

THE BEST WISDOM.

A

SERMON,

PREACHED IN THE

PARISH CHURCH

OF

MARY WOOLNOTH,

ON

WEDNESDAY, the 21st of NOVEMBER, 1787,

THE DAY OF THE

ANNUAL MEETING of the SOCIETY for promoting
RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE among the POOR.

BY JOHN NEWTON, RECTOR.

I PET. iv. 10.

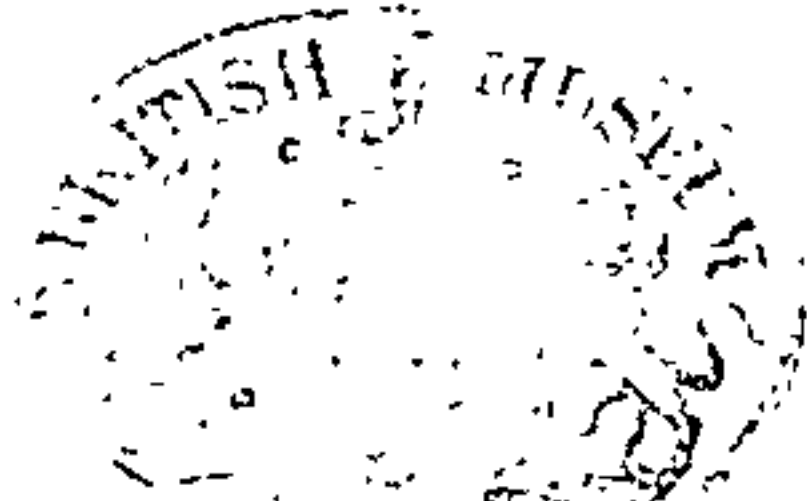
EVERY MAN HATH RECEIVED, EVEN SO MINISTER THE SAME
ONE TO ANOTHER, AS GOOD STEWARDS OF THE MANIFOLD GRACE
OF GOD.

L O N D O N :

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A D V E R T I S E M E N T.

THE Importunity of Friends is not pleaded as an Excuse for this Publication, but, simply the Importance of the Subject.

Nor is this Discourse offered as an exact Copy of what was preached; but it is as nearly as Recollection could make it. They who have heard the one, if they read the other, will probably recognize the same leading Sentiments in both, and perhaps a Page or two would contain that has been either added or omitted.

Coleman-Street Buildings,
1st Jan. 1788.

A

S E R M O N, &c.

PROV. ch. xi. v. 30.

He that winneth souls is wise.

ONLY He, who redeemed the soul by his blood, is able effectually to win it to himself. The work is his, and they who know him will render the praise to him alone. But in this respect, as in many others, there is an analogy between the Natural and the Moral World. In both, he displays his power, and executes his purposes, by an instituted course of means and instruments. In both, he often so conceals his operations under the vail of second causes, that, to a common and inattentive eye, he seems to do nothing, when in reality he does all. The manna, with which he fed Israel in the wilderness, though more immediately and visibly, was not more certainly, the effect and proof of his providence and goodness, than the bread by which *we* live. It is he who giveth the earth virtue to produce ¹ corn; the discretion of the husband-

¹ Psalm civ. 14.

B

man

man who prepareth the ground, and soweth the seed is from him : And the influence of the sun and the rain, so necessary to ripen the grain, and to clothe the fields with plenty in the season of harvest, is the influence of him who worketh all in all. In this process, the blessing which secures the desired event, is wholly from the Lord, though the labour of man, and the use of means are indispensable, because his appointment has made them so.

Thus in the great concern of winning souls, though God, (whose thoughts and ways are above ours, as the heavens are higher than the earth) may, sometimes, as in the instance of the Apostle Paul¹, affect and win the heart by an immediate and instantaneous exertion of his power; yet this is not his ordinary method. Though fallen, we are still rational creatures, and he is pleased to treat us as such. He proposes considerations and motives in his holy word, which, though ineffectual, considered, merely, as means, and without the concurrence of his agency; yet have, in their own nature, a moral tendency and suitability to awaken our attention, to convince us of our sin and misery, and to recall us to our original state of dependence upon his goodness, and obedience to his will. For the proof of this, I may appeal to the consciences of many persons; the force of truth has compelled them to tremble like Felix, and perhaps like Herod, to do many things; and though their depravity has been too obstinate to yield to conviction, they

¹ Isa. xxviii. 24—29.

² Matt. v. 43.

³ Acts ix. 6.

have

have understood and felt enough, to leave them without excuse.

The Lord God usually employs those whom he has already won and subdued by his grace, as instruments of winning others; and there are none of his people, however weak their capacities, or however low their situations in life, but may hope for a share in this honour, if they are faithful to the light he has given them, and live according to the rule of his word. But he has instituted the office of the Gospel Ministry, with a more especial view to this important service.

The proposition in the text is simple, and plain; and the principal division of my subject is suggested by the appearance of our present assembly. I never had an opportunity before, of preaching to so many of my brethren in the Ministry, and perhaps I never may again. And at my time of life, it becomes me, whenever I stand in the pulpit, to consider seriously, that it is, at least, possible, it may be the last time, and that you, to whom I am now about to speak, may see my face no more. Were I even sure of this, how could I more properly close my public services, than by aiming, with my latest breath, to impress upon you, my friends and brethren, this weighty aphorism, *He that winneth souls is wise?* May it be written upon my own heart while I live! may it be written upon all our hearts! Let the scholar, the philosopher, the politician settle their several claims to wisdom, among themselves; but may *this* wisdom be ours. The man that winneth souls is truly and emphatically wise.

