

MAN REGARDED, BUT GOD DESPISED.

Robert Murray M'Cheyne:

"If I be a father, where is mine honour?"—MAL. i. 6.

The first conviction that is essential to the conversion of the soul, is conviction of sin; not the general conviction that all men are sinful, but the personal conviction that I am an undone sinner; not the general conviction that other men must be forgiven or perish, but the personal conviction that I must be forgiven or perish. Now, there is no greater barrier in the way of this truth being impressed on the soul than the felt consciousness of possessing many virtues. We cannot be persuaded that the image of God has been so completely effaced from our souls as the Bible tells us, when we feel within ourselves, and see exhibited in others, what may almost be termed godlike virtues. The heroes of whom we have read in history, with their love of country, and contempt of death—their constancy in friendship, and fidelity in affection—seem to rise up before us to plead the cause of injured humanity. And what is more baffling, our every-day experience of the kindness of hospitality—the flowings of unbounded generosity—the compassion that weeps because another weeps, and all this among men that care not for Christ and his salvation, seems to raise a barrier impregnable against the truth, that man is conceived in sin and shapen in iniquity. When we enter one cottage door, and see a whole company of brothers and sisters melted into tears at the sight of a dying sister's agonies; or when we enter another door, and see the tenderness of a mother's affection toward her sick infant in her bosom; or when we see, in a third family, the cheerful obedience which the children pay to an aged father; or, in a fourth family, the scrupulous integrity with which the servant manages the affairs of an earthly master, we are ready to as, 'Is this indeed a world of sin? is it possible that the wrath of God can be in store for such a world?' It will be very generally granted, that there are some men so utterly worthless and incorrigible—so far gone in the ways of desperate wickedness, that nothing else is to be expected for them, but an eternity of hopeless misery. There is a crew of abandoned profligates, who scoff at the very name of God and religion. There are atheists, who openly deny his very being—infidels, who openly deny that Christ came in the flesh. There are cold-blooded murderers, and worse than murderers, who are confessed by all to be a disgrace to the name of man. For these, few would dare to plead exemption from the awful vengeance that awaits the ungodly. So that there is a felt reasonableness in the dreadful words: "The abominable, and murderers, and whore-mongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone." But that the obedient child, and the faithful servant—the tenderly affectionate mother—the hospitable and generous neighbour—the man of intelligence and good feeling—that all these should ever be bound up in the same bundle of destruction, and consigned to the same eternal flames, merely because they do not believe in Jesus—this is the rock of offence on which thousands stumble and fall, to their inevitable ruin.

There is, perhaps, no way more commonly used by man to repel all the personal convictions of sin which the Word of God would cast on us. For do I not feel within me all the tender affections of humanity—all the honesties and integrities of our nature? Do not I feel pleasure in being honest and fair-dealing—in being compassionate, and generous, and hospitable? How, plainly, then, may I say to my soul: "Soul, take thine ease"? These virtues of thine are a sure token that thou art born for a blessed eternity. Ah! my friends, is it not a most blessed thing that, in the passage now before us, God wrests from our hand the very weapon wherewith we would defend ourselves, and turns it with a shaft to pierce our worldly conscience? And oh! if we had minds as intelligent as when Adam walked with God in paradise, nothing more would be necessary to carry to our hearts the overwhelming conviction of sin than the repetition of the words: "A son honoureth his father, and a servant his master: if then I be a father, where is mine honour? and if I be a master, where is my fear? saith the Lord of hosts unto you." There is power and pathos in this argument, which might well break down the hardest and most unfeeling mind; it is as if God had said, as he elsewhere doth: "'Come and let us reason together." You say that you have many excellent virtues—that you have tender and beautiful affections; you say that filial and parental love occupy a master-piece in your bosom—that integrity and unsullied honesty beat high in your breast. And do I deny all this? Shall I detract from the glory of my own handiwork, so beautiful, even in ruins? No, it is all true; the son does honour his father—the servant is faithful to his master; all is beautiful, when I look only to the earthly relationships. But that is the very thing which shows the utter derangement of all the heavenly relationships; for, "If I then be a father, where is mine honour? If I be a master, where is my fear? saith the Lord of hosts unto you." I see that you honour your earthly fathers, and serve faithfully your earthly masters; but that is the very thing which shows me that I am the exception. I see that there is not a father in the whole universe that is deprived of the love of his children, but myself—there is not a master under heaven that is robbed of the honour and service of his domestics as I am. If, brethren, you and I were sunk into actual brutality—if we had no love for parents—no honesty to masters—then God might have had cause to say of us, that nothing better could be expected from such wretches, than that we should forget our heavenly Father and Master. But oh! when there are such tender affections in our bosoms towards our earthly relations, is not our sin written as with an iron pen, and with lead in the rock for ever, that we make

God the exception—that we are godless in the world ?

I would, with all affection and tenderness, beseech every one of you to search his own heart, and see if these things be not so,—see if that which you generally take for the excuse of your sins, be not the very essence of them. What would you not do, what would you not suffer, for the sake of an earthly parent ? and yet you will not expend so much as a thought, or the breathing of a desire, for your heavenly Parent. God is not in all your thoughts. You will toil night and day in behalf of an earthly master ; yet you will not do a hand's turn for your heavenly Master. God is the only parent whom you dishonour ; God is the only master whom you wrong. "If you were blind, you should have no sin ; but now it is plain you see, therefore your sin remaineth." If you were incapable of affections or fidelity, then you should have no sin ; but now it is plain you are capable of both, therefore your sin remaineth. Imagine a family of brothers and sisters all bound together by the ties of the closest amity and affections. Oh ! it is a good and pleasant sight to see brethren dwell together in unity. "It is like precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard, that went down to the skirts of his garments. It is as the dew of Hermon, that descended upon the mountains of Zion." What will they not do for one another ? what will they not suffer for each other ? But imagine, again, that all this unity, which is so much like the temper of heaven, was maintained among them, whilst all the while they were united in despising the tender mother that bore them—in turning away from, and forsaking the grey-haired father that had brought up every one of them. Would not this one feature in the picture change all its beauty and all its interest ? Would it not make their unity more like that of devils than that of angels ? Would you not say, that their affection for one another was the very thing which made their disaffection to their parents hateful and most unnatural ? Oh ! brethren, the picture is a picture of us : "A son honoureth his father, and a servant his master : if then I be a father, where is mine honour ? and if I be a master, where is my fear ? saith the Lord of hosts unto you."

It is a fearful thing, when our very virtues, to which we flee for refuge against the wrath of God, turn round most fiercely to condemn us. What avail your honesties,—what avail your filial attachments,—what avail your domestic virtues, which the world so much admire, and praise you for, if, in the sight of God, these are all the while enhancing your ungodliness ? Let no man misunderstand me, as if I had said that it was a bad thing to be honest, to be faithful and just, and affectionate to parents. Every sensible man knows the value of these earthly virtues, and how much they are invigorated and enlarged, and begin a new life, as it were, when the worldly man becomes a believer. But this I do say, that if thou hast nothing more than these earthly virtues, they will, every one of them, rise in the judgment only to condemn thee, I say only what the mighty Luther said before me, that these virtues of thine, whereby thou thinkest to build thy Babel tower to heaven, are but the splendid sins of humanity ; and that they will only serve to cast thee down into tenfold deeper condemnation. God doth not charge you, brethren, with dishonesty, with disobedience to parents. The only charge which he brings against you here, is the one long sin of the natural man's life—ungodliness. God is not in all your thoughts. He admits that you have earthly virtues ; but these just make blacker and more indelible your sins against heaven.