

OF ABSTAINING FROM THE APPEARANCE OF EVIL.

1 THESS. v. 22.

Abstain from all appearance of evil.

My last subject, as you may remember, was to show you the great evil and danger that there is in little sins.

Now, because the words at present read to you, seem to have a near cognation to the truth then delivered: it being a most certain gradation, that he that would avoid great sins, must avoid little sins; and he, that would avoid both great and little, must consequently shun also the very appearances of sin; I have, therefore, pitched upon this brief exhortation of the apostle, that thereby we might, as far as possible, be led up unto that exact purity and holiness, the endeavour after which is absolutely necessary to all those, whose desire and care it is to obtain eternal salvation.

In sundry verses before the text, the apostle laid down several sententious commands: "Let none render evil for evil: rejoice evermore: pray without ceasing: in every thing give thanks: quench not the Spirit: prove all things: abstain from all appearance of evil." Being now towards the end and close of his epistle, and not willing to omit the mentioning of duties so necessary for their practice, he doth, as it were, pour them out in weighty, though short exhortations.

The connexion betwixt most of them is very dark, or else none at all: only, betwixt the text and the two im-

mediately foregoing verses, it may seem more plain and natural.

In v. 20. he exhorts them not to despise prophesying. "Despise not prophesyings;" that is, the preaching even of the common and ordinary preachers and teachers, whose office it was to expound the scriptures to them, and to declare the mind and will of God out of the scripture. Did the apostle mean only that extraordinary and miraculous prophesying that he spoke of, 1 Cor. xiv. when, by an immediate impulse and influence of the Holy Ghost, either they foretold things future, or else spake in divers languages; he needed not then to have so solicitously forewarned them not to despise him, since so great a miracle as this prophesying would sufficiently have vindicated itself from all contempt. The meaning therefore is this: Whatever gifts or graces you may have attained unto, though you may know your duties as well, and though you may practise your duties better than they; yet, despise not their teaching: but what they propound to you as the will of God, that attend unto, with all reverence and submission.

'But yet,' says the apostle. 'I would not have you therefore pull out your own eyes, because of the gifts of your teachers and leaders. No: do not mancipate and captivate yourselves to whatever they shall dictate unto you; but "prove all things:" as it is in v. 21. "Search the scriptures: examine whether the things delivered to you be true or not. If, upon trial, you find them so; then, "hold fast the form of sound words: in v. 21, "Hold fast that which is good." But if, upon impartial search, you understand and find that the doctrine delivered to you be unsound, then abstain from it. Though the doctrine delivered to you be true, yet, if their expressions be deceitful or such as may lead into error, if their notions be dangerous, if their expressions be bold and adventurous, though you must not reject the doctrine, yet abstain from that appearance of evil that is in them.'

Hence, from the connexion, we may observe, that, in the delivering and receiving of doctrines, we should carefully abstain, not only from what is unsound and dangerous, but also from what is unsafe and venturous.

And, truly, had this caution of our apostle been duly regarded; had not teachers luxuriant tongues, and hearers itching ears, loathing old truths, unless they appear set off in new dresses; our times had not been so fruitful in those monsters of opinions, that make it disputable, whether our knowledge or our errors were more.

It is a true saying among the ancients, that heresies spread from words, if not falsely, yet unduly and improperly spoken. The foolish, rash, and daring expressions, that have dropped from men sound in the truth, being received by those, that have not been able to put a difference, betwixt what is proper and what is figurative, what is doctrinal and what is rhetorical, have been the occasion of leading many aside into most dangerous and destructive tenets. Certainly, Christian religion is a thing more severe and punctual, than to be rhetoricated upon, and flourished with oratory, that may, through hearers' mistakes, as much pervert the judgment, as it may please and tickle the fancy. There is great weight in words; for, by them, the understanding is steered, either into the knowledge of truth, or else into the embracing of error: and, therefore, we ought to use such expressions, as are least liable to any misapprehensions or misinterpretations.

It is not enough, to speak that, which may possibly be fetched off, with truth, by a distinction; but, if we did but consult the ignorance of some and the malice of others, we should see reason enough to speak, if possible, so as that the ignorant might not be able to mistake us, nor the malicious be able to misconstrue us. As, for instance, to affirm that we are mystically united unto Christ, and thereby become one with him, this is a most high and most undoubted truth; but, to say that we are Goded and Christed, as some have gone about to express this ineffable mystery in sweet and sugar words, this hath been the occasion of that familistical blasphemy and nonsense, that hath invaded so many parts of the nation.