I shall, in the first place, point out the principal acknowledged characteristics of wisdom, and shew that they are all exemplified, in the spirit and conduct of the Minister, who is duly qualified for the service of winning souls. I do not say that all faithful Ministers are influenced by this wisdom in the same degree; but unless it has an habitual and prevailing influence on the plans and practice of a public teacher, we need not wonder, if he be neither faithful nor useful. My chief design is to elucidate and confirm this first point; but towards the close of my discourse, I shall, secondly, address myself to private Christians, and remind you of your common interest with us in this concern, and the advantages and opportunities you have of shewing yourselves Wise, by contributing your endeavours to promote the great design of winning souls.

I.

The Minister who winneth souls is wise.

I. Wisdom is discovered in the choice of a fit and valuable end. If a man has great talents and abilities, we do not account him wise, unless he employs them properly; a life whiled away in low and trivial pursuits, implies a want of wisdom. But he who aims at winning souls, proposes an end which well deserves his application, and will, so far as he succeeds, richly compensate him for all that he can do, or suffer, in so good a cause. The grand object of his life, in subordination to the will and glory of God, is the recovery of souls. We often use the word *win*, in a sense which

which the Hebrew term suggests; as to win a battle, or a fortress. The soul, in its fallen state, separated and alienated from God, is, by his righteous permission, under the power of Satan, who rules in it as a strong one^s armed in his own house or castle. Were the effects of this bondage confined to the present life, an attempt to free the soul from that misery, mischief and madness, with which the world is filled, would be honourable and important. But God, who formed the soul originally for himself, has given it such a vast capacity, that nothing short of himself can satisfy its desires; and it is likewise, by his constitution, immortal. This capacity of being exquisitely happy or miserable, and that for ever, renders the soul so valuable in the judgment of its Creator, that He gave the Son of his love to redeem it from sin and misery, by his obedience unto death, even the death of the Cross. By this adorable method of adjusting the demands of his justice, and the honour of his government, to the purposes of his mercy, his wisdom and glory are more eminently discovered to his intelligent creatures, than by all his other works. If the only wise God commends to us his gracious design of recovering souls from the domination of Satan, and of winning them to himself, as the highest instance of his wisdom and goodness; then, certainly, He who proposes it as the great end of his life, that, by serving God in the Ministry, he may be an instrument of winning souls, is truly wise, so far as concerns his leading aim and object.

^s Luke xi. 21. Ephes. ii. 2.

2. Wisdom directs us likewise to a consideration and choice of means, proper to the attainment of a proposed end. To attempt what is impracticable, however desirable it might be thought, upon a supposition that it could be accomplished, is a mark, not of wisdom, but of folly. A man, without being chargeable with rashness, may undertake to move a stone of several tons weight, and even to raise it, if needful, to the top of a tower; or to force open the strongest gate of a castle; but then the application of mechanical powers would be necessary. If he were unacquainted with these, or disdained to employ them; if, without estimating or considering the resistance to be overcome, and relying solely on his personal strength, he should attempt to move the enormous stone with his hands, or to burst the gates of brass and bars of iron asunder with his feet, his utmost efforts must issue in weariness and disappointment, and no one would think him wise. The experience of ages has demonstrated all endeavours to win souls, to free them from prejudice, to reclaim them from the love and practice of sin, by the mere force of human arguments and moral suasion, to be equally chimerical and unsuccessful. The Heathen moralists laboured much in this way, but they laboured in vain. Some of them felt and acknowledged that human nature was depraved, but not knowing the root, nor the extent, nor the proper remedy of the disorders they wished to cure, their best sentiments, however specious in theory, made little more impression upon the hearts of their admirers.

or even upon their own, than the falling snow makes upon a rock. If the ancient Sages could do but little, the modern Philosophers, as they chuse to be called, have done, if possible, still less. What a poet observed of the former, is, at least equally, applicable to the latter, *Virtus laudatur et alget*. Virtue is defined, described, recommended and praised, but wickedness and folly rapidly increase under their instructions; and while in their pompous declamations they propose liberty⁶ to others, they are themselves the servants, the slaves of corruption. The Gospel of Christ, the glorious Gospel of the blessed God⁷, is the only effectual mean for reforming mankind. To the man who possesses, and knows the use of this grand, this wonderful machine, if I may be allowed the comparison, what is otherwise impracticable, becomes easy. The Gospel removes difficulties insuperable to human power. It causes⁸ the blind to see, the deaf to hear; it softens the heart of stone, and raises the dead in trespasses and sin to a life of righteousness. No force, but that of the Gospel, is sufficient to remove the mountainous load of guilt from an awakened conscience, to calm the violence of tumultuous passions, to raise an earthly soul from groveling in the mire of sensuality or avarice, to a spiritual and divine life, a life of communion with God. No system but the Gospel can communicate motives, encouragements and prospects, sufficient to withstand and counteract all the snares and

⁶ 1 Pet. ii. 19. ⁷ 1 Tim. i. 11.

⁸ Isa. xxxv. 8. Matt. xi. 5.

temptations with which the Spirit of this World, by its frowns or its smiles, will endeavour either to intimidate or to bribe us from the path of duty. But the Gospel, rightly understood and cordially embraced, will inspire the slothful with energy, and the fearful with courage. It will make the miser generous, melt the churl into kindness, tame the raging tyger in the breast, and, in a word, expand the narrow selfish heart, and fill it with a spirit of love to God, chearful unreserved obedience to his will, and benevolence to mankind.

I shall not trespass upon your time, by delineating at large my idea of the Gospel. Yet it may be proper to mention three points, which, in my judgment, are essential to it.

The first respects the character of Jesus the Saviour. That he is very God and very Man, God manifest in the flesh⁹. That in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. That this Divine Word assumed our nature into a personal union with himself, lived and died in behalf of sinners, and now reigns upon the throne of Glory, over all, God blessed for ever. That He is the proper object of our worship, supreme love, trust and adoration; that it is He on whom the eyes and expectation of sinners, sensible of their wants and miseries, are fixed¹, and out of whose fulness they all receive life, strength, comfort and grace, to help in time of need. This doctrine is the pillar and ground of truth². They who have a right

⁹ 1 Tim. iii. 16. John i. 1, 12.
i. 16. ² 1 Tim. iii. 15.

