

CHRISTIAN DILIGENCE - THE WAY OF ATTAINING COMFORTABLE ASSURANCE

2 Peter i. 10—Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure; for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall.

It is certain, that, when Christians do reflect upon these woeful and impious actions of that mystery of iniquity that is within them, they may be constrained to put on their mourning apparel, and to walk with the spirit of heaviness. We confess, it is a great mystery, that we can walk with so much peace and contentment under the chains of our iniquity, as if they were chains of gold and fetters of fine gold. It is certain, that that which darkens a Christian's hope and obscures his interest in Christ, is his entertaining a body of death in his company. However, we would say this to those, that it is suitable for a Christian to assent to the assertions of misbelief [to what unbelief says] concerning our iniquities [that they are very great and deserve eternal death], but they must deny the conclusion from such assertions drawn by sense [that therefore there is no hope for us]. We confess this is not good logic, but precious divinity: Psalm lxy, 3, "Iniquities prevail against me"; hut there is a sweet conclusion in answer to such an assertion, "but as for our transgressions, thou shalt purge them away." And we would say this to these that are under the power and dominion of

their lusts, that they may make an argument with God from the multitude of their iniquities to obtain pardon from God, Psalm xl, 11, 12, “Withhold not thou thy tender mercies from me, O Lord; let thy loving-kindness and thy truth continually preserve me.” (And his argument is) “For innumerable evils have compassed me about; mine iniquities have taken hold upon me - they are more than the hairs of mine head.” We confess, this argument would not hold in schools; but we may make it our argument to plead for pardon from God. And withal, we conceive it is suitable, that one that is dwelling under the convictions of a body of sin and death would be thus in proposing that desire, that He whose hands are soft as oil, and will not bruise your head, may reprove you, and cause you to walk in the paths of righteousness.

But to come to the words: ye may remember that we were speaking concerning the advantages that a Christian has by living under the solid faith and certain persuasion of his interest in God. Now, we shall propose to you these disadvantages that flow to a Christian from his walking under the uncertainty of his interest, and of his calling and election being made sure.

And the first disadvantage is this, for one that is much under the exercise of misbelief, and walking under the uncertainty of his interest in God, it is the compendious way to attain that woeful evil of hardness of heart and stupidity: Heb. iii, 12, 13, “Take heed brethren lest there

be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. But exhort one another daily while it is called today; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.” And the deceit of unbelief is most singular, not only because it is so spiritual, but likewise because it walks under the visor of the holiness of God. But be persuaded, that, if unbelief be entertained it will procure hardness of heart, and likewise it will entertain it; and the reason is, because unbelief is that sin which interrupts the lively actings of the grace of prayer. The unbelieving Christian cannot at all be a diligent Christian in duties. It is impossible that diligence and unbelief can be two companions together; and is not that a notable disadvantage and prejudice?

There is this second disadvantage that comes to a Christian by his living under the uncertainty of his interest in God, and it is this, that such a Christian can much less mourn for the absence of Christ than these that are under the exercise of faith. This is clear, not only from Song iii, 2, where the spouse is said still to seek Him, though she could not find Him (where the bride’s faith and anxiety are conjoined together: He was absent, and she sought Him; but she could not find Him), hut it is likewise clear from John xx, 12, 13, where Mary misseth Christ, and she saw two angels standing, and they say unto her, “Why weepest thou? She saith unto them, because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him.” Certainly it must be so, that faith does

put a Christian to the pursuit after Jesus when He is away; for it is this grace that makes known to him these visible perfections that are in Christ. Faith is a most intelligent grace, and therefore it is called “understanding,” CoL ii, 2, “That their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding.” And likewise it must be so; because such a one that has that grace of faith does take up that infinite solace and advantage which is to be found in conversing with God. Faith cries out, “One day with Christ is better than a thousand elsewhere!” and love comes in, and seals that assertion with an oath, and it says, ‘That is most true; it is better to be a door-keeper in the house of God, than dwell in tents of sin.’ Love lays hold on the heart of Christ, and Christ’s heart, as it were, melts in the hands of love, and faith lays hold on the word of promise.

The third disadvantage that comes to a Christian by not living under the certainty of his interest in God is, that such a one lays an impediment in the way betwixt him and the enjoyment of Jesus Christ. O Christians, what makes us so oft- times cry out, Why art thou as a sojourner, and a way-faring man, to turn in but for a night? It is the want of the exercise of the grace of faith, this is clear, Eph. iii, 17, “That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith.” It is likewise clear from 1 Pet. i, 8, “In whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable, and full of glory.” It is the exercise of

the grace of faith that makes a Christian rejoice with unspeakable joy, and likewise it may be comprehended under that word, Matth. xiii, at the close, etc did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief. O suppose, or think ye, that Christ can rest with you that have so many jealousies and suspicions of Him?

