

SERMON XVII.

Self-examination recommended.

Preached at a monthly Exercise
in the Year 1744.

By
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Jeremiah viii. 6.

I hearkened and heard, but they spake not aright: no man repented him of his wickedness, saying, What have I done? every one turned to his course, as the horse rusheth into the battle.

THE importance of the work we are professedly engaged in this day, will by no means admit that I spend your time in a large explication of the context. It is sufficient to observe, that God was now reasoning the point with his people : they had sinned, and greatly rebelled against him, and their provocations were attended with most heinous aggravations: he was coming out of his place to execute judgment against them, which he had often threatened, in case of their continuance in disobedience. And, though there were awful signatures of his resentment already upon them, but few comparatively attended to them, and laid them to heart. So that God seems to be speaking after the manner of men, as surprised at their obstinacy and stupidity and yet mercy being his delight, and judgment his strange work, there seems to be some relenting and an unwillingness to proceed to extremities, I hearkened and heard: these are expressions after our manner, and are to be understood with security to the glory of the divine immensity and prescience. God, as it were, stooped down from heaven, bent his ear in a way of attention to their discourse, to know whether there were any righteous holy persons among them, any who were lamenting over their own sins, or exciting one another to acts of solemn humiliation, for the transgressions of the people., But none of them spake aright: that is, none, is compared with the great multitude who spake against God, or whose lips uttered vanity and falsehood. No man repented him of his wickedness,

saying, What have I done? Every one was ready to shift off guilt from himself; but few, very few, hardly any mourned over their own iniquities; on the contrary, almost every one turned to his own course, turned a way from God, from all advice and reproof, to his own course of folly and rebellion, according to his particular appetite and inclinations, and this with impetuous violence, like the horse rushing into the battle, not knowing it was to the hazard of his life. From the words, thus opened, we may,

First, observe, that sin, in every instance of it, is evil in the sight of God, and most hurtful to the souls of men; its wickedness is great, in the account of an infinitely wise and holy judge, and will cost the sinner dear, either in the bitterness of repentance in this world, or everlasting misery in the world to come. The original word, which we render wickedness in the text, signifies, what divines call *malum culpae & poena*, both criminal evil, and the punishment of it. And most true it is that there is the essence of the one, and the desert of the other, in every violation of the law of God. Many sins may appear to us little and inconsiderable, but there is not one of them, but which is abominable in the sight of God, and exposes the guilty creature to the curse of his law, and to the fury of his indignation. The wages of sin is death¹. Further,

Secondly, every man hath his own wickedness.—No man repented him of his wickedness. There are some sins which may be more properly said to be a man's own sins, or as the apostle Paul says, the sins which do easily beset us;² to which, by constitution, or situation, we are most inclined, or most exposed. It is true indeed of all the transgressions we commit, that we are personally charged with the guilt of them, and must answer for them before God. But how apt are we to soften the language, when we are speaking of our own sins? This is a common case: what men call wickedness in others, they are ready to stile unavoidable failures, or mere human infirmities in themselves. But let us remember, that sin found with us is as real wickedness, as when committed by others; as hateful to God, yea, is possible, more so in professors, than in the profane. Sin as sin, abstractedly considered, where ever it is found is infinitely odious in the pure eyes of that God with whom we have to do: but a profession of religion aggravates it greatly. Moreover,