¹ Ps. xxxiv. 5. John

sense of the guilt and power of sin, of the Holiness and Majesty of God, and of the hosts of enemies combined against their peace, must sink into despair, unless supported by the knowledge of an Almighty Omnipresent Saviour; who is always near, a very present help in trouble; and who can discern the thoughts³ of the heart; for often their most trying and dangerous exigencies, are beyond the reach of a creature's eye. Whatever they thought of him before, when they know themselves, they cannot entrust their souls to the power, or care, or compassion of a creature; and therefore rejoice that they are warranted and encouraged to commend themselves to him, as to a faithful Creator⁴.

The second grand peculiarity of the Gospel, is the doctrine of an atonement: that Christ in his state of humiliation, by his obedience unto death, even the death of the ⁵Cross, made a full, proper, and perfect satisfaction for sin. That is, his sufferings unto death, the torments which he endured in his body, and the agonies of his soul, inconceivable to us but by their effects, (his bloody sweat in the garden, and his astonishing complaint upon the Cross, that God had forsaken him,) exhibited a striking and solemn proof to the world, to the universe, no less to angels than to men, that God, in affording mercy to sinners, still shews his inflexible displeasure against sin, and makes no relaxation in the awful demands of his Holiness, Justice and Truth. A substitution capa-

³ Rev. ii. 23.⁴ 1 Pet. iv. 19.⁵ Phil. ii. 8.

ble of manifesting the justice of God in the highest exercise of his mercy, that he might appear just in justifying the ungodly⁶, was of such vast importance, to the honour of God's character and government, that if it could have been effected by any inferior means, Christ died in vain⁷. The interposition of a mere creature, even if voluntary, (but what creature would dare to draw upon himself the displeasure of God due to the sins of men,) could not have displayed the full-orbed glory of all the divine perfections, as it now shines forth in the⁸ person of Jesus Christ. None in Heaven or on earth were able or worthy to interpose. Therefore the Son said, *Lo I come!* He himself, his ownself, bore our sins in his own body upon the⁹ tree; He who knew no sin, was made sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in¹ him.

There is a third point, which is peculiar to the Religion of the Bible, and which discriminates it from all religious systems of human institution. There are few of these but contain some important truths. In general, they inculcate a degree of attention to the practice of social virtues. But no other system ever proposed, to all persons, and as a general truth, the necessity and certainty of supernatural influence and agency; an agency, which from the greatness of its effect, and the universality of its proposal, (being promised to all without exception, who desire it,) must be divine.

⁶ Rom. iv. 5.

⁷ Gal. ii. 21.

⁸ 2 Cor. iv. 6.

⁹ 1 Pet. ii. 24.

¹ 2 Cor. v. 21.

That

That the bodies of believers are the temples of the Holy Ghost, that God dwelleth in them by his Spirit, that they have received the Spirit of God, that they are led by the Spirit, walk in the Spirit, and have communion with the Holy Spirit; these truths are either expressed or strongly implied in almost every page of the New Testament.

The Gospel then is a message from God. It stains the pride of human glory, and without regarding the petty distinctions which obtain amongst men, with respect to character or ranks, it treats them all as sinners in the sight of God, and under the power of depravity strengthened by habit. As such, it points them to a Saviour; it invites and enjoins them to apply to him, to submit to him, and to put their whole trust in him; to renounce all pleas of their own, and to plead his name and his atonement for their pardon and acceptance, and promises to all who thus plead, that the Holy Spirit of God will visit them, dwell in them, and abide with them, to enable them by his gracious influence, both to will and to do according to his good pleasure.

I omit other particulars, nor shall I at present attempt to prove these, farther than by an appeal to observation and experience. I trust my brethren, we all desire to win souls. It is a good desire, it is a noble, a glorious ambition. I hope we are likewise apprized of the nature of the undertaking, and are too wise to attempt

¹ 1 Cor. vi. 19.

² Rom. viii. 4. Gal. v. 18, 25.

³ 1 Cor. xiii. 14.

it, or to expect success, by any power or exertion of our own, unless we faithfully and humbly make use of the instrument which God has appointed for the purpose. This instrument is the Gospel message, the principal parts of which I have stated to you. This is the rod of God's strength, which, like the wonder-working rod of Moses, when held up in his name, though wielded by a feeble arm, can perform miracles. And I will venture to affirm, without hesitation, and without exception, that no man, whatever his abilities and qualifications may be in other respects, though he had the zeal of a martyr and the powers of an angel, will be able to force the strong holds of Satan, to cast down the lofty imaginations of men, and win souls to holiness and happiness, without it. But, if he be called and taught of God to preach this Gospel, he will do great things: he will be honoured and successful; he will win souls; he will be numbered among the wise.

Let us appeal to facts. The Apostle Paul was eminently successful in winning souls. He planted churches in many different and distant parts of the Roman empire; wherever he went, Power from on high accompanied his word, and made it effectual, according to the commission he had received from the Lord, to open the eyes of the blinded Heathens, to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God⁴. Can we propose a better example for our imitation? Would we

⁴ Acts xxvi. 18.

know the subject matter of that preaching which produced such extensive and salutary effects? He gives us full information. He preached Christ crucified; Christ the wisdom and power of God⁵; the⁶ unsearchable riches of Christ; Christ the Man who shall judge the quick and dead⁷; Christ as God, who purchased the Church with his own blood. As a wise master-builder, he laid this foundation, and declared, that other foundation can no man lay⁸. He preached the atonement, that Christ made peace by the blood of his Cross, died for us while sinners, and that we are justified by his blood⁹. He preached the agency of the Holy Spirit, as absolutely necessary and powerfully efficacious, and ascribes that operation by which Christ in his true character is revealed to the heart, to the same power which commanded light to shine out of darkness, in the Beginning¹. These truths were the weapons of his warfare². He went forth conquering and to conquer, not by the enticing words of man's wisdom, but in the spirit of demonstration and power.

