

Articles and Sermons :: Christian Love, EXAMINATION & HUMILIATION By John Angell James

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Christian Love,
or the Influence of Religion upon Temper

By John Angell James, 1828

EXAMINATION & HUMILIATION

SELF-EXAMINATION is the duty of every Christian, not merely that he may ascertain whether his faith be genuine—b^ut whether it be sufficiently 'operative'. It ought not to be a frequent and undecided question with anyone, "Am I in reality a child of God?" But it should be a constantly recurring inquiry, "Is there any one branch of pious obligation, which, through the deceitfulness of the human heart, I do not feel? or through a criminal heedlessness, I habitually neglect?" The object of self-examination, with a believer, is to supply those defects in his graces, and to put away those remains of his corruptions, which, though they may not prove that he has no piety, prove that he has less than he ought to have. For this purpose, he should often bring his actions and his motives to the standard, and try his whole profession; what he does—which he should not do; as well as what he does not do—which he should do.

If we are to exhort one another daily, lest any of us be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin, we surely ought to examine ourselves daily for the same reason. Our guilty self-love is perpetually attempting to throw a veil over our sinful infirmities—to hide their criminality from our view; and thus to keep us in a state of false peace by keeping us in ignorance. Against this deceitfulness of our heart, we can only be guarded by a frequent and close examination of our whole selves

A frequent examination of our hearts and conduct is necessary, because of the multitude of our daily sins—which are often so minute as to escape the observation of a careless and superficial glance—and so numerous as to be forgotten from one day to another; and so, they either do not come into our notice—or pass out of recollection. And therefore they should be summed up every evening, and repented of, and forgiven, before we compose ourselves to 'sleep'—that nightly returning harbinger, and monitor, and image, of approaching death. The advantages of frequent examination are so many and so great, as to recommend the practice strongly to all who are deeply concerned about the welfare of their souls—by this means, we shall not only detect many lesser sins which would otherwise be lost in our attention to greater ones; but we shall more easily destroy them, and more speedily revive our languishing graces; just as a wound may with greater facility be cured while it is yet fresh and bleeding.

"Sins are apt to cluster and combine, when either we are in love with small sins, or when they proceed, from a careless and unconcerned spirit, into frequency and continuance. But we may easily keep them asunder by our daily prayers, and our nightly examinations, and our severe sentences; for he who despises little things, shall perish little by little." A frequent examination of our actions will tend to keep the conscience clear, so that the least dirty spot will be more easily seen; and so tender that the least new pressure will be felt—for that which comes upon an already blotted page is scarcely discerned—and that which is added to an already great accumulation is hardly seen or felt. This, also, is the best way to make our repentance pungent and particular. But on this subject we shall have more to say shortly.

If self-examination be neglected for lack of opportunity, it is plain that those, at least, who have their time at their own command and disposal, are far too deeply involved in the business of the world, and the labyrinths of care—no man ought to allow himself to be so taken up in looking into his secular pursuits, as to have no time to look into the state of his soul; and to be so greedy after gain, or so intent upon the objects of an earthly ambition—as to be careless about examining whether we are growing in grace, and increasing in the riches of faith and love—reveals a mind which either has no true religion at all, or has reason to fear that it has none.

But besides that 'general review' of the conduct of the day, which we should take every evening; a portion of time should be frequently set apart for the purpose of instituting a more minute and exacting inquiry into the state of our personal piety; when, taking in our hand the Word of God, we should descend with this 'candle of the Lord' into the dark and deep recesses of the heart, enter every secret chamber, and pry into every corner, to ascertain if anything is hiding itself there, w

which is contrary to the mind and will of God. Many standards will be found in the Scriptures, all concurring with each other in general purpose and principles, by which this investigation of our spirits should be conducted. We now propose 'the law of love'.

On these occasions of introspection, we should inquire how far our faith is working by love. I will conceive of a professing Christian who has set apart a portion of time, say on a Saturday evening, before he is to partake of the Lord's supper on the next day; or on a Sabbath evening, when he has received the sacramental memorials of the Savior's love—to examine into the state, not only of his conduct—but the frame and temper of his spirit. He is anxious to know how far he is living so as to please God. We can imagine him, after having read the Scriptures, presenting his fervent supplications to God, in the language of the Psalmist, and saying, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life." Psalm 139:23-24

He now enters upon the business of self-examination; and the subject of inquiry that evening is the frame of his heart towards his fellow creatures, the state of his mind in reference to the law of love, the measure of his love, and the infirmities of his temper. Hear his holy colloquies with himself—"I have no just reason, thanks be to sovereign grace! to question whether I have received the fundamental doctrines of the Gospel. I believe my creed is sound, nor have I any serious ground for suspecting the sincerity of my faith, or the reality of my conversion—my conduct, too, so far as the estimate of man goes, has, through the help of God, been free from open immorality. And though I may without presumption say that I love God, yet I am covered with confusion that my love is so weak and lukewarm. But my solemn business at this time is to examine into the state and measure of my Christian love; for I am persuaded that whatever knowledge, or faith, or seeming raptures, or supposed communion with God, I may lay claim to—I am but a very imperfect Christian, if I am considerably deficient in love. Taking the apostolic description of this lovely virtue, I will bring my heart to the test.

"Do I, then, love, in the biblical sense of the word? Is my heart a partaker of this disposition? Is the selfishness of my corrupt nature subdued, and made to give way to a spirit of universal benevolence; so that I can truly say, I rejoice in the happiness of others, and am conscious of a continual benevolent sympathy with all others, and of a perpetual flowing of good-will to all creatures? Do I feel as if my own happiness were receiving constant accessions from the happiness of others; and that my soul, instead of living in her own little world within—an alien from the commonwealth of mankind, indifferent to all but herself—is in union and communion with my race? In short, do I know the meaning of the apostle's emphatic expression, 'He who dwells in love, dwells in God, and God in him?' But let me descend to particulars.

"What do I know of the PATIENCE of love? Can I suffer long, or am I easily provoked? Am I patient under provocation; restraining my anger; keeping my wrath in subjection under the most provoking insults, amid the basest ingratitude, and the most irritating scorn? In my communion with my brethren in Christ, am I quick to take offense by any real or supposed slight or impertinence? Am I so jealous of my own dignity, so sensitive and irritable, as to be roused to anger by any little offense, and transported to wrath by more serious provocation? Am I revengeful under injuries; brooding over them in silence, cherishing the remembrance, and reviving the recollection of them, waiting for an opportunity to retaliate—and rejoicing in the sufferings which come upon those that injure me? Or am I easily conciliated, most forward to forgive, and ever ready to return good for evil? How have I acted since my last season of self-examination in these particulars? Let me call to recollection my conduct, that I may see how far I have practiced the duty, and exhibited the excellence of Christian meekness.

"Love is KIND." Is kindness—universal, constant, operative kindness—characteristic of my conduct? Is the law of kindness on my lips, its smile upon my countenance, and its activity in my life? Or am I uncivil and uncourteous in speech, frowning and repulsive in my demeanor, grudging and unfrequent in acts of generosity? Have I the character among my neighbors and acquaintance, of a man who can be always depended upon for a favor, when it is needed? Or, on the contrary, am I by general report a very unlikely person to lend a helping hand to a person in necessity? Are there any instances of unkindness which I can now call to remembrance, which have brought dishonor upon my reputation, guilt upon my conscience, reproach upon the cause of true religion, and for which, therefore, I ought to seek the pardon of God through Christ?

"Love does not ENVY." Am I subject to the tormenting influence of that truly diabolical temper by which a person is made miserable in himself, and to hate his neighbor or rival on account of that neighbor's or rival's eminence? Am I so truly infernal in my disposition as to sicken and pine at the sight of the success or happiness of others—and to cherish ill-will on that account towards them? When I hear another praised and commended, do I feel a burning of heart within, and an inclination to detract from their fame, and to lower them in the estimation of those who applaud them? And do I secretly rejoice when anything occurs to lessen and lower them in public opinion, or to strip them of those distinctions which render them the objects of public dislike? Or do I possess that true spirit of love, which constrains me to rejoice with those who

o rejoice, to feel pleased with their prosperity, and to consider their happiness as an accession to my own? Have I indeed, that benevolence which delights so truly in felicity, as to make me glad at seeing it in the possession of an enemy or a rival?

"Love does not BOAST. Love is not PROUD." Is this descriptive of my spirit, in reference to my own attainments and achievements? Am I lowly in my own eyes, clothed with humility, modest in the estimate I form of myself, and all that belongs to me? or am I proud, vain, or ostentatious? valuing and admiring myself on the ground of any personal, civil, ecclesiastical, or spiritual eminence? Am I fond of exciting the admiration of others towards myself—and obtaining their applause? Or am I content with the approbation of my own conscience, and the smile of God? Do I wish to make others feel their inferiority, and to suffer under a mortifying sense of it? Or do I, from the most tender regard to their comfort, conceal, as much as possible, any superiority I may have over them; and make them easy and happy in my company? Do I indulge in haughty airs—or maintain a kind affability and an amiable humility?

"Love does not behave UNSEEMLY." Is it my study not to give uneasiness and offense, by anything unsuitable to my age, sex, rank, station, and circumstances; anything crude, rough, impertinent, or improper? Or am I continually disturbing the comfort of those around me, by inappropriate and unsuitable behavior?

"Love is not SELF-SEEKING." Am I habitually selfish—anxious only for my own gratification, and building up my own comfort—to the annoyance or neglect of others? Am I indulging a stingy, covetous disposition—feasting upon luxuries, and refusing to minister to the relief of human misery, according to the proportion in which God has blessed me? Or am I diffusing abroad my substance, considering that I am only a 'steward' of what I hold, and must account for it all? Am I overbearing and intolerant in discussion and debate—wanting others to sacrifice their views, in order that I may have everything my own way? Or am I willing to concede and yield, and disposed to give up my own will to the general opinion, and for the general good?

"Love thinks no evil." Am I suspicious, and apt to impute bad motives to men's conduct? Or am I generous and trusting—prone to think the best that truth will allow? Am I censorious and critical? Do I feel more in haste to condemn than to excuse—and more eager to blame than to exonerate?

"Love does not rejoice in iniquity—but rejoices in the truth." What is my disposition towards those who are my opponents? Do I delight in, or mourn over their faults? Do I so love them, as to be glad when by their regard to truth and righteousness, they raise themselves in public esteem; and to be sorry when they injure their own cause, and give me an advantage over them by their errors and sins? Have I made that high attainment in virtue and piety, which leads me to delight in the righteousness of a rival, even when it exalts him? Or am I still so destitute of love as to say, in reference to his faults, 'Ah! so would I have it?'

"Love BEARS all things." Am I prone and anxious to conceal the failings of others—or to expose them?

"Love BELIEVES all things." Am I credulous of whatever is to the advantage of a brother?

"Love HOPES all things." Where the evidence is not enough to warrant belief, do I indulge an expectation and desire that further knowledge may explain the matter favorably?

"Love ENDURES all things." Am I willing to make any exertion, to bear any hardship, to sustain any reasonable loss—for the peace and welfare of others? Or am I so fond of ease, so indolent, so selfish, as to give nothing but mere ineffectual wishes for their comfort and well-being?

"What measure of holy love have I, of that love which puts forth its energies in such operations as these? Do I so love God, and feel such a sense of his love to me, as to have my soul transformed into this divine disposition? Does the love of Christ thus constrain me? Am I so absorbed in the contemplation of that stupendous display of divine benevolence, that unparalleled manifestation of infinite mercy, which was made in the cross of the Son of God, as to find the selfishness of my nature melted, and all its enmities subdued, by this most amazing and transporting scene? I feel that without love, I cannot have entered into the meaning and design, the moral force and beauty, of the great atonement; that I can have no disposition which properly corresponds to that magnificent and interesting spectacle. I see that knowledge is not enough, that belief is not enough, that ecstasy is not enough, that hope is not enough; that, in fact, nothing can come up to the demands, to the spirit, to the design, of a religion which has the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ for its central object, and grand support, and distinguishing glory—but a temper of universal and practical benevolence. Have I this? If so, how much of it?"

Such should be the subject of diligent and frequent examination to every professing Christian.

HUMILIATION should follow examination. The act of humbling and abasing ourselves before God, is a part of the duty—not only of sinners, when they make their first application to the mercy-seat for pardon—but of believers through every successive stage of their Christian career. As long as we are the subjects of sin—we ought also to be the subjects of contrition. We may, through sovereign grace, have been justified by faith, and have been brought into a state of peace with God—but this does not render a very humbling sense and confession of our sins, an exercise inappropriate to our state—any more than it is inconsistent with the relationship of a child to humble himself before his father for those defects in his obedience, which, though they do not set aside his sonship, are unworthy of it.

"If we say we have no sin," says the apostle, "we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." This language applies to believers, and not merely to unconverted sinners; and so does that which follows—"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." The most perfect assurance of hope does not release us from the duty of abasing ourselves before God; and if an angel were sent to assure us that we are in a state of acceptance with heaven, we would still lie under obligation to cultivate a contrite and penitential frame of mind. Sin, and not merely punishment, is the ground of humiliation. It is the most detestable selfishness to imagine that because we are freed from the penal consequences of sin, we are under no obligation to lie low in the dust. With what unutterable disgust we should look upon the individual, who, because his life had been spared by royal clemency, when it might have been taken by national justice, acted after his pardon as if that very pardon had entitled him to forget his crime, and live as carelessly and as confidently as he would have done had he never sinned. A pardoned sinner—and no believer is anything more—should ever be a humble and self-abased creature in the sight of God.

The subject we are now upon shows us what cause there is for humiliation before God. This frame of mind should not be founded upon, or produced by, mere general views of our depraved nature—but by particular apprehensions in reference to sinful practice—as long as our confessions are confined to mere acknowledgments of a depraved nature, our convictions of sin are not likely to be very deep, nor our sorrow for it very pungent. Such confessions will usually sink into mere formal and sorrowless acknowledgments of transgression. It is by descending to details—it is the lively view and deep conviction of specific 'acts of transgression', or specific 'defects in virtue', that awaken and sharpen the conscience, and bring the soul to feel that godly sorrow which works repentance. One distinctly ascertained 'act of transgression', or 'defect in virtue'—especially if it be much dwelt upon in its extent, and influence, and aggravations—will do more to humble the soul, than hours spent in mere general confessions of a depraved nature.

There are many things, on the ground of which no self-abasement can be felt by the Christian who is walking in any degree of pious consistency. He cannot confess that which he really has not been guilty of—he cannot be humbled on account of any act of open immorality, for he has committed none. In reference to actual vice, he is to be thankful, not humble. He is to be humble, indeed, that he has a nature capable of it, if left by God; but he is to be thankful that he has not been permitted thus to disgrace himself. It is sometimes to be regretted that good people, in their public confessions of sin, are not more definite than they are, and that they do not express the particular sins for which they seek forgiveness of God. Without using language that seems applicable to adultery, and robbery, and drunkenness—our defects in all Christian graces are so numerous and so great, that there is no degree of humiliation which is too deep for those defects and omissions, of which the holiest man is guilty before God. And we have no need to go beyond the subject of this treatise, to find how exceedingly sinful and vile we must all be in the sight of God. Let us only call to remembrance the truly sublime description which the apostle has given us of the divine nature, and to which, of necessity, we have so often referred, "God is love"—infinite, pure, and operative love; let us only recollect his wonderful patience, his diffusive kindness, his astonishing mercy even to his enemies—and then consider that it is our duty to be like him—to have a disposition which in pure, patient, and operative benevolence, ought to resemble his; that this was once our nature, and will be again, if we reach the celestial state; and surely, in such a recollection, we shall find a convincing proof of our present exceeding sinfulness.

Let it not be replied that this is subjecting us to too severe a test. By what test can we try our hearts—but the law of God? What a proof is it of sin, when we find that the instances in which we have committed it are so numerous, that we want to get rid of the law by which it is proved and detected! O, what a fallen nature is ours, and how low has it sunk! We are not now examining it in its worst state, as it is seen among Pagans and savages, or even the best of the heathen; nor as it is seen in the worst parts of Christendom; nor as it appears in the best of the unrenewed portions of mankind—but as it is exhibited in the church of Christ—in the enlightened and sanctified portions of the family of man.

Must we not, after this survey, exclaim with the Psalmist, "Who can understand his errors? cleanse me from secret faults

!" Who can carry in his bosom a proud heart, or on his brow a lofty demeanor? Who can look with delight upon his poor, starveling graces, and doat with fond and pharisaic eyes upon his own righteousness? Who is not stripped at once, in his own view, of all pride in his imperfect virtues, and presented to his own contemplation in the naked deformity of a poor, sinful, and imperfect creature, who has no ground for pride—but most ample and abundant cause for the deepest humiliation? Let the men who value themselves so highly on the ground of their moral dignity, and who are regarded by others as almost sinless characters, and who feel as if they had little or no occasion for the exercises of a penitential frame of mind; who pity as fanaticism, or scorn as hypocrisy, those humble confessions which Christians make at the footstool of the divine throne; let them come to this ordeal, and try themselves by this standard, that they may learn how ill-grounded is their pride, and how little occasion they have to boast of their virtue! Would they like that any human eye should be able to trace all the movements of their hearts, and see all the workings of envy, and jealousy, and wrath, and selfishness—which the eye of Deity so often sees there? Say not that these are only the infirmities of our nature, to which the wisest and the best of the human race are ever subject in this world of imperfection; because this is confessing how deeply depraved is mankind, even in their best state. Can envy, and pride, and selfishness, and jealousy, and revenge—be looked upon as mere peccadilloes, which call for neither humiliation nor grief? Are they not the seeds of all those crimes which have deluged the earth with blood, filled it with misery, and caused the whole creation to groan together until now? Murders, treasons, wars, massacres—with all the lighter crimes of robberies, extortions, and oppressions—have all sprung up from these vile passions.

What need, then, have we all of that great sacrifice which takes away our sin! And what need of a perpetually recurring application, by faith and repentance, to that blood which speaks better things than the blood of Abel, and which cleanses from all sin! What cause have we to repair nightly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy; and daily, that we may find grace to help in time of need! With the eye of faith upon the sin-atoning offering that was presented to Divine justice by the Son of God upon the cross, let us continually approach the awful majesty of heaven and earth, saying "God be merciful to me a sinner!"