¹ Romans 6:23

² Hebrews 12:1

Thirdly, we may further observe that, though we cannot make satisfaction to God for our sins, it is our indispensable duty, and, when enabled by his Spirit, a very great and invaluable mercy to repent of them. Or, as the original word signifies to grieve for them, as having changed our minds concerning them. God complains in the text, that no man repented him of his wickedness: plainly suggesting that this ought to have been the case. And what more reasonable than that a creature wholly dependent upon his Maker, and infinitely obliged to his goodness, when he hath ungratefully departed from him, and rebelled against him, should repent, or, as Solomon expresses it, bethink himself and turn to the Lord, saying, “ I have sinned, I have done amiss, I have dealt wickedly ³; but, won over by thy grace, I would return to thee with all my heart, and with all my soul: hear thou from the heavens, even from thy dwelling place, and forgive thy servant who hath sinned against thee ⁴. And, for our encouragement, there is very special notice taken of the true penitent by God, who, though' he is the high and lofty one that inhabiteth eternity ⁵, yet he saith to this man will I look, even to him that is poor, and of a contrite Spirit, and trembleth at my words. ⁶ So, in the text, God hearkened and heard whether any spake aright, and repented him of his wickedness. The expression may not only intimate the accuracy of the inquiry, but the great pleasure God takes in it. Wherever this is truly the case, he says, I have surely heard Ephraim bemoaning himself thus, thou hast chastised me, and I was chastised as a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke: turn thou me, and I shall be turned for thou art the Lord my God. Surely after that I was turned, I repented; and after that I was instructed, I smote upon my thigh : I was ashamed, yea, even confounded, because I did bear the reproach of my youth ⁷. In what melting, pathetic language doth God speak upon Ephraim's making this acknowledgement? Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he a pleasant child? For since I spake against him, I do earnestly remember him still: therefore my bowels are troubled for him; I will surely have mercy upon him, saith the Lord ⁸. Thus, in order to repentance of the right kind, it is absolutely necessary that things should be brought home to ourselves, each of us saying, “*What have I done?* Wherein have I departed from the Lord? What am I chargeable with in his sight? “God hearkened and heard, but they spake not aright. Many might be making acknowledgements

³ 2 Chronicles 6:37

⁴ Verse 39

⁵ Isaiah 57:15

⁶ Chapter 66:2

⁷ Jeremiah 31:18-19

⁸ Jeremiah 31:20

of the iniquities of the public, and of a general departure from God; but none repented him of his own wickedness, saying, *what have I done?*

And thus I am brought to what I had chiefly in view in the choice of these words, I mean the great duty of self-examination, in order to humiliation and repentance. If ever we would rightly humble ourselves before God, we must, every one of us, put this question to his own soul, *What have I done?* That this is our duty, will not be disputed in the theory, how much so ever it be neglected in the practice. We are to commune with our own hearts, to examine ourselves, to prove our own selves⁹. We are to look back upon the words of our lips, the actions of our lives, and the ways we have walked in and not only so but we must enquire into the frames, the dispositions, and workings of our hearts, in order to discover of what kind, and nature they have been, whether good or evil. As to the manner of the performance of this duty,

1. It should be done secretly, or in our retirements, at a distance from the business, the noise, and hurry of the world; where no eye sees us, but that of the great God. A merchant is not willingly interrupted when he is settling his accounts, and casting up his books. The most desirable company, and the most welcome at other times, is then unseasonable. And thus we should say to the world and every thing in it, keep at a distance till the enquiry is finished. Far be it from me to suggest that a Christian should live out of the world, and throw up all his temporal concerns, in order to devote his life wholly to meditation and reflection. But there are some seasons in which he is called to be alone some things which are to pass between him and his own soul, as well as betwixt God and him, things that will admit of no earthly witness. And when this is the case, every thing else should stand still. And, by the way, it is a sorrowful sign, that the affairs of our souls are but in a bad condition, when we are afraid, or unwilling to go into our retirements, and enter into a close examination of ourselves.

2. This duty calls for great seriousness of spirit; for it is a business of the last: importance, and therefore should be attended with suitable solemnity. The honor of God is nearly concerned, as our lawgiver and judge. It is no trifling affair when we come, as under the eye of an infinitely righteous and heart searching God to say, *What have I done?* Moreover, the importance of the enquiry should make us search with the utmost

⁹ 2 Corinthians 13:5

deliberation, and with the severest strictness and impartiality. It is not enough that we recall the matter of our actions, but the manner, principle, and end of them are to be attended to; what knowledge we have sinned against, what convictions of our own consciences, and how often we have resisted the Spirit of God; what professions we have made, and what obligations we have been laid under to live to God, and walk closely with him, and the like. The self love, that is found with every one of us, may tempt us to put more favorable constructions on things than we ought; as on the other hand, unbelief, and the malice of Satan may swell the charge beyond measure, and aggravate circumstances beyond the truth. But the word of God is to be our rule of judging : this is the grand directory of obedience ; every deviation from the precept is evil: the law of the Lord is pure, and spiritual, reaching to the inward man ; to our desires and affections as well as our words and actions ; and, if we would come to a right knowledge of ourselves, we must, with the psalmist, lift up our voice to the Lord, and say, " Search me, O God, and " know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: thou, whose eye nothing can escape, shew me, every evil that is in me, or hath been committed by me, and lead me in the way everlasting." ¹⁰