I need not tell this auditory what were the doctrines which shook the pillars and foundations of Popery, at the Reformation, and diffused a knowledge and practice becoming the profession of Christianity, among many nations which had been long involved in the darkness of ignorance, superstition and wickedness. In our own land, it was not very long before the

⁵ 1 Cor. i. 23, 24.
and xxvi. 28.

⁶ Ephes. iii. 8.

⁷ Acts xvii. 31.

⁸ 2 Cor. iv. 6.

⁸ 1 Cor. iii. 10, 11.

⁹ Col. i. 20.

² 2 Cor. x. 4.

principles

principles of the Reformation were severely discountenanced. Particularly in the reign of Charles the Second, they were opposed by methods which the good providence of God at length effectually restrained, by favouring us with a succession of Princes of the House of Hanover. If the lives and conduct of those who endured fines, stripes, imprisonment and death, for conscience sake, be compared with the spirit and temper of those who inflicted or approved them, I think a candid and attentive enquirer will be at no loss to determine on which side the advantage lay, in point of real religion and sound morality.

The spirit of our present excellent constitution and government, allows us a degree of religious liberty unknown to our forefathers, for which we cannot be sufficiently thankful; and the doctrines of the Reformation, and of the Apostles, are still preached. Nor have we reason to fear that sanguinary laws, and the iron hand of arbitrary power, will be employed to silence us. Yet the doctrines themselves are far from being generally acceptable. The spirit of opposition is awake, and active as formerly, though the method of its attack is varied. But great is the truth, and will prevail. It has triumphed over violence and rage; it is equally superior to the arts of subtlety and refinement. We are not afraid to repeat the Apostle's challenge: *Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?* Which is the scheme of

³ 1 John v. 5.

Religion in the present day, which produces the most conscientious reverence to the holy name of the Lord our God, the most habitual and devout observance of his holy day, and of family worship? What kind of preaching evidences itself to be a doctrine according to Godliness, by the most numerous, and notorious instances, of persons reclaimed by it from habits of gross licentiousness, and effectually taught to fear the Lord and depart from evil? What are those principles, which, by experience, are found most suitable, and most powerful, to support the soul under the pressure of great afflictions, or upon the near approach of death? I know there are people under afflictions, who, like Pharaoh, harden themselves yet more; who value themselves upon a proud Stoical resolution, and deem it a weakness to complain. But Christian fortitude is a very different thing. It is the temper of a humbled pardoned sinner, who has entrusted himself and his all to the Saviour, and, believing that he condescends to direct all his concerns, submits to his appointments, not by constraint, but willingly; sensible that the wisdom and love of him, in whom he confides, will chuse better for him than he could possibly chuse for himself. I know, or have read, that the American Indians, when put to death by their enemies, in the midst of the most excruciating tortures that cruelty can invent, will sing their war songs, and insult their tormentors, without uttering a groan or shedding a tear; and I have likewise read of philosophers, who, to confirm their admirers

in a persuasion, that Infidelity had freed them from all fear of death or its consequences, have jested in their dying hours. What a contrast to these is the relation we have of the death of Stephen, who, with the utmost composure committed his departing spirit⁴ into the hands of his Saviour, whom he saw ready to receive him, and employed his latest breath in prayer for his murderers! When a believer in Jesus is about to die, he does not express the fiend-like phrenzy of a Savage, or the ill-timed levity of a buffoon: he is serious and recollected. Conscious of his unworthiness, but knowing whom he has believed, he rejoices with a joy unspeakable and full of glory. There is often a dignity and energy in the language of plain people, in dying circumstances far superior to what might be expected from their former habits of life: they seem to have new ideas and new faculties; heaven opened to them, and opened in them, while yet in the body. Ignorant and profane persons, who are sometimes spectators of such scenes, have been astonished at effects, which, though they could not account for, have for the moment secretly extorted from them the wish of Balaam, *Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my end be like his!*⁶ By these effects on the lives and deaths of those who cordially receive the Gospel which we preach, the doctrine of the Cross, approves itself to be the power of God unto Salvation, the sure and only means of winning souls to his favour and image.

⁴ Acts vii. 53—60.

⁵ 1 Pet. i. 8.

⁶ Num. xxiii. 10.

If I have taken up too much of your time with this second particular, let the importance of it, and the state of religion amongst us, plead my excuse. Thus far we have advanced,—If it be Wisdom to aim at a great design, and to adopt the most fit and proper means for the accomplishment, the Man my text speaks of is Wise. His End is great, to win souls. The Mean he employs is the Gospel, which God has revealed and instituted for this very purpose, and with which his power and blessing are surely connected by promise.

