

Self-Deception

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The greatest care and caution are necessary in examining the evidences of our conversion. We ought to exercise a holy jealousy over ourselves, and to avoid arriving at any definite conclusion as to the safety of our condition, except on sure and scriptural grounds. Especially we must beware of trusting to imaginary evidences—to evidences which may be possessed and are possessed by the unregenerate as well as by the regenerate. The very possibility of deception in such a momentous matter is truly dreadful. To think that we are converted, while we are still in our natural state; to suppose ourselves the objects of God's love, while in reality we are exposed to His wrath; to speak peace to our souls, when there is no peace; to imagine that we are on the narrow way to heaven, while we are travelling along that broad way which leads to destruction; and to continue to the end of life in this state of deception is, as has been strikingly observed, "a mistake which requires an eternity fully to understand, and an eternity adequately to deplore."

The peculiar danger of self-deception consists in the extreme difficulty of knowing when we are deceived. The avowed sinner cannot conceal his crimes from himself; he knows that he is not safe, and that unless he repents he must perish. The believer is ever jealous over himself; he continually dreads lest he should not be in a state of salvation; he examines himself carefully and only on clear evidence does he come to any satisfactory conclusion. But self-deceivers are "pure in their own eyes." Their freedom from open immorality gives them confidence; the comparison they make of themselves with others confirms them in their delusion; their attendance at public worship, and their performance of those religious ceremonies which custom enjoins, quiet their conscience; the serious impressions which they once felt, but have now outgrown, help to delude them; and thus they live a life of

tranquility, undisturbed by any fears concerning their spiritual condition, conceiving themselves to be something, while in reality they are nothing.

The terrors of the law do not awaken them; for they flatter themselves that they are not exposed to its condemnation. The invitations of the gospel do not persuade them; for they think they have already accepted the offers of salvation. They seize upon the promises without any right, and they look upon the threatenings as not addressed to them. Like the church of Laodicea they think that "they are rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and know not that they are wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked." Their peace is like that deceitful calm which mariners describe, the sure precursor of a storm. The wind is hushed, the sea is calm as a lake; and while the passengers are glad, the skilful mariners tremble; for presently the heavens are darkened, the sea becomes troubled, the storm bursts, the thunders roll, the lightnings flash, the billows rise like mountains, and every wave appears as the messenger of death.

Nor let it be supposed that instances of self-deception are rare. On the contrary, it is much to be feared that such a mistake is made by many professing Christians, especially in this age of ceremonies, of external decorum, and of zeal for the outward forms of religion. Men in our days are not so chargeable with hypocrisy or with endeavoring to impose upon others with false pretences of religion, as with self-deception, deluding their own souls; and this is a more dangerous, as it is a more lamentable state of matters.

I fear that it is not a mere probability, but amounts almost to a certainty, that some who may read these pages are self-deceivers. Conversion is not so common as many suppose. Our Savior Himself tells us that His people are a little flock; and that the way to heaven is narrow and difficult, while the way to hell is broad and easy. Let us soften these statements as much as we please; let us view them in the

most favorable light; yet the conclusion at which we must arrive is, that comparatively few are converted. If, then, we can still remain unconcerned; if we have never any doubts at all; unless we have made considerable progress in the Divine life, our security and insensibility are too evident marks of self-deception.

In this chapter I propose to point out some imaginary evidences of conversion, on which men trust for salvation, but which in reality afford no good reasons for their confidence; marks which are found not merely in the experience of the regenerate, but frequently in the experience of the unregenerate, and which consequently afford no satisfactory proof of regeneration.

I.—Many trust to their religious knowledge for salvation. Their knowledge of religion is correct; their creed is orthodox; they have embraced no false doctrines; and they are able to give a reason for the faith which is in them. Now, religious knowledge is most desirable and necessary; without it religion is apt to degenerate into superstition: but then it is no evidence of the presence of religion in the soul. It may be the result of education and mental application, without the assistance or exercise of religious feelings. And indeed, when persons have sat long under a gospel ministry; and especially when attention has been paid to their religious education in their youth; it is impossible that they should be altogether ignorant of Divine things. Nay, it is quite possible that this knowledge may be accurate and minute; may embrace the whole scheme of salvation; so that we may be able to discourse eloquently and to reason correctly on the truths of the gospel.

And it may not only be correct, but also in some degree founded on conviction. We may be Christians not merely because we were born so, but from a careful study of the evidences of Christianity. Our creed may be pure, and we may see clearly the foundation on which each truth rests. All this may be obtained by our own unassisted powers; but then we must remember that it is one thing to know our duty

and another thing to practice it. The faith which saves is not the mere assent of the understanding to any system of doctrines; but a practical principle which leads a man to act as he believes. The doctrines of the gospel are not like the propositions of mathematics, concerning which nothing more is necessary than to assent to their truth; they are realities designed to affect the heart and influence the conduct. Christianity is a remedy which, in order to profit us, must be embraced. The extent of our knowledge, and the purity of our creed, if these have no influence over our hearts, will no more save us than they will the devils, whose knowledge is more extensive and whose belief is stronger than ours. "Though," says the apostle, "I understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and have not charity, I am nothing."

II.—Many trust to their morality for salvation. This certainly is preferable to bare knowledge; and indeed, properly speaking, Christian morality and religion are one and the same thing. But what is the morality which is so much applauded in the world? It is not the morality of Jesus Christ; that embraces the whole law, and requires us to be "perfect even as our Father in heaven is perfect." But the morality of the world consists merely in freedom from certain scandalous vices, but includes neither faith, nor love to God, nor humility, nor patience: it has respect to the second, rather than to the first table of the law.

We must remember that there are duties which we owe to God, as well as duties which we owe to our fellow-men; and that the former are of more consequence than the latter. Respect for our reputation, regard to our interest in life, a worldly prudence, a love of approbation, a fear of punishment whether in this world or the next, may restrain us from the practice of scandalous vices; but these are very different from the motives and principles which the gospel requires. The selfish man who attends solely to his own interests, may be induced, by reason of his very selfishness, to be moral in order to gain credit in the world. Nay, I do not see anything to prevent an atheist from being

an extremely moral man; and I believe such instances have occurred. If, then, morality can exist without piety, surely it is no evidence that our salvation is sure.

More than this: a man may not only possess a good moral character, that is, be just in his dealings, true to his word, and free from all scandalous vices; but he may be also extremely amiable, kind to his fellow-men, compassionate to the sorrowful, and affectionate in his disposition; and yet be destitute of piety. Such a man is not only respected, he is also beloved; he is not only the object of our admiration, but of our affection. Still, however, mere amiability of temper is a natural endowment, and therefore is no proof of a change of heart. Such appears to have been the character of the young man in the gospel, who came to our Savior inquiring the way of salvation. His conduct was free from vice: he could appeal with sincerity to the moral law, and say, "All these have I kept from my youth up;" nay, he appears to have been of a very amiable disposition, for it is expressly said that "Jesus beholding, loved him;" and yet this young man, so correct in his conduct, so amiable in his disposition, so beloved by his fellow-men, wanted one thing, and, alas, it was the one thing needful.

III.—Many trust to their regular attention to religious ordinances as evidence of their salvation. They are a church-going people; they are constant in attendance at the house of God; and they regularly partake of the sacrament of the Supper. All this may be well, so far as it goes. But then it is not conversion. Custom enjoins men to attend the public worship of the sanctuary; completely to neglect it would lessen their character in the world. But, surely, religion is something very different from the mere performance of its outward rites and ceremonies. There were none more exact in this respect than the Pharisees; they prayed thrice a-day and fasted twice a-week; they gave tithes of all that they possessed, even of the smallest trifles, as mint, and anise, and cummin; and yet our Savior calls them "serpents and a generation of vipers;" and surely what was no

evidence of religion in them can be no evidence of religion in us. Yea, our Savior expressly says, "Except your righteousness exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven."

Still further, there may not only be attendance on the public ordinances of religion, but also some degree of attention paid to private devotion; and yet there may be no true religion. This is indeed a more favorable symptom; and if there be fervor and sincerity in the performance of secret prayer, it is a good evidence of piety. But then it is evident that private devotion may degenerate into formality, and be the result of mere habit. We may have been taught in childhood to offer up our morning and evening prayers; or we may, as the result of religious impressions, long since passed away, have set apart stated times for private prayer; but it is quite possible that these religious exercises may be mere formal observances; the utterance of certain words with the tongue, while our thoughts are wandering on other subjects; and thus instead of being acts of devotion, they become a profanation of the name of God. It is spiritual worship which God demands: it is the homage of the heart, and not the adoration of the lips, which He requires. "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven: but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say unto me, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Thy name 1 and in Thy name have cast out devils 1 and in Thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you; depart from me, ye that work iniquity."

IV.—Many substitute for religion an attachment to the particular denomination of Christians to which they belong, and trust for salvation to their religious zeal. But zeal for a particular sect is not zeal for religion; and attachment to a particular tenet is not attachment to the truth. We may consider that we belong to the purest denomination in the world, and in the excess of our bigotry suppose that salvation is difficult

beyond the pale of our church. We may be intolerant to those who differ from us, and in the intemperance of our zeal lose sight of charity. But let us not deceive ourselves with supposing that bigotry, intolerance, and party zeal bear any resemblance to the religion of the gospel. Even allowing that the church to which we belong is superior to all others in purity, yet if this does not produce a corresponding beneficial effect on our heart and conduct, our connection with it will only increase our guilt by adding to our other sins the abuse of such privileges, and the resistance of so much knowledge. He who knew his Master's will, and did it not, shall be beaten with many stripes. "Trust not in lying words, saying, The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are these." At the day of judgment, it shall no more be asked to what church we belonged than in what country we were born. All human distinctions of sects and denominations shall then be forever abolished, and men shall be divided into only two classes—the disciples of Christ, and the partisans of the world; the children of grace, and the children of nature; the future inhabitants of heaven and of hell. It is evident that a partial reformation is quite consistent with a total want of religion. The same reasons which induce a man to be moral also induce him to correct the irregularities of his conduct. Age also may have weakened the strength of his passions, or his health may have been injured by intemperance. And, indeed, it often happens that what a man calls the reformation of his conduct may only be the exchange of one vice for another; from being intemperate when young, he may become covetous when old. God demands the heart for His service; there can be no compromise between Him and sin; no man can serve two such masters, whose services are so opposite, whose commands are so much at variance. To be religious, our obedience must be sincere; we must harbor no known sin, nor habitually and willfully neglect the performance of any duty. "Whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all."

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VI.—Many trust to their religious impressions. This is, perhaps, the most fruitful source of self-deception. Some, for example, place confidence in the strong convictions which they at one time had of the evil of sin, and of the danger to which it exposed them. They tell us of the tears they shed, of the agonies they endured, and of the awful sense they had of the wrath of God. Now, conviction of sin is very important and essential: it always, in some degree or other, precedes conversion. Until we see ourselves lost, we will never truly come to the Savior for salvation. Until we feel our disease, we will never betake ourselves to the remedy. We must not then despise these convictions, but nourish and cherish them as the motions of the Holy Ghost—as mercifully designed to awaken us out of our false security. But the great error lies in mistaking conviction for conversion. A man may tremble at the remembrance of his sins and at the prospect of the judgment to come, and yet never be converted. It is one thing to know our danger, and another thing actually to flee for refuge; it is one thing to see our sins, and another thing to betake ourselves to the Savior. Convictions may arise, and frequently do arise, from natural causes. There are probably few hearers of the gospel who have not at one period of their lives been subject to these religious influences. But how often do these impressions wear away: how often do they prove as "the morning cloud and the early dew" which vanish before the rising sun. Like the stony ground hearers, we may have received the word with joy, but endured only for a time, and then have fallen from the faith. We may have healed our wounds slightly, saying, "Peace, peace," when there is no peace. And perhaps the result of these convictions with respect to us may have been to nourish our self-deception, and to render our state more dangerous and alarming than it was before. "For if," says St Peter, "after we have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, we are again entangled therein and overcome,

the latter end is worse with us than the beginning. For it had been better for us not to have known the way of righteousness, than after we have known it to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto us." Felix trembled when Paul reasoned with him of righteousness, temperance, and a judgment to come; and even Ahab, the profane king of Israel, humbled himself and put on sackcloth under the denunciations of the prophet. Such also was the grief of Judas; so violent were his convictions that he could no longer support them; they drove him to despair, and caused him to put an end to his miserable existence.

VII.—Many trust to their good works for salvation. Good works, when performed from proper motives, are sure signs of a spiritual change; they are the good fruits of a good tree. But works are only good in the sight of God when they are performed from religious motives; if the motive be wrong, the work, however advantageous it may be to man, ceases to be virtuous. Now it is evident that a man may perform many good works without being actuated by religious principles. We may support charitable and religious enterprises merely from ostentation; from a desire, like the Pharisees, to appear religious and to obtain the praise of men. Or a constitutional tenderness of heart, a natural sympathy with the misfortunes of others, an instinctive kindness of disposition may induce us to relieve the wants of the miserable. We may also think that by performing good works we may merit heaven; and thus we may exceed even the people of God in them, merely from a principle of self-righteousness—from a desire, as it were, to purchase the Divine favor; and thus being ignorant of God's righteousness, or from pride and self-love, we may go about, like the Jews of old, to establish our own righteousness, not submitting ourselves to the righteousness of God; and hence our good works, instead of being acceptable in the sight of a holy and heart-searching God, become positively sinful—the offspring of a corrupt and depraved heart. "Though," says the apostle, "I bestow all my

goods to feed the poor, and have not charity, I am nothing."

So far then a man may go, and yet be destitute of true religion. But wherein, it will be asked, does such a man fall short? Here is a man who has right notions of religion; who is a believer in Christianity, not merely because he was born so, but from conviction; who is blameless in his morals and amiable in his disposition; who is regular in his attendance at public worship, and even attentive to private devotion; who is sincere and even zealous in his attachment to the church to which he belongs; who has reformed many things that were formerly amiss; who has had many serious impressions—convictions of the evil of sin and of the danger to which he is exposed; and who is liberal to the poor, and a supporter of charitable and religious institutions: and yet it is asserted that, notwithstanding all this, such a man may not be a true Christian. What can be wanting in such a character? What is wanting? Why, the very soul of religion is wanting. If the man has nothing more than what I have described, I again solemnly assert that he is not a regenerate man; that all his religion, his ceremonies, and good works are vain. He wants spiritual life: he is, as the Scriptures emphatically express it, "dead in trespasses and in sins." There is wanting a heart loving God and delighting in His commandments. There is wanting a sincerity in religion; the man is only half a Christian; he is serving two masters—God and the world. There is wanting a living faith in Jesus Christ, not a mere speculative belief in the truths of Christianity, but a humble renouncing of self, and a simple confidence in the merits of the Savior.

Do I address any who fear that they are deceiving themselves; any who feel that they belong to any one of these classes of self-deceivers whom I have mentioned? Your case is most distressing, most worthy of tears. You are not far from the kingdom of God, and will you at length fall short of it? You have reformed your outward conduct; you are regular in your attendance on public ordinances; you neglect

not the devotion of the closet; you perform good works; you have been the subjects of religious impressions; and will you rest satisfied with being "almost a Christian?" Have you performed so many things in vain? And will you not be decided? You are not even called to more labor; you are required to perform almost the same things which you already do, but only to perform them with greater earnestness and from purer motives. And will you, for want of this, render useless all your efforts? If I could only persuade you to a greater degree of spirituality, your religious exercises would become easier; your secret prayers would be transformed from being an irksome task, as they must now be when your heart is not engaged in them, to be a delightful privilege, a foretaste of the pleasures of heaven.

I conclude this chapter with a few advices of a practical nature.

Carefully examine yourselves. I would exhort you to spend some time in retirement for religious purposes. This, I have supposed, you do not altogether neglect, but that you already pay some attention to private devotion. Now, at these seasons think on the state of your soul in the sight of God; compare your character with that of the righteous as recorded in His Word; and do not rest satisfied until you perceive in your soul the Scriptural marks of regeneration. "Examine yourselves whether ye be in the faith: know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates."

Be much engaged in earnest prayer. Your prayers hitherto may have been a mere form; you may have gone through them as a task; but henceforth be in earnest about religion; trifle not in your approaches to the throne of grace, remembering that "God is a Spirit; and they who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth." Is the salvation of your soul a thing to trifle with? Is a crown of glory—a kingdom—a thing to ask in a cold and formal manner? Pray for pardon, as a criminal condemned to death. Pray for salvation, as one exposed to endless misery.

Search the Scriptures. Let your hours of secret devotion be divided between prayer and the perusal of God's Word. Read the Scriptures, not with the mind of a scholar, but of a Christian; not in order to criticize them, but to find out what God requires. At other times you may read them for the sake of your intellectual improvement, and they are well worthy of such a perusal; but in those hours which are consecrated to your religious improvement, you ought solely to be intent upon the practical bearing which they may have upon you.

Attend diligently to the ordinances of religion. At present you may go to the house of God, and take your seat at the communion table, merely because custom enjoins you. But henceforth go to meet with God Himself in His ordinances, to hear what He has to say to you, and to attend solely to the interests of your immortal soul. "I will go to the altar of God," says the Psalmist, "unto God, my exceeding joy." The preaching of the word is the instrument which the Spirit generally makes use of in arousing the unconcerned, in converting the unconverted, and in strengthening the graces and mortifying the corruptions of believers.

Guard against worldliness. This world is the great rival of God in the hearts of men. Beware, then, of fixing your affections upon it; of making some worldly object, whether it be riches, or fame, or domestic comfort, the chief aim of life; or, in other words, of allowing selfishness to be the ruling principle of your conduct. The gospel requires us to deny ourselves, and to take up the cross. We must live to Christ, else we cannot be His disciples.

Give yourselves over unto God in an everlasting covenant through Jesus Christ. Meditate well upon what you are about: that you must renounce the world and self, and serve God with all the members of your body and with all the faculties of your soul. Let this, then, be the language of your heart:—"Lord, I heartily accept the free offers of salvation through Jesus Christ: I take Thee for my covenant God and Father; I take Christ in all His offices to save me—as my Prophet to instruct me, as my Priest

to intercede for me, as my King to rule over me; I take the Holy Spirit for my Sanctifier; I take Thy word for the rule of my life, Thy glory for the end of my existence, heaven for my eternal home, and the enjoyment of Thee for my chief good."

Thus make religion the great duty of your lives, and the service of God the great work which is given you to do. "Every way of a man is right in his own eyes; but the Lord ponders the heart." Remember that you have to do with a heart-searching God, whose eye pierces through all coverings, whom no outward appearances can deceive, who sees your true character, and who will assign you your proper place in another world.

"O Lord, Thou who seest the hearts of all the children of men, suffer us not to impose upon ourselves, awaken us out of our false security, that, seeing the danger to which we are exposed, and the number and aggravations of our sins, we may be inclined and enabled to embrace the gracious offers of the gospel, that so we may obtain a peace, of which the world cannot deprive us, and which death itself can neither disturb nor destroy."