We must observe and consider also, that the sense and meaning of many expressions vary and alter from the time in which they were used. Those very words, that were well used some ages since in matters of divinity and religion,

cannot now be used without appearance of evil in them ; because, now, their signification is quite different from what it was then. I will instance but in one ; and that is concerning the meriting of good works. It is true, the ancient fathers of the church did hold there was merit in good works : but, yet, it is clear also by their writings, that the word merit did not then signify, as now it doth : then, it signified only rewardableness ; and, when any maintained that works merited, the common sense of them all was no more than this, that their works should be rewarded by God : and this is all that they did affirm. But, now, the word ' merit ' signifies desert in works, arising from the equality that is in them, to the reward propounded and promised to them ; and, therefore, now to assert, that works have merit in them, is very unsafe and erroneous ; which whilst the papists do, they do indeed still retain the expressions of the ancient fathers, but the sense is gone ; that is, they still hold fast the feather, when the bird is flown away.

We should, therefore, beware, in our discourses of the doubtful things of religion, that we venture not upon those phrases and expressions, that either border upon error, or that may likely lead into error. And, truly, the generality of Christians have need of much spiritual prudence and sobriety ; that, while they desire and are taken with luscious and sweet words and expressions, they do not withal suck in poisonous and destructive errors.

This shall suffice to be observed from the connexion of the words foregoing, " Prove all things ; " that is, all doctrines that are delivered to you : " Hold fast that which is good ; " but " abstain from " that which hath but " the appearance of evil " in it ; though the doctrines themselves, that are delivered, be, in some sense, sound and savoury ; yet, if they be delivered in a sense and expression that may be wrested aside to undue and erroneous interpretations, abstain as far as is possible from such expressions.

I shall now consider the words under a more general latitude, as they relate unto practice as well as to doctrine.

And so here the apostle lays it down as an unerring rule, that we must not embrace any thing, that hath but

an appearance and no more, whether that appearance be of good or of evil : we must not hold fast any thing, that hath but the appearance of good only ; and we must abstain from every thing, that hath but only the appearance of evil.

And, therefore, when licentious persons are reprov'd for the vanity, looseness, strangeness, and immodesty of their garbs and attire (that possibly more disguiseth than adorneth them), and other symptoms of a vain and frothy mind, they think presently to cover their nakedness with such fig-leaves as these : ‘ What evil is there in these things ? Can you prove them sinful ? If you can, we will forbear the use of them : if you cannot, forbear you to reprove them.’ What if they could not be proved to be in themselves sinful : yet have they not the show, the face, and the appearance of evil ? So judge all serious and sober Christians ; and you yourselves also, possibly, may so judge sometimes ; therefore, dispute not the lawfulness or the unlawfulness of these things in themselves : if they have but the show and the likeness of evil in them, they are to be abstained from absolutely.

And, truly, considering that great carelessness and want of circumspection, that is even among professors themselves, who, if they can but keep themselves from that which is intrinsically in itself sinful, make no scruple of venturing upon the borders and edges of sin, I thought it therefore very necessary to open this phrase and exhortation of the apostle unto you : which I shall endeavour to do, in the prosecution of this plain proposition ;—*That a truly conscientious Christian ought carefully to avoid, not only the commission, but also the very appearance of evil.* “ Abstain from all appearance of evil.”

This point is indeed full of niceness and difficulty : and, truly, when the most is said of it that can be, we must stand very much to the judgment of Christian prudence and Christian charity, for our chief resolution in it : of Christian prudence, to know when an action hath the appearance of evil in it, and when not ; and of Christian charity, to shun whatever may scandalize others, though we do not defile ourselves. It is a point hardly limited to such bounds, but in some places there will be a failing.

Yet that I may afford you some light in the knowledge of a duty so necessary as this is, I shall,

I. Lay down some *distinctions* concerning the appearance of evil; and from them,

II. Lay down some *positions*, whereby it may be cleared how far forth we stand obliged to avoid even the very appearance of evil.

III. Some *demonstrations*, whereby it may appear how necessary and requisite this duty of avoiding of the appearance of evil is.

I. I will begin with *some distinctions* of the appearance of evil. And,

i. An appearance of evil may be either altogether *groundless*; or, else, it may be built upon *good grounds*, and upon *probable presumptions*.

ii. That which hath only a groundless appearance of evil, may so appear either to *ourselves*, or to the consciences of *others*.

iii. We must also consider, whether this action, that appears to be evil, be a *necessary* action and duty in itself; or only *free* and *indifferent*, and left to our own free choice.

