And O what work will these violations and abuses make for a *tormenting conscience* in hell! With what rage and fury will it then avenge itself upon the most stout, daring, and impudent sinner! The more guilt now, the more rage and fury then.

Secondly, The more knowledge, or means of knowledge any man hath enjoyed in this world, so much the more matter is prepared and laid up for conscience to upbraid him with in the place of torment? And the upbraidings of conscience are a special part of the torments of the damned. O what a peal will conscience ring in the ears of such sinners! "Did not I warn thee of the issue of such sins, undone wretch? How often did I strive with thee, if it had been possible to take thee off from thy course of sinning, and to escape this wrath? Did not I often cry out in thy bosom, Stop thy course, sinner? Hearken to my counsel, turn and live; but thou wouldst not hearken to my voice! I forewarned thee of this danger, but thou slightest all my warnings; thy lusts were too strong for my light, and now thou seest whither thy way tended, but, alas, too late!"

Thirdly, The more knowledge, or means of knowledge any man hath abused and neglected in this world, so many fair opportunities and great advantages he hath lost for heaven; and the more opportunities and advantages he hath had for heaven, the more intolerable will hell be to that man; as the mercy was great which was offered by them, so the torment will be unspeakable that will arise from the loss of them. Sinners, you have now a wide and open door, many blessed opportunities of salvation under the gospel; it hath put you in a fair way for everlasting happiness: Many of you are not far from the kingdom of God: there will be time enough in hell to reflect upon this loss. What think you, will it not be sad to think there: O how fair was I once for heaven, to have been with God, and among yonder saints! My conscience was once convinced, and my affections melted under the gospel. I was almost persuaded to be a Christian, indeed the treaty was almost concluded betwixt Christ and my soul; there were but a few points in difference betwixt us; but wretch that I was, at those points I stuck, and there the treaty ended to my eternal ruin: I could not deny my lusts, I could not live under the strict yoke of Christ's government; but now I must live under the insupportable wrath of the righteous and terrible God for ever: and this torment will be peculiar to such as perish under the gospel. The Heathen, who enjoyed no such means, can therefore have no

such reflections; nay, the very devils themselves, who never had such a plank after their shipwreck, I mean, a mediator in their nature, or such terms of reconciliation, offered them, will not reflect upon their lost opportunities of recovery, as such sinners must and will. This, therefore, “is the condemnation, that light is come “into the world; but men loved darkness rather than light.”

Inf. 1. Hence it follows, that neither knowledge, nor the best means of knowledge, are in themselves sufficient to secure men from wrath to come. Light in itself is a choice mercy, and therefore the means that begat and increased it must be so too; but yet is a mercy liable to the greatest abuse, and the abuse of the best mercies brings forth the greatest miseries. Alas! Christians, your duty is but half learnt when you know it; obedience to light makes light a blessing indeed. John xiii. 17. “If ye know these things, happy “are ye if ye do them.” Happiness is not intailed upon simple knowing, but upon doing; upon obedience to our knowledge; otherwise he that increaseth knowledge, doth but increase sorrow: “For that servant which knew his Lord’s will, and prepared not “himself, nor did according to his will, shall be beaten with “many stripes,” Luke xiii. 47. “And to him that knoweth to do “good, and doth it not, to him it is sin,” James iv. 17. We are bound with all thankfulness to acknowledge the bounty of heaven to this sinful generation, in furnishing us with so many excellent means of light, beyond many other nations and generations that are past, but yet we ought to rejoice with trembling when we consider the abuses of light in this wanton age, and what a dismal event is like to happen unto many thousands among us. I fear the time is coming when many among us will wish they had never set foot on English ground. God hath blessed this nation with many famous, burning and shining lights. It was once said to the honour of this nation *, *that the English ministry was the world’s wonder*; and when a man of another nation began to preach methodically and convincingly, they were wont to say †, *We perceive this man hath been in England*: The greater will our account be for abusing such light and rebelling against it. The clearer our light is now, the thicker will the mists of darkness be hereafter, if we are thus wanton under it. The devils have more light than we, and therefore the more torment: Of them it is said, James ii. 19. “The “devils also believe, and tremble;” the horror of their consciences is answerable to their illumination, *they tremble*; “the ‡ word sig-

* *Clerus Anglicanus stupor mundi.*

† *Percipimus hunc hominem fuisse in Anglia.*

‡ *Φῶς ἰσχυρὸν; φῶς, est maris agitatio. Eust.*

“nifies the roar of the sea,” or such a murmuring, dreadful noise as the tempestuous seas use to make when they break themselves against the rocks.

Inf. 2. If the abuse of light thus aggravate sin and misery, then times of great temptations are like to be times of great guilt. Wo to an enlightened, knowing generation, when strong temptations befall them. How do many, in such times, imprison the known truth to keep themselves out of prison? offer violence to their own consciences, to avoid violence from other hands?