Once more,

3. The enquiry should be entered upon with a determination, in the strength of grace, to charge ourselves with every evil we discover, to take shame to ourselves for it, to judge and condemn ourselves, and to apply to the fountain of Christ's blood for pardon, and to his Spirit for cleansing, and preservation, for the time to come. Duty is enjoined, not merely to throw a man into confusion, much less to drive him to despair; but to make him loath himself in his own eyes; to bring him to acknowledge the mercy and forbearance of God; that Christ may be exalted in the character of a Saviour; and that, under deep conviction of guilt and unworthiness, the soul may fly for refuge to him, and shelter itself, under the shadow of his wings. Nor can the case be so bad, where the heart is right with God, and solicitous to pass a righteous sentence on itself, as to admit of no relief. The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin: ¹¹ and we have promises from the God of truth, that if, from an humble and an heart affecting sense of the error of our ways, we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness ¹². There is no man that lives, and

¹⁰ Psalm 139:23, 24

¹¹ 1 John 1:7

¹² Verse 9

sinneth not ¹³ if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous ¹⁴ we have a fountain set open, to which faith may apply with comfortable assurance, that God, for Christ's sake, will forgive all our sins, and heal all our backslidings. Neither can we regularly come at comfort, I mean such as God gives and approves, but as having first judged ourselves, and acknowledged our guilt. Thus I have considered the duty itself, with the manner of its performance.

I go on to observe, that there are some seasons in which we are more especially called to attend to it. As,

1. When conscience is stirring, and charging us with any new guilt, instead of putting off an enquiry, we should endeavor immediately to enter upon it. It is a wonderful instance of the wisdom of God, that he hath lighted up this candle in the breast of every man ; and though, through the fall, this light is greatly impaired, and, till sanctified by the Spirit of God, it will not regularly and effectually do its office ; yet there is not a man in our world, except those who are given over to judicial blindness, whose confidences are seared as with a hot iron, but feels it accusing him more or less, at one time or other, for the evil he commits. But an enlightened and a tender conscience is peculiar to the saints; and when this speaks it is the voice of God, and ought immediately to be attended to. When perhaps we have hastily concluded a matter, or unwarily taken this or the other step, we have often had a sudden whisper in the soul, this is not right you have not done well. Whenever this is the case, the believer should immediately retire, and take a careful and serious survey of his temper or conduct, compare it with the rule, and judge himself accordingly. This is the way to maintain peace in the conscience, and a method which God greatly owns for the advantage, and improvement of his servants. Let us then be willing our own minds should charge us, when there is a proper call for it: and, on every such occasion, let us seriously enquire, *What have I done?*

2. When any thing unusual befalls us, as to our persons, families, or friends, which hath the appearance of chastisement, and looks as though God was displeased with us. In time of affliction we are to consider what may be the voice of God, wherefore he is contending with us, whether we have not provoked him by some neglect of duty, or commission of evil. It is certain

¹³ 1 Kings 8:46

¹⁴ 1 John 2:1

God may exercise his people with affliction for the trial and improvement of their graces: but, upon strict inquiry, we shall find guilt enough in us at all times, to justify him in his afflictive dealings with us; and sometimes he may point at some particular instances of it by his rod. And when this is discerned, we should take up the language of the church, and say, I will bear the indignation of the Lord, because I have sinned against him ¹⁵. Elihu's description of a sick man is full of instruction to our purpose. He is chastened, says he, with pain upon his bed, and the multitude of his bones with strong pain: so that his bones abhorreth bread, and his soul dainty meat. His flesh is consumed away,—and his soul draweth near to the grave ¹⁶. To which he adds, that in this the Lord looketh upon men, and is any say, I have sinned, and perverted that which was right, and it profited me not : he will deliver his soul from going into the pity and his life shall see the light ¹⁷. It is highly proper that God should be justified in all his ways, as well those of rebuke, as those of mercy; and when the hand of the Lord is upon us, or upon any that are dear to us, we should say, Behold we are vile, shew us wherefore thou contendest with us.