II. Now from these distinctions, I shall lay down several *positions*, concerning the limitation of our obligation to abstain from all appearance of evil.

i. *We ought, in no case whatsoever, to do that, which hath an appearance of evil in it, if that appearance be grounded upon a probable presumption.*

1. Now, to *explain* this, an action then carries in it a probable presumption of being evil, either,

(1.) *When ordinarily it proves an occasion of evil.*

Such actions there be, that are in themselves possibly lawful: but yet they prove occasions of sin to most that venture upon them; because, thereby, many times they are brought within the verge and compass of a temptation, which temptation overcomes them. It was not simply unlawful in itself for Achan to look upon the Babylonish garment and the wedge of gold: but yet, thereby the devil got an advantage upon him, and made that an occasion to stir up his covetousness; and, therefore, because it was probably to be feared and presumed that this might

be an occasion of sin to him, therefore he ought to have refrained even his very eyes from looking upon them.

(2.) *When an action is ordinarily done to an evil end, then it hath in it the appearance of evil, grounded upon a probable presumption.*

Thus, to enter silently into another man's house in the dead of the night, carries in it a presumption of theft: and to enter into the temples of idols at the time of idolatrous worship, carries in it a presumption of idolatry: and so our intimacy, familiarity, and friendship with those that are wicked, is a grounded presumption that we are like them, and that we do as they do. And the reason of this is, because, when we do those actions that commonly tend to a bad and sinful end, it is an ill sign, that we intend the end itself to which those actions lead.

2. *Now from every such appearance of evil, we ought, in all cases, to abstain: and that for these two following reasons.*

(1.) *Because all such appearances of evil always prove scandals unto others.*

A scandal is two-fold; either the scandal of sin, or the scandal of sorrow. Now this venturing upon the presumed appearance of evil, proves a scandal in both respects: it proves a scandal of sin to the weak, and it proves a scandal of sorrow to the strong.

[1.] *It proves a scandal of sin to the weak.*

Then are we said to give a scandal of sin, when we do any thing, that tends naturally to bring others into the commission of sin. But the very appearance of sin in us may lead others to the practice of sin; when a weak Christian sees us run into those things that are occasions of sin, he also thinks he may lawfully venture as far as we do; and, venturing, because possibly he is weaker than we are, he is ensnared and entrapped in those sins, to the occasions of which we led him by our example.

[2.] *It proves also a scandal of sorrow to strong Christians.*

They see such probable signs and presumptions of sin in us, that they justly conclude, that certainly we are guilty of those sins; and, thereby, their hearts also are saddened and grieved.

And that is the first reason, why we must forbear all

appearance of evil, that is built upon strong presumptions that we have indeed committed the evil.

(2.) Another reason is, *because all such occasions of sin and such appearances of sin have guilt in them also; as being against the same commandment, which that sin violates and tends unto.* For the same commandment, that forbids the sin itself, forbids all occasions and all appearances of that sin. That commandment, that forbids theft, forbids also whatever may induce, though but remotely, thereunto: and that commandment, that forbids adultery, forbids also all remote occasions thereof. Hence it is, that Solomon gives the young man that scrupulous caution against a strange woman, in Prov. v. 8. "Come not nigh the door of her house." To pass by the door of her house, is not, in itself, unlawful: but yet, when this may be justly feared to prove an occasion of sin; or when, by going near a house, it may be strongly presumed by others, that we are guilty of any sin; then it must be carefully avoided and abstained from. So, again, when the wine looks red in the cup, Solomon bids us that we should not then look upon it. To look upon the wine in the cup, is not a thing that is unlawful; but because this may be an occasion of intemperance, and drunkenness, or the like; therefore, we must abstain from this very appearance and occasion of evil.

So then in the appearance of evil, there is not only the evil of scandal given to others, but there is also the evil of guilt in itself. And, therefore, let us all examine ourselves, what at any time hath proved a snare to us, and what hath been an occasion of sinning. Have you not often said it, and resolved it, that you would venture but so far and no farther; and, though you do approach near to sin, yet you will keep yourselves within your duty? and have you not found, that, when you have thus ventured upon the occasions of sin, you have stopped nowhere short of the commission of those sins? This is to put yourselves out of God's way, and to put yourselves from under his protection; for God doth not usually keep them from the commission of sin, who do not keep themselves from the occasions and appearances of sin.

And, so much, for the first position.

ii. But, if, in case an action appears evil to a man's self, though this apprehension of it be wholly groundless, then I shall lay down this second position;—*though an action be in itself indifferent; yet if it appear evil and sinful to us, we ought not, in any case, while that mis-persuasion continues, to venture upon the doing of it.* No, though by doing of it, we might avoid the greatest evil. Yea, we are rather, if Providence bring us to that sad choice, to lose our very lives, than to do any thing against the persuasions of our own consciences, though in itself it be not evil or sinful.