Plato * was convinced of the unity of God, but durst not own his convictions; but said, “It was a truth neither easy to find, nor safe to own.” And even Seneca †, the renowned moralist, was “forced by temptation to dissemble his convictions;” of whom Augustine saith, “‡ He worshipped what himself reprehended, and did what himself reprov’d.” And even a great Papist of later times was heard to say, as he was going to mass, *Eamus ad communem errorem*, Let us go to the common error. O how hard is it to keep conscience pure and peaceable in days of temptation! Doubtless, it is a mercy to many weak and timorous Christians to be removed by a seasonable death out of harm’s way; to be disbanded by a merciful providence before the heat of the battle. Christ and Antichrist seem at this day to be drawing into the field; a fiery trial threatens the professors of this age: but when it comes to a close engagement, indeed we may justly tremble, to think how many thousands will break their way through the convictions of their own consciences, to save their flesh. Believe it, sirs, if Christ hold you to himself by no other tie than the slender thread of a single conviction; if he have not interest in your hearts and affections, as well as in your understandings and consciences; if you be men of great light and strong unmortified lusts; if you profess Christ with your tongues, and worship the world with your hearts; a man may say of you, without the gift of prophecy, what the prophet said of Hazaël, I know what you will do in the day of temptation.

Inf. 3. If this be so, what a strong engagement lieth upon all enlightened persons to turn heartily to God, and reduce their knowledge into practice and obedience? The more men know, the more violence they do their own consciences in rebelling against the light, this is to sin with an high hand, Numb. xv. 30. Believe it, sirs, you cannot sin at so cheap a rate as others do; knowledge in a wicked man, like high metal in a blind horse, doth but the sooner precipi-

* *Opificem aniversi neque invenire facile, neque inventum in vulgus promulgare tutum.*

† *In animo religionem habeat, sed in actibus fingat.*

‡ *Celebat quod reprehendebat, agebat quod arguebat, quod culpabat adorabat.*

tate him into ruin. You may know much more than others, but if ever you come to heaven, it must be in the same way of faith and obedience, mortification, and self-denial, in which the weakest Christian comes thither; whatever knowledge you have, to be sure you have no wisdom, if you expect salvation upon any other, or easier terms than the most illiterate Christian finds it. It was a sad observation of the father, *Surgunt indocti, et rapiunt cælum*; the unlearned rise, and take heaven. What a pity is it that men of such excellent parts should be enslaved to their lusts! that ever it should be said, *Sapientis sapienter descendunt in Gehennam*; their learning doth but hang in their light, it doth but blind them in spiritual things, and prepareth them for greater misery.

Inf. 4. Hence also it follows, that the work of conversion is a very difficult work; the soul is scarcely half won to Christ, when Satan is cast out of the understanding by illumination. The devil hath deeply intrenched himself, and strongly fortified every faculty of the soul against Christ; the understanding, indeed, is the first entrance into the soul, and out of that faculty he is oftentimes cast by light and conviction, which seems to make a great change upon a man: now he becomes a professor, now he takes up the duties of religion, and passes up and down the world for a convert; but, alas, alas! all the while Satan keeps the fort-royal, the heart and will are in his own possession; and this is a work of more difficulty: the weapons of that warfare must indeed be mighty through God, which do not only cast down imaginations, but bring every thought of the heart into captivity to the obedience of Christ, 2 Cor. x. 4, 5. While the heart stands out, though the understanding be taken in, the soul remains in Satan's possession; it is a greater work, (and we daily find it so,) to win one heart than to convince twenty understandings.

Inf. 5. Hence also we may learn what strength and power there is in the lusts of men's hearts, which are able to bear down so strong convictions of the conscience before them. That is a great truth, though a very sad one, Eccl. viii. 11. "The heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil." O how common is it every day, and in every place to see men hazarding their souls to satisfy their lusts! Every man, saith the prophet, "turneth to his course, as the horse rusheth into the battle." The horse is a very fierce and warlike creature; and when his courage is roused by the sounds of drums and trumpets and shouts of armies, he breaks headlong into the ranks of armed men, though death is before him. Such boisterous and headlong lusts are found in many enlightened persons, though their consciences represent damnation before them; onward they will rush, though God be lost, and a precious soul undone for ever.

Inf. 6. To conclude, *As ever you will avoid the deepest guilt, and escape the heaviest condemnation, open your hearts to obey and practise whatsoever God hath opened your understandings and consciences to receive of his revealed will*; obey the light of the gospel, while you have opportunity to enjoy it: this was the great counsel given by Christ, John xii. 35, 36. "Yet a little while the light is with you, walk while you have the light, lest darkness come upon you." The manifestation of Christ in the gospel, is the light of the world; all the nations of the earth that want this light are benighted; and those upon whom this light is risen, have but a short time under it; "Yet a little while the light is with you:" and whatever patience God may exercise towards poor ignorant souls, yet commonly he makes short work with the despisers of this light. The light of the gospel is a shining lamp, fed with golden oil; God will not be at the expence for such a light for them that do but trifle with it. The night is coming when no man can work. There are many sad signs upon us of a setting sun, a night of darkness approaching; many burning and shining lights are extinguished, and many *put under a bushel*; your work is great, your time short, this is the only space you have for repentance, Rev. ii. 21. If this opportunity of salvation be lost it will never come again, Ezek. xxiv. 13. How pathetical was that lamentation which Christ made over Jerusalem, Luke xix. 41, 42. "And when he was come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it, saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace, but now they are hid from thine eyes." Christ is threatening those nations with the removal of his gospel presence; he hath found but cold entertainment among us: England hath been unkind to Christ; many thousands there are that rebel against the light, that say unto God, "Depart from us, we desire not the knowledge of thy ways." Christ will not tarry where he is not welcome; who would, that hath any where else to go? Obey the light therefore, lest God put it out in obscure darkness.