

bended knees to God. It is, you see, sometimes of use for temporal salvation.

We might easily enlarge here, but must not run too far. Let me exhort, entreat, beseech you to set about this necessary duty ; that your families may be no longer prayerless families. O that you may not be found to have lived all your lives in the neglect of this duty, when death comes to drag you out of your houses ! The day is coming apace, and is not far off, when you will, when you must be serious. And you that have been careful and conscientious in performing this duty, go on, it is not long before your praying shall be turned into praising, your hosannahs into hallelujahs.

SERMON V. *

NATURE OF CONVERSION.

MATT. XVIII. 3.

Verily I say unto you, except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.

IN the first verse of this chapter the disciples were inquiring, who should be greatest in the kingdom of heaven ? But our Lord was resolved to put a stop to their vain curiosity. This he did, first, by a visible sermon : “ Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst,” that he might teach them the doctrine of humility. Secondly, by an audible sermon in these words : “ Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.” We are here taught not to be childish, but child-like in several dispositions. Children are not without their faults ; though they may be so young as to be without actual transgression, yet they have the seeds of all the sins in the world in their nature. Little children are generally praised as being without covetousness and ambition. In the text, our Saviour shows us the nature of true conversion, it makes men become as little

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children; and the necessity of it, without it we cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven. From the text we may observe, 1. The truth of the assertion, "I say unto you:"—I, that am truth itself—that know the terms of salvation—that shall be the judge of quick and dead—that have all power in heaven and in earth, so that none can enter heaven but those whom I let in—I tell you, that except ye be converted, and become as little children, &c. 2. He not only asserts this truth, but confirms it; he that never spake an idle word sanctions it with an asseveration: "Verily I say unto you," &c. 3. See here the positiveness of Christ in what he said: "You shall not enter;" without this change you shall not enter into the kingdom: as if he had said, I have the keys of heaven and keep the door, none can come into that state without my leave, and I tell you plainly, that except ye be converted, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Holiness must go before happiness.

The doctrine we shall raise, and at this time insist upon from these words is, that converting grace makes persons become like little children.

The text and context may have relation to two descriptions of children, those just born, or those who are a little grown. We shall endeavour to shew wherein converts resemble both these. Converts resemble little children newly born:

1. Children enter the world with much difficulty and hazard. So God's children have a difficult entrance into a state of grace; "Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God," John iii. 3. He must be renewed by the influences of the Holy Spirit, accompanying the word of God to his heart. And Oh! what pangs and sorrows the poor Christian undergoes, when God first lays hold on him. Many bitter sighs, and tears, and groans are produced ere he is born again. In his fears he is ready to cry, shall I not die before the change take place? "Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it," Matt. vii. 14. The entrance into the way of holiness is so narrow, that if ever you be converted, you will experience trouble of soul, that you have been so long in sin, and so long an enemy to God and yourself. There are two descriptions of persons, whose entrance into a state of grace is more difficult than ordinary, namely, rich men, and old men. As for rich men our Saviour says: "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. 24. By a camel, some understand a cable rope; now it is impossible for a cable rope to go through the eye of a needle, yet it may be so untwined

as that in time it may be made to pass: so rich men, though it be hard for them to be converted, may be brought to see themselves so vile and little in their own eyes, that by the grace of God, they may yet be brought through. I have also said it is peculiarly difficult for old sinners to be born again; "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil," Jer. xiii. 23. The longer men live in sin, the more difficult is it for them to be brought to God. All sinners have not the same measure of sorrow and trouble at their conversion, yet all have some experience of it, in some degree.