The reason of this is clear: because we are rather to choose the greatest affliction and suffering, than to commit the least sin.

But to go contrary to the dictates and persuasions of our own consciences, this is sin: Rom. xiv. 23. "Whatsoever is not of faith, is sin:" that is, whatever a man doth, if he be not fully persuaded and convinced of the lawfulness thereof in his own conscience, that is a sin to him that ventures upon it while he is unsatisfied, though the thing in itself may be lawful. And "he that doubteth," says the apostle in the same verse, "is damned if he eat;" that is, though there be no real difference betwixt one kind of meat and another, but all are alike lawful; yet, if a scrupulous conscience put a difference betwixt them where there is none, and if it account it unlawful to eat of some sorts of meat, if, after this, a man venture to eat them, hereby he sins, says the apostle, and incurs damnation, by doing that against his conscience, that yet, were his conscience otherwise informed, were lawful for him to do. And so in Rom. xiv. 20. "For meat destroy not the work of God. All things are pure; but it is evil for him, who eateth with offence."

These and many other places clearly prove, that what is done against a man's own conscience is sinful to that man. Conscience hath the privilege of a negative vote in the soul: nothing can lawfully be done by us, but what hath the full consent and approbation of our consciences; and, though every thing we think is lawful doth not thereupon presently become lawful to us, yet

what we think is unlawful doth thereupon become unlawful for us to do, and we ought, whatever the case be, wholly to abstain from the doing of it.

iii. *If the action, that we judge evil and unlawful to us, be our duty, and so becomes necessary to us, then are we under a most sad entanglement: we sin, if we do it; and we sin also, unless we do it.*

This is the unhappiness of many, that, through a misinformed conscience, they verily believe they ought to abstain from that, which is indeed their duty; and to do that, wherein they sin indeed if they do it.

And so Christ speaks of some, that thought verily they did God good service, when they persecuted and murdered his saints, in John xvi. 2. If they did not what they thought was good service to God, they sinned on that hand; and, yet, if they killed the saints, which they judged to be good service, they sinned on that hand also: so that they were entangled on both hands.

So is it in our days also. We have seen and known many, that thought it their duty to abstain from ordinances; yea, who thought it their duty to perform no duty at all to God. Now if these men abstain from them, they sin, in doing that, which is contrary to what God commands: if they use them, they sin too, because they do that, which is contrary to what conscience commands.

So that it is, indeed, the greatest plague and punishment in the world, for God to give men up to the power of an erroneous and misguided conscience.

Now it appears, that whatever a man doth against his conscience, be the action indifferent, or be the action his duty and so necessary; yet he sins. Which is evident in two things.

1. Because *there is no man, but thinks his conscience is rightly informed.*

No man thinks his conscience erroneous: every one judges himself to be in the right, and to be rightly informed. Now, if he thus judges, and acts contrarily, he sins, because he intends to sin: and, therefore, by crossing an erroneous conscience, though possibly he

doth well in the action; yet he sins in intention, since he doth that, that he himself thinks doth cross the rule by which he should walk.

2. Another reason is this;—because, *by acting contrary to conscience, though misinformed and erroneous, we do contemn the authority and will of God; and, therefore, it is sin.*

We are all to guide our consciences by the word, that is, God's written will; and we are all to guide our lives by our consciences. No man thinks his conscience to be erroneous; but thinks it to be according to the will of God. Now, if we do not act accordingly, we sin as much as if indeed it were informed according to the will of God. Conscience is God's deputy and vicegerent in the soul; and what conscience saith, we think it is God that commands, whether it be or not: and to act contrary to it, is virtually and implicitly to disobey God; because we think what conscience speaks, God speaks. And, therefore, it is very sad to fall under the entanglements of an erroneous conscience; for then we are under a sad necessity of sinning on both hands: if we act according to it, we sin; and if we act not according to it, we sin. We should, therefore, above all things, heartily beg and desire of God, who is the Lord of conscience, that he would rightly inform our consciences in those things that are our duties; that so, by guiding our lives by our consciences, we may guide them also according to his will.

These three positions respect those things that appear evil to ourselves.

iv. But there are other things, that have a good appearance unto us, that yet may have an evil appearance to others. They may scruple, and be offended at what we do, though, for our own parts, we ourselves are sufficiently satisfied in the lawfulness of it.

And, indeed, our times, what through different customs and interests, have brought men's consciences also to such different sizes, that it is utterly impossible, but some will condemn what others allow as lawful; yea, what others not only allow, but stiffly maintain to be necessary and our duty.