3. Yet the knowledge of a worthy end, and of the means by which it may be attained, is not sufficient to denominate a wise man. If he be truly wise, and his object of great importance, he will not suffer himself to be easily diverted from it, but will rather hold and manage every inferior concernment, in a due subservience and subordination to his main point. Sir Isaac Newton, when a child, might possibly have amused himself, as many other children have done, by blowing up bubbles in soapy water with a pipe. But it was not a childish amusement in the hands of this sublime genius, when he applied it among other experiments to discover and establish that theory of light and colours, by which, in his admirable System of Optics, he enlightened the world. But if we speak strictly, the most important employments and discoveries of which mankind are capable, if directed no higher than to the concerns of the present life, are trivial and worthless as the sports of children, or the wretched amusements of lunatics,

to an *Immortal*, who is soon, very soon, to pass into the unseen world, to appear before the Judgment Seat of God, and to be fixed, according to his righteous award in a state of endless happiness or misery. The desire of pleasing God, and of doing all to his glory, which *should* be the ultimate end of a rational creature, and *will be*, if he feels his dependance and his obligations, this, like the fabled philosopher's stone, turns every thing into gold, sanctifies the most common actions of life, which belong to the situation in which Divine Providence has placed us, and gives them a sublimity and dignity. Consecrated by this intention, they become acts of devotion. They have a very low idea of religion, who confine it to what we usually mean by devotional exercises. The truly religious man does indeed bow his knees in secret before the Most High God, he carefully consults his Holy Word, he waits upon him in his public ordinances. In these ways he derives fresh supplies from the fountain of Wisdom and Grace, and his strength is renewed. But he does not leave his religion in the closet or the church; it abideth *in him*, is the governing spring of his whole conduct, and according to the degree of his attainment in faith and love, and allowing for the unavoidable abstractions incidental to our frames, (which are too weak and limited to be able to fix our attention closely upon many things at once,) whether he be upon the Throne or the Bench, upon the Parade or the Exchange, whether he be called to serve God in a public capacity, or in private life, whether he be in a

state.

state of affluence, or earns his honest bread by sweeping the streets—in every station and situation he is a servant of God, from morning to night: and these very different services are all equally acceptable to Him, who seeth not as man seeth, and estimates them, not by their comparative importance in our view, but according to the principle of love by which they are performed, and the sublime end to which they are directed.

But we, my brethren, who are Ministers of the Gospel, have this great advantage, (if indeed we improve it,) that our particular calling, as Members of Society, coincides with our general calling as Christians. The person who serves God in a secular calling, may, as I have observed, be equally acceptable to God, because equally devoted to his will; but his advantages and opportunities for winning souls, are not equal to ours. It is our professed and appropriate business; and we are freed from the incumbrances of worldly business, that we may give our whole attention to this very thing. If we are wise, we shall watch and pray against being impeded by any studies and pursuits, which have not an evident tendency to promote our success in winning souls. You have probably heard what is related of the address of whale-fishers, when the whale, irritated by the wounds he has received, attacks their boats. It is said, they have a tub in readiness to throw into the sea, and that, while the whale furiously encounters the tub, the

⁷ Acts vi. 4. 1 Tim. iv. 15, 16.

boat has time to escape. Whether this be fact or not, methinks it may suggest a useful lesson to us. Many things, not criminal in themselves, will prove so to us, if we suffer them, by engrossing too much of our time and thoughts, to divert us from our principal object. It may not be wrong, it may be commendable, for a Minister to possess some general knowledge of Philosophy, History, Criticism, and other branches of literature, or of the controversies which have disturbed the peace of the Church. But *perimus in licitia*. An over attachment to these studies, tho' less scandalous, may prove little less hurtful to our Ministry than the love of pleasure, or the love of money. He who is duly sensible of the importance and difficulty of winning souls, will find but little leisure for sorting shells or butterflies, for studying grammatical niceties, for poring over manuscripts scarcely legible, for decyphering ancient inscriptions, or entangling himself in the dry uninteresting thickets of controversy. He will be careful lest avocations of this kind should prove like the tubs I have mentioned, amusements to divert his attention from the state of souls around him, who are in danger of perishing in ignorance and sin. We are set as watchmen to sound the alarm, to warn the wicked of their evil ways, to direct enquirers into the paths of peace, to point out the snares and temptations to which they are exposed, to exhort and charge those who profess the truth, that they walk worthy of God who has called them to his kingdom and glory, in a word to

use our best endeavours publicly, and from house to house', in season, and out of season; to build up our hearers in their most holy faith. We are to give an account of the talents, opportunities, and souls entrusted to us, and we should tremble at the thought of being then obliged to confess, while thy servant was busy here and there, the man was⁹ gone. If such an eminent servant of God as Archbishop Usher, though possessed of the faith and hope of the gospel, found cause, when reviewing his past life on his dying bed, to cry out repeatedly and earnestly, Lord, forgive my sins of omission! how jealous ought we to be of ourselves! It behoves us to use the language of Nehemiah, to many proposals and pursuits which our inclinations may plead for, "I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down. Why should the work cease, while I leave it, and come' down to you." Seldom is any man remarkably successful and eminent, in arts or sciences, in the acquisition of wealth or power, who does not resolutely deny himself in other respects, and make every secondary point give place, so far as it stands in competition with his leading and favourite object. Such a determined resolution, to follow the vowed design of our calling as the *One thing*, in comparison with which, every thing else is to be undervalued and neglected, if likely to hinder us, is essential to that wisdom, which alone can qualify us for winning souls.

Acts xx. 10. 2 Tim. iv. 2.

⁹ 1 Kings xx. 40.

Neh. vi. 3.

4. This Wisdom implies Fortitude also. If we engage in this work without counting the cost, and without being apprized of the difficulties and snares to which it may expose us, or if we cannot, in some measure, say with the Apostle, *None of these things move me*, we shall probably be soon discouraged. What should we think of a Statesman, who, having formed a wise and noble plan for the benefit of a kingdom, and having the means, necessary to accomplish it, within his power, should be deterred from carrying it into execution, though it was approved by all competent judges, merely because he could not bear to be misunderstood, or misrepresented, by the very lowest of the people, or by the children who play in the street? His want of spirit, upon such supposition, would doubtless be esteemed want of wisdom. But this is a faint representation of our folly, if, believing ourselves to be the servants of God, being convinced, we say, of the worth and danger souls, and knowing that the Gospel of God, committed to our trust², is the only possible mean of their recovery; a regard to the fear or favour of men should prevail on us to suppress or soften our message, and to accommodate ourselves to their taste, instead of conforming to our instructions, lest we should displease them. Would an earthly king bear with an ambassador who was guilty of such timid treachery? We cannot, my brethren, think too humbly of ourselves, but we may magnify our office, and we ought

² Acts xx. 23.

