

## SERMON III.

The insufficiency of any atonement the sinner can make.

Micah, 6: 6, 7, 8.

Wherewith shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the high God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my first born for my transgression; the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?

The First Sermon on this text.

WHEN, God in his providence or grace is pleased, in a peculiar way, to distinguish a people with spiritual or temporal privileges, as hereby he lays them under the strongest engagements to obedience, so the disregard of their divine Benefactor, in the midst of the enjoyment of his favors, bespeaks the most disingenuous behavior. The general conduct of the people of the Jews affords us an eminent discovery of this perverseness of human nature. And in the whole of their history, from *Moses* to *Christ*, as transmitted to us, in its several parts, *by holy men as they were moved by the Holy Ghost*, we may read ourselves, who naturally, in all the affluence of the bounties of providence, say unto God depart from us, and on whom the greatest obligations too frequently make little or no impression.

The prophet *Micah* was sent upon a very awful errand to the children of Israel, to reproach them for their ingratitude to their greatest and best Benefactor, and to denounce destined vengeance upon them. And as the judgments threatened were of a very severe and destructive kind, that God might appear to be righteous in inflicting them, in the chapter before us, we have a plea lodged in their consciences, and an expostulation with them, as to the ungrateful returns they had made the Lord for his kindness and care. And it is observable that this is ushered in with the greatest solemnity, by an invocation of the *hills* and mountains to witness to the controversy between God and his people. *Hear ye now what the Lord saith, arise, contend thou*

*before the mountains, and let the hills hear thy voice. Hear ye, O mountains, the Lord's controversy, and ye strong foundations of the earth: for the Lord hath a controversy with his people, and he will plead with Israel.*<sup>1</sup> As if he had said, Were it possible, the most inanimate parts of the creation would be sensible of the inequality and disproportion between my ways of mercy, and your paths of rebellion. You have then an affectionate enquiry into the cause of their ingratitude. *O my people, what have I done unto thee, and wherein have I wearied thee? Testify against me.*<sup>2</sup> If you have any charge against me produce it. If I have been unjust or unmerciful, enter your plea, and it shall be heard. But on the contrary, he goes on to remind them of what he had done for them. Have I not brought thee up out of the land of *Egypt*? Did I not hear thy groans in the state of bondage, and redeem thee from that burdensome servitude? Did I not give thee *Moses* as a leader and a lawgiver, *Aaron* as a priest, and *Miriam* as a prophetess? Did I not turn Balak's designed evil in hiring Balaam to curse thee, into a blessing? Reflect on these things, and then witness against me, if you have the least ground for it. In consequence of this awful charge, the people of Israel are represented as enquiring, in the former part of our text. *Wherewith shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the high God?*

*Shall I come before him with burnt offerings calves of a year old? Shall the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousand of rivers of oil? Shall I give my first born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? To which the prophet replies, He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good, and what doth the Lord require of thee, to do justly, and to love mercy, and walk humbly with thy God? In which words you have,*

- I. A conviction of guilt fattened on their consciences.
- II. A resolution taken by them, to wait upon God, and worship in his presence.
- III. An inquiry into the way of expiation, or means of atonement.
- IV. An intimation of the impossibility of making an atonement, by any thing men can do, or give. And then,

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<sup>1</sup> Micah 6:2

<sup>2</sup> Micah 6:3

V. And lastly, you have the rule of human obedience, or what it is that God expects, or requires of us.

Each of these heads contains matter of the highest importance, and deserves very special attention. And, I begin,

I. With the conviction of guilt, which seems to be fastened upon their consciences.

That this was the case, I think is pretty evident, partly by their silence upon hearing the dreadful charge brought against them; but more especially, by their inquiring after an atonement. If the case had been other wise, we should no doubt have heard of their innocence; for where there is any room for it, though only in our own apprehensions, we are naturally very prone to justify ourselves, and especially when accused of ingratitude. But when the Spirit of God brings the charge home, and we feel that we are really the persons who have thus come short of the glory of God, and abused his infinite goodness, there is no longer any dispute: but, with *Paul, when sin revives*<sup>3</sup> in this manner, and we compare it with the purity and perfection of the divine law, we are disabled as to our usual attempts to excuse ourselves, or extenuate our guilt. And from the method that the Holy Ghost makes use of, to bring the *Israelites* to a sense of their evil, we may learn, that the best way to fasten a thorough conviction of guilt on the soul, is to represent the mercy and kindness of God as abused, and despised by its rebellion. Sometimes the Lord indeed works by terrible things upon his people: but this issues not in the sorrow which the gospel recommends, without some displays of the divine mercy. We never sorrow truly after a godly sort, but when we consider our God as the best, as well as the highest of beings, as full of mercy and compassions as well as possessed of indisputable authority; and so view our sins as injurious to his goodness, as well as affrontive to his sovereignty. Thus you find the Lord reasons with his people here. First, he shows them what he had done for them, that they might the better know what they had done against him. All moral suasion, indeed, or reasoning, how just so ever in itself, or founded on the best principles, will be fruitless and inefficacious, unless the Spirit first create a light in the darkened understanding, and implant a principle of love to God in the soul. And thus it would have been to no manner of purpose for the prophet to have

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<sup>3</sup> Romans 7:9.

set before the people the mercies of God, had he done this in ever so moving and reasonable a way, *unless the arm of the Lord had been revealed.*<sup>4</sup> But supposing him to be, as certainly he is, the author of all grace in the soul, yet the way or means by which he excites this grace of evangelical repentance, is by representing to the sinner those bowels of God's compassion, and the multitude of his tender mercies, which have been neglected, and trampled upon by his carelessness, and wickedness. The terrors of God's wrath against sin have a tendency to drive us to despair, without some discoveries of his mercy and compassion; and indeed until then, we shall never have a just sense of our guilt, or of the desert of our iniquities. Thus it was with *David*, when the prophet *Nathan told him that the Lord had put away his iniquity,*<sup>5</sup> he cries out in the bitterness of his soul, *against thee, thee only have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight?*<sup>6</sup> And, as it is in the first exercise of repentance, so, in the whole of the Christians conversation afterwards; there is nothing hath so great a tendency to melt him into ingenuous contrition for sin, as the belief that God will heal his *backslidings*, and love him freely,<sup>7</sup> that he will *be merciful to his unrighteousness, and his sins and his iniquities he will remember no more,*<sup>8</sup> But again,

II. You have the resolution of this people to come before the Lord, and bow in his presence.

When we are made sensible of our deficiencies in duty, and are awakened to a sense of our guilt upon that account, we are naturally very ready to enter into resolutions that we will now serve the Lord with full purpose of heart; his worship, that hath been neglected, shall be now constantly, and diligently attended to; we will *come before the Lord*, we will bow to his authority, and be obedient to his laws. There is indeed a presence of the Most High God from which we cannot separate ourselves, as he sits upon the circle of the earthy and beholds, by one all comprehending view, things done in both worlds. But there is also a special presence of God in the ordinances of his appointment, and worship of his sanctuary, which, how much so ever it may be despised, and neglected by persons estranged from him yet, when they are apprised of their guilt, they will in some measure see the folly of their ways, and resolve to return unto the Lord. And this is the

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<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 53:1.

<sup>5</sup> 2 Samuel 12:13.

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 51:4.

<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 14:4.

<sup>8</sup> Hebrews 8:12.

practice of every soul under religious awakenings. When our sins were first set in order before our eyes, we entered into the firm resolutions, that we would for the future be more conscientious in all our ways, especially with respect to our attendance on religious worship; and this hath often served to still the clamors of conscience about past guilt, till the work has been carried on with power, and the soul put upon enquiry after a proper worthiness, in which to appear before the Lord, as a just and Holy God. And this leads us to the next general head. Which is,

III. That having thus resolved to come before the Lord, they enquire in what way they must approach, so as to find favor in his sight. *Wherewith shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the high God?*

This supposes a discovery made to the soul of the infinite distance, and direct contrariety, that there is betwixt the most high and Holy God, and itself, as nothing but a poor sinful creature. It was a very just observation of the apostle, that it is through *ignorance of God's righteousness, that we go about to establish our own.*<sup>9</sup> Were we apprised of the perfection and purity of his nature, and the rigorous demands of his law, we must either contradict our own experience, or believe it impossible to appear before God with comfort, but as clothed with perfect innocence and purity. It is because, either we think not at all of the Almighty, or else regard him as one like ourselves, that we rush into his presence, *as the horse rusheth into the battle.* Were we sensible that he is as necessarily just, as gracious, and therefore can by no means acquit the guilty, any more than he can deny himself, we should be more earnest in our enquiries wherewith to come before him. One single transgression renders him our enemy, as well as leaves us incapable *serving him in spirit and in truth.* Angels approach him with awe, but then it is with the freedom of spotless creatures, that never offended him. Man being fallen from his original integrity, and having lost his beauty, upon the least spiritual awakening, must be sensible of the enmity there is between God and him. And it is observable that this seems to have been a principle common to the whole world, though known only in the glory of it, by that gospel *which hath brought life and immortality to light.* As there is no nation without its God, so they have all by their practice acknowledged that they had a sense of guilt, in those sacrifices, of some kind or other, which they have been used to offer to their offended deities. And as it thus supposes that

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<sup>9</sup> Romans 10:3.

we know God in some measure, before we can *obey the gospel of his Son*,<sup>10</sup> or shall be solicitous after a righteousness in which to approach unto him; so you have here several methods proposed, some of God's institution, though designed to other purposes, and some of man's invention, that were abominations in his sight. And,

The first of these is that of *burnt offerings*, and *calves of a year old*. These were appointed by God to be observed by the children of Israel, through all their generations, not as expiatory in themselves, but as specifying, and shadowing forth *good things to come*.<sup>11</sup> Shall I come, says Israel, with these? They have divine authority for their sanction; or will God be better pleased with rams, or with thousands of them? Or if oil should be more acceptable, will ten thousand rivers of it be sufficient to take away my guilt? or if he be wearied out with his own appointments, so that he will have no more such oblations, *shall I give him my first born*, according to the barbarous superstitious custom of the heathens, the child of my strength, *the son of my affection for my transgressions, or the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul*? This is all that I have in my power, except I give my body to be burnt; and this shall be readily offered, if it may be accepted. From which we may learn these two things:

1. How easy a matter it is to mistake the design of God in his institutions. It is a very great unhappiness to converse with the ordinances of God from wrong principles, or with mistaken views. All the services of the old testament dispensation, many and pompous as they were, had no immediate influence upon the people's acceptance with God, nor were designed to eclipse the glory of Christ, *as the Lord our righteousness*; and whenever they were regarded as expiatory, it was an abuse put upon them, contrary to the intention of the great Lawgiver. And, would to God the *children of Israel* were alone in their abuse of divine institutions. How easy is it to observe, in ourselves and others, the aptness there is to rest in duty, or to regard the sacrifice of praise, or a broken heart, as the ground of God's delight in us? There is a wide difference between neglecting or despising, and idolizing a duty or ordinance. By the one we condemn the *authority of Christ*, and by the other we diminish his glory, by making any thing a partner, or competitor with him.

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<sup>10</sup> 2 Thess. 1:8.

<sup>11</sup> Hebrews 10:1.

2. Hence we may also see that persons under convictions will naturally turn to any thing, how expensive or unnatural so ever, rather than submit to God's righteousness. They will heap up oblations, *give thousands of rams, and ten thousands of rivers of oil*, nay, lose the tenderness of a parent, in their concern for sin, and give up the *fruit of their bodies*, as a sacrifice for *their transgression*, rather than look to him whom God has *set forth as a propitiation*. And how agreeable is this to the conduct of many in our day? If constancy in their attendance upon divine worship or the largest charity may suffice, they may have some light into the way that leads to everlasting life. But if they must cease from pride, and glory only in the Lord, if Christ must have all the honor of salvation, and they be no sharers with him, they practically say they will rather have no life, than receive it from his hands. O the vileness and enmity of our natures! The pride of our hearts! And the obstinacy of our wills! This ought to be matter of lamentation unto us. What grievous penances do the poor deluded *papists* submit to? What large contributions do they cheerfully make, to gain salvation out of God's way? And I am persuaded, that, what seems to be most contrary to nature, would rather be submitted to by the carnal mind, than that Christ alone should be exalted. What necessity then is there for his mighty power to subdue every high thought and imagination before we shall become his willing people? Which leads us,

IV. To show you the impossibility of any thing of ours, to make atonement, or to take away sin.

We may offer *burnt offerings, or thousands of rams*, and, if possible, do every thing of this kind mentioned in the text; but all will not do. And that for these two reasons: first, they were never designed by God to this end; nor, *secondly*, are they in themselves sufficient for it.

1. They were never appointed by God unto this purpose. The apostle to the Hebrews shows us at large, that none of their rites were designed to be substituted in the room of Christ: and accordingly you find, when they were abused by the people, God very strongly declares his abhorrence of them: which must be understood as respecting rather the abuse of these institutions, than the institutions themselves for they were not only good, but then in their full force. There are two remarkable passages in the prophecy of Isaiah to this purpose. *Hear the word of the Lord, ye rulers of Sodom, and give ear unto the law of our God, ye people of Gomorrah. To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? Saith the Lord: I am full of burnt*

*offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts, and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he-goat. When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hands to tread my courts? Bring no more vain oblations, incense is an abomination unto me, the new moons, and Sabbaths, the calling of assemblies I cannot away with, it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new moons, and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me, I am weary to bear them.*<sup>12</sup> And, they are rejected with greater abhorrence, is possible, in another passage in the same prophecy, *He that killeth an ox, is as if he slew a man: he that sacrificeth a lamb, as if he cut off a dog's neck: he that offereth an oblation, as if he offered wine's blood: he that burneth incense, as if he blessed an idol.*<sup>13</sup> It must be very surprising to every considerate mind, to observe here, with how much detestation the Lord rejects those very institutions, which he himself had so positively commanded. But when we consider, how strangely they were abused by the Jews, in the regard they paid them, and the dependence they had upon them, as making atonement, then the wonder ceases; for it is very evident from the whole tenor of God's word, that he never designed *the blood of bulls and goats, or the ashes of an heifer to take away sin;*<sup>14</sup> for then there would have been no occasion to have *laid the iniquities of his people on his Son,* or to have made his soul an offering for sin.<sup>15</sup> But, as that which may fully satisfy us that God never intended it, compare what you find in Romans 3:25. where we are told of Christ, that God hath sent forth, or as it should have been rendered.<sup>16</sup> *Preordained him to be a propitiation thro faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins,* compare this, I say, with 1 Corinth, 1: 30. *But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, righteousness, Justification, and redemption,* and you will easily see, that it was never the design of God, that burnt offerings or rivers of oil should satisfy for sin. *And we know that his counsel shall stand, and he will do all his pleasure.*<sup>17</sup>

2. This will further appear, is we consider the insufficiency of these rites, in them selves, to answer the demands of divine justice, or to come up to the perfection which the law of God requires. Now the law requires perfection of nature, and universal uninterrupted obedience and, in case of failure, threatens death. And let us then consider what is proposed here. And

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<sup>12</sup> Isaiah 1:10 – 14.

<sup>13</sup> Chap. 66:3.

<sup>14</sup> Hebrews 9:13. and 10:4.

<sup>15</sup> Isaiah 53:6, 10.

<sup>16</sup> Greek word

<sup>17</sup> Isaiah 46:10.

here is nothing to answer for that perfection of obedience that is required. All that can be thought of by those, *who would give the fruit of their bodies for the sin of their souls*, is, that it should take away the penalty threatened: But then, it is also necessary that the law be made honorable by a perfection of obedience. Further, as all that is proposed answers but to one part of a sinner's case, so it is altogether insufficient for that; for what is there in the blood of bulls or of goats that can satisfy for the breach of the divine law? Is there any proportion between a created life, and the affront offered against an infinite Being? What though we could give the whole world, and all the lives of men and angels in both worlds, would it equal the debt we owe to God? No, sin, as it carries in it a contempt of the divine authority, leaves the sinner helpless, as well as hopeless in himself. This the apostle treats with such a force of reasoning in the 10th of the Hebrews that he that runs may read it. *For the law, says he, having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices, which they offered year by year, make the comers thereunto perfect for then would they not have ceased to be offered.*<sup>18</sup> We come now,

V. To consider what it is that the *Lord our God requires of us, and that is, to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with him.*

But of these things I shall consider hereafter, and conclude this discourse with a few remarks on what has been said. And,

1. We may here justly reflect on the great unhappiness and folly of the Jewish nation, who fell into so general and fatal a mistake with respect to the design of the ceremonial law, notwithstanding such great care was taken, to guard them against resting in the performance of its rites, for their justification in the sight of God. This led them to add many inventions of their own to those divine appointments, and into a neglect of him *who is the end of the law for justifying righteousness*, and consequently into a carnal apprehension, and very partial discharge of the moral law itself, and upon the whole, exposed them, in the end, to the severity of the divine resentments. Again,

2. We may from hence see the infinite advantages we enjoy under the gospel dispensation: by which we are delivered from this yoke of

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<sup>18</sup> Hebrews 10:1, 2.

ceremonies, and have so clear a revelation of *Jesus Christ* in all the glory of his satisfaction, and perfection of his righteousness.

3. This will surely teach us the aggravations of their crimes, under these superior advantages, who attempt to add their own foolish inventions to the appointments of God, or rest on any thing but Christ Jesus, and what he has done, and suffered, for their justification before him. To which I will add,

4. And lastly, The double obligation we are under, both from our deliverance from the burden of the legal ceremonies, and the clear revelation we enjoy of Christ and his salvation, to manifest our firm and humble faith in him, by the holiness of our lives and conversations.