

THE DUTY

OF

FAMILY RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION.

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If the importance of a Christian duty is to be estimated by the emphasis with which it is enjoined in the word of God, then the religious instruction of the young demands a degree of attention, which, we fear, it does not ordinarily receive. Where is the considerate parent who does not readily admit the importance of this subject? And yet, if we may judge from the frequent deviations among our youth, not only from the paths of moral rectitude, but also from the faith of their fathers, how small is the number of parents who have met the obligations of this duty, in *the incessant*, self-denying, yet delightful labour of training their offspring in the knowledge and the practice of divine things!

The Holy Scriptures are explicit and emphatic in enjoining the duty of family religious instruction.

No sooner had the Lord instituted his covenant with Abraham by the rite of circumcision, (Gen. xvii. 9—14,) "to be a God unto him, and to his seed after him," than that father of the faithful took Ishmael his son, and every male

of his household, in the self-same day, as God had said unto him, and administered unto them the token of the Lord's covenant. In the following chapter is recorded the testimony of God in regard to parental faithfulness: "I know Abraham, that he will command his children, and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment, that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him." Gen. xviii. 19.

At the institution of the Passover, commemorating the redemption of God's people from the servitude of Egypt, and in immediate connection with the ceremonial observances to be attended to in that impressive ordinance, the obligation is enforced: "Thou shalt show thy son in that day, saying, This is done because of that which the Lord did unto me when I came forth out of Egypt." "And it shall be when thy son asketh thee in time to come, saying, What is this? thou shalt say unto him, By strength of hand the Lord brought us out from Egypt, from the house of bondage." Ex. xiii. 8, 14.

When Moses would impress the people with a deep sense of their exalted privileges, as a nation, in having "Jehovah their God so nigh unto them, in all things that they called upon him for," and having statutes and judgments so righteous as all those which he set before them that day, he adds: "Only take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thine heart all the days of thy life; *but teach them thy sons, and thy sons' sons.*" Deut. iv. 8, 9. Again, when exhorting the people to obedience in the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy, he says, "And these words which I command you this day shall be in thine heart, *and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children,* and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down,

and when thou risest up." The summary of parental instruction contained in this chapter concludes with these impressive words: "And it shall be *our* righteousness, if we observe to do all these commandments before the Lord our God, as *he* hath commanded us." Deut. vi. 20—25.

The calamities which befel the ten tribes that revolted from the house of David, do not exceed what might have been foreseen and predicted by any pious Israelite, as the consequences of the abolition of the divinely instituted worship of Jehovah, and the setting up of the idolatrous worship of the calves at Dan and Bethel—a measure, in the judgment of Jeroboam, essential to the permanence of his usurped authority, 1 Kings xii. 25—33. With this change in the national religion, family religion must have experienced a corresponding mutation. For when Jeroboam had cast off the Lord's priests from executing the priest's office, and had ordained priests for the high places, and for the calves which he had made, it cannot be supposed that the families adhering to him would be inclined or permitted to attend to the injunction of Moses: "Ye shall command your children to do all the words of this law," which sayeth, Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.

By the house of Judah, likewise, we infer that the duty of *parental religious instruction* was to a great extent neglected, from the prevalence of idolatry among all classes of the people. For it cannot be supposed that the Lord would have commanded "the fathers to make known his truth to the children," as a means of preventing idolatry, (see Deut. iv. 9, *ad fin.*) and then would have suffered the nation to fall into the most degrading forms of idol worship, unless those *fathers* had forgotten the covenant of the Lord their God, and hidden from their children "the praises of the Lord, and his strength, and his wonderful works."

Although this national sin brought upon them the threat-

ened displeasure and wrath of the Most High ; and although they endured the consequences of this guilt in the horrors of the siege, the oppression of conquerors, and finally in their captivity, yet there is reason to apprehend, even after their return from that captivity, they neglected the duty of family religious instruction, and were forgetful of the sacred obligations involved in the family constitution. The canon of the Old Testament Scriptures closes with this remarkable language :—“ Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord ; and he shall turn the heart of the *fathers* to the *children*, and the heart of the *children* to the *fathers*, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.” Mal. iv. 5, 6.

From this brief account, drawn from the history of God’s people under the old dispensation, it is obvious that the neglect of a duty so plainly enjoined, and upon the faithful performance of which so much depended, must have been a sin of no ordinary magnitude. And connected as this sin was with many of the more flagrant offences of the Jewish people, both as a nation and as individuals, it need not surprise us that, in God’s dealings with them, it should have met the fearful retributions of his justice, in every age, from the time that Rebecca instructed her son in the arts of deception, to the period when his descendants rejected their Prince, madly imprecating the curse—“ His blood be upon us and on our *children*.”

In the New Testament, which contains the doctrines and institutions of the Christian religion, the duty of parental religious training occupies a position not less prominent. In the gospel, truly, “ the hearts of the fathers are turned to the children, as well as the disobedient, to the wisdom of the just.”

Our Saviour rebuked his disciples for forbidding children to be brought unto him, saying, “ Suffer little children, and forbid them not to come unto me, for of such is the king-

dom of heaven." Matt. xix 13. To qualify children and youth for this membership in the kingdom of heaven, so far as education and discipline can accomplish that end, they are brought into covenant relation to God on the faith of their parents, 1 Cor. vii. 14. Promises are made to them, (Acts ii. 39,) and special instructions are addressed to them, Col. iii. 20. Parents are cautioned against provoking them to wrath, and are enjoined to bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. They were doubtless dedicated to God in the baptism of households, (Acts xvi. 15, 33; 1 Cor. i. 16,) and instances are recorded of their walking in the truth, 2 John 4, and of their acquaintance with the Holy Scriptures from childhood. 2 Tim. iii. 15.

Thus in both the Old and New Testaments the duty of family religious instruction occupies a position of importance, which should bespeak for it the awakened attention of Christian parents and the Christian church. Its neglect cannot but prove fatal to the usefulness and happiness of families, and disastrous to the prosperity of Zion.

The subjects which should be embraced in a course of early religious instruction, are worthy of serious consideration.

As "all Scripture is given by inspiration of God," the Bible should be the principal text-book in the religious teaching of the young. For this purpose, among others, was this precious volume given to the world. "The entrance of thy word giveth light; it giveth understanding to the simple."

The adaptation of the word of God to the purpose in question, appears in the fact that the reception and contemplation of the truths of revealed religion, more than any other subjects of study, elevate and strengthen the mind. Familiarity with one truth of revelation invigorates the mind for the contemplation of others more complex and profound. If the material works of God, spread out to

our view, present a noble field of study, how much more the displays of his perfections in his moral kingdom! If truth partially revealed in the visible creation is deserving of study, how much more in its full revelation in the divine word! As the mind advances in such a study it is strengthened for the pursuit of higher attainments in knowledge. Its progress is as the light which shines more and more unto the perfect day. In contemplating the deep things of God, and acquiring the knowledge of the manifold relations of the creature to the Creator, the immortal spirit is filled with ceaseless astonishment, admiration and praise, ever approaching the eternal throne, yet never reaching it.

This invigorating and elevating influence of divine truth is not confined to the intellectual faculties alone; it powerfully develops the whole moral nature. For although in our fallen condition the law of our natural conscience is so far obliterated, as to be unavailable in ascertaining our duty to God, yet there remains the original faculty by which we distinguish right and wrong; and to this faculty, in an especial manner, are the teachings of the word of God addressed. While a wrong education may lead to its greater perversion and depravation, it is susceptible of great improvement under proper moral culture. The education of which we speak, is the aggregate result of all the influences of instruction and example which may be brought to bear until principles are settled and habits formed.

Let a child be trained under the influences of heathenism, and he will know no other deity than his false and cruel gods; he will strangle his aged father as an act of humanity, and sacrifice his own offspring to devils. The same child, educated in Romanism, will regard it as a mortal sin to think for himself on matters of faith; will yield his soul to the polluting influences of the confessional as the only medium of pardon, believe that the gift of God is to be purchased with money, and that the great and blessed God

himself is pleased with vain oblations, pomp, and parade. But the same child, trained under the influence of the gospel, and instructed in the great doctrines of the Bible, will manifest a clearness of mind, a tenderness of conscience, and a strength of moral principle, which can result from no other educational instrumentality. So peculiarly adapted is the divinely inspired word to operate upon the natural conscience.

“*The fear of the Lord*” is not only “the beginning of wisdom,” but one of the most powerful motives that can be addressed to the heart of youth. This sentiment, when once habitual, becomes the master influence of the life. Although it may not cleanse from secret faults, it strongly tends to keep back from open and presumptuous sins, such as profane swearing, Sabbath-breaking, uncleanness, fraud, violence, intemperance, and the like. It inclines to the path of duty, and strengthens the sense of moral obligation. Holding its possessor in subjection and obedience to God, it is remarkably adapted to overcome the fear of man.

The existence and majesty of God, his moral government over his creatures, and the final awards of his justice, are the truths which tend to cultivate in the youthful mind the controlling sentiment of which we have spoken; and these are the doctrines recognized and inculcated throughout the Bible.

The influence of these truths is not temporary. It grows with the growth, and strengthens with the strength. “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.” “Wherewith shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word.” Many a young man has by this means been kept from the path of the destroyer, from which he could hardly have escaped, had his childhood and youth been uninfluenced by “*the admonition and the fear of the Lord.*”

Nor do the advantages of Scripture instruction terminate

with the restraining and moulding of the external deportment. The sacred Scriptures, through faith in Jesus Christ, are able to make wise unto salvation; and this should be the great and ceaseless aim of the parent, in teaching his child out of the lively oracles of God.

Children, at a very early age, can understand their need of a Saviour, and the great features of the plan of salvation. Their earliest remembrances should be associated with the love of God as displayed in the transactions of Calvary. They should be early familiarized with the name of Jesus, with the holiness of his character, the benevolence of his heart, his sympathy for the distressed, his special regard for children, the greatness and goodness of his miracles, and, above all, with the shedding of his precious blood in atoning for sin, proclaiming himself to be both able and willing to save to the uttermost.

Let the first great idea impressed upon the infant mind, in lines of indelible distinctness, be the idea of the God-man, Christ; the mighty God over all, the sympathizing friend of poor sinners, the pattern of their life, their Protector and help in trouble, their Redeemer, their Judge, their God!

Thus made acquainted from their youth with the holy Scriptures, they are not only kept from receiving for doctrines the commandments of men, but in the day of God's merciful visitation to their souls, when they shall be effectually called by his Spirit into the kingdom of his Son, it will not be their part to occupy the place of the ignorant, who are necessarily confined to a limited sphere of usefulness, while they are learning what are the first principles of the doctrine of Christ, but with sanctified affections, and enlightened minds, they are qualified to enter at once into the active and efficient service of the Master. The individual, who in youth has been thoroughly instructed from the Scriptures, and trained in the path of duty, by parental



faithfulness, needs but the life-giving energy of the Holy Spirit on his soul, to introduce him at once into a sphere of usefulness, and to invest him with a maturity of Christian intelligence, to which he would have been a stranger, had his early religious training been neglected.

Besides the general principles of Christian faith and practice, children should be thoroughly indoctrinated in the peculiar views of our church, and faithfully instructed in its history.

These subjects have been unfortunately too often omitted from the early instructions of our children, in order, as is alleged, "to avoid giving undue importance to non-essentials, and that the youthful mind may not be biased by sectarian prejudices." We apprehend the Presbyterian Church has not yet suffered all the evils necessarily resulting from this error.

We deprecate as much as any the bad effects of early prejudices, and the "tithing of mint, and anise, and cummin, to the neglect of the weightier matters of the law;" but as the most efficient guard against these very evils, we earnestly recommend to the parents of our beloved Zion, that they familiarize their children with the distinctive doctrines and order of the Presbyterian Church, exhibiting them in their proper place, and showing their real importance in the system of divine truth. It will not fail to appear that the truths of the gospel, as held forth by Presbyterianism, "are like apples of gold in pictures of silver." And we need not fear that any one will be a Presbyterian *from prejudice*, who is well instructed in the Scriptural authority of that system, and in the eventful history which has distinguished its progress.

What system ever held by man, is superior to that popularly known as Calvinistic, in its power to benefit the world? What other system ascribes the same glory to the infinite Majesty of heaven, and at the same time is so calculated to

develope the highest qualities of human nature? By this system, the man of distinction and extensive usefulness is made to feel that he has nothing but what he has received; that it is God who maketh him to differ, "working in him to will and to do." So, too, his more humble fellow-servant, no less important in his appointed sphere, is encouraged to improve his single talent with the utmost diligence.

Inculcating the sovereignty of God, and his changeless purpose of justice and grace, it inspires the heart of man with high resolves for the glory of God, and for the good of his fellows, and nerves his arm with invincible prowess for the execution of noble enterprizes.

While it affords to the believer effectually called, the assurance that he shall never perish, being "kept by the power of God, through faith unto salvation," it extends to the impenitent sinner the encouragement which he needs. "It is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy." "By grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God."

The brightest pages of history are the records inscribed with the principles of this system. In the progressive development of liberty, knowledge, and righteousness, these principles have exercised a controlling influence; and they enroll among their advocates multitudes of the wise, and great, and good, who have arisen to bless mankind in every age.

Above all, we believe this system to be the precious truth of God, which he has revealed concerning our duty and destiny. Shall we fail, then, to impress upon the minds of our beloved offspring the proper estimation of such a system as this? Shall we not faithfully indoctrinate them in its principles, that they may imbibe its healthful and invigorating spirit, and be enriched by its priceless blessings?

To the discharge of this duty we are urged by fidelity to

our children. If we do not give them a decided inclination to what we believe to be the truth in religion, there are multitudes ready to direct them in some other way upon that subject. Above all, the world will not scruple to pervert them to its ways of error and vice, if they be allowed to pass from the parental roof without minds as clear and decided as our instructions can make them.

But why should not the lambs of our flock be retained within their own fold? The voice of the good Shepherd is as distinctly heard within our borders as elsewhere. Here are the green pastures, not less abundant, and living waters flow through all our coasts, as free and clear as gushed of old from Horeb's smitten rock!

Especially is this demanded in such a day as the present, when "*this way*" is evil spoken of by many, contradicting and blaspheming, and a fearful current of infidelity and atheism threatens to deluge the land. "We will not hide it from our children, showing to the generations to come the praises of the Lord, and his strength, and his wonderful works."

In the constitution of the family, divine Providence has invested the parental relation with peculiar authority and influence. Nothing so strengthens that authority, and augments that influence, as the assembling of a family, morning and evening, to be led in their devotions by parental piety, and to be instructed out of the law of the Lord.

We are to regard the responsibility of a father as commensurate with the near relation which he sustains to his offspring. God has, for a season, committed to parental stewardship the immortal soul of the child. How much depend upon the manner in which the duties involved in that stewardship are performed! To a great extent the success or failure of their offspring in the world—their weal or woe in eternity.

And in what terms may we define the delinquency of

that parent who fails to acknowledge God before his household, and to speak to his children of salvation? Not only does he deprive himself of one of the richest pleasures known to the sanctified heart, but he defrauds his little ones of a divine inheritance, whilst contemning the authority of heaven.

The total neglect of family religion is commonly associated with the absence of personal piety, want of interest in the cause of religion generally, derangement of secular business, feuds among brethren and sisters, the alienation of children from parents, the untimely breaking up of families, and other evidences of God's just displeasure.

The observance of a merely formal morning and evening service at the family altar, in which the children and domestics take no part, and which is accompanied by no religious instruction, accomplishes little more than to remind the household that a profession of religion is made in the family.

Should the devotions of a family be conducted even with spirit and zeal, yet still be unaccompanied by proper instruction, and "training in the nurture and admonition of the Lord," the members of the family will derive from such devotions little strength to withstand the influences which tend to divert them from the path of virtue, or to correct those false impressions made upon the minds of our youth, by which they are sometimes enticed from the faith of their fathers. On the other hand, when family religion is made to consist in mere instruction, how appropriate and orthodox soever, to the exclusion or neglect of devotional duties, and more especially if the instruction relates chiefly to outward ceremonies and forms, those under its influence may be expected to become formalists and bigots; or in disgust at all religion, to imbibe the principles of infidelity.