

A
DISCOURSE
ON THE
NATURE, CORRUPTION, AND RENEWING,
OF THE
CONSCIENCE.

ACTS XXIV. 16.

“ Herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God and toward men.”

IN this chapter, St. Paul gives an account to Felix of the general course and demeanour of his former life; being accused by Tertullian, a flattering orator, as one who was profane and seditious. After that he had purged himself in sundry particulars, he comes, in the text, to show, that he was far from those crimes that were laid to his charge; having made it his constant exercise, all his life-time, to keep a good conscience.

The words have little or no difficulty in them: and, therefore, instead of giving you an elaborate exposition, I shall only run them over with a brief paraphrase.

“ Herein do I exercise myself:” that is, I make it my constant care and employment, “ to have always a conscience void of offence:” that is, to keep my conscience clear, that it may not justly accuse me of any offence done

either against God or against men : that is, I labour conscientiously to practise, as well the duties of the second, as the duties of the first table ; to be just towards men, as well as to be religious towards God ; knowing, that the one without the other, to be without offence towards men only is but mere morality, and to be without offence only towards God is but vain hypocrisy.

Without farther explication, the words do, of their own accord, deliver to us this doctrine, that *it should be our continual care and employment, in all things, whether relating to God or man, to keep clear and inoffensive consciences.*

Conscience is nothing but a practical syllogism or argumentation ; and always infers a personal conclusion, either excusing or accusing : and it hath three offices.

First. It discovers to us what is sin, and what is duty ; and the reward, that is entailed upon both.

And thus it gives in its verdict according to that light that shines into it. If it hath only the twilight of nature to illustrate it, as the heathens had no other, then it can pass judgment only upon natural duties and unnatural sins : thus the consciences of heathens, through some remainders of original knowledge, informed them that worship was due to God and justice to men ; and that all impieties against God and all injuries against men, should, in the end, be severely punished. But, if conscience enjoys the superadded light of scripture, it judges then of those duties and those sins, that could only be known by divine revelation : hence it is, that conscience is enabled to form such a proposition as this : “ He, that believeth, shall be saved : he, that believeth not, shall be damned : ” this proposition it forms, not from natural light, but from the super-induced light of scripture. This is the first direct act of conscience, whereby it pronounceth of men’s works, whether they be sinful or not, and what the reward or punishment is that shall follow them, according as it finds it written in the dark and imperfect law of nature, or in the superadded law of God.

Secondly. When conscience hath thus pronounced whether the action be good or bad, and what reward or punishment belongs to it, its next office is, to witness and depose, that we have done such or such actions.

This is a reflex act, whereby, when conscience hath discovered what is sin and what is duty, it testifies, that, either we have performed the one, or that we have committed the other. The scripture reveals, that faith shall be rewarded with eternal life, and unbelief punished with death eternal: hereupon conscience makes reflection upon itself, and applies the proposition: 'But I believe, or I do not believe:' and that is its witnessing or deposing office.

Thirdly. It hath besides this, the office of a Judge, to acquit or condemn.

And this it doth, by inferring a comfortable or a terrifying conclusion from the former premises; applying the reward or punishment to ourselves, according as those actions have been ours to which they belong. If it hath proved us unbelievers, straight it pronounceth us condemned persons; or if it evidences our faith to us, presently it justifies and acquits us. Hence it is, that wicked men are haunted with pale fears and ghastly reflections; because they are always malefactors arraigned at a bar: a bar that they carry about with them in their own breasts; where they hear a thousand witnesses sworn and examined; where they hear their judge, ten thousand times a day, pronouncing them cursed and damned. And hence it is, also, that there is sometimes diffused into the hearts of God's children such sweet joy, such solid peace, such calm stayedness, and some prelibations of heavenly bliss; because they carry in their breasts a court of judicature, where their earthly judge, conscience, acquits them, and assures them that their heavenly judge will do so also.

This is conscience: that faithful register in every man's bosom, that writes down the actions, discourses, and cogitations of every hour and minute.

This being premised concerning the nature and offices of conscience, I shall come, in the next place, to inquire into these following particulars, into which I shall digest the method of this subject.

I. What it is that doth corrupt and vitiate conscience.

II. What it is, to have a clear conscience.

III. Of what importance and consequence it is, that

our consciences be kept clear and void of offence : under which, I shall give you the reasons of the point.

IV. I shall lay down some rules and means, whereby we may attain unto and keep a pure and clean conscience.

I. *What is it, that doth corrupt and vitiate conscience, in executing its offices ?*

This I shall couch under two particulars : and they are ignorance, and wilful sinning.

i. *Ignorance* corrupts the conscience.

Conscience is the guide of life, and knowledge is the eye of conscience ; and if this be darkened, the blind leads the blind till both fall into the ditch. Conscience is a guide, that leads apace ; and, therefore, had need see its way before it : which some not being well able to discern, have wound themselves into inextricable wanderings ; pursuing every glaring delusion ; and running after every skipping light, that dances before it, till at last they have lost both themselves and their consciences too. How many are there, that have thus bewildered themselves in their own fancies and opinions ; and so have fallen upon the precipice of damnable errors, and into bogs of mire and filthy lusts, only through an ignorant conscience and self-conceited pride that is always a companion of it ! This ignorance fills the conscience with false presumptions, and draws it to wrong determinations and conclusions ; which, though they seem to be but little mistakes in the notion, yet are most destructive and pernicious in a man's practice. As a small mistake in the levelling of an arrow at the hand, makes a wide distance at the mark ; so a small mistake, in the notion of truth, makes a wide error in the practice of godliness. A mis-persuaded conscience usually gives rise to misguided zeal : and zeal, without knowledge, is but a religious frenzy, that fashions out to itself strange shapes of sin and duty, of good and evil ; and, usually, takes the one for the other, until it falls under that woe denounced by the prophet, Isa. v. 20. " Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil ; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness ; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter."

Ignorance vitiates and corrupts the conscience two ways : either it makes it unnecessarily scrupulous ; or, else, it makes it daringly presumptuous.

1. *Ignorance fetters and binds up the conscience, either to the doing of or abstaining from that, concerning which God hath laid no law and obligation at all upon it.*

This is an encroaching conscience, which makes that an enclosure, that God hath left common ; and rigorously exacts from us, what God hath permitted as indifferent. It is a very sad judgment to be given up to the domineering impositions of a scrupulous conscience. Such a conscience as this is will certainly make much more sin, than ever the law made : for, whatever we do against the commands of conscience is sin, though it be not immediately and directly against the commands of God : Rom. xiv. 23. Now some there are, who do so needlessly pin and coop up themselves, that they cannot stir, nor moderately use that lawful liberty which God hath indulged them, but presently they are entangled in sin, because of the imperious prohibitions of their own consciences.