³ 1 Thess. ii. 4.

In this sense, at least, we are ambassadors for Christ⁴, that the message we are to deliver, is not ours, but His, by whom we are sent. We are not answerable for the success, but we are under the strongest obligation to be faithful. And He whose we are, and whom we serve, is well able to support us. Let us not fear the reproach of men, nor be afraid of their revilings⁵. In the sight of our Lord God, all the nations of the earth, collected, are less than nothing, and vanity, inconsiderable as the drop which falls unperceived from the bucket, or the dust⁶ which cleaves to the scales without affecting the balance. The Apostles were wise to win souls. They tried the spirit of the world before us, and were despised and insulted by it. They were accounted the off-scouring and filth of all things, and suffered much shame for their Lord's sake⁷; but they esteemed shame, in such a cause, their highest honour. Jesus endured the Cross, and despised the shame, for them and for us. He was buffeted, spit upon, treated as a madman, a demoniac, and laughed to scorn. Let us go forth bearing his reproach, in meekness of wisdom instructing those who oppose, not rendering railing for railing, but pitying and praying for them: but let us be firm and unmoved, and not hesitate to speak the truth in love, whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear. We shall not speak wholly in vain; and to be instrumental in saving one soul from death, is

⁴ 2 Cor. v. 20.

⁵ Isa. li. 7.

⁶ Isa. xl. 15.

⁷ 1 Cor. iv. 13. Acts v. 41.

an honour, sufficient to compensate for all the slights and contempt we can meet with from an unkind world. It is, indeed, our duty to study to find out acceptable words, to endeavour to please men for their edification, and to be careful not to add to the unavoidable offence of the Gospel, by debasing our zeal with the unhallowed fire of an angry spirit: but we degrade our character, if we appear too solicitous to conciliate the good opinion of men, or to depend upon their favour. The Lord who employs us, will take care of us; and to live in a spirit of unreserved dependance upon Him, will raise us to a noble independence, with respect to creatures. All hearts are in His hands: He will protect our persons and characters, supply our wants, controul our enemies, and raise us friends, so far as He sees it needful, without any sollicitude on our parts, if we can but put our trust in Him. Such are the principles of Christian fortitude. He who is wise to win souls, loves his fellow-creatures, but he cannot fear them, because he fears the Lord. He will neither provoke nor dread their frowns, nor will he meanly court their smiles. He knows, that if they receive his message, they will love him for the truth's sake, and he neither expects nor desires their favour upon other terms. By the Cross of Christ he is crucified to the world,⁸ and the world to him. He has chosen his side. He will serve the Lord,⁹ and he will use his utmost influence to prevail on others to serve

⁸ Gal. vi. 14.

⁹ Joshua xxiv. 25.

him likewise ; so far as he succeeds, he feels a joy superior to the joy of harvest, or of those who divide⁹ the spoil. When he cannot succeed, he is grieved, but not disconcerted ; and, for the most part, his calm but steadfast perseverance in well-doing, will gradually establish his character, stop the mouth of calumny, and extort a reverence to his person, even from those who cannot bear his doctrine.

5. I shall mention but one particular more, which, though experience shews to be not so absolutely necessary, as those, which, I have already specified because, in fact, it has been too little regarded by many who have been wise to win souls ; yet is certainly a branch of that wisdom which, as Ministers, we ought incessantly to ask of God. I mean, a due attention to the importance of Union among those who are engaged in the same cause. A great stress has indeed been often laid upon uniformity of sentiment, and modes of worship ; but this, in the present state of human nature, can no more be effected either by force or persuasion, than men can be forced or persuaded to a uniformity of stature or complexion : and if it were practicable, it might prove of little value. The form of Religion may be strenuously contended for, by those who are strangers to the power of it ; but the best form we can conceive, if destitute of power, is lifeless, like the body without the soul. The true unity of spirit is derived from the things, in which,

⁹ Isa. ix. 3.

those, who are taught and born of God, agree, and should not be affected by those in which they differ. The Church of Christ, collectively considered, is an army; they serve under one Prince, have one common interest, and are opposed by the same enemies. This army is kept up, and the places of those who are daily removed to the Church triumphant, supplied, entirely by those who are rescued and won from the power of the enemy, which is chiefly effected by the Gospel Ministry. This consideration should remind Ministers, that it is highly improper, I might use a stronger expression, to waste much of their time and talents, which ought to be employed against the common foe, in opposing those, who, though they cannot exactly agree with them in every smaller point, are perfectly agreed, and ready to concur with them, in promoting their principal design. A wise Statesman, who has a point much at heart, which he cannot carry without assistance, will gladly accept of help from persons of all parties on whom he can prevail to join with him, and will not, at such a crisis, preclude himself from this advantage by an unseasonable discussion of more minute concerns, in which he knows they must, and will, be against him. When I see Ministers of acknowledged piety and respectable abilities very busy in defending or confuting the smallest differences, which already too much separate those, who ought to be of one heart and one mind, though, while they are all fallible, they cannot be exactly of one judgment; though I give them credit for their good intention, cannot