3. When God hides his face from us, and we seek him in the way of his appointments, and find him not; when those duties and ordinances, which have formerly been eminently owned for our consultation and joy, are now become barren and uncomfortable; surely every child of God who values the presence of his Father, and hath sweetly tasted that the Lord is gracious, should, in this case, with his eyes directed up to heaven, lay his hand on his heart and say, " *What have I done ?* What hath provoked my God to suspend the visits of his "love?"

Why is it that Jesus, who is my best "friend, the lovely object of my supreme affection, oh why is it that he keeps at such a distance! That, he is so long before he returneth to my weary, thirsty soul? Have I not been careless, and drowsy, carnal, and worldly? Is there no idol indulged, no rival to his glory admitted? Whence is it that I go mourning all the day long? Shew me O "Lord the matter of the controversy, and take "it away." Here the believer is loudly called upon to search his heart, and examine his ways; and whilst he is faithfully attending to this, there is good reason to expect, from the usual conduct of our gracious Saviour, that he will surprise him with his love, and,

¹⁵ Micah 7:9

¹⁶ Job 33:19-22

¹⁷ Verse 27, 28

before he is aware, by the returning presence of his Lord his heart shall be made like the chariots of a willing people.

4. Another season for this is, when God is coming out of his place, in a way of national judgments, and threatens, or begins to execute deserved vengeance: for when his judgments are in the earthy the inhabitants of the world should learn righteousness¹⁸ and this cannot be, without searching our ways, in order to mend them, and turn to the Lord. The believer is safe in the hands of Christ, and the bonds of the covenant: let what will come in the course of providence, *all things shall work together for good to him*¹⁹. But as he may have his part in outward calamities together with others; so it highly concerns him to see whether he hath not contributed to the public guilt. Good men have always humbled themselves before God in times of public calamity, and God hath encouraged them to do so: for, says he, If I shut up heaven, that there be no rain; or if I send pestilence among my people : if my people shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land²⁰. On the contrary, when God is calling by public visitations to weeping and mourning, and behold, joy and gladness, slaying oxen, killing sheep, and drinking wine, &c. he looks upon himself as greatly affronted, and threatens, Surely this iniquity shall not be purged from you till you die²¹ Once more,

5. We are called to this duty, when, by the authority of the magistrate, or our own mutual agreement, on account of the judgments of God, we meet together professedly to humble ourselves before him. It is indeed one great part of the service, and ought always to accompany our days of fasting and prayer. Without this, we rather mock God with declaiming against the sins of others, than honor him by taking shame to ourselves. And as we are now in the house of God on purpose to bewail our own sins, as well as the sins of all the Churches in this land, and of the nation in general, shall we not engage our own souls? Oh that I could engage mine and yours in this service! Let each of us put the question then to ourselves, and say before the Lord, *What have I done?* And here, I pass over the more enormous instances of vice, hoping that, through the goodness and mercy of our God, we have none of this kind to charge ourselves with. And it is a great savour that we

¹⁸ Isaiah 26:9

¹⁹ Romans 8:28

²⁰ 2 Chronicles 7:13, 14

²¹ Isaiah 22:12-14

are not running into all excess of riot, and abandoned, with the profligate, to open profaneness and impiety. I would further hope that, by far, the greater part of this assembly have truly received the grace of God, have true love to the Lord Jesus, entire dependence on his blood and righteousness, and some good hope, through grace, that the Lord is their God, and will be their guide in this world, and their everlasting portion in the next. But let us consider, that we are not only called by the name of Christians, children of God, and friends of the bridegroom; but have entered into a solemn profession of religion, on well founded hope, of a saving change, wrought by the Spirit of God upon our hearts: and let us take into view the special obligations we are under from privilege and experience, from what we have in hand, and what we have in hope. Has God chosen us unto everlasting life in his Son called us by his grace; and revealed Jesus in us, as the hope of our glory; spoken peace to our troubled consciences; indulged us with the light of his countenance, and given us some Pisgah views of that glory, which will be hereafter more sully revealed, some realizing and appropriating exercises of faith? Have we sat under the Redeemer's shadow with great delight, and been sealed by the Spirit of promise to the day of redemption? I say, supposing all this to be the case, the question then returns, *What have we done?* I do not say, for God, alas, how little! But what have we done against him? Let us a little look back upon our thoughts; how vain and unprofitable have they been; engaged about trifles, things of no moment, neither tending to our own good, nor the advantage of others? May it not truly be said, of the thoughts of our hearts, they are little worth? Were all the roving and musings of our minds set down, how surprisingly vain and unprofitable would the greatest part of them appear? But that is not the worst. Have there not been many base and unworthy imaginations stirring in our hearts? And whatever hand the enemy may have had in them, have they not almost at all times, met with too much indulgence from us? True, there is, through mercy, a law in our minds opposing these things, but how doth sin and corruption seem to prevail? Again, *What have we done?* Has there not been too much irreverence of God in our solemn acts of worship? With how much difficulty are we sometimes brought to our religious duties, even those in which we have often found the greatest pleasure and advantage? How thoughtless of the glory of God, the object we profess to worship? What confusion in our spirits? What distraction in our affections, and strange wanderings from God, even whilst his name has been in our lips? How ready to be satisfied with the work done, though performed at a poor rate, and in a lame and imperfect manner? Farther, what have we done? As to our love to Jesus? As to faith in his blood, desire after communion with him, and zeal for his

glory? Has there not been an abatement as to each of these? Once his person, righteousness, and offices were truly and abundantly precious in our esteem; we saw his superlative excellence and glory, and we could not satisfy ourselves without going out after him in a way of dependence, and reaching forth the desires of our souls after fellowship with him, were glad to do every thing we could for the glory of his name, and willing to suffer any thing for his cause and interest. But how is it now? How hath it been for months, or perhaps years past? Hath not Jesus been too much neglected? And have not our hearts gone after other objects? Has there not been too great an attachment to the things of time and sense, and too eager a pursuit after this perishing world? How justly may he complain of us, as having lost our first love? Again, how have we behaved in the day of prosperity? Hath every mercy, especially those of a distinguishing, remarkable nature filled our souls with adoring apprehensions of the loving kindness of God? Have our hearts been turned towards him with grateful acknowledgements, and our lives shown forth his praise? Or rather, have we not been proud, vain, and forgetful of God, even the God of our mercies, and of ourselves too? But further, what advantage have we made of the means of grace? And how have we improved under the droppings of the sanctuary? Hath our fruitfulness bore any proportion to the care the Lord has taken in our cultivation? When we have attended on divine ministrations of the word preached, or at the table of the Lord, have we looked for God, for the living God? Have we desired the presence of the Redeemer, and the awakening, purifying, comforting influences of the Spirit? I am afraid the enquiry must issue, as to many of us, in this mournful acknowledgement, "O" my leanness, my barrenness, under rich means of fruitfulness, and profit?" Yet again, *What have we done*; Have we not been apt to envy the prosperous state of others, and to fret, and be uneasy at the dispensations of providence towards ourselves? Have there been no heart risings when others have been loaded with honor, have increased in riches, and enjoyed a great share of health, whilst we have been disappointed, impoverished, and despised, or have groaned under pining sickness, and sore pain? And, to add no more, *What have we done*? If we have had a little comfort, or a spiritual frame, how apt have we been to sacrifice to our net, and burn incense to our drag²²? And when denied it, have we not grown sullen, peevish, and been ready to quarrel with God and all about us? This may serve as a specimen of the reasonableness of this inquiry. Many other particulars might be mentioned, in which the best of us may, with great propriety, put the question in the text

²² Habakkuk 1:16

to ourselves, *What have I done?* And upon a serious, and faithful answer to it, find reason for repentance and humiliation.