2. *Sometimes ignorance makes conscience licentious ; indulging itself in those actions, that the law of God condemns ; making it daringly presumptuous.*

And this is a quite contrary extreme ; and yet, as opposite as these are, we oftentimes find them joined together in the same persons ; the same persons, that have a needlessly scrupulous conscience, have also a daringly presumptuous conscience : and this proceeds from an ignorance of their due bounds and limits. Who, ordinarily, so profane, as the superstitious ? Their ignorance makes them scrupulous observers of little circumstances, and yet bold adventurers upon notorious sins. What a strange wry conscience have such men ; who tie up themselves strictly where God gives them scope, and yet run riotously where God's commands and threatenings restrain ! dreading more the transgressing of one law of man, than they do the transgressing of the whole moral law of God ! This is from ignorance ; whereby men do not know the due bounds, either of that liberty which God indulgeth them, or that restraint which God lays upon them.

And this is the first thing, that corrupts conscience ; namely ignorance.

ii. *Wilful sinning* corrupts and vitiates the conscience, and that, two ways.

1. Sometimes such sins *stupidify and deaden the conscience*, especially if they become frequent and customary ; and, therefore, we usually call them conscience-wasting sins.

Believe it, through a continued course of known and presumptuous sins, you will bring your consciences into very sad consumptions, that they will pine away under iniquities. And how many are there, who have their consciences already lying speechless, senseless, and gasping ; ready to give up the ghost ! The apostle, in Eph. iv. 19. speaks of them, that " being past feeling, have given themselves over unto lasciviousness."

2. Sometimes such sins do *affright, terrify, and enrage the conscience* : filling it with dreadful thoughts of eternal, future vengeance.

Wilful and known sins sometimes terrify and enrage the conscience. And this is a corruption of the conscience, when the terrors of it are so overwhelming, as to sink men into despair : for, mark it, it is its office to accuse and to threaten for sin ; and, the greater the sin is, the more sharp and stinging ought to be its reproofs : but, be the sin never so great for which conscience reproofs, if yet it denounceth wrath without making mention of repentance and hopes of mercy, it exceeds its commission that God hath given it, and becomes an evil and corrupt conscience. And, therefore, we have that expression. Heb. x. 22. " Let us draw near, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience." By an evil conscience, here, is meant a despairing conscience ; from which we are freed, only by the blood of sprinkling : to be convinced of sin, and not at all to be convinced of righteousness, is such a conviction, as constitutes one part of the torments of the damned in hell, whose worm never dies : and, certainly that conscience must needs be very evil and very corrupt, which breeds in it this hellish worm, while we are here upon earth.

And, so much, for the first thing,—what it is, that corrupts the conscience.

II. The next thing propounded, is, to show you *what it is to have a clear conscience.*

There are two things, that denominate a conscience to be clear; when it is pure, and when it is peaceable: when it is free from all known and wilful defilements, and when it is not justly burdened with the guilt of sin, then is it a clear conscience.

i. Then a man hath a clear conscience, *when it is free from all known and wilful sins.* I say, from all known and wilful sins; for it is impossible, while we are encompassed about with infirmities and oppressed with a heavy body of sin and death, to keep ourselves free and pure from all sin: “For in many things we offend all,” says St. James: iii. 2. But these sins of daily weakness and sudden surreption, as they are usually small sins and scarce discernible, so are they no obstructions to a clear conscience; no more than the moats of the sun-beams are obstructions to a clear day. As for those quotidian weaknesses and sins of daily infirmity, they neither leave guilt nor defilement upon the conscience of God’s children: but, as their more foul sins are done away, by particular acts of repentance; so these are done away, by a general state of repentance, which state the children of God are always in: and there is also a constant out-flowing of the blood of Christ and of the mercy of God upon the soul, to remove the guilt and filth of those sins as we fall into them. Then is the conscience clear, when, all former sins being pardoned to us, we daily labour to please God: though it be with manifold imperfections and weaknesses, this doth not hinder but that our consciences may be both pure and peaceable; while we thus sincerely strive to keep ourselves from all wilful and from all presumptuous sins, our consciences are clear, notwithstanding the sins of daily infirmity. So says the Psalmist, Psalm xix. 13. “Keep back thy servant from presumptuous sins; then shall I be upright, and I shall be innocent from the great transgression.”

That is the first thing; conscience is clear, when it is free from all known and wilful sins.

ii. Then a man hath a clear conscience, *when it is not justly burdened with the guilt of sin*. I say, not justly burdened; because, sometimes, we may burden ourselves without cause, when God hath already forgiven us. Many times, through temptations and desertions, God's children reflect back upon their old sins with new troubles, and rip up their old wounds and make them bleed afresh. They remember against themselves, what God hath forgotten; and, with great terrors, accuse and condemn themselves, for what God hath already remitted to them.

Here I shall lay down two things—that every quiet conscience is not a clear conscience;—that every troubled conscience is not an evil conscience.

1. *Every quiet conscience is not a clear conscience.*

Some are lulled asleep in security; and their consciences are quiet, merely because they are insensible: it may be, they have so harrassed and wasted their consciences by dreadful sins, so often mortally wounded them, that now they have not strength enough to become quarrelsome and troublesome; and this they call peace. Indeed, it is such a peace as Galgathus reproaches the Romans with in Tacitus; when they had laid all waste, then they called it peace: so these sinners think they have good and peaceable consciences, because they do not menace, torment, and worry them; and, alas! how can they? their consciences are murdered: there is no sense nor life left in them. This is no peace, but a mere solitude and desolation of conscience: and, yet, believe it too, these quiet and peaceable consciences will not be long so: at the hour of death, or if not then the next moment after death, these peaceable consciences will be startled out of their sleep, and will roar so loud, that heaven and hell shall hear them. As, in still weather, many times, matter is gathering for a storm; so, while conscience seems so still and quiet, it is only gathering matter for a tempest, that will one day pour upon your heads. And, oh, how grievous will it be, when those consciences, that never gave them an ill word before, shall on a sudden drag them before the tribunal of God, and there bitterly accuse them of those horrid sins that once they seemed to take no notice of, and call for the severest execution of divine

wrath and vengeance upon them! And, possibly, many, that speak of the peace of their consciences, do not find it so neither: they are as far from a peaceable conscience, as they are from a raving and a raging conscience. A raving conscience soon discovers itself in hellish despair: but there are many, whose consciences do not rave, and yet are never quiet: they give them many a secret twitch and gird at the very heart, not outwardly discernible by others: as thunder rumbles long in the entrails of a cloud, that never breaks forth into dreadful and terrible cracks; so a man may have a rumbling and a grumbling conscience, a conscience that may murmur and scowl upon him, and yet he may carry it as if all were calm and serene within him: however, though all within may be quiet, yet a quiet conscience may be a polluted conscience; as a standing puddle may be as foul as the raging sea, when it casts out its mire and filth.