cannot but lament the misapplication of their zeal, which, if directed into another channel, would probably make them much more successful in winning souls. Let us sound an alarm in the enemies camp, but not in our own! I have somewhere met with a passage of ancient history, the substance of which, tho' my recollection of it is but imperfect, I will relate, because I think it very applicable to this part of my subject. It is an account of two large bodies of forces, which fell in with each other in a dark night. A battle immediately ensued. The attack and the resistance were supported with equal spirit. The contest was fierce and bloody. Great was the slaughter on both sides, and on both sides they were on the point of claiming the victory; when the day broke, and, as the light advanced, they soon perceived, to their astonishment and grief, that, owing to the darkness of the night, they had been fighting, not with enemies as they had supposed, but with friends and allies: they had been doing their enemies work, and weakening the cause they wished to support. The expectation of each party to conquer the other, was founded upon the losses the opponents had sustained; and this was what proportionably aggravated their lamentation and distress, when they had sufficient light to shew them the mischief they had done. Ah! my friends, if shame be compatible with the heavenly state, as perhaps in a sense it may, (for believers, when most happy here, are most sensibly ashamed of themselves,) shall we not, even then, be ashamed, to think how often, in

this dark world, we mistook our friends for foes; and that, while we thought we were fighting for the cause of God and truth, we were wounding and worrying the people whom he loved, and perhaps indulging our own narrow, selfish, party prejudices, under the semblance of zeal for his glory.

II.

I hope what I have hitherto offered, though more directly addressed to Ministers, may not be altogether uninteresting or unuseful to the rest of my auditory; but you, who are not in the Ministry, if you have tasted that the Lord is gracious, have a desire, in common with us, to win souls. And there is not only ample room and scope for your endeavours, in concert with ours, but, without concurrence on your parts, we can expect but little success. You, likewise, if animated by the wisdom which is from above, even those of you who are in the most confined situations, may be greatly instrumental in winning souls.

1. By your example. If you walk agreeably to your profession, blameless and harmless as the children of God, shining as lights in the world². When we preach a free salvation by the blood of Jesus, they, who know no better, misrepresent our doctrine, as being unfavourable to the practice of morality, supposing, that by the stress we lay upon faith in his atonement, as the only solid ground of hope for acceptance with God, we

² Phill. ii. 15.

encourage men to expect to be saved at last, whether they obey his commandments or not. We endeavour to convince them of this mistake, and to prove, that as without faith it is impossible to please God³; so it is no less impossible for any person to possess true faith, without earnestly endeavouring to please and obey him in all things, from principles of love and gratitude. The proof of this is easy, to those who understand the Scriptures and acknowledge their Divine Authority. But many, yea, most people, are more likely to be convinced by what they observe of you, than by what they hear from us. We assure them that our gospel teaches those who receive it, to renounce all ungodliness and worldly lusts, to live soberly,⁴ righteously and godly; to be temperate in prosperity, patient under affliction; to fill up their several relations in life with integrity and diligence; to be cheerfully submissive to the will of God under all changes; to be meek, gentle and benevolent, forbearing and forgiving; in a word, to do, in all cases, to others, as we would they should do unto us⁵. Happy for us, if when we look abroad upon our hearers, we can with confidence say, *Ye are our epistles, known and read of all men*. If any ask us concerning the tendency of our doctrines, shall we send them to you, that they may notice, not only your serious and constant attendance upon public worship, but the good order of your families, your beha-

³ Heb. xi. 6.⁴ Titus ii. 12.⁵ Matt. vii. 12.

2 Cor. iii. 2.

viour as husbands or wives, parents or children, masters or servants, your punctuality in business, and to all your engagements and promises, and the tenderness you discover to the characters and concerns of your neighbours. Shall we send them to you, when you are in trouble, when you are visited with sickness and strong pain, or when the desire of your eyes is taken away with a stroke, that they may see with their own eyes and be satisfied, that you have neither followed cunningly devised fables nor contented yourselves with mere lifeless notions of the truth; but that your religion is real and powerful, and not only inspires you with a good hope respecting a future state, but is the source of your comfort, and the spring of your conduct, in the present life? May we venture, my friends, to make this appeal? Then undoubtedly you are wise to win souls. A profession like yours cannot be without an influence within your own circle. Do any persons, who know your whole deportment, affect to scorn or pity you? If they treat you as hypocrites, they are hypocrites themselves; they are contradicted by their own consciences. I will not say they love you, but be assured they secretly reverence you. It is only the trifling half professor, who hears the gospel and talks about it, but dishonours it by his practice, whom the world really despise. And who can blame them for despising such characters? But, alas for those, who, by their causing the ways of truth to be evil spoken of, lay stumbling-blocks before the blind.^s

⁷ Ezek. xxiv. 16.

^s Levit. xix. 14.

The effects of a consistent conversation becoming the gospel in those who profess it, were remarkably exemplified in the first Christian Church at Jerusalem. They were apparently like sheep without a shepherd, sheep in the midst of wolves. They were surrounded by the very people who had lately murdered their Lord. But the holiness, love, joy, peace, union and simplicity, which animated their conduct, impressed an awe upon the beholders, so that no poor pretender durst presume to join them; and though divested of all outward advantages and support, the people were constrained to magnify them. Were this spirit more general amongst us, I believe it would be more effectual to stop the mouths of gainfayers, and to silence the cavils of infidels, than all our books and sermons. And the twelve Apostles, were they now living amongst us, would probably preach to little purpose, unless a measure of this spirit, were discoverable in their professed admirers.