2. An infant has always a principle of life and motion; so converts have a principle of spiritual life infused into their souls. In God's family there are no abortions; all his children are brought forth into a state of grace; "You hath he quickened who were dead in trespasses and sins," Eph. ii. 1. The poor sinner, when first quickened, is ashamed to tell any body his state; he dares not tell good Christians how it is with him, lest he should prove a hypocrite; he dares not tell the wicked, lest they should laugh him to scorn: notwithstanding this degree of shame, there is life in the soul. Let me ask you now, if you have ever seen your miserable state by nature? Have you ever seen yourself ready to be dragged down to hell torments for your sins? If you are true converts, you have experienced something of this, and have been made alive to God: "To be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace," Rom. viii. 6. The carnal mind is dead to God and all holy duties, but is alive to the world and worldly affairs. On the other hand, a gracious soul is dead to sin and the world, but alive to God, delights in holy duties, and can discern a difference between what he was, and the state in which he now is.

3. The child bears the image of the father: so converts bear a likeness to God, they have his image. The image of our heavenly Father consists in "knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness." "Be ye renewed in the spirit of your mind; and put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness," Eph. iv. 23, 24. Now, has God given you to understand his will more experimentally than formerly? Has he given you the knowledge of himself "in the face of Jesus Christ?" Are your wills rectified, and made conformable to the will and law of God in true holiness? God's children are made partakers of a divine nature. Religion is not only an outward conformity of the outward man to the law of God, but an inward conformity of the soul and all its faculties thereunto, and a Christian's actings in religion proceed from

grace in the heart. What say you? Hath the seed of God's word been sown in your hearts, and formed your natures into the nature of Christ? Saints are "begotten again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Christ from the dead; by the word of God which liveth and abideth for ever." You cannot own God to be your Father, unless you are followers of him as dear children: "As he that hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation," 1 Pet. i. 15.

4. A child comes weeping into the world; so God's children are crying children. As soon as they are born, they cry, "Abba, Father." "Because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father," Gal. iv. 6. O the tears, groans, and cries of a young convert! He could willingly give himself unto prayer. It was said of Paul when he was converted, "Behold he prayeth." Did you but see the Christian in his closet, you would find him grieving for his sins, praying unto the Lord for grace and acceptance. As a new-born child has no way of expressing his wants, but by crying; so the Christian has no way to express his desires, but by prayer: "For this shall every one that is godly pray unto thee, in a time when thou mayest be found," Psal. xxxii. 6. Every one that is truly godly will pray. "The righteous cry, and the Lord heareth;" they wrestle like Jacob, who "had power over the angel and prevailed: he wept and made supplication unto him." Hos. xii. 4.

5. There is a natural instinct in children, as soon as born, to seek the mother's breast; so a gracious soul, when newly converted, desires "the sincere milk of the word, that he may grow thereby." There is nothing more nourishing to an infant, or more desired by it, than its mother's breast; so panteth the true convert after God. "My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God; when shall I come and appear before God?" Psal. xlii. 2. If you attempt to put a little child off with toys and fine things, it will not be pleased long, it will cry for its mother's breast; so let a man come into the pulpit with pretty Latin and Greek sentences, and fine stories, these will not content a hungry soul, he must have the sincere milk of the word to feed upon: "I have esteemed the words of his mouth more than my necessary food," Job xxiii. 12; as if he should say, I love it more than my meal when I am hungry; I know not how to live without it. A poor good woman said, in time of persecution, when they took away the Christians' bibles, "I cannot part with my bible, I know not how to live without it." When a gracious soul has heard a profitable sermon, he says, methinks it does me good at my heart; it is the greatest nou-

ishment I have: "I have rejoiced in the way of thy testimonies as much as in all riches. The law of thy mouth is better unto me than thousands of gold and silver," Psal. cxix. 14, and 72.

6. Converts resemble little children in their weakness and dependance. Nothing is so weak as an infant when it comes into the world; it is so helpless, that unless some careful nurse take care of it, it is in great danger of being lost. A young convert is so feeble in his own apprehension, that he is now sensible he can do nothing as he ought to do—can neither stand, walk, nor move one step in the way of God's commandments. It is well, saith he, I have a father in heaven to take care of me and help me. I once thought I could have shifted pretty well for myself, have prayed well, and performed duties well, but I see I cannot pray of myself; never surely was a poor creature so weak as I! "We are not sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God," 2 Cor. iii. 5. "When I am weak then am I strong," saith Paul; we may, therefore, be glad when we are weak in our own sight, then we look for strength from God. We cannot go a step but when we lean on our God, and if we have any strength to do any thing that is good, we must receive it from God; "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me," Phil. iv. 13.