2. As every quiet conscience is not a clear conscience, so *every troubled conscience is not an evil conscience.*

Hypocrites and wicked men may indeed, and do often, so judge. 'Would God ever suffer such strange terrors to seize upon men, were they not notorious sinners?' As those barbarians at Malta, spoken of in the Acts, when they saw the viper fasten upon the apostle's hand, presently concluded that he was some wicked person, whom divine vengeance would not suffer to live: so these men, when they see the worm of conscience fasten upon others, presently judge them guilty of notorious crimes; crimes, for which the vengeance and wrath of God pursue them. But this is a wrong censure, and most unjust. For the most part it is seen, that those, that have the best consciences, are most troubled, at least for a time; until the Holy Ghost persuade them of the love of God, and of the pardon of their sins. It is the greatest fault of a tender conscience, that it misinterprets every thing against itself: and, oftentimes, when God rejoices over it, it apprehends he frowns upon it; mistaking the firing of a bonfire for the firing of a beacon, and giving an alarm when they should proclaim peace and joy: many times it is so with them, that have tender consciences. A man may be long troubled for those sins, that are already pardoned to him:

Nathan comes to David, and, upon his confession that he had sinned, 2 Sam. xii. 13. "I have sinned," says he: God by Nathan tells him, that he had put away his sin from him; and yet his conscience, though it were clear in respect of any guilt that God charged upon him, was not clear in respect of what he himself charged upon himself: he thought himself guilty in his own apprehension, as you may perceive by his penning of the 51st Psalm; yet he was not guilty in God's account, for he assures him, by his prophet, that he had pardoned him.

Question. 1. 'Now it being so, that both a quiet conscience may be impure, and that a troubled conscience may be a clear conscience, how shall we know whether when our consciences are troubled, it be from the guilt of sin remaining upon them; or whether, when they be clear and quiet, it be from the removal of that guilt?'

For answer unto this;—it may be known when a man's conscience is troubled from the guilt of sin remaining upon it, by considering the effects of this trouble. Doth he find, that, when conscience is disquieted, he is apt to shift off the trouble by diverting it, and doing what he can to lull it asleep? doth he neglect prayer, reading the word, and other duties and means that God hath appointed to bring him to a true repentance for his sin? If it be so, this man hath great cause to fear, that the trouble of his conscience proceeds from the impurity and defilement of it. Where God will save the soul, this trouble of conscience works in another manner, and stirs up a man to pray, to hear, to meditate upon God's word, where his condition will be stated to his hand; to follow God in all his ways and ordinances, making him restless till he come to know that his sins are pardoned, and his wounds healed and closed up by the blood of Jesus Christ. Many there are, in whom the troubles of conscience never produce any good effects; but all their care is, how they may divert all troublesome and disquieting thoughts from themselves; and so they wear off convictions: now this trouble can never produce any saving effect; and is itself produced merely from that corroding and gnawing guilt, that lies upon conscience, which a true and genuine trouble is a means by God appointed to remove.

Question 2. ‘How may a man know when conscience is quiet, whether it be quieted upon God’s grounds, because the guilt of sin is removed from it?’

To this I answer—it must be considered, whether quietness of conscience comes after trouble: and, if conscience be quiet after trouble, then you must consider how it came to be quieted. Did you wear it away with other businesses? or, did you seek to God by prayer, and applying of the promises to yourselves? Did you in the way of God, obtain peace? Now if a man’s quietness, that he hath, be got after trouble, and if got in God’s way, that way which he hath appointed to still and quiet the conscience, you may then satisfy yourself in it. But, when as you never have been troubled, or having been troubled have worn it off, you may be assured such a peace of conscience is far worse and more dangerous, than the most horrid troubles and disquietments of conscience that can be.

III. I come now to the third general head propounded: and that was, to show you, *of what great importance, and of what beneficial consequence it is, to keep our consciences clear and inoffensive.*

And, in speaking unto this, I shall, at once, both give you the reasons of the point, why it should be our continual endeavour to keep clear consciences; and, also, give you motives to persuade you to the duty.

I shall name only six.

i. *A clear conscience is the most comfortable relief under false reproaches and aspersions, that are cast upon us.*

A good conscience is in our own power alone; but, it is in the power of every slanderous tongue, to blast a good name: and, indeed, it is a thing almost impossible, to keep at once both a good conscience and a good name. The world is shattered and fractured into so many parties, and each of them of such different relishes of good and bad, that unless our actions have as universal a gust, as, according to the rabbins’ tradition, the Israelites’ manna had, that it had the taste of that which they best fancied; we must of necessity fall under mis-constructions, censures, and defamations. For, indeed, if we observe it, it is usually our similitude to others that makes them think

and speak well of us: whosoever commends another, commends him for somewhat, that he supposeth at least he hath in himself: and this is the reason of that woe, which our Saviour denounceth, Luke vi. 26. "Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you." When wicked men speak well of us, it is a sign that we are but too too like them: even a heathen could say, when he was highly applauded by the vulgar rout, 'What evil have I done, that these men praise me?' the very reproaches of ungodly men are the best testimonials that can be given of an excellent and singular Christian. In a strict and holy conversation, there is that contradiction to the loose profaneness of the world, as, at once, both convinces and offends them, reproves them and galls them: and if, as we ought, we thus reproach them by our lives, we must expect that they will again reproach us by their lying slanders. It is a sinful tenderness of our esteem among men, when we tack about to every popular breath that blows: such must needs prefer the praise of men, before the praise of God. And, let me tell you, this is as fruitless, as it is sinful; since this wind will always blow from contrary points: while some extol us, others will as much vilify and scorn us. It is miserable to live upon the reports and opinions of others: let us not reckon what they say, but what reports our own consciences make: it is far better to offend the whole world, than God and conscience: and, if a storm of obloquy and reproaches, railings and curses, do at any time patter upon us; how sweet then is it, to retire inward into the calm innocency of our own hearts! there a thousand witnesses will tell us, we have not deserved them: how comfortable is it, to remit our cause to God; and leave our vindication to him, for whose sake we suffer reproach! Thus Jeremiah appeals to God, Jer. xx. 10, 12. "I have heard the defaming of many; Report, say they, and we will report it:" that is, let us raise a disgraceful and reproachful report of him: "But," says he, "O Lord of hosts, thou that triest the righteous, and seest the reins and the heart, unto thee have I opened my cause." Thus, if, while-wicked men are maliciously conspiring how to blot and sully our names, we can but keep our consciences clear; what need we