How then should we behave ourselves in this case? What rules must we walk by, so as to keep consciences void of offence, not only to God, but, as far as is possible towards men also? In this, if in any thing that belongs to Christianity, there lies a great deal of difficulty, to state the case aright, or aright to practise it.

And the difficulty is increased from these two considerations, which I shall lay down as general premises to the following discourse.

First. If we give no power to the scrupulous judgments of weak and tender consciences to oblige us to duty, to abstain from what appears evil to them, then we shall sin evidently against the law of charity; and against many apostolical injunctions and commands, that we should have respect to their opinions and censures: especially in Rom. xiv. and in 1 Cor. chap. viii. & x. almost throughout. Indeed there is scarcely any one thing belonging to Christianity, that hath more rules and prescripts prescribed by the apostle to us, than this of abstaining from offending the weak consciences of others.

Secondly. If we make other men's consciences the rule of ours, and if we lay down this for a maxim, that we ought to do nothing that appears evil to another; this would be utterly impossible: since men are of such contrary persuasions, that, if the doing of an action appear evil to one, the omission thereof appears as evil to another; so that, unless we can at once both do it and not do it, some will unavoidably take offence at it, and be scandalized at us. This would abridge, yea utterly destroy, all Christian liberty in things indifferent: because, if nothing should be lawful that another scruples, then almost every thing would become sinful, since almost every thing is scrupled by some or other. In vain, therefore, is it to reckon it as our privilege, that we are freed from the old ceremonial law, and that heavy yoke of ordinances that none were able to bear, if yet Christian religion brings our consciences under the most imperious laws of men's humours, censures, and opinions: it were far easier to observe all the Levitical law from one end of it to the other, than to be bound to those worldly rudiments; as the apostle calls them in Col. ii. 21. "Touch

not, taste not:" wear not, speak not; if such a person be offended at it, and count it unlawful.

From the consideration of these two particulars, I shall lay down this fourth position, concerning abstinence from the appearance of evil, in respect of others;—*If the appearance of evil be to others, and not to ourselves, then, in some cases, we are bound, in duty and conscience to abstain from it, and in others not.*

Whatever hath the show or appearance of evil in it, it must either be commanded, and so it is necessary; or, else, it is left indifferent and arbitrary.

And, accordingly, we may take these following rules.

1. *If so be those things, that appear evil only to others, either are in themselves, or at least appear to us to be, commanded, and so necessary, we are bound not to regard, yea we are bound to despise and scorn, the scruples of all the world.*

If they will be offended at us for doing of that, which is our duty, let them be offended. We may, in this case, use the same plea, that the apostles did: Acts iv. 19. "Whether it be right before the Lord, to obey men, rather than God, judge ye." To perform a duty, can be but a scandal to men, at the most; and those also, usually, of the profaner sort: but to omit a duty for fear of scandalizing men, is a scandal and an offence even unto God himself. It is most preposterous charity, to run upon sin in ourselves, only to prevent scandal in others. Though all the world censure holiness and strictness of life, to be only a sour and rigid humour, and an affectation of singularity; yet must we not, upon any pretence of gratifying their humour or winning upon them, remit the least part of that severity, that the law of God and our consciences require from us.

But suppose, as too often it happens, that this strictness and holy severity prove to be an occasion of sin unto others accidentally, what must we do in that case? What is it, that makes so many hate religion, and scoff at the professors thereof, but only that their lives are too morose and reserved? Duties are too frequent and tedious: so that some laugh and mock; others storm and rage; and

all are frightened from the embracing of that profession, that requires so much rigour and severity.

Be it so : yet we must not abate any thing of our duty, nor sin ourselves, to keep others from sinning. Is it your duty to pray, or are you called to any other duty ? though you are assured that all that hear you will scoff at you, yet you ought not therefore, for fear of it, to forbear that duty, or to lessen your fervency and affection in it. Here, indeed, is required much spiritual prudence and discretion, to discern the seasons of our duty for several circumstances : and, among those offences that wicked men may take, it may make that cease from being a duty that at other times is our duty : and therefore, the wise man in Prov. xxvi. 4. bids us. not to “ answer a fool according to his folly ; ” and yet, in the next verse, he bids us, “ answer a fool according to his folly : ” two commands quite contrary, in two verses following one another. Now this is to note to us, that, according to several circumstances and several opportunities, it may be our duty to abstain at one time from that, which at another time it is our duty to do : it is our duty sometimes, not to reprove a fool, but to answer him according to his folly ; and, according to divers circumstances, at another time, it is our duty to reprove him, and not to answer him according to his folly. But yet, notwithstanding, that, which is our duty in its particular season, and which we are convinced to be so, we ought to perform, though all the world be offended at it : yea, and if it were possible that it should prove an occasion of sin unto all the world ; for, as we must not do evil out of hope that it may prove an occasion of good, so neither must we forbear the doing of good that evil may not occasionally ensue thereupon. Our Saviour Jesus Christ was, as it was prophesied of him, to be “ a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence : ” almost all were scandalized at him ; some at his doctrine, as a despiser of the law of Moses ; others at his conversation, as being “ a glutton, a winebibber, and a friend of publicans and sinners : ” but yet, for all these outcries, he alters nothing either in his teaching or his living ; but, whilst they are clamouring against