2. By your prayers. You are not called to preach the Gospel, but, in this way, you may greatly assist those who are. Brethren, pray for us. Our work is great; the difficulties we have to surmount, the snares and temptations which surround us, and our infirmities, are many. Who is sufficient for these things? The Apostle Paul, distinguished as he was by the eminence of his grace, experience and services, set a high value upon the prayers of God's people. Hear how he pleads with them,

• Acts v. 13.

with

with an earnestness, like that of a needy beggar requesting alms: *I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that you strive together in your prayers to God for me*¹. And pray, *That the word of the Lord may have free course, may run and be glorified*². The Lord has promised to do great things for his people, but he has said *That he will be inquired of by them, to do it for them*³. Prize, and improve, your great privilege of access to the throne of Grace, by which every believer in Jesus, like Israel of old, has power with God and with man. In answer to effectual fervent prayer, the army of Sennacherib⁴ was destroyed in a night, and Peter was delivered from a strong prison, and from the malice of Herod⁵. The efficacy of prayer is still the same. If the Lord were pleased to pour out a spirit of prayer and supplication upon his people, we should find our public ordinances more lively and more fruitful: We should then hope to be more successful in winning souls, and *you* might justly claim a principal share in the comfort and honour, of seeing that good works prosper, to the success of which, your prayers would largely contribute. Next to the immediate assistance and consolations of the Holy Spirit, nothing encourages a faithful Minister so much, as when he thinks he can perceive that, while he is speaking, his hearers are drawing down a blessing upon his words, by their prayers: it adds wings to his

¹ Rom. xv. 30. ² 2 Thess. iii. 1. ³ Ezek. xxxvi. 37.
⁴ Isa. xxxvii. 21, 36. ⁵ Acts xii. 5, 12.

zeal, gives him a double impression upon his own heart, of the weight and importance of the truths he delivers; and enables him to dispense them with a double impression, of demonstration and power, upon the hearts of others.

3. By affording your countenance and assistance, according to the ability the Lord has given you, to promote every prudent and well-directed scheme, which is set on foot, for the more effectual spreading of that knowledge, which is necessary in order to win souls, from the dominion of sin, to the service of God. Among these there are few, if any, which I can more warrantably commend to your attention, than the laudable and benevolent object of the Society for promoting Religious Knowledge among the Poor:—an institution which it has pleased God signally to prosper, both by the large increase of their fund from year to year, and the many instances of the known happy effects, which have followed the perusal of the books they have distributed. Many more instances, as yet unknown to us, we trust will be manifested in the great day, when the Lord shall appear in glory. Though the beginning of this Society was small, they have, since the year 1750, when it was first formed, distributed more than four hundred thousand books, upwards of one hundred and five thousand of which were Bibles and New Testaments; the rest were small and plain books, well adapted to the capacities and circumstances, of those who have, mostly, but a confined education, and who have not much time for reading. The number of books bestowed annually has
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been

been on the increase from year to year. In the course of the last year, according to the printed account, the number, of all the different books, was fifteen thousand five hundred and eighty. How much these donations may have multiplied the means of religious knowledge, among people otherwise destitute, in these kingdoms, in our plantations, and in America, who can say, who can even conjecture? And we hope, by the benefactions of this year, the Society will be able to do more the following year than in any former. People, who are in danger of perishing for lack of knowledge, are still very numerous. The much which has been done, is little, compared with what the Society might yet do, were their resources equal to their wishes. I trust, my request, that you will strengthen their hands at this time, will not be in vain; and that the brief account I have given you of their design and progress, will render farther solicitation needless. To bespeak the benevolence of my stated congregation, when a collection is proposed, I seldom do more than inform them of the occasion, and that it has my good wishes. After the repeated proofs I have had of their generosity, I need do no more. Nor will I suppose, that it is necessary to use any farther arguments to prevail with you.

There may be some persons present, who will kindly assist us in procuring the means of religious knowledge for others, who are, hitherto unacquainted with the power, and the comfort of Religion, themselves. May the good Lord now awaken their desires to obtain the one

thing needful, the pearl of great price. That knowledge which is necessary for the poor, is equally so for you, whatever your situation in life may be. Will you pity others, and not feel a concern for your own case? You may deserve thanks from us, for your ready assistance in this good work, and yet your heart may be in a state of alienation from God; you may have amiable qualifications, which entitle you to the esteem of your fellow-creatures, as you are members of society, and be, at the same time, destitute of the faith and hope of the Gospel. Permit me, before we part, to offer one consideration to your serious thought. We read, that eight persons⁶ only were saved in the ark, and only four of these, Noah and his three sons, were men. Considering the large dimensions of the ark, I think we may take it for granted, that Noah and his sons did not build it without assistance: and there were no men to assist them in escaping from the flood, but such as afterwards perished in it. What an awful case! To afford their help to build an ark for the preservation of others, and then to remain out of the ark themselves, until the flood came and swept them all away. There is a day of wrath approaching. It will burn like an oven; it will ravage like a flood. The Gospel points out a refuge. The believer in Jesus Christ, like Noah in the ark, is in perfect safety: he is already delivered from condemnation, and shall stand before the Lord in humble confidence, when he shall come to

⁶ 1 Pct. iii. 20.

judge the world. Your concurrence in this charitable design of distributing Bibles among the poor, that they may be timely warned to flee from the wrath to come, is commendable :— thus you assist in preparing an ark for them; the very book or books which your money will purchase, may be blessed to the saving souls, and consequently you may be the instrument. Can you bear the thought of being instrumental to the salvation of others, and to lose your own soul, and be yourself a cast-away at last, after all the means and opportunities you have been favoured with, after all the warnings and calls you have had, after all the good you may have done, as a member of society.—Alas ! is it possible that you can believe there is a flood coming, and that an ark is prepared, and not flee, instantly flee, for refuge, to the hope set before you ? Oh ! may the Lord make you truly wise, and effectually win your soul to himself.

Brethren, the wisdom spoken of in my text is very different from the wisdom of this world, which knows not God. But the Scripture cannot be broken ; let us therefore abide by the sure decision of that *word* which cannot deceive or disappoint us. They are truly wise, who are wise to win souls ; and though they may be now obscured by misrepresentations and reproaches—they shall shine, ere long, as the brightness of the firmament⁷, and they shall turn many to righteousness, as the stars, for ever and ever.

⁷ Dan. xii. 13.

F I N I S.