much trouble ourselves how the wind blows abroad, since we are harboured under the retreat of a peaceful heart? They may, possibly, persuade others to believe their calumnies; but they can never persuade God to believe them. He, who searcheth the heart and conscience, knows that we are injured; and he is hastening forward a day, wherein he will clear up our righteousness: and, then, the testimony of a good conscience shall put ten thousand slanderers to silence.

ii. A clear conscience, as it enables a man to bear reproaches from others with patience, so *it gives him an advantage to reprove others with authority.*

It is a true rule, that he, who reproves another, ought himself to be free from the fault which he reproves: for, otherwise, the reproof neither comes with freedom from the reprover, nor with efficacy to the reprovèd.

1. *A reproof, that comes from a guilty conscience, is but stammering and timorous.*

Such a man's own conscience must needs rise up in his throat, and choke his reproofs. Consciousness of the same miscarriages will retort whatsoever we can say against others, more forcibly against ourselves; and will suggest to us, that it is but a base piece of hypocrisy, to blame that which we ourselves practise. With what face canst thou press others to repent and reform? What arguments canst thou use, who, by continuing in the same sins, dost thyself judge that those arguments are of no force! Thus conscience suggests; and, thereby, tongue-ties reproof.

2. *This too makes reproofs ineffectual.*

It were a temper to be wished and prayed for, that we could only respect how righteous the reproof is, and not how righteous the person is that gives it; and be content to have the motes plucked out of our eyes, though it be by such as have beams in their own eyes. For, indeed, there is no more reason to reject sound admonition, because it comes from an unsound heart, than there is to stop our ears against good counsel, because it is delivered perhaps by an unsavoury breath. Yet so it is, that, when men of defiled consciences and conversations reprove others, they are apt to think, either that they are not in earnest, and do not personate what they speak; or, else,

that they envy them their sins, and would engross all to themselves; and so the reproof takes no place upon them. But, when a man of a clear and unspotted conscience reproofs wicked men, his reproof breaks in upon them with conviction and authority; and, if it doth not reform, it must at least daunt and silence them. 'Here is one, that reproofs me for sin, who doubtless believes it to be evil, by his own avoiding it. Here is one, that denounceth wrath if I repent not, who doubtless believes it to be as terrible as he represents it, by his own carefulness to escape it.' And, thus, a clear conscience hath a great advantage to reprove sinners with success; at least to work conviction, if not amendment in them.

iii. *A clear conscience gives us boldness of access unto God.*

Guilt abashes the soul, and makes it both ashamed and afraid to appear in the presence of God: and therefore Adam, as soon as he had sinned against his Maker, presently hides himself from him. We may observe in ourselves, what a slavish dejectedness seizeth us when we come to God in duty, after we have wronged him by any known sin: we come to him suspiciously; and with such a misgiving fear, as if we would not have God take notice that we are before him; and are still in pain, till the duty be over. But, when our consciences are clear, oh, with what delight do we haste to God, and with what content do we stay with him! How doth the soul dilate and spread itself under the smiles of God, beating full upon it! 'Lo, O Lord, here is a heart, that I labour to make and keep void of offence: do thou fill it with thy promised grace and spirit. It is not, indeed, a mansion pure enough for the pure and holly God; yet is it such, as thou wilt accept of and dwell in. There are still many hidden corruptions in it, but do thou search them out; and thou, who hast kept thy servant from presumptuous sins, do thou also cleanse me from secret faults.' Thus a clear conscience, with a holy and reverend boldness, addresseth itself to God; and sweetly closeth up every duty and every prayer, with full assurance of obtaining mercy from God. So the apostle, Heb. x. 22. "Let us draw near, in full assurance of faith:" how may we gain this full

assurance, when we draw near to God? by "having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience." Get but a pure and clear conscience, and that will enable you to draw near to God "in full assurance of faith." And so, in the like parallel place, 1 John iii. 21. "Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then we have confidence towards God:" if conscience be not evil to accuse us, then have we confidence towards God. When the face of a man's conscience looks cheerful, and hath not a frown nor a wrinkle upon it, this makes us joyfully to apprehend that God's face towards us is serene also, and that we shall be welcome at all times into our Father's presence: this conscience suggests to us, and makes us come with a holy, yet with an awful boldness unto God.

iv. *A clear conscience is the sweetest bosom friend, with which we may at all times freely and intimately converse.*

Wicked men, indeed, of all company in the world, dread and hate themselves most; they have a lowering, rumbling conscience within, that always threatens and disquiets them; and, therefore, they love to keep them abroad: soliloquies and heart-discourses are a very torment to them; and they wonder that the Psalmist should ever bid them "commune with their own heart, and be still;" as it is in Psalm iv. 4: they are never less still, than when they discourse awhile with their own consciences; which, upon many high provocations given them, are grown so quarrelsome, and do so thunder out woes and curses against them, and so hurl about swords, firebrands, and death, that they dare not so much as once look within doors. But a Christian whose conscience is clean and clear, finds it the best companion in the world: in his solitudes and retirements, with what delight doth he call his own heart aside! There he and his God, sweetly and peaceably confer together; and there pass mutual endearments and embraces: the soul embraces and clasps about God, with the arms of faith and dependance; and God embraces the soul, with the arms of his everlasting love. Here is mutual communication of secrets: the soul unlocks the secrets of its own conscience before God; and God, again, reveals the secrets of his own love to the soul. Here are mutual rejoicings: the soul rejoiceth in God, its Saviour;

and God rejoiceth over the soul, to do it good. And, under these intercourses of love and favour, the soul is ready to faint away, and to dissolve with sweetness and delight. This is that continual feast, which a good conscience entertains a Christian with, where all is transacted with a noiseless mirth.

v. *A clear conscience is the best comfort and support; when fears, and troubles, and dangers are on every side.*