There is this fourth disadvantage that a Christian has by his living under the uncertainty of his interest in Jesus Christ, and it is this: Such an one cannot be much in the exercise of love, because, though Christ give never so many signs of His favour, unbelief calls them all delusions. Unbelief is an evil thing. Nothing puts so great a price on precious Christ as faith does; and it is certain, that unbelief keeps love at a right low exercise; and likewise, unbelief hinders the grace of mortification. I can hardly believe that a Christian under the fit of unbelief, can attain the mortification of any lust, because he cannot take hold of Him by whom only he can mortify his lusts.

There is this last disadvantage that comes to a Christian by his living under the uncertainty of his interest in Jesus Christ, and it is this; unbelief does exceedingly impede that grace of repentance. I would have these that take such delight in this evil of unbelief be persuaded, that it hindereth that divine sorrow for sin, and their contrition of spirit; therefore, it is a folly, when Christians lose their feet, that they should lose their hands also. Be persuaded, that the point of conviction is away, when the grace of

faith is out of exercise. Therefore a Christian, in condemning himself, does speak these words, "If it had been an enemy that had done this evil, thou mightest have suffered it; but it is by one whom thou dealt familiarly with, and with whom thou hadst sweet fellowship; that he should rise up against thee, that is a transgression that cannot be soon done away." And so the Lord, when He presses repentance, holds out Himself in the meanest degree, Jer. iii, 22, "Return, ye backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings." O when did the conviction of your sins make you go in your mourning apparel and clothe yourselves with sack-cloth, and weep seven days in the bitterness of your souls, and to put your mouths in the dust?

Now, the second thing we shall speak to is this, what is the most compendious way by which one that is endeavouring at this certainty and assurance of their interest, may attain it. And, we conceive, the best way to get our calling and election made sure, is some of these things. And

first, a Christian that would attain to this, would be much in the exercise of the grace of prayer. We conceive, that prayer is that grace wherein the most part of Christians get their assurance, and the intimation of their interest in God. When was it that Daniel got (we shall not say intimation, but) confirmation? It was when he was a-praying, Daniel ix, 23, the angel said unto him, "I am come

to shew thee; for thou art a man greatly beloved of the Lord.” And there is this

second thing, in which a Christian gets intimation and assurance of his interest in God, and it is this; one that would attain this, would be much in the exercise of fear, Psalm xxv, 14, “The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him; and he will shew them his covenant.” By the secret of the Lord here, we conceive, is for one to have the intimation of their election; and the following words say, “He will shew them his covenant,” which is but explicatory to the former; this does comprehend high thoughts and apprehensions of the majesty of God. There is this

third thing in which a Christian gets intimation and assurance of his peace and interest with God, and it is this: One that would attain to this would be much in the mortification of iniquity; Psalm lxxxv, 8, “I will hear what God the Lord will speak: for he will speak peace unto his people, and to his saints: But let them not turn again to folly.” This is likewise clear, 1 John iii, 3, “He that hath this hope in him, purifieth himself, even as he is pure.” Their hope and mortification is linked together. But the most ordinary way how folk attain to this assurance and intimation of their interest and peace with God, is, either by sense, or by holy reason, or by the grace of faith. They attain to this assurance by sense when Christ condescends to let them taste of that sweetness; and on the

communication of His signal love, or signal tokens of His love, faith then begins to grow. We think faith that is built upon sense may be compared to a house that is built on the sand, which will fall by the wind; therefore, it will be your advantage to build upon the word of promise. And they that attain to assurance of their interest in God by holy reason are those who are comparing some characters of grace with their own way; and, finding some of those characters in themselves, they presently conclude that they are passed from death to life. And they that attain to their assurance by faith is, when theres no place to fly unto; but when a sinner is convicted so that he knows not where to go to, then faith, the forlorn hope, comes in and strengthens the Christian, saying “Why art thou cast down, O my soul; still hope in God.” Faith has a holy magnanimity and courageousness, and will stand to that which it asserts. There is this

third thing that we would speak to, and it is this, that there is a difference betwixt the actings of faith on a promise, and faith’s resting on a promise. for we conceive, that one may believe the truth of a promise, as likewise, with some conviction, of the believing of the promise, and yet not rest upon the promise, it being certainly a work of His own Spirit that must bring one to quietness in resting on the promises. And the reason we conceive why promises, even of our eternal salvation, when believed, do not quiet our consciences is:

(1) It either proceeds from this, that a Christian believes not the truth of these promises, as he ought to do; and therefore a Christian would retire and turn back, and mourn over his believing.

(2) And there is this also that we would say, that a Christian who believes a promise, and finds no satisfaction in it, would learn this, that it is not an easy thing to quit unbelief, and to cast it away from us. It is that which will take us as much mortification as any other sin.