him and speaking evil of him, he still goes about doing good. And, truly, those, that will be the disciples and followers of Christ, though the way in which they are to worship and serve God be generally decried, and every where spoken against and carped at as needless peevishness; yet, if it be a known duty, they must not, they ought not to put themselves out of the way of their obedience, to put others out of their groundless offences.

Only, let me add a necessary caution to this particular also: for we cannot be too exact in stating this case of giving offence to others: and that is this. If that appear a duty to us, that hath an appearance of evil in it to the generality of the most sober and serious Christians (let us suppose that), though this should not presently sway our consciences, yet it should engage us to make a strict search and inquiry, whether it be our duty or not: if it is that, which is contrary to the opinion and practice of holy and pious Christians, it ought to have this authority with us, to put us to a stand: and to make us to examine, whether that, which we account a duty, be indeed a duty or not. As, for instance, some among us at this day are persuaded that they ought to worship God one way, and some another; and what appears a duty to one, hath the appearance of evil in it to another. Follow neither of these; because it is their judgment and practice: but yet, if thy persuasion be contrary to the persuasion of the most pious and most sober Christians, this ought so far to prevail, as to make men suspect lest they mistake; and to put them upon a diligent inquiry, and an impartial search into their grounds and arguments: but, after all, still follow that, which you are convinced in your own conscience is your duty, how evil soever it may appear to others, either one way or the other.

And that is the first particular:—if those things appear evil to others, that are our duty, or necessary, or that appear so to us, we ought not to regard the censures and opinions of others concerning them.

2. *If so be those things, that are in themselves indifferent, and appear to us so to be, have yet an evil appearance unto others, if they be offended and scandalized at them,*

then the rule of Christian charity obliges us to abstain from them.

I call those things indifferent, that are neither in themselves forbidden, nor yet commanded; but only permitted, and left to the arbitrary government of every private Christian's prudence and discretion. As, for instance: under the Levitical law, some kinds of meat were unlawful; as in Lev. xi. and some kinds of garments were unlawful to be worn; as in Lev. xix. 19. But now, under the gospel, since the abolishing of those "carnal ordinances," as the apostle calls them, Heb. ix. 10. both all sorts of meat become lawful, whilst we use them within the bounds of temperance and moderation; and all sorts of garments may be lawfully worn, while we use them within the bounds of modesty and decency. These things are left free, for us to use them or not to use them, without sin, according to our own conveniency and discretion. These things I call indifferent things.

And yet, such is the strictness of Christian religion, that these indifferent, lawful things are not to be used at random, neither. It is a certain truth, though it may seem a paradox, that we never sin in any thing more, than in doing that, which is in itself lawful. In these things we usually offend, either by using them immoderately; or with a neglect, yea with a contempt of those consciences, that are weak. The use of our Christian liberty is not uncontrollable; but God hath subjected it to the consciences of others: so that it is utterly unlawful for us to do that, which is in itself lawful, if it give offence unto others.

How this ought to be limited, I shall show you by and by.

In the mean time, see it clearly proved out of 1 Cor. x. from v. 25 to the end: where the apostle decides this question, whether it were lawful to eat meat that was offered to idols. For the understanding of this you must know, that it was a custom among the heathens to offer cattle in sacrifice to their idol-gods; part whereof they did eat in their religious feasts in the temple; selling the remainder in the common market. Now the question was not, whether it was unlawful to join with the heathens in