It is a most blessed thing, when trouble is without, to have peace within, in our own bosom; to be then at peace with God and ourselves. And therefore saith Christ, John xvi. 33. "These things have I spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation." A Christian is a man made up of paradoxes: he is "sorrowful, yet alway rejoicing:" poor himself, and yet enriching many: he hath "nothing, and yet possesseth all things:" 2 Cor. vi. 10. And so, here, he hath tribulation in the world, and yet is at peace. When once that great and bloody quarrel between God and the soul, is taken up and compounded; when we are reconciled to God, and thereby our consciences become reconciled to us; all the enmity and persecutions of the world are but little pelting differences, which cannot disturb the solid and inviolate peace of a Christian. This is a peace, which as the friendship of the world cannot give, so neither can the enmity of the world take away. "My peace I leave with you: my peace I give unto you. Let not your hearts be troubled." It is observable concerning Josiah, 2 Kings xxii. 20. that God promiseth him by the mouth of Huldah the prophetess, that he should be gathered into his grave in peace: and yet, in the very next chapter, v. 29. it is related, that he was slain in the wars that he undertook against Pharaoh-Nechoh, king of Egypt: he was slain in war, and yet he died in peace: and no wonder; for whosoever dies in peace with God and his own conscience, dies peaceably, though he die in the midst of wars and tumults.

vi. *A clear conscience affords sweet and unspeakable comfort in a dying hour.*

When all things must take their last leave of us, and we of them; when death sets all its terrors in array against

us: oh what a blessed support will it then be to the departing soul, to be able to make its appeal, as Hezekiah did! Isa. xxxviii. 3. "Remember now, O Lord, I beseech thee, how I have walked before thee in truth, and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in thy sight." Such a testimony at such a time, is as much worth as heaven itself. This is to have heaven let down into us one hour, and to be ourselves taken up into heaven the next. Now, possibly, men may frolic away their days in sin and vanity, and live as though they should never give an account: but that day and hour are coming, wherein conscience will begin to open its eyes, when their friends stand ready about them to close up theirs: and then it will see those horrid shapes of death and hell and wrath eternal, which, while they were secure sinners, they never believed, and, now that they are awakened sinners, (and, alas! possibly too late awakened) they cannot escape. If, therefore, you would have peace and comfort in death, be sure you cherish a good conscience in your life. You may now, indeed, bribe it to give in a false and flattering testimony; but, when eternity is in view, it will then speak truth. And O thrice happy they, to whom a true conscience becomes then an excusing conscience.

And, so much, for the third thing propounded, namely, of what concernment it is to labour, to keep consciences void of offence.

IV. The next thing propounded was, *to give you some rules and directions how you may get, and also how you may keep, clear and inoffensive consciences.*

But you will say, 'It is in vain to give rules for that, which is impossible to be done. Doth not the wise man challenge all the world upon this point, Prov. xx. 9? "Who can say, I have made my heart clean, I am pure from my sin?"' Never did the raging sea cast up more mire and filth than the heart of man doth; and, as soon may we empty the vast waters of the great deep, and scour the bottom of it from all its dirt and mud, as attempt to keep conscience clear, into which a sinful heart is continually emptying and pouring its filth and mire.'

To this I answer;—were it impossible, yet there is no

release to our obligation. We are commanded to be holy even as God is holy, whose infinite purity is such, as stains the heavens themselves, and puts the glorious angels out of countenance. This perfection is much more impossible for us, who are but lumps of dirt mingled and kneaded together with sin, than for a thick clod of earth to be as transparent as the sun that shines : but yet these excessive commands have a use in them, even to raise up our endeavours to a higher pitch and strain, than if we were commanded only somewhat that were within our own power ; as he, that aims at a star, is like to shoot higher, than he, that aims only at a turf. Thus, though it were impossible to keep clean consciences, “ void of offence both toward God and toward men,” according to the exactness of God’s command ; yet he, that is careful to avoid all pollutions, both of flesh and spirit, shall certainly have a much cleaner conscience by far, than he, that wallows in those sins. In a foul way it is perhaps impossible to keep ourselves from being bespattered with dirt ; yet he, that walks warily and carefully, comes cleaner home, than he, that tumbles and rolls himself in it.

But yet this duty is not impossible. It is, indeed, difficult to keep a clear conscience ; but, yet, it is a thing that is feasible.

i. And, *in general*, there are two ways to keep our consciences clear : either, by preserving them from being defiled ; or, else, by cleansing them when they are defiled.

1. We may keep our consciences clear, *by preserving them from being defiled.*

You will say, ‘ How can this be ? Is there any man living, says the wise man, “ that doeth good, and sinneth not ? ” And doth not every sin leave behind it a spot and stain upon the face of conscience ? How then can we keep them clear ? ’

I answer :—sins are of two sorts : there are sins, that are crimes ; and there are sins, that are but faults. Crimes, I call those sins, that are branded for infamous both by God and man ; as murder, adultery, blasphemy, and the like, at which even natural conscience recoils ; such carnal sins, as affright conscience, and make it look pale and ghastly : a crime, I also call any sin, that is consub-

stantiated by an access of guilt, by the dreadful aggravations of being committed knowingly and wilfully. By faults, I mean sins of daily infirmity and surreption; such, as do frequently surprise the best and holiest Christians; from which no man's piety nor watchfulness can secure him. Now, though we be overtaken with faults, and every day and hour contract new and fresh guilt upon our consciences; yet we may have clear and good consciences, while we are careful to keep ourselves from crimes; from all sins, that are so in their own nature by the horridness of the fact, and from all sins that are made so by greatening circumstances of being deliberate and wilful: while we keep ourselves from these we have good consciences, notwithstanding sins of ordinary weakness: that man hath a good conscience, who preserves himself from all infamous and gross sins, and from all other wilful and deliberate sins. Now this clearness of conscience is a thing possible to be attained: men may, with care and caution, keep themselves from all self-condemning crimes; and may live so evenly, that, when their consciences are most peevish and touchy, yet they shall have nothing to accuse them of, but what is common to all men. Of such men as these, this we may affirm, that they have been able with joy to reflect back upon their past lives in a dying hour; who, possibly, never knew any other guilt by themselves, than what the sins of common and daily infirmity have exposed them unto. This it is, to keep good consciences. 'We live well,' says St. Austin, 'if we live without crimes: to live without fault is impossible; and he, that thinks he doth it, keeps himself not from sin, but from pardon.'