(3) And there is this, lastly, that we would say, and it is this. When a Christian can believe a promise, and yet not find quietness in it, we conceive it proceeds from this, that a Christian is not convinced of that absolute necessity of closing with such a promise. And that which we used to say is true here, 'necessity has no law'; for if we were brought to a necessity, we would not wait on these ceremonies. Or, lastly it proceeds from this; they have no knowledge of the freedom of the promise. And we would only say this, that free grace is the rule of the necessity of the promise, and our Christ is the rule for application to the promises. There is this last thing that we would speak to, and it is this. What is the most fit and compendious way for a Christian to maintain his interest in God, when he has attained it? It is true that is said, "it is no less art, or virtue, to keep the things that are purchased, than to purchase them." But the best way for a Christian to maintain his interest, when it is attained, is to be much

in entertaining communion and fellowship with God. That is a great mean to preserve our faith, and keep it in exercise. This is clear from Psalm cxix, 168, 169, "I have kept thy precepts, therefore let my cry come near before thee; and give me understanding": For it is certain, that our communion and correspondence with God, is a most effectual mean to preserve our interest in Jesus Christ; because a Christian, that is much in conversing with God by prayer, receives most sweet and precious manifestations of His love, by which faith is kept in exercise.

And that faith that is without communion, and without being entertained and kept in exercise thereby, I say, that faith is but a golden dream, and a night vision, that quickly passes away and is gone; but where communion and fellowship with God is entertained and kept in exercise, sense gets leave then to read love in Christ's face, and also in His hands, and faith is admitted to read love in Christ's heart.

The second way how a Christian would study and endeavour to entertain and maintain his interest in Jesus Christ, when he has attained it, is, he would be much in studying and endeavouring to keep his conscience unspotted and without blemish, and offence towards God and man. That excellent and precious grace of faith can lie on no bed, but in the bed of a pure conscience. A challenging conscience and the grace of faith cannot continue together, and live in one another's company; for when a

Christian is challenged in his conscience, then the grace of faith begins to languish and decay.

The third way how a Christian would study and endeavour to maintain his interest in Christ, when attained, is this; he would be much in strengthening the grace of experience. This is clear from Rom. v, 4, 5, "For patience worketh experience, and experience hope, and hope maketh not ashamed." And it were certainly for your advantage to be concluding the reality, and maintaining these enjoyments, that, when temptations or unbelief would call them in question, ye may have a decree passed on them already.

There is this fourth way that we would prescribe to you that would entertain the reality of your hope : - Ye would be much in the spirit of tenderness. We conceive, that one that has a holy reluctancy to put out his hand to any forbidden fruit, is that Christian who will maintain his interest longest. Ye would look on every difficulty and impediment that lies in the way of the exercise of your faith, to remove it. It would teach you to maintain the exercise of the grace of your faith, and the reality and certainty of your interest in Jesus Christ, and your peace with God. O Christians, study to bind up this design in all your actions, to have your peace made with God. and to make your calling and election sure. O be persuaded no longer to delay this excellent and most soul-concerning business. Know it, that it is not long before all these shadows

shall flee away, and the voice of the archangel, with the sound of his trumpet, shall be heard in Heaven, "Arise ye dead, and come to judgment." O do ye not think that ye shall have a sad entering into the possession of eternity, if ye pass the borders of this span-length of time with an uncertainty of your interest and peace with Jesus Christ? And I am afraid, that there are many who live in this generation, who are under an exceeding woeful and dangerous delusion; who suppose that they are going to heaven, and that they are in the high way that leads to that blessed and precious city, and yet they are going to hell and eternal torments, and posting to their own destruction, and are in the broad way to it.

O try and examine your own estates and condition, lest ye go to the grave with a lie in your right hand, and to hell with a delusion in your bosom; and woe eternally shall be to you if so be! "O be not deceived, God is not mocked; for what a man soweth, that shall he also reap." And, O Christians, what may the most of us expect to reap of the most of all our labours, to the wearying of our souls? Have we not sown iniquity, and shall we not then reap the whirlwind? O Christians, study to walk answerably to your calling and election. O what infinite love appears in this, that He should have put His desires on you, before that ye desired Him! Isa. lxxv, 1, "I am found of them that sought me not: I said behold me, behold me, unto a nation that was not called by my name." O! know it, that the first offer did come on His part and side, and

not on our side; for when we were sleeping as on the top of a mast, he then did sweetly plead for our souls. I think a Christian that does seriously meditate on the freedom of the infinite love manifested in making a difference betwixt you and others, might provoke you to a holy admiration and astonishment, to consider this, how ye were chosen in His election, and so many thousands passed by. Surely there is no cause or reason of love, but love. And I would say this to them that are yet strangers to Him, let them be persuaded of this, ye that never knew what it was to embrace this precious offer and exhortation, "Come unto me," etc., the day is coming, when Christ shall with equity retaliate, or render unto you as ye did unto Him; ye shall call upon Him to open, but He will not hear. And to others of us, we would exhort you, that, since the beauty of Christ has overcome us, to long for that day, when He shall be admired and glorified of all His saints, and of all them that believe in Him. Amen.