

wisely in a perfect way ; I will walk within my house with a perfect heart.' Though shut up in their families from the observation of others, yet God seeth them ; therefore behave yourselves wisely and prudently there. Servants : Col. iii. 22, 23, 'Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh ; not with eye-service, as men-pleasers, but in singleness of heart, fearing God ; and whatever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men.'

SERMON XXVII.

Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence towards God.—1 JOHN iii. 21.

HERE is the effect of a good conscience. In the words we have—(1.) A condition supposed, 'If our hearts condemn us not ;' (2.) A privilege asserted, 'Then have we confidence towards God.'

First, The condition supposed. There are three functions and offices of conscience : there is, first, a knowledge, remembrance, or keeping up of principles, according to which our state and actions must be interpreted ; secondly, a sense of our actions, or what is done, or left undone, in conformity or contrariety to those principles ; thirdly, a judging or applying to ourselves those rules which concern our fact or state. As to the first act and office, conscience hath the force of a law and rule, informing us of good or evil. With respect to the second act, it is a witness, testifying what we have been or done. With respect to the last act, it is a judge, to condemn or acquit as the matter shall require. As, for instance, in that copulate axiom which you have, Rom. viii. 13, 'If ye live after the flesh, ye shall die ; but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.' Take the first part ; he that 'liveth after the flesh shall die,' meaning the second death ; there conscience interposeth as a law or rule. But I 'live after the flesh ;' there conscience interposeth as a witness : therefore I shall die the second death ; there it condemneth as a judge. Take the second clause, and you will have an instance of conscience not condemning or acquitting : 'They that by the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body shall live ;' but I mortify the deeds of the body, therefore I shall live. Now if conscience goeth upon a right principle, and beareth true evidence, the sentence and judgment remaineth firm, or in full force, be it by way of condemnation or absolution. As in the first reasoning, the conclusion must needs breed sorrow, trouble, and dejection of heart, which must not be put off till God put it away ; that is, till we break off our fleshly course of living, and obtain our pardon and peace by Jesus Christ. In the second reasoning the sentence of absolution is a ground of comfort, and giveth boldness in our approaches to God. Once more, conscience may condemn us two ways—in part or in whole ; according to the strictness of the first covenant, requiring unerring obedience ; on the equitable terms of the second, accepting

our sincere obedience. Our hearts may accuse us of imperfection, but not of insincerity and hypocrisy, or partial dealing with God. In this latter sense is the text taken.

Secondly, The privilege, 'Then have we confidence towards God.'

1. What is this confidence ?

[1.] It is sometimes put for boldness, or not fearing any danger or evil from one: 1 John ii. 28, 'That when he shall appear we may have boldness, and not be ashamed at his coming.' And so the sense will be, You need not fear any danger from him; for God will not be wanting to them that walk sincerely before him. So it is said the 'righteous are bold as a lion,' Prov. xxviii. 1. So Phil. i. 20, 'According to my earnest expectation and my hope, that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but that, with all boldness, as always, so now, Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life or death.' That he should boldly avow the truth, as fearless of any danger; living and dying, he should glorify Christ. A christian feareth nothing that is established upon sound terms: Ps. xxiii. 4, 'Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.' They are not discouraged and disquieted, as others, with the apprehensions of danger; as not from men, so not from God, to whom they look chiefly. Fear and dread of God's displeasure followeth the consciousness of sin, but expectation and hope of reward and good countenance from God is the natural result of righteousness and holiness. This is the first notion of the word 'confidence,' and not to be excluded here.

[2.] It signifieth liberty in prayer, a telling God all our mind, and so it signifieth praying freely to God, and asking of him whatever we stand in need of; a freedom to speak our hearts and open our minds to God in all necessities: Eph. iii. 12, 'In whom we have boldness, and access with confidence, through the faith of him;' and Heb. iv. 16, 'Let us come boldly to the throne of grace.' We may present ourselves and our requests before him with confidence. Only let me note, that this confidence noteth liberty of heart rather than liberty of speech; not a flowing of words so much as a holy confidence of audience and acceptance whenever we draw nigh unto him.

2. In what sense we may be said to have it. It may be understood *de facto* or *de jure*. It is not meant of the first only, for two reasons—(1.) Because otherwise it were not an argument of the value of the testimony of conscience if we have confidence towards God, and he doth not allow it or approve it; for though he doth not say, If our hearts condemn us not, God will not condemn us, as in the former verse, 'God is greater than our hearts, and knoweth all things;' yet it must be understood, or else the apostle's reasoning were impertinent. (2.) Because *de facto* all that are sincere have not this confidence; they have a right to it, though they enjoy it not; for there needeth another witness: Rom. viii. 16, 'The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit that we are the children of God.'