2. Another way to keep our consciences clear, is, *by cleansing them when they are defiled.*

He keeps his garments clean, who keeps himself from falling; and, in the next degree, he, who, being fallen, hastes to cleanse himself from his contracted filth. And thus, at least, we may keep our consciences clear, both from crimes and from faults also, while we labour to cleanse them from their defilements, and to rub out and wash away those spots with which at any time we are occasionally bespattered. There is a two-fold blot, which sin

leaves behind it : there is a blot of discredit, and a blot of defilement. The former is indelible : as the scar remains, when the wound is healed ; so this blot remains upon the soul, when the guilt of sin is removed : it is a discredit to a malefactor, though pardoned, that ever he should do that which deserved death : and, so, it is a kind of blot upon a Christian's name for ever, to have committed those sins that have deserved eternal death, though, through the free mercy and unspeakable grace of God, he hath obtained the pardon of them. But, then, there is another blot, a blot of defilement, that renders men loathsome and deformed in the eyes of God ; and, thus, every sin that we commit leaves a blot and a stain upon the soul ; a stain, that defaceth God's image, and that defiles our own consciences ; and, when this stain and blot is cleansed, then we are said to have clear consciences, when we have taken off that blot and defilement that sin hath left, whereby we are rendered deformed in the sight of God, and whereby the image of God is defaced upon the soul.

Thus you see, in general, that there are two ways to keep a clear conscience ; the one, by preventing its defilement, and the other, by cleansing it, when it is defiled.

ii. Now to help you, in both these cases, I shall lay down *several particulars*.

1. If you would have your consciences clear, *get them rightly informed*.

How can conscience be clear, so long as the fogs and thick mists of ignorance and error possess it ? Labour, therefore, to let spiritual light into it, that you may see how to cleanse it. It is as much vanity to go about to cleanse an ignorant conscience, as it is in vain to sweep a dark room. An ignorant, conscientious man, that knows not the limits of sin and duty, may, after a great deal of pother with his conscience, leave it much worse than he found it ; and cast out jewels, instead of rubbish. Indeed, it is impossible for an ignorant man to have a good conscience, whether we respect duty or comfort. In point of duty, I have showed you formerly, that ignorance will make conscience unnecessarily scrupulous, or daringly presumptuous. Neither can an ignorant conscience be good in respect of comfort ; because, through ignorance, con-

science oftentimes quarrels at that, which is a true ground of rejoicing. Conscience is that glass, whereby we may view both ourselves and our actions. Now as a glass, when falsely framed, represents a beautiful face monstrous and frightful; so conscience, when falsely informed, makes even lovely actions appear misshapen and terrifying, by distorted representations of those things that are lawful, and perhaps our duty also. Therefore, in the first place, get an enlightened conscience, if you would get a good conscience: for, what says the wise man, Prov. xix. 2? "That the soul be without knowledge, it is not good;" or, as some translations have it, "a soul without knowledge is not good:" it is, indeed, good for nothing, unless it be to make men sin conscientiously; and to embolden them to commit the greatest wickedness in the world, with peace and comfort. Thus, says our Saviour, John xvi. 2. "Whosoever killeth you shall think that he doeth God" good "service," through the error and mistake of their conscience. So, in 1 Cor. ii. 8. "Had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory."

Knowledge betters the conscience two ways.—It gives it *direction*, what to choose and what to avoid: it instructs it to discern betwixt good and evil. Ignorant persons often mistake the one for the other; and eschew, what they should follow: or, if they chance to do that, which is good, as it is not of great worth to do good only by chance and hazard; so they sin also in doing good: while the judgment is in suspense, the conscience must needs be under guilt. If I know not whether I ought to do an action or to forbear, which way soever I take I am entangled in sin; "for whatsoever is not of faith is sin:" that is, whatsoever is done with a wavering conscience, that I know not whether it be sinful or not, that thereby becomes sin; and, whatever a man doth doubtingly, he is damned if he doth it. He that eateth doubtingly, says the apostle, "is damned if he eat:" Rom. xiv. 23.—Knowledge gives the conscience *strength*, to enforce us to the doing of that, which it discovers to be good; and to the flight of that, which it discovers to be evil. A knowing person cannot sin so easily as an ignorant man may; but he must struggle and wrestle harder, and offer more

violence by far to his own conscience. A man, that sees his danger before him, will hardly be dragged unto precipices; whereas one, that is blind, is easily led thither, suspecting nothing; so, here, a knowing person, that sees the danger of hell and damnation before him, if he sins it must be with a great deal of inward reluctance; an enlightened conscience struggles, and withholds him: and, if temptation be so violent as to wrest him out of the hand of conscience, how is he racked and torn in pieces betwixt conscience and temptations! And, when conscience hath lost its hold, still it pursues him; and follows him to his sin; and disturbs his pleasure; and embitters that sweetness, that he thought to have found in sin before; and never leaves its clamours, till it hath, at least by a hypocritical and formal repentance, and by engagements to be more observing of the commands of conscience for the future, satisfied and appeased it. This force conscience hath, when it is duly informed with knowledge. But, where ignorance hath blinded it, it suffers men quietly to rush upon God's neck, and "upon the thick bosses of his buckler." It sees not, neither respects any danger, when it is even on the very brink of hell. An ignorant conscience is like a benighted or bewildered traveller, which, because it cannot see its own way before it, what is to be chosen and what is to be refused, lays the reins upon the neck of men's lusts, and suffers them without control to take their own course. And, therefore, if you would have good consciences, get them rightly informed, with the knowledge of what is sin, and what is duty.

2. If you would have a clear conscience, then *cast out the filth of conscience by a daily and frequent confession.*

Confession, one of the fathers calls 'the vomit of the soul,' whereby it easeth itself when it is over-charged and glutted with sin and guilt: and so the scripture also speaks, when the apostle speaks of apostates relapsing back again into their old sins: in 2 Pet. ii. 22. he saith, they return with the dog to his vomit; that is, they return and do again lick up those sins, which before they disgorged and cast up by confession. This, indeed, is the way, when conscience is burdened with the guilt of any sin: when sin lies un concocted and heavy within, go then