7. There is a resemblance between little children and converts in their harmlessness. Infants are just emblems of innocence and harmlessness; none could dash them against the stones but those who are hardened in barbarity and cruelty; so a child of God, by converting grace becomes harmless. "We ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lust and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another; but after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared"—this quite altered us; instead of being hateful and hating one another, we could not lift up a hand or a foot to hurt any body. "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.—They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain," Isa. xi. 6 & 9. Those very persons that formerly were like wolves, leopards, and lions for fierceness and cruelty, become like lambs for meekness; though they are the same persons, yet their nature is so changed that they seem as if they were not the same men, they now are "blameless and harmless, the sons of God without rebuke."

Thus we have shewn wherein converts do resemble little infants, we shall now show wherein they represent children a little grown. To such-like our Saviour seems particularly to refer, in the connexion of our text ; for it is said, he "called a little child unto him." Converts resemble such,

1. In their guileless disposition. Little children are generally plain and downright what they seem to be, and do not dissemble. A child is known by his doings, and will express his disposition. "Esau was a cunning man," and could hide his intent of killing his brother, but "Jacob was a plain man." David says : "Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile," Psalm xxxii. 2; that is, no predominant or approved guile: if a convert finds guile in his heart, he hates, abhors, and strives against it. "I hate and abhor lying, but thy law do I love," Psalm cxix. 163. "Behold an Israelite indeed in whom is no guile," John i. 47; he is an honest, harmless, gracious man; what he seems to be. "These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth. These were redeemed from among men, being the first-fruits unto God and to the Lamb. And in their mouth was no guile, for they are without fault before the throne of God," Rev. xiv. 4, 5. Not so liars and dissemblers, that profess something of religion, but make no conscience of secret duties and of truth; they are none of God's children.

2. Little children are of a gall-less disposition; they may be angry, but bear no malice. "Brethren, be not children in understanding; howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding be men," 1 Cor. xiv. 20. Children are sometimes angry and fall out, but soon become friends again; so God's children are "gentle, easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits." If a man be implacable, it is not the property or disposition of God's children. "Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, long-suffering; forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye," Col. iii. 12, 13. Some have no gentleness towards those that have angered them, but God's children should not let the "the sun go down upon their wrath." "Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil-speaking, be put away from you, with all malice; and be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you," Eph. iv. 31, 32. So also the apostle Peter: "Love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous; not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing;" not threatening, they shall have as hot as

they bring: if any of God's children have a rugged temper, they will pray and strive against it, and if at any time they have been overcome by it, they will be more watchful.

3. Little children are submissive to correction. When a child has committed a fault and is made sensible of it, he submits to his father's correction. "We have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits and live?" Heb. xii. 9. The converted soul is so meekened by grace, that he does not attempt to contend with God, and therefore submits. "It is meet to be said unto God, I have borne chastisement, I will not offend any more: that which I see not, teach thou me; if I have done iniquity, I will do no more," Job xxxiv. 31, 32. "I have surely heard Ephraim bemoaning himself thus: 'Thou hast chastised me, and I was chastised, as a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke;'" that is, I think I was the most stubborn and unruly wretch that ever was yoked: but now, he saith, "turn thou me and I shall be turned; for thou art the Lord my God;" I would lay me down at God's feet, there I would lie, there I would cry, and there I would die; if I must perish for my sins, I will submit and say, "The Lord is righteous." When such conduct as this is shown, then God is heard saying, "Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he a pleasant child? for since I spake against him, I do earnestly remember him still; therefore my bowels are troubled for him: I will surely have mercy upon him," Jer. xxxi. 18, 20. The converted soul is then ready to say, I bless God who has taken down my stubborn and unruly spirit; the strokes of God did me no good, till the grace of God brought me to this submissive frame and temper of heart.—Has it been thus with you?