eating of their sacrifices in the temple, before their idols ; for this were to join with them in their idolatrous worship : but there were some more scrupulous Christians among them, that judged it unlawful to eat of those sacrifices, when sold in the shambles or common market. The apostle determines this matter to be altogether indifferent, in v. 25. " Whatsoever is sold in the shambles," whether offered to idols or not, " that eat." But yet, if any weak Christian even so scruple to eat that which is offered to idols, after it is sold in the shambles, and if he be offended at others for eating of it, the apostle then gives this rule, that the strong ought not to eat for the sake of the weak : though the thing be indifferent, and might be done ; yet the strong ought not to eat for the sake of the weak : v. 23. " If any man say, This was offered in sacrifice unto idols," though sold in the shambles, yet " eat not, for his sake that showed you it." Now what the apostle here speaks of meat offered in sacrifice to idols, holds true proportionably in apparel, in recreations, and the like indifferent lawful things ; all of which become sin to you, if they become offences and scandals unto others. The reason of this is evident : because when men rashly do what they think is lawful, without regarding the scruples of others, hereby they do, as the apostle speaks, in Rom. xiv. 13. " put a stumbling-block and an occasion of falling in their brother's way : " that is, they bring him into the commission of a sin, and this is against the law of charity. For, says the apostle, in v. 15. " If thy brother be grieved at thy meat, thou walkest not charitably."

Now, in doing that which appears evil to others, though it be lawful in itself, yet it may be an occasion of sin to them two ways.

(1.) *It may alienate their hearts from the ways of God.*

When, notwithstanding all the profession thou makest of holiness and of strictness of life and conversation, yet they see that what they account loose and sinful is generally practised and maintained ; whether it be sinful or not, yet seeing you generally practise that which is accounted evil, this alienates their hearts from the ways of God and from the profession of religion.

(2.) *It brings sin also, because it may encourage them to do the same things, that you do also.*

Now that may be sin to them, that is to you lawful; because as I told you, whatever is done contrary to the dictates and persuasions of a man's own conscience, that is sin to him. Now many weak Christians may be induced to act contrary to conscience, only acting according to the examples of stronger Christians, that are better informed, and that have more light to direct them; and so, by their unlimited doing what they think is lawful, they bring a great deal of guilt upon the consciences of others, that are weak; and that scruple the things they see others do; and yet, because they see others do them, will themselves venture to do them also, though they scruple it. It is not enough, therefore, that you yourselves are satisfied in your own consciences, that what you do is lawful; but you must weigh and consider how it will suit with the consciences of other men also: else, what you think is lawful, may be a sin both unto you and unto them; to them, because they are brought to sin by your example; and to you, because you brought them to sin by doing that which was to you lawful.

But here some may say, "This is to bring us under a most intolerable yoke of servitude, if we must be bound to observe every ignorant humorous man's conscience, that will scruple every thing. It is in vain to tell us, that some things are lawful and allowed to us, if yet we must do nothing to give offence in that which appears evil to others; for what one thing is there in the world, that doth not appear evil to some or other? This is to bring us into an intolerable bondage and slavery."

To this I answer:—there are several cases, wherein, though there be an appearance of evil unto others in some things, yet we may lawfully do them: as,

First. We are not obliged to abstain from things indifferent, that may have in them an appearance of evil to others, unless we have some ground to conjecture, that they take offence and are scandalized at them.

We are not bound to ask every one that we meet with, whether they scruple such and such a thing that we must

do : this were endless and ridiculous. We are not obliged to abstain, if there be only a remote possibility of scandal, unless there be also some great probability of it : nor are we bound to divine whether or no it be possible, that such an action of ours may be offensive to some or other ; but if there be no present probability to conjecture that such a thing may be offensive, we may then lawfully do whatever is lawful unto us.

And, therefore, if, by comparing the circumstances of an action together, we cannot probably guess that any should be offended at it, it is their weakness, and not our sin, if they be offended at it. Indeed, whenever we converse with others, it becomes our Christian prudence and charity, to weigh such circumstances exactly ; to consider the action that we do, though lawful, yet whether or no it be common or unusual ; to consider the persons with whom we are, whether weak or strong, whether scrupulous or resolved Christians : for that, which may be lawful in some of these circumstances, may be unlawful in others of them. An action may be lawful, if it be common, though it be done before a weak and scrupulous Christian ; and it may be lawful, though uncommon, if it be done before a strong and a resolved Christian : but, if it be unusual, and if it be done before a scrupulous and a weak Christian, it may seem to have in it a great probability of giving offence and being a scandal to them ; and, therefore, we must forbear such uncommon, unusual actions before weak Christians, in which there may be any probable guess that they will take offence, and be scandalized at them ; but if, upon examining these and the like circumstances, we can find no such probability of giving offence, we may then make use of our Christian liberty in them.

After we have weighed these circumstances and can find no probability of scandal in them, if others, with whom we are or who are liable to take exception, do not discover their exceptions, we are not bound to abstain from any thing that is indifferently lawful. We have a hint of this from the apostle, 1 Cor. x. 28. " If any one say unto you, This was offered unto idols, eat not." If he say to you. But, if they take offence and will not make it known, the

offence, as it rests in their own bosom, so shall it lie on their own heads, and we shall be guiltless.

And that is the first limitation. We are not bound to abstain from things lawful in themselves, though they carry in them an appearance of evil towards others, if there be no probable grounds to conjecture that they will be offended at them.

Secondly. We must consider whether or not the action that we do, which another takes offence at, be as indifferent to us, as it is indifferent in respect of God; that is, whether it be of great conveniency, or of great importance and concernment to us: if it be not of such convenience and importance, then the rule of charity obligeth us to abstain from it.

There are those things, that are indifferent in respect of God, that yet may not be indifferent in respect of us; because they may be of great concernment unto us. If it be so, then we ought to observe this method: so long as we may without any notable inconveniency, we must abstain from these things; endeavouring, in the mean time, to satisfy their doubts, and inform their consciences of the lawfulness of that wherewith they are offended. This rule the apostle lays down for us, Rom. xv. 2. "Let every one seek to please his neighbour for his good to edification." We ought to abstain from those things, that are indifferent in respect of God and yet of importance unto us, from the exceptions of others, so long as we have no notable inconveniency accruing to ourselves thereby, endeavouring also to inform them of the lawfulness of them.

'But what if they continue scrupulous, and contemn information; resolving not to be satisfied with any reasons, that we can produce: what must we do in this case?'

Truly, it ceaseth now from being any longer an offence to a weak brother; and becomes a groundless offence taken up by a peevish, froward, and malicious person: and, certainly, in this case, no man is bound to abstain from that which is lawful, though he may give offence to such an one; especially, if it be of moment and concernment to him. As, for instance: if any be unsatisfied of the unlawfulness of another man's calling and profession;

as, at this day, the Socinians are unsatisfied of the lawfulness of warlike and military employments; if they will not be satisfied when sufficient reasons are alleged to justify it, we are not bound in this case to quit our callings; for they are matters of concernment to us: but we are bound rather to neglect their censures; as proceeding from malice and spite.

‘ But what if others still continue unsatisfied, not out of pride and malice, but out of weakness; as being insufficient to receive that information from us that we give them, and to conceive of the depth of our reasons and arguments for the justifying of such and such actions: what shall we do in that case?’

To this I answer, in the third place;—we are not bound to abstain from what they are offended at, unless they produce some probable grounds and reasons for their offences. It is not enough to oblige our consciences, that they tell us they imagine such a thing to be evil, unless they show some grounds for their imagination. Nor is it here required, that the grounds they produce should be demonstrative; but it is enough if they be probable grounds: though they amount not to prove the things that appear evil to them, to be in themselves evil; yet, if they prove that these things carry in them a probable presumption of evil, this is sufficient to oblige us to abstain from them.

Hereupon it was, that the apostle forbad the Corinthians to eat meat offered unto idols. If any took offence at that meat, others were not to eat thereof in their presence and company; and that, because their offence had some probable show of reason to judge that they thought they had too much communion with idols, because they did eat of those things that were sacrificed to them.

And, upon this ground, the apostle himself resolves, in 1 Cor. viii. 13. that if meat made his brother to offend, he would eat no flesh while the world stood: that is, as I take it, no flesh offered to idols; for that is the subject of which he had been treating all along in that chapter. Though it was lawful, in itself considered; yet, because the weak had probable grounds and reasons to show why flesh offered to

idols might not be eaten, therefore he would abstain from it whilst the world stood.

And so, in like manner, if any except against what we do, and bring this reason for it, that it is too like the custom of wicked men, that none do thus and thus but the generality of the looser and profaner sort: this is such a ground, that, though the thing in itself be not sinful, yet we ought hereupon to abstain from it; being a probable ground of evil, though the thing in itself be not evil.

But, if there be no such probable reasons produced as carry in them a show and appearance, that probably that is evil which we do; then we are not bound to abstain, merely because such a man says or thinks such an action is evil. As, for instance: if any take exception against preaching in a pulpit and by an hour-glass, as things unlawful, as of late many have; truly, unless they produce some grounds to prove these things to be unlawful, their cavils are not to be hearkened to nor regarded. And so, in any other things, that are indifferent to be used.

3. In the last place, take this limitation also:—*we are not bound to abstain from those things that appear evil to others, though they are in themselves lawful; unless in those places, and at those times, where there is danger of giving offence.* At other times, and in other places, we may lawfully do what is lawful. When there are any present, that are weak and scrupulous, and apt to be scandalized at us, then we must have respect unto their weak consciences; but, at other times, we are left to the free and full use of our Christian liberty.*

* The author does not appear to have completed this discourse according to the plan proposed in the beginning, as he has omitted the third general head.