and pour out your heart before the Lord in the confession of your sin. See what sudden ease this will bring to conscience: David was sin-sick, and he resolves upon this course, Ps. xxxii. 5. "I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I would confess my transgressions," and suddenly there came ease to his conscience: "and thou, O Lord," says he, "forgavest the iniquity of my sin." Are our consciences oppressed with the burden and weight of great and numberless sins? here we may, by an humble and penitent confession, unload them all before God. And this is the mystery of confession. The way to unload our sins from off us, is, to take them upon ourselves. When we charge ourselves with them and impute them to ourselves, God will not impute them to us, but charge them upon Christ; for he hath promised, if we judge and condemn ourselves, that we shall not be judged and condemned. Thus, in 2 Sam. xii. 13. as soon as David had, by an humble confession, taken his sin to himself, saying, "I have sinned;" God, by the prophet, tells him, that he had taken away his sin from him: "The Lord also," says the prophet to him, "hath put away thy sin." And, indeed, have we not found it thus by manifold experience, that, when conscience hath been bowed down by the unsupportable weight of the guilt of sins, a sorrowful and ingenuous confession of them unto God hath lightened the burden? and whereas, before, conscience was heavy and gloomy; now, it looks cheerfully upon us, under the apprehensions of God's pardoning grace, that God will pardon and forgive them to us? Now this easing of our consciences by confession must be frequently reiterated: our consciences are always filling with sin and guilt, and therefore we must be always casting of it out by confession: as in the emptying of a pond, where there are many streams rising and bubbling up, if we stop and intermit the work, the pond grows presently full again; truly our hearts and consciences are like such ponds, in which there are many corrupt streams still sprouting up: now confession is the laving of it out, which if we do but a while intermit, our consciences again grow as full of sin and guilt as ever; and, therefore, there must be a frequent and daily confession of sin, yea, our

confession must be reiterated as often as we fall into and commit any sin. And that is another means to keep our consciences clear.

I might also add, that an effectual means to keep the conscience clear, is *frequently to wash it with repenting tears*: but, because unfeigned confession of sin doth also include and suppose a penitential frame of heart, I shall not, therefore, insist upon this as a particular head.

3. In the third place, therefore, if you would keep your consciences clear and inoffensive, then *labour to get a mean and low esteem of the world*.

The inordinate love of the present world is utterly inconsistent with a good conscience. What is it, that makes so many offer violence to their consciences, to stretch and rack them to any base compliance or sinful practice, but only that they may thereby gain some secular advantage, or that they may thereby avoid some worldly inconvenience? This is that, which fills the world with fraud and cozenage, with rapine and extortion, while all tug hard to get from one another, although they lose their consciences in the scuffle. This is that, which makes men so often shift their sails, that they may run before every wind that blows. If times grow rough and tempestuous, and they must throw overboard either their gain or their godliness, this inordinate love of the world persuades them to make shipwreck of faith and a good conscience, only that they may bear up in the world. Now they, who have but a low and mean esteem of the world, such as it deserves, escape this temptation; and they can, with a holy generousness, scorn to prostitute their consciences and to barter their precious souls for the gain of any of these fading and perishing riches here below; riches, that perish in the using. If, therefore, you would keep good consciences, learn to despise the threats and frowns, the flatterings and fawnings, of this world: look upon it as of no great concernment to you, whatever in adversity or prosperity can happen to you in this short and frail life: reflect upon those, who groan under the terrors of a wounded conscience: all the world cannot give them one moment's ease or comfort; yea, had they the whole world at their dispose they would give it all to procure peace, yea but a

truce for a while with their own consciences ; such a vain and contemptible thing is the world, in comparison of inward tranquillity and serenity of mind. Now thus to rate the world below the peace and quietness of our own consciences, is an excellent means to preserve them clear and peaceable.

4. If you would keep conscience clear, *labour, above all things, to strengthen your faith.*

Faith is a purifying grace. Acts xv. 9. " Purifying their hearts by faith."

Now faith hath a double influence to purify the heart or conscience ;—a dogmatical faith keeps the conscience clear and pure ; and that morally :—a justifying and saving faith purifies the conscience ; and that mystically.

(1.) A dogmatical faith keeps the conscience clear and pure.

A dogmatical faith I call that, which hath for its object the whole revealed truth of God : and it is nothing but a firm, undoubting assent to the verity and certainty of whatever is contained in the holy scriptures, upon no other account and reason, than merely the authority and veracity of God, who is the author of it. This is a dogmatical or a historical faith : which, though it be not justifying, as the papists hold ; yet is it of a mighty influence to sanctify the heart, and to keep the conscience and conversation inoffensive. And this it doth in a moral way : for, did but men believe that heaven is so unconceivably glorious, sparkling with light, flowing with pleasure, resounding with praises, a place where joy and bliss ever dwell, and where we shall dwell too in an endless eternity in the smiles and love of God, if now but for a few short years we strive to live holily ; did we but as really believe these things to be true and certain, as we know those things to be true and certain that we see with our very eyes, what manner of Christians would this force us to be in all holiness and godliness of conversation, cleansing ourselves from all pollutions both of flesh and spirit ! Wherefore is it, that the promise of some temporal reward, the hope of some mean preferment from some great person, is of force sufficient to make men obsequious to them ; and yet the promises, that God him-

self hath made of heaven and glory (in comparison of which to promise crowns and sceptres, is but to promise pebbles and gewgaws) work so little effect upon the generality of men, to allure them from sin to a holy life? Whence is it, but that men believe not that heaven is so glorious as the scripture describes it to be? Nay, indeed, if they would speak their minds, they are not yet sure whether there be a heaven or not. It is from their unbelief. Did men but believe the insupportable wrath of God, those horrors and torments, that fire and sulphur, that stench and darkness, those burning chains and those fiery whips, the woe and anguish of the damned in hell, which are as far from being utterable as they are from being tolerable, did they as certainly believe these things, as if they believe them not they shall certainly feel them, would they dare still to venture on to treasure up wrath to themselves "against the day of wrath? would they still dare, by wounding their consciences now, to enrage them to their own wounding and smart for ever hereafter? would they dare to do it, did they believe these things? Did they but believe that conscience will be revenged seven fold on them for all the wrongs and violence that they have done it; that this worm, which they now carry in their breasts frozen and benumbed, shall be heated by the fire of hell, and fly upon them and sting their souls with a burning and flaming anguish; did they believe this, would they not be careful to give no offence to their consciences? would they not be as careful to avoid all sin, that arms the terrors of hell against them, as they have reason to think a damned wretch in hell, who hath had the experience of these things would be, if God would release him out of it, with a promise that he shall for ever escape it, upon the same terms that he hath promised us? Think with yourselves, what effect the sense and feeling of those dreadful things would have upon such a one, to make him rigorously conscientious, that in nothing he provoke so terrible a God, or offend and irritate a revenging conscience, that will be sure to repay him home seven fold into his own bosom; why the same carefulness and circumspection would it work in all of us, did we as firmly and

strongly believe those things to be true, as God hath evidently and clearly revealed them to be true in his word. It is true, these things we all know, and we persuade ourselves that we do believe them: do we not profess to believe that Jesus Christ shall judge both quick and dead? and that all shall receive rewards according to their works: those, that have done well, the reward of eternal life; and those, that have done ill, the reward of eternal death? These things we may, indeed, profess to believe; and these things we may frequently represent to our own thoughts: but the weak and small influence, that these things have to over-awe our consciences, evinceth clearly that this is not faith but fancy: it is a wavering, unevident opinion, that we have taken up, and that we call by the name of faith; for, did we live in the belief of these truths, we should no more dare to sin against our consciences, than if we saw hell flaming before these eyes of ours, and knew that upon the next sin we commit we were to be cast into it. And thus you see a dogmatical faith is a great help to purify the heart, and to keep the conscience clear and inoffensive.