And, with great deference to the serious piety, exemplary usefulness, and zealous spirit discovered by you, my honored fathers and brethren, who are engaged in the great work of the ministry, suffer me, without offence, to say, that perhaps there may be yet some reason for each of us, sure I am there is great reason for me, to say with deep concern of soul before the Lord, *What have I done?* You are sensible of the great honor God has put upon us, in calling us to preach the gospel; our obligations are of a peculiar nature, and our account very awful. *If I ask my own soul,* "What have I done with God in secret? Have I been wrestling for future, assistance, and success, crying for souls to be gathered, and edified? What have I done in preparation? Have I studied with dependence on the Spirit, and labored hard to find out what might be suitable to every case, and useful to all? What have I done in my public ministry? What seriousness and reflection of spirit have I used; what earnestness and zeal for the honor of Christ and the good of souls? What have I done in the oversight of the flock? Have I watched over them in love, taking every opportunity to advise and reprove, as the case called for it? What have I done by my example, in following after righteousness, and godliness, faith and love, patience and meekness? What in every other particular of my important office? " so much hath been amiss, that shame may " well cover me, and there is great reason for me to cry out, enter not into judgment with thy servant, ²³ O Lord, but according to the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. ²⁴ But, to draw to a close, from what has been said we may learn,

I. What a poor miserable creature the hardened impenitent sinner is. He is taking all the pains he can to stifle the convictions of his own mind, to put away the threatening of God's word from him, whilst he is every day treasuring up wrath against the day of wrath, and the revelation of the righteous judgment of God. ²⁵ Should I be speaking to any such at this time, remember there is a long eternity before you. Perhaps you are too much engaged in the business of the world, or too much immersed in the pleasures of it, to attend to the voice of conscience now: but you will have nothing else to do hereafter. If you die in this condition, the worm will never cease gnawing, and with bitter howlings you will cry out for ever, Oh what have I

²³ Psalm 143:2

²⁴ Psalm 51:1

²⁵ Romans 2:3

done! The summer is gone, the harvest over, my soul is lost for ever, and that for trifles, for vanity, for worse than vanity! Wretch that I am, *what have I done!*

2. We may farther learn, from what hath been said, the utter impossibility of being saved by any righteousness of our own. How shall a creature, who cannot stand before the bar of his own conscience, if it is faithful, pretend to meet his judge, a God of infinite knowledge, and infinite purity? Alas, we see but little comparatively of ourselves! But God searches the hearty and understands our errors in another manner than we can do. How shall man then be just with God? Let us therefore thankfully embrace Jesus as the end of the law for righteousness,²⁶ and with the apostle disclaim, and give up our own, and count all things but lost for the Excellency of the knowledge of Christ, that we may be found in him, not having our own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which—is of God by faith.²⁷

3. We may infer the necessity of the operations of the Holy Spirit, and the marvelous success which attends them in the work of grace wrought upon the hearts of sinners. The heart of every natural man is fully set in him to do evil: none of them say is there not a lie my right hand?²⁸ But they speak peace, and promise happiness to themselves, even in the ways which lead to death, and say, in a very different spirit, What have I done that should deserve the divine resentment? What less than almighty efficacy can bring such a one to say, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight?²⁹ And how often have we seen such an haughty, obstinate rebel brought, with tears of contrition, to cry out, God be merciful to me a sinner.

4. And lastly, From hence we may learn the happiness of the heavenly state. The believer will have nothing there to charge himself with; will be in no danger of offending God, or grieving his spirit. Every tear will be wiped away from his eyes, every corruption banished from his soul, and he will be always in a spiritual frame, and his joy full, and without interruption. Bless God for Jesus your hope of glory; live more upon his Spirit, the author of all grace; look frequently into the promises; believe the word, and the oath of a faithful God; reach out the arm of faith, and let your desires go before you

²⁶ Romans 10:4

²⁷ Philippians 3:8, 9

²⁸ Isaiah 44:20

²⁹ Luke 15:21

into that world, where your everlasting employment will be, not at present with tears of grief to say, *What have I done?* But with an elevation of triumph, *What hath God done? What hath Christ done? What hath grace, sovereign, matchless grace done for our souls?* Oh the riches of the glory of what is done by Father, Son, and Spirit! Happy now in the contemplation of it; but thrice happy then, in the ineffable enjoyment of it, you will for ever say, Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy name be all the glory!