4. Little children are full of jealousies and fears. A child fears his father's displeasure, and when he sees him angry is grieved; so a child of God is more grieved to see his heavenly Father offended, than himself afflicted. It is said, Ps. cxxx. 4, "There is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared." A carnal heart would take encouragement from this to sin against God; but a gracious soul will say, if God be so tender-hearted as to forgive my sin, I will be so tender-spirited as to fear sinning against him: I dare never offend so gracious a God; for "they shall fear the Lord and his goodness," Hosea iii. 5.

5. Little children are very affectionate. They will maintain an affection for their parents, companions, and sometimes for strangers who treat them kindly; so God's children love their heavenly Father, the love of God is shed abroad in their hearts: they love their fellow-Christians, by this we "know

that we are passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren :” these are the companions in whom is all their delight, those “ that fear thee, and keep thy precepts.” It is a common saying, birds of a feather flock together : God’s children cannot well be alone : when Paul was converted, “ he assayed to join himself to the disciples,” and when the apostles were “ let go, they went to their own company.” Heaven-born souls will talk with those that are like them, and love them, but cannot love wicked men : “ As touching brotherly love, ye need not that I write unto you : for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another,” 1 Thess. iv. 9. Heathens were accustomed to say of the primitive Christians, “ See how they love one another.”

6. Little children are very inquisitive. If a child walk out with his father into the fields, he will ask perhaps twenty questions before they come home again ; he will be inquiring, Father, what is this for ? Who is that yonder ? &c. Thus it is with God’s children also ; those whose faces are turned towards Zion will inquire : “ What must we do to be saved ?” They will have something to say to a godly minister ; some case of conscience to propose ; it is said of God’s people—“ they shall ask the way to Zion ;”—they will be inquiring which way they may get to heaven. The grace of God will make men inquisitive persons.

7. Little children are generally tractable. Children are apt to learn from, and imitate their parents ; it is much easier to teach some children Latin and Greek, than it is to instruct grown up persons to read English : “ Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it,” Prov. xxii. 6. A new vessel is soon seasoned ; so converts are apt to learn. There is one great lesson they must all learn : “ No man can come unto me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him ; and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, and they shall be all taught of God. Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me,” John vi. 44, 45. They are taught by God to pray and believe, to lay hold on Christ ; they are taught “ the truth as it is in Jesus ;” that is, experimentally and savingly.

8. Little children do all for their parents, and acknowledge them in all they have ; so the child of God does nothing for himself but for God’s glory. Let me be for the Lord, says a gracious soul, I am content to be his, and acknowledge all I have is from God : “ By the grace of God I am what I am ;—I laboured more abundantly than they all : yet not I, but the

grace of God which was with me," 1 Cor. xv. 10. If you ask a little child, "Who was it brought you over that dirty place?" He will say, "My father." "Who bought you those new clothes?" "Why my father;—my father does all for me." A child of God will give his heavenly Father all the glory: "Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory," Psalm cxv. 1. "Who maketh thee to differ from another?" is it thyself? O no! I can do nothing of myself, it is God that does all: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ," Eph. i. 3. All our care and concern in religion will come to nothing without God's help and grace: "For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen." Rom. xi. 36.

9. Converts resemble little children in their growth. The longer children live, the stronger they grow; so believers grow in grace: "Ye shall go forth and grow up as calves of the stall." Christians, are you not ashamed of yourselves that you are no taller, after so long standing, than you were the first year of your spiritual life? Shall we have ordinances and the various means of grace, and grow no better? "The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day," Prov. iv. 18. If you grow not, perhaps it is because you are not a living member of Christ's body.