(2.) A justifying faith also is of great use to purify the conscience.

And this it doth not morally, by any natural influence or efficacy of its own; but only mystically, as it applies to the soul the blood of Jesus Christ, that blood that alone takes away the defilement of our sins. A historical faith may keep the soul from contracting defilement; but this justifying, this saving faith washes out the stains and defilements that we have contracted, and makes us white and spotless in the blood of the Lamb. Faith is that conveyance, which God hath appointed to bring the blood of Christ to stream forth upon the defiled soul and conscience; and, upon every renewed act of sin, we ought, by a renewed act of faith, to lay our spotted and defiled souls under the fall of that fountain, that is set open to wash and cleanse us from our filth and pollution. Thus faith cleanseth the conscience, mystically; and, by the actings of faith, we may thus get and keep our consciences clear and inoffensive.

5. If you would keep your consciences clear, then *set*

a strict watch and guard upon yourselves, both upon your inward and upon your outward man.

Set a guard on your heart, and on all the approaches to your heart.

(1.) Keep a narrow guard upon your heart.

The heart is the great meeting place, where objects, thoughts, and affections do swarm and crowd together: and, as much concourse leaves dirt behind it upon the place, so this great heart-assembly usually leaves it foul and polluted. Our Saviour, Mark vii. tells the Jews, that it was that which was within them, that wickedness which lay latent in their hearts, that, which proceedeth from the heart, "that defileth the man." There is a defilement in the thoughts and in the desires, as well as in the more gross and bulky sins of the life. Hence the prophet Jeremiah says, Jer. iv. 14. "O Jerusalem, wash thy heart from wickedness!" Why, wherewith is it polluted? the next words show it: "How long shall thy vain thoughts lodge within thee? Vain thoughts leave a stain and contagion upon the soul; and, certainly, if a vain thought, that is such a fleeting and volitrary thing, breathes a kind of contagion and taint upon the heart, they certainly then must have foul hearts indeed, and their spots in grain, who lie soaking and stewing themselves in unclean, malicious, and covetous thoughts and designs. Since, then, conscience is apt to receive taint, but with the breathing of a vain and sinful thought upon it, how doth it concern us to keep a watchful and circumspect eye over every motion of our hearts! It is the wise man's counsel, as you have heard; "Keep thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life." Look to it, therefore, that you suffer not your hearts to be defiled with sinful thoughts or sinful affections, by those inward and invisible corruptions that settle at the bottom of it: though the life be never so clear and crystal, yet, if that mud be but stirred and raised, conscience becomes thereby defiled and an evil conscience. And therefore the apostle, 1 Tim. i. 5. joins them together, speaking of "a pure heart and a good conscience." But, if the steams of lust rise up thick in the heart, they defile and pollute the conscience: hence the apostle, again, joins them to-

gether, Tit. i. 15. a defiled mind and a defiled conscience : “ the mind and conscience,” says he, “ is defiled.” How can the mind be defiled, unless it be with sins of the mind ? Evil thoughts and evil affections, as sprightly and aerial as they seem to be, yet leave a stain upon the conscience : as the breathing upon a glass sullies it, and dims the representation of the face that looks into it ; so the breathing of evil cogitations upon conscience, the glass of the soul, leaves a mist and cloud upon it, that it can but dimly and darkly represent to us our true state.

(2.) Watch diligently, as the heart itself, so all the approaches unto the heart.

The approaches to the heart are like your roads to a great city, which are full of passengers, and usually full of dirt also. And these are the senses, by which and through which objects are continually travelling to the heart, and carry with them a world of wickedness. These are sluices, which, instead of letting in pleasant streams to refresh, commonly let in nothing but mud, which pollutes the soul. There is no actual filthiness in the hearts of any, but what enters in by these inlets. Through these the devil casts in abundance of filth ; stirs up and increases indwelling lust ; and, by sinful objects that the senses convey to the soul, dungs that ground, which is of itself but too fruitful. Thus, the devil makes use of the ear ; through it he blows up the bladder of pride, by the breath of popular applause and praise : and thus he makes use of the lascivious eye, as a burning glass to set the heart on fire : and so also he makes use of the other senses, as sinks of luxury and intemperance. Now if you would keep your consciences clear and undefiled, set a strict guard and narrow watch upon all these passages to your hearts : critically examine every thing that goes in, and every thing that comes out by these gates : arrest whatever cannot produce its pass and warrant from the word of God : keep the same watch upon these gates, that God would keep on the gate of the heavenly city, the new Jerusalem. It is said, Rev. xxi. 27. that “ that there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth.” Let us, who would keep our consciences clear, guard all the approaches to them, with the same

strictness; and let nothing, that defileth, enter in by these approaches to our hearts.

6. Take this direction: *be sure to listen to the voice of conscience.*

Those, that stop their ears and will not hear conscience when it directs and reproves, shall be sure to hear it loud enough when it shall accuse and condemn them. Conscience is the voice of God in the soul: now if this voice be slighted, beware lest the next time it speak to you in thunder. Do nothing contrary to the dictates of your consciences; for this will provoke God to give you up to a reprobate sense, and judicially to harden you in your sins: for, if sinning against your consciences doth not corrupt them by making them insensible and stupid, it will certainly corrupt them by making them enraging and despairing.

Now, for your encouragement, let me tell you, while you are careful, by following these directions, to keep your consciences clear, you shall also keep them peaceable. It is the foulness of a gun, that makes it recoil in discharging: and, so, it is the foulness of men's consciences, that makes them recoil back again upon them in discharging of their offices. But, while conscience is kept clear and void of offence, it will be also kept free from quarrelling with you, and from accusing and condemning you.

So much for this time and text.