Doct. That a good conscience is one means to open an effectual door to us for free and full communion with God.

I shall prove two things to you—

1. That it is a great privilege to have free and full communion with God in his worship.

2. That a good conscience hath a great influence on this.

I. For the first, that free and full communion with God in his worship, expressed here by boldness, or 'confidence towards God,' is a great privilege. This will appear if you consider—

1. Man's forfeiture by sin; God's image, favour, and fellowship lost all at once. All sweet commerce between us and God was cut off, as is evident by the story of the fall, where you will find man first a fugitive, and then an exile. First he ran away from God, and then God banished him out of his presence, Gen. iii. 8. When God came walking in the garden in the cool of the day, Adam and his wife hid themselves, as being afraid of the presence of the Lord; they shuffled out of the way, and ran among the trees of the garden; and afterwards we read again, ver. 23, 24, that God sent him forth, and drove him out of his presence, and set a guard of cherubims, and a flaming sword turning every way upon paradise, which was a figure of his wrath. As it was thus with Adam, so it was with all his posterity; sin is the wall of partition between us and God: Isa. lix. 2, 'Your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear.'

2. The estrangement of the heart that grows upon this forfeiture, as appeareth by that legal bondage and those guilty fears which are natural to us. Sinners fear God, and fly from him: 'I was afraid, and hid myself,' saith Adam, Gen. iii. 10; and all his posterity have the same disposition: Isa. xxxiii. 14, 'Who among us can dwell with devouring burnings?' Yea, it appeareth by the bashfulness and inconfidence that befalleth the children of God by reason of sin. The fears of a guilty child make him shun his father's presence, as David kept silence when he had sinned, Ps. xxxii. 3. Strangeness and distance groweth between God and us while sin lieth on the conscience.

3. The majesty of God, and the state which he kept during the old testament dispensation. In the whole frame of that worship, God would show them how unworthy sinners were to approach and draw nigh to him and his holy things. When they were married to him in the covenant on Mount Sinai, there was a rail between him and the people, and they were not to go up into the holy mount, or touch the border of it, under penalty of being put to death, Exod. xix. 12, 13. In their passage to Canaan, the common Israelite was not to come near the ark lest he died, Num. i. 53, but the Levites were to interpose between God and them. The Levites also were not to be too bold; some of them were chosen out to touch the staves of the altar, and perform other ministries, but not to see the holy things when covered, lest they died, Num. xix. 20. Sinful man must not come too near the great God. The priests were to minister at the altar of burnt-offerings, but not without solemn washings, Exod. xxx. 20. The high priest (Lev. xvi. 2, 'And the Lord said unto Moses, Speak unto Aaron thy brother, that he come not at all times into the holy place within the veil before the mercy-seat, which is upon the ark, that he die not') was not to be too familiar with God; and if any of these orders were broken, judgments were executed, and they were struck dead in the place. The people were sensible of these restraints: Num. xvii. 17, 18, 'And the children of Israel said unto Moses, Behold, we die, we perish, we

all perish. Whosoever cometh anything near unto the tabernacle of the Lord shall die: shall we be consumed with dying? Some were killed with the sword, the earth swallowed up others, some died with pestilence, and all for making too bold with God in his holy things.

4. The many failings which the best are conscious of. When we consider the exact inspection of God, and the many infirmities of the best christians, it is a wonder they can have any confidence towards God, when our own conscience condemneth us of many things; but the Lord layeth not them to our charge where the heart is sincere for the main; and he could observe many more things against us than our consciences do, yet such is his mercy and fatherly love, that he will pardon and reverse all these failings, and will delight in our converse with him: Prov. xv. 8, 'The prayer of the upright is his delight.' God looketh more to their good than their ill; though he knoweth more by them than all the world, or they themselves do, yet if our hearts do not reprove us of partial dealings, we may plead, 2 Kings xx. 3, 'I beseech thee, O Lord, remember now how I have walked before thee in truth and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in thy sight.'

5. The thing itself is very valuable. This confidence towards God, what is there in it?

[1.] A readiness to converse with God and come into his presence; whereas otherwise the heart is shy of him, and hangeth off from him; as Israel, when they had sinned in the matter of the calf, they durst not come near the sanctuary, but worshipped every man afar off at his tent-door, Exod. xxxiii. 8, as looking what success Moses' mediation would have with the Lord about reconciling him to his people, when he was angry and ready to depart. Now when we can cheerfully come into God's presence, and converse with him, we have boldness to enter into the holiest, Heb. x. 9; we have leave to come, and a heart to come: to have both is a very great privilege. Liberty of access, with assurance of welcome and audience, surely is a great favour and privilege; the soul cannot keep away from God.

[2.] A free familiarity. When we come, we unbosom ourselves to him as a man would unto his friend, and tell God all our mind, acquaint him with all our griefs, sorrows, fears, hopes, desires, temptations, conflicts; tell him plainly how it is with our souls. This is that free spirit David begs for, and had lost some degree of it by his sin, Ps. li. 12, and is set forth by Ps. cxix. 26, 'I declared my ways, and thou heardest me.' We keep back nothing from him: Ps. lxii. 8, 'Trust in him at all times, pour out your hearts before him.' We lay down our burden at his feet; we deal openly and plainly with him.

[3.] A childlike trust, that he will pity and help us, that our persons and duties are accepted with him; for much of the disposition of children lieth in owning him as a Father. The spirit of adoption was given us to this end and purpose: Rom. viii. 15, 'But we have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father;' and Gal. iv. 16, 'He hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.' Oh, what a mercy is this, to come to him, not as our judge, but as our Father, not with a spirit of fear, but love! It is not a tribunal of justice we stand before, but a throne of grace.

Surely to have a merciful reconciled Father to go to, and make our moan for relief in all our distresses and wants, is a very comfortable privilege, that we cannot sufficiently value. Whosoever scorneth and slights him, a christian knoweth where he may be welcome: 'My friends scorn me, but mine eye poureth out tears to God,' Job xvi. 20. Though slighted elsewhere, he will not be refused there. Surely God will deal kindly with his children; his fatherly love will not suffer him neglect them, or any of their concernments.

[4.] The rich treasure that we have an interest in and free access unto. God's all-sufficiency is our storehouse; he hath grace enough to pardon our sins, to pity and relieve our miseries, to heal our natures, supply our necessities, to help us in our straits, and finally to save us with an everlasting salvation. This confidence implieth a dependence on God's all-sufficiency, Gen. xvii. 1. Cast all your care upon him, 1 Peter v. 7. Earthly parents, their affections and power are limited. Now to come to such a God every day, and to know that as often as we come we are welcome to him, in and through Christ, our persons and prayers are pleasing to him, and that he will give us all the things we ask of him according to his will, what a mercy is this!

II. What influence hath a good conscience upon it?

1. The door of access to God is opened by Christ. It was first opened by the merit of his passion, and is still kept open by his intercession; therefore it is said, Heb. iv. 15, 16, 'For we have not a high priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in a time of need;' Heb. x. 19, 'Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus.' Our peace and atonement was made with God by Christ's passion, represented and pleaded by his intercession.

2. It supposeth our justification by faith, for otherwise we are not entered into the evangelical state: Rom v. 1, 2, 'Being justified by faith, we have peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ; by whom also we have access by faith.' Till we are accepted in the Beloved, we have a charge lying against us: Acts xiii. 38, 39, 'Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins; and by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses.' This is a ground of rejoicing: Rom. viii. 33, 34, 'Who then shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect?'

3. Our justification is evident to us when conscience witnesseth on good grounds that we do not allow ourselves in the omission of any known duty, nor in the commission of any known sin: Heb. x. 22, 'Let us draw near with a true heart, in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.' When we are justified and sanctified, and our consciences, which were unquiet by reason of sin, are purged and purified, then we may cheerfully come to God for all things. Particularly—
(1.) To remove terror; (2.) To establish boldness and confidence.

[1.] To remove terror. There are two things obstruct our soul's access to God—our own guiltiness and God's terror.

(1.) Our own guiltiness, that straitens the heart, and stoppeth the mouth, and breedeth bondage in us. All the world naturally is become guilty before God, Rom. iii. 19; but they who are renewed and pardoned, they come out of this guilty and wretched estate, and by little and little are settled and established as to their consciences, as their pardon and sanctification is made more evident to them by a holy conversation: Rom. vi. 14, 'For sin shall have no dominion over you.' Where sin reigneth not, they come to understand their estate by grace, and so vanquish their legal fears. Where worldly and fleshly lusts bear sway, a man is under the law, not under grace. The law is alive or dead according to the state a man is in, either of sin or holiness. He that liveth in a state of sin still carrieth his sting and wound about him, and is always under doubts and fears, or hath the matter and ground of them. Certainly they have not the true courage and boldness of the saints. Not only their flesh and spirit is at war in their hearts, but law and grace. As the Spirit prevaieth against the flesh, so doth grace prevail against our law-fears: 'For they that are led by the Spirit, are not under the law,' Gal. v. 18; that is, not under its condemning power. So Rom. viii. 14, 'Ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear, but the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.' If we live in obedience to the motions of the sanctifying Spirit, he doth as a Spirit of adoption overcome our legal fears.

(2.) God's terror. God is our friend and Father in Christ; not a terrible judge, but a reconciled Father; and his throne is not a judgment-seat, but a mercy-seat. He is terrible to those that lie in their sins; they look upon him as a malefactor doth upon his judge, a rigid lawgiver or severe avenger; as a condemning God, not as a pardoning God. But not so to those that are adopted and taken into his family; he maketh the renewed and sanctified his children, and is pleased to own them as a Father: 'That we should be holy, and without blame before him in love; having predestinated us to the adoption of children,' Eph. i. 4-6. Surely when God is our Father, the chief cause of all our fear and trouble is gone. We have no cause to fear the flames of hell, or sting of death, and the terror of the judgment, any further than to make ready for the day of judgment. Surely then we can not only draw nigh to God, and behold his face with comfort and confidence now, and rejoice in his presence with us in the ordinances, but also look and long for his appearance, when he shall come in his glory: 2 Tim. iv. 8, 'Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day; and not to me only, but unto all them that love his appearing;' Rev. xxii. 20, 'He who testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly, Amen. Even so come Lord Jesus.'

[2.] To establish boldness and confidence; for—

(1.) There is an everlasting merit to depend upon, and that is the blood of Christ, quieting the conscience: Heb. ix. 14, 'How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge our consciences from dead works

to serve the living God?' Heb. xii. 24, 'And to Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than the blood of Abel.' We are admitted for Christ's sake, and have only his righteousness to plead against the first covenant.

(2.) Here is a blessed covenant, wherein God hath showed his willingness to accept us, and hath given us his warrant for the discharge of the sincere and upright: Rom. viii. 1, 'There is now no condemnation to them that are in Christ, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.' Therefore, if our consciences do not charge us with a doubling with God, what should disquiet our minds?

(3.) There is a sure claim, and that is sincerity, when our hearts condemn us not, nor reproach us for any voluntary wilful neglect of or disobedience to the laws of Christ, or living in any wilful and allowed sin; yea, rather acquit us, assure us of such sincerity to God and Christ, that we can appeal to his all-seeing eye: John xxi. 17, 'And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things, thou knowest that I love thee.' Now surely all this will breed boldness, and be matter of joy and confidence to us: 2 Cor. i. 12, 'For our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience, that, in simplicity and godly sincerity, we have had our conversation in the world.'

Object. Will not this strengthen the security of the wicked, to leave all upon the judgment of conscience? Jer. xvii. 9, 'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?' Many men's consciences do not condemn them; they absolve themselves with great confidence, which is not to be imputed to the strength of their faith, but the hardness of their hearts.

Ans. 1. Wicked men are never perfect as appertaining to the conscience; they have not a true sound peace; it is but a truce, as appeareth because it is so soon disturbed by the seriousness of their own thoughts, their troubles, the agonies of death. A dead stupid conscience they have, but not the rejoicing of faith and liberty towards God. It is not the lively sense of God's love; their hearts reproach them, though they regard it not.

Ans. 2. It doth suppose that conscience doth its office rightly, and that all things concur which are necessary to a good conscience. As—

[1.] Some competent knowledge of the gospel, the privileges and duties thereof. Carnal men are bold through ignorance. Now, 'without knowledge the heart is not good,' Prov. xix. 2; as in outward courts, through ignorance of law or false evidence, wrong sentence may be given. Therefore the apostle supposeth them to be persons whose hearts and consciences are in some measure enlightened in the things of God, and are still inquiring what is his holy, good, and acceptable will.

[2.] One that hath heartily consented to the new covenant so understood: 1 Peter iii. 21, 'Baptism doth also now save us, not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience towards God.' When they answer to the Lord's offers and demands in the gospel, thankfully accepting the offered benefits, faithfully resolving, by the strength of the Lord's grace, to perform the required duties, this is the covenant made with God in baptism.

[3.] Those that set their hearts to fulfil their covenant-vow : ver. 22, 'Whatsoever we ask we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do the things which are pleasing in his sight.' Now those, if their hearts do not condemn them of doubling, and dealing insincerely with God, they have liberty and confidence : Gal. vi. 16, 'As many as walk according to this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, as upon the whole Israel of God.' On the contrary : Ps. lxvi. 18, 'If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.' In short, then, those that allow no sin, complain of it, fight against it, and study to please God in all things, and abound therein more and more ; those are declared to be sincere that seek to be without offence, Phil. i. 10. If men walk crookedly, they break their confidence, and cannot look God in the face with any comfort.

[4.] That the case be well studied and weighed before conscience pronounceth and passeth the doom, for the heart is very deceitful : 1 Cor. xi. 29, 'Let a man examine himself ;' 2 Cor. xiii. 5, 'Examine yourselves whether ye be in the faith ; prove yourselves ;' when a man well knowing his duty doth often search and examine himself, his conformity and inconformity thereunto, to see if any of these be wanting. Blind men cannot judge of colours. If no hearty consent to the covenant of grace, founded in the blood of Christ, he hath not taken the course to pacify conscience. If it be not his hearty and daily endeavour to please God, it is impudence, not confidence ; if there be slightness before the matter be debated, and doth undergo a full trial and hearing, it is rashness and presumption, hypocrisy and senseless overweening.

Use 1. That liberty in prayer is so great a mercy, that we should not easily sin it away, and make our sincerity questionable ; the heavenly trade is then interrupted, and comfortable commerce between God and us broken off. Before we come into God's glorious presence, he first traineth us up by inviting us into his gracious presence, and the throne of grace is the porch of heaven. God taketh this course, not only to settle our affections, that we may begin that acquaintance here which there shall be perfected and consummated, but to try our confidence. If we cannot come to God in prayer, how shall we come to God in heaven, and in a dying hour cheerfully set sail for eternity, and launch into the other world ? Now whilst we are insincere, serious prayer is irksome ; we can have no delight in God's company, or comfortable thoughts of him ; while we indulge any secret sin, every duty is a penance to us. Therefore do not lose your liberty and openness of heart to God, but preserve the friendship settled in the covenant of grace inviolable and entire.

2. That God's presence, which is the comfort of the faithful, is the burden of the carnal and the guilty. The presence of God is terrible to sinners ; they think they are never better than when farthest off from God and most forget God. The devil and the wicked sympathise : Mat. viii. 29, 'What have we to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of God ? art thou come hither to torment us before the time ?' Job xxi. 14, 'They say unto God, Depart from us, we desire not the knowledge of thy ways.' God's presence and company is a burden to them. Now into what a miserable condition hath sin brought men ! It hath

changed their joy and content into the greatest terror. Wicked men can neither fly from God's presence, nor yet well endure it.

Use 2. To press christians to keep a good conscience. If you would maintain your liberty and confidence towards God, carry yourselves so that conscience may not condemn you. There are so many blessed fruits accompany it, that we should value it the more. If you have it not, you want liberty in prayer, here mentioned; no hope of glory, no sweetness in the word, no readiness in duty, nor strength to resist sin, nor comfort in distresses and afflictions. But if you have it, you cannot conceive the joy that accompanies it: Rev. ii. 17, 'To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna; and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a name written, which no man knows but he that receives it.' It makes the thoughts of God sweeter, for he is your Father; his mercy, for it is your portion. His justice is not your terror, but support. His wrath you have escaped; as the Israelites looked back on the Red Sea, and saw their enemies drowned and they escaped. His world of creatures are for your use and service; heaven is your Father's palace; Christ is your Redeemer and Saviour; the word is your charter; ordinances and prayer the porch of heaven; the Lord's supper the table God keepeth for his children.

SERMON XXVIII.

And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight.—
1 JOHN iii. 22.

IN the context the apostle is speaking of the benefit of a good conscience. It is double—

1. Confidence towards God.

2. Acceptance with God; or, if you will, access to God, and success in prayer. Of confidence to make the prayer we spake in the former verse; acceptance of it, when it is once made, of this in the text, 'And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him,' &c.

In the words there are two things—

1. The privilege of a good conscience, 'Whatsoever we ask, we receive of him.'

2. The character and property of a good conscience, 'Because we keep his commandments, and do the things that are pleasing in his sight.'

1. For the privilege; and here note—

[1.] The universality and extent of it, 'Whatsoever we ask.'

[2.] The certainty, 'We receive;' not, we shall receive; we are as certain to receive it as if we had it already.

2. The character, evidence, and property of a good conscience, 'Because we keep his commandments, and do those things which are pleasing in his sight.' This is fit to be added, because he had only