10. Little children are mostly of an humble and condescending disposition. "Whosoever shall humble himself," saith Christ, "as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven," Matt. xviii. 4. The child of a prince will play with the child of a peasant, and will not mind high things such as crowns and sceptres. Thus it is with the children of God, they are content with their stations, and can say, "My heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lofty: neither do I exercise myself in great matters, or in things too high for me," Psalm cxxxix. 1. A child of God will not make so much stir for the riches and honours of the world as other people; he is content with ordinary food and raiment: "Godliness with contentment is great gain:" and St. Paul says, "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content."—I have learned this lesson, that if God take all, I am content. A Christian will be of a condescending temper: he will "condescend to men of low estate," and "esteem other better than himself." He is not seeking after the dignities of this world, he is looking for a greater object, even the kingdom of heaven.

We now come to the use and application of our subject. If

converting grace makes persons become like little children, we may learn these four things:—

1. That the power of God is unlimited. He that can change man's nature, so that old sinners, who have lived so long in sin, should be born again; that they who have scorned the saints and counted them a company of fools, should be made like them, praying and regarding other spiritual duties more than others; that they who have formerly pursued the world with such eagerness, should now cast it at their heels, become meek and patient in spirit, and, it may be, outstrip others in holiness that set out long before them:—he that can produce such wonderful changes, must indeed be unlimited in power. The Almighty, by his grace, can of a grey-headed man raise up a son to call him blessed, nothing is impossible with him; he can renew the heart, unite the soul to himself, and cleanse it from the filthiness of sin: "Such were some of you," that is, as filthy and polluted sinners as those before-mentioned, "but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God," 1 Cor. vi. 11.

2. We may learn, that the work of the ministry is very great. Nobody knows what we have to do, or the difficulty of that work in which we are engaged. A pious husband, that strives with an unconverted wife to do her soul good, may perceive something of the difficulty when he cannot by any means prevail. Gehazi, when sent to lay the prophet's staff upon the dead child's face, returned to his master, saying, "the child is not awakened:" so we go out and preach the word to poor, dead sinners, and are many times obliged to return to God and complain, "the child is not awaked," we can do no good, souls are not converted: but, however, God will pay the nurse though the child die, and if we are faithful to our work we shall not lose our reward, but receive it to the full another day: yet it is a great burden to labour for souls when they are not converted. You think it hard, when for preaching God's word we are imprisoned with thieves and rogues, as if we were not fit to go loose; but we have greater trials than these, when we labour to do good to souls, and see no good effects. You have great occasion to "pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course, and be glorified," 2 Thess. iii. 1.

3. If converting grace makes persons become like little children, then conversion is no half work. As a child has the same number of members as his father, so a child of God is renewed throughout, in body, soul, and spirit. A half persuasion to be good, God cannot abide; therefore, saith the apostle, "I pray

God sanctify you wholly." As the soul is in every part of the man, sees in the eye, hears in the ear, so converting grace changes the whole man. It makes a change not only in the mind, but also in the will and affections; it is not merely a moral change from profaneness to civility, or an external change to a form of godliness, but it changes men's dispositions and inclinations; "All things become new." Do you think heaven will be peopled with profane sinners, idle neglecters of duties, and vain talkers? O no! men must be fitted for heaven, or they will never arrive thither.

4. If true conversion makes men become like little children, "then there is reason to fear few people go to heaven." We may see young persons when they grow up a little, become proud and stubborn, and oftentimes the older they grow the worse; but Christ says, "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." Look to yourselves, for few find the way to heaven; because "strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it," Matt. vii. 14. "The righteous scarcely are saved;" that is, with much difficulty, they endure many a bitter pang ere they come to heaven. Most men go in the broad road; they may easily go to hell; may sleep themselves there, and by forgetfulness of God and their souls may bring themselves to it; but the way to heaven is hard. You had need be jealous lest you should not be the Lord's. If times of calamity come, God will take care of his children, but he regards not others. If you profess to be Christians, and are not like God, he will not accept you, nor any thing you do, but will at last cast you into hell; if you resemble him, he will look after you and preserve you at all times, and in all conditions, so that persecutions shall not daunt nor hurt you. Examine, therefore, whether you be the children of God by conversion: for "except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven."