

THE COUNSEL OF CHRIST
TO CHRISTIANS
BY
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"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me' (John 10:27).

"Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory' (Psalm 73:24).

"And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell" (Matt. 5:29-30).

It must be granted, that many who are called, Christians, are not much disposed to listen to this advice. It is, however, the advice of our best friend, on a matter of common concern to all His followers. The sense of this wholesome advice, seems to be this: That we should always sacrifice that which is morally offensive, whatever it may cost us, in favour of that which is profitable for us as the followers of Jesus Christ. Such is the advice that is given to Christians. For Christ must be received before He can be obeyed. And when He is cordially received by us, His commandments will not be grievous.

Should He say to us, as in effect He doth in this text, In this world, there are pernicious pleasures that must be abandoned, and powerful propensities, in our hearts towards them, that must be mortified' we should bear His voice: believing it will cost us much less to regard, than it will to reject His counsel

Though our profit and pleasure are always inseparably connected, they are not always immediately connected in this world. Nor can we reverse this remark, and say, That whatever is pleasing must be profitable. To affect this, would be to forget we are fallen creatures, and that our fall from God was connected with the admission of this pernicious principle.

For when Eve, our common mother, Saw, that the forbidden tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise; she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat. In so doing, she preferred the testimony of her senses to the dictates of reason, and the declaration of God. You know the consequence. And can you, when you recollect it, as lengthened out from age to age, attempt to justify her conduct, or think it your honour, or interest, to imitate her example? I hope not. Leave it then to the Epicure to say, That what is pleasing cannot be hurtful. And to infidels, modern or ancient, to ask, Why hath God given us propensities which it would be criminal in us to gratify? You know that God hath not given us any irregular propensities. But having violated His will, we are

“TO SENSUAL JOYS INCLINED”.

So inclined, that if the counsel of Christ be despised, we have every thing to fear that can either shame, or shock humanity.

The words of the wise are as goads. While those of the wicked are smoother than oil. So David found the words of Nathan the prophet, and Achitophel the courtier. But the pricking goads of the wife, are intended to correct, and not to injure us. God forbid, then, my brethren, you should ever be like those rebellious people who would "not hear the law of the LORD r(Isa. 30:9). Who said "to the seers, See not; and to the prophets, Prophecy not unto us right things; Speak unto us smooth things; prophecy deceits" (Isa. 30:10). On the contrary, you will endeavour, more and more, I hope, to "lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word,

which is able to save your souls' (James 1:21). Being doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves" (James 1:22). With this disposition attend to the counsel of Christ, now before you; which considered, even in a literal view, will be found instructing; but, in its figurative sense, it will be found of much greater importance, if it be properly regarded, to the advancement of real religion among us, both in the public, and private walks of life.

The members of the body, mentioned in the text, are very precious in our estimation. Yet, it is well known, they may become so offensive to us, by being diseased, as to endanger the rest. And in such circumstances, how often have they been sacrificed, or given up, for the general good of the body? This is natural. But is it not astonishing, that some have been so immoderately addicted to sensual pleasures, that, rather than abstain from them, though warned of the danger, they have voluntarily deprived themselves of one sense, by attempting to gratify another; nay of life itself! Against the most pathetic remonstrances, we have known some resolve to run all hazards, and publicly to avow that resolution. You are shocked. And well you may. But I wish you to consider, whether many do not form the same resolution, and act upon it, who never publicly dared to avow it. Is it not a shame, that such martyrs to iniquity, should have more resolution to indulge corruption, whatever it may cost them, than many have who are called Christians, to follow the counsel of Christ! Surely, Sirs, if we were not able to perfect holiness, in the fear of the Lord, at any less expense than by literally complying with our Lord's advice, he who knows the worth of purity, the pleasures attending it, and the miseries of its absence, would cheerfully comply with it. Christ Himself, in sanctifying His people, hath given the fullest, and strongest proof, that this is a just way of thinking on this subject. For, He freely 'poured out his soul to death, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works!

But do not mistake me. I don't mean to insinuate, that either the loss, or mutilation of any of the members of the natural body, would at all advance the kingdom of God within us, or that we are called to do this, or any thing else injurious to humanity, under pretence of promoting that kingdom. However, from this supposition, and more particularly from the manner in which our Lord hath expressed Himself on this subject, I would infer, that purity of heart is incomparably precious in His sight. And when it is so in ours, I will venture to say, we shall be willing to do any thing to preserve, and promote it, that He

prescribes. ---What that is, in general, you have heard. But as the figurative sense of our Lord's words, is that which principally demands our attention, I will endeavour to be a little more particular.

In this sense, if our eye, or hand offend us, i.e., prove a stumbling block, or an occasion of scandal to us, by giving us offence, or causing us to offend others, we are advised to mortify those evil propensities, which naturally produce, if indulged, that which is offensive in the members we have mentioned, and in other parts of the animal frame. Job being aware of this, made a covenant with his eyes, that he might not be betrayed by them to commit mental folly. And he had, it seems, an equal command over his hand, and other members of his body, to refrain them from acts of immorality and in piety (Job 31:1-27). But, as it cannot be supposed that evil motions are subdued, where vicious acts are not restrained, the manner in which our Lord communicates, and clothes His advice, is not only proper, but deserving our best attention. --How difficult it is thus to regard it, will be best understood by applying His advice to some particular instances.

This advice, I think, may be applied to envy and ambition, covetousness, and lust, and to other corruptions of the human hart. Though it is evident, from the context, that our Lord hath a particular reference to the last. --When any of these unhallowed fires burn within, do you think it is easy to cut off every outward occasion of ministering fuel to those insatiable burnings? You are under a mistake if you do. Could Joseph's brethren turn their eyes from him, when he appeared before them in the envied coat his father made him? Could Haman forbear looking at Mordecai, when he sat in the king's gate, and refused to gratify his boundless ambition? Could Achan forbear looking at the babylonish garment, the two hundred sheckels of silver, and wedge of gold, which he saw and coveted at the siege of Jericho? Or David desist from surveying Bathsheba, when he saw her from the roof of his house? ---Why not? The reason is plain. Irregular and inordinate affections, at each of these periods, violently agitated the heart of each, and by them the members of the body, thus disordered and inflamed, were easily brought into willing subjection to the service of sin. Are we utterly unacquainted with such emotions? To suppress them may be difficult: but to satisfy ourselves by indulging them, is impossible. A resolution to attempt it is dangerous; and the attempt, without repentance, is death. But though it be difficult to obey the counsel of Christ, you must grant it is necessary, and that, that which makes it so difficult for us to obey it, is the corruption of our own hearts. Shall we then plead for it, or

say, corruption is subdued, where envy and ambition, covetousness and lust, fasten, as usual, on every object that attracts our attention? --He who gives us this counsel, gives us grace, if we are believers, to do His will. And between Him, that doth his master's will, and him that doth it not, you must allow, there is a material difference. I will, therefore, endeavour to exhibit the outlines of the character of each, and should I be able to do this with tolerable propriety, you will remember, that in exhibiting their characters, I must of course, in one of them, or in a mixed view of each, exhibit your own. If you admit this, and I cannot see how you can avoid it, it will doubtless secure me your fixed attention to what I have proposed to lay before you, on this interesting subject.

We begin then, with saying something concerning them who practically regard the counsel of Christ. And,

I. We see, that they are possessed of a clear, and strong conviction, that this is their indispensable duty. For who can imagine, that any man who is not the subject of such conviction, will ever comply with such advice? It is true, we are not now contending for the literal sense of these words. But to cut off the criminal communication of the eye and hand from any object, on which the heart is set, is not to be effected without a full conviction that this is our duty, and that not to do it, is to sin against God. The idea of its being fit and right, or of its being our privilege, will not avail us, abstractedly considered, in innumerable temptations. Mere breach of privilege doth not leave a sufficient sting behind it to make us resist, steadfastly, the pleasures of sense, or to sacrifice much in order to obtain the testimony of a good conscience. But a breach of duty, when we are properly convinced of it, is alarming. The fear that attends it, guards us in the awful hour of temptation, and makes us say with Joseph, "How can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" In such perilous moments, reason can exercise but a feeble authority over such rebellious subjects as we are. It can only admonish us, as old Eli did his profligate sons, and say to us, Why do ye such things? "It is no good report that I hear of you" (1 Sam. 2:23), and in both cases, you shall find the reproof to be equally despised:

II. In them who practically regard the counsel of Christ, we behold a courage that is portioned to their conviction. Conviction relates to the discovery of what is our duty; and by courage, we now mean, a fixed resolution to execute

it. Conviction, therefore, unaccompanied with such resolution, must be a state of mind truly pitiable, and deplorable. A state, in which one would not wish to see our worst enemy. Yet, how often, in some respect or other, have we seen our friends, alas! How often have we found ourselves in this painful situation? The opposite state of mind how pleasing! Powerful and permanent convictions, accompanied with suitable and corresponding resolutions, are there united. The minds of such are filled with light and love: Light that directs them, and love that animates them to fulfill the counsel of Christ. What an attracting sight are such Christians! Who would not gaze on them with pleasure: Who not wish to possess the same grace, and to manifest it in the same manner? But

III. As by conviction we are only satisfied what is duty, and as courage itself, in the sense we now consider it, doth no more than make us resolve to perform it, strength is still wanting to make us properly regard the counsel of Christ. This, therefore, we discern in them that obey His voice. Yes, in them we discover strength that is more than human; strength that evidently shows it is derived, and from whence the Christian derived it. In deed, he is indebted to Christ for counsel, conviction, and strength, and for every thing else that is necessary to do His will. For "what hath he", or any man, "that he hath not received?" Thus supported, what cannot the Christian suffer, to what cannot he submit for Jesus Christ? "He can to do all things; incumbent on him to do, "through Christ that strengtheneth him: Yes, sirs, thus supported, he is not only able to "endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ; but through Him to become "more than a conqueror?"

IV. Once more; in those who both practically and evangelically regard the counsel of Christ, it may be truly said, that wisdom is as apparent as strength. They not only comply with His counsel, but they do this, as Christ Himself complied with the counsel of His Father, ---without ostentation: Like Him, they "set their faces as a flint", against all their open and secret opposers; 'enduring the cross, and despising the shame for the joy that is set before them: Nor can any thing wholly divert their attention from being obedient to Him, Who "became obedient to death, even to the death of the cross" for them. By the wisdom imparted to them from above, they are "skilful in the word of righteousness: and know how to make use of the "whole armour of God." They are taught, "having done all, to stand.' And in all that they either do, or suffer, according to the will of God, to say, "Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory, for thy mercy and thy truth's sake" (Ps. 115:1)---In a

word, in them who thus obey the counsel of Christ, we see the promised all-sufficiency of His grace.

And now, allow me to ask, Whether Christ be not as willing to impart sufficiency of grace to us who believe in His name, to do His will, as He was to James or Jude, to Paul or Peter? Certainly He is. But how was such grace imparted to them? ---Freely? True. But was it not imparted wisely also? Were they not made to see, and feel the utter insufficiency of every thing else to answer that end, and to believe, that it would not be imparted to any one who has not this conviction? Do we thus seek it, and thus exercise it? If not, how dare we complain? And if we do, have we any occasion? Far from it! We find it, in our several characters, what they found it in theirs, and, according to the degree we have received of the same grace, we continue to enjoy it, as they themselves enjoyed it. Were that degree equal to theirs, the effects also would be the same. Like them, we should "die to sin: and "live unto God." Like them, we should 'take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake:" knowing, "that when we are weak, then are we strong' And that "if we be dead with Christ, we shall also live with him."

Such is the character of them who obey our Redeemer's counsel. In which it appears, that conviction and courage, strength and wisdom, are the great outlines that form it; and, that, in their conduct, the promised all-sufficiency of the grace of Christ shines forth beautifully conspicuous; sufficiently strong, (notwithstanding all that remains of a contrary nature) to distinguish it from every thing else, to the praise of Him who bestowed it, and of them that receive the promised blessing.

Let us now glance at the opposite character: theirs I mean, who reject the counsel of Christ.

Whoever rejects the counsel of another, is supposed, to have heard it, and that he did not choose to regard it. And indeed, the counsel that is not followed is always rejected, even though it should be commended. The young man that said, "I go Sir; and "went not; certainly rejected the counsel of his father. And we are informed, that "the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel of God against themselves, not being baptized with the baptism of John' To which, the publicans submitting, 'justified God' In those then, that reject the counsel of

Christ, instead of conviction, we see conceit, instead of courage, we perceive cowardice, instead of strength, we discern weakness, and instead of wisdom, we behold the height of folly.

The disobedient are repeatedly represented in the Word of truth, as ignorant and conceited. As not being able to "see afar off;" and yet as "wiser, in their own eyes, than seven men who can render a reason' Their cowardice is as conspicuous, in the time of trial, as their conceit before it approaches. Their vain boasting cannot conceal it from a discerning eye; nor can their temerity, to which the greatest cowards are sometimes subject. The strength of such is generally confined to their tongue. While their wisdom, or cunning rather, is principally employed in attempting to draw a shining veil over those actions that will not bear a moment's inspection. Persons of this unhappy cast, talk much, it maybe, of the efficacy, and all-sufficiency of the grace of Christ: But, alas! They only talk of it. In them it effects nothing. Their disposition is as depraved, their mind as sensual, and their life as mercenary and mean, as many who never heard of the Saviour's name, Surely, such are, if any be, "enemies to the cross of Christ!' And if we may not say, "they glory in their shame; it is not uncandid to say, they "mind earthly things:' The world itself is weary of such Christians. They who are Christians indeed weep for their folly, and warn the young convert against the widely spreading influence of their pernicious example; which the parts of some, the wealth of others, and the profession of each, have a tendency to commend to the unwary. Who doth not wish to see a better prospect among us than he beholds at present? To see genuine, and unadulterated Christianity mightily prevailing over artifice and opposition from its open enemies, and secret foes? Should I say, I long to see a sight so pleasing, I am persuaded, I should say no more than what the most Christianized of every denomination wish, and pray for, night and day. But while many are thus concerned, many I fear there are, both in a private and public character, who aim at nothing less than a revival of pure and undefiled religion! Alas! The religion of thousands, consists in little, or nothing more than in embracing, and verbally supporting, some imperfect and inconsistent system, and in unmercifully, and indiscriminately condemning those that do not receive it. If, in this great city, you have ministers who treat you as wise and faithful physicians treat their patient, (and, I believe, you have many) they who are better judges than I am apprehend you have more, who treat their people as confectioners treat their customers, consulting nothing more than how to gratify their taste, how injurious forever it may be to their constitution. But those ministers who are otherwise minded, are not yet

dismayed. No, they rejoice in the testimony of a good conscience, which the world can neither give nor take away. They rejoice in what they see of the fruit of their labours among them who have not "received the grace of God in vain: And, "believing they rejoice; in hope of those better days, which God hath revealed and promised, and which they wish they may be honoured to hasten by their united endeavours to be 'labourers together with God.'

It becomes us now to consider, which of the two characters we have attended to, is our own. Whether we ourselves, regard or reject the counsel of Christ. I imagine I behold some Christians at a loss to determine this point to their own satisfaction. The first character seems too exalted to be theirs, and the last appears as much beneath them, as that is above them. They are at a loss what to conclude. To what is it owing? The fact, I presume, is this: They are conscious, that as they regard, so, in too many instances, they also reject the counsel of Christ. This, I apprehend, will be acknowledged by every Christian, present or absent. I scruple not, however, to confess, that to this hour, I find a certain mixture of the conviction and conceit, the courage and cowardice, the strength and weakness, the wisdom and folly of each character I have mentioned. If you, my brethren, be conscious of the same internal mixture, let us unite in confessing what we find and feel, to Him whose compassion is as great, as His counsel is wise. Let us own what He hath imparted with gratitude. And whatever we discover of a contrary nature, with humility.

I cannot put a period to this discourse, without submitting to your consideration the following requests; the design of which is too evident to need any explanation.

I. BE PERSUADED, That neither the love nor labour of Jesus Christ, was ever intended to indulge us in sloth, or carnal security. But I need not tell you, that some talk, and that others live as if this was actually the case. When they were first alarmed on account of sin, "repentance towards God, and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ; seemed equally to engage their attention. But their following conduct hath convinced Us, that what they called repentance, was not a 'spirit of mourning, which is lasting, efficacious, and always produces "answerable fruit: No, it was only a transient touch of their affections, which had no tendency to 'purge their consciences from dead works to serve the living God: Its operations faded soon, and came to nothing. What then held them in fear is now their jest. Still, as usual, they are in bondage to corruption, but insensible of their state. Strange state indeed! Within, all is confidence, without, corruption and carnal security! --"But

how; say you, "is the confidence that these people have of their good state supported?" They are believers. This is their general answer; and that to which every other may be reduced. But what is it, my brethren, that they believe? Do they believe, 'that the son of God was manifested to take away our sins: That faith in him purifies the heart, and makes us zealous of good works?' Do they believe, 'That God is light, and in him is no darkness at all? That if we say we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not obey the truth?' We are obliged to deny it. For, we are taught "not to know the Speech of them that are puffed up, but the power! And are assured, That "the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power' (I Cor. 4:20)---These people seem rather to believe the delusions of their own hearts than any thing else; and to believe, that the obedience of Christ is admitted as a substitute for theirs, in a sense never intended by Him, and never desired by them who "know the grace of God in truth.' 'Whatever Christ did, or suffered for us, all was done by Him, "as the only mediator between God and many In this view, the substitution of His services and sufferings, is truly glorious. But to suppose, that any thing which He did, or suffered, was with a view to tolerate, or allow of indevotion, or immorality in us, is to snake it contemptible. God, in justice, cannot make that man happy whom He doth not make to resemble Himself. All the ideas we have of His perfections forbid it. 'Be ye therefore followers of God as dear children.'"

II. BE PERSUADED, That pleasure is often preceded by pain in this world, and pain by pleasure. "Who hath woe? who hath sorrow? Who hath contentions? Who hath wounds without cause? Who hath redness of eyes? They who tarry long at the wine, they that go to seek mixed wines (Prov. 23:29). That is, they who immoderately indulge themselves in sensual pleasures. Who then are they that avoid these evils? Who, but they who avoid the cause of any evil can expect to be preserved from the consequences attending it? 'Can a man take fire in his bosom and not be burnt?' Exemption then from moral evil cannot be expected without self-denial: Nor can that be exercised without pain? Can we think, (pardon me for asking such a question; a view to your edification extorts it from me), can we think, I say then, that Christ meant to jest with us, when He advised us to 'pluck out, cut off, and cast from us: in a moral sense, our 'offensive' members? Or do we imagine, that this can be done without pain? --the Christian, it is true, as a Christian, is offended with nothing but that which is offensive to Jesus Christ. And though we know of nothing that is offensive to Him, but sin, yet as sin hath been as pleasing to us, as it is offensive to Christ, it is not without much difficulty that we are divorced from it But whatever pain this may give us, is it not necessary? Is it not profitable? Why then are we alarmed at the cost, or discouraged at the conflict? Have we yet resisted to blood? Or if we had, should we have any cause to repent? Let us then endeavour to animate, and cease to intimidate one another. Let US adopt the Apostolic language, and say to all that are engaged in this conflict, "Be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord" (I Con 15:58).

III. BE PERSUADED, That the joys of victory obtained in the name and strength of Jesus Christ are more than adequate to all the pain which attends the present conflict between flesh and Spirit. The consolation communicated to the believer who obtains repeated victories in this warfare is peculiar to himself. A stranger intermeddles not with it. And, I believe, they who have obtained the fewest victories, would prefer those to any other. But, "no man is crowned except he strive lawfully: And temperance and triumph are as inseparably connected in this combat, as they were in the Olympic games. In the former, as well as in the latter, "every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things": not in the loose sense of the voluptuous, or of many who are now thought to be very temperate, but in the Apostolic sense of that comprehensive expression. In this sense, may we be "temperate in all things"! Then, we shall be as remote from modish, modern temperance, on the one hand, as on the other, from monkish superstition, and pharisaical ostentation. In this sense, to be temperate is to be wise, and happy. Garlands of unfading bliss she weaves for each, that listen to her wise and kind injunctions. She leads us forth undismayed to the conflict, and unassuming to receive the conqueror's crown. Or He rather, who is the giver of that, "and of every good and perfect gift," If joys like these attend the Christian here, what, think you, is his consolation when his arduous combat is finally closed? Who can tell what Paul felt, when he said, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day"? And can you, my brethren, forget what the dying conqueror added, in this triumphant hour? "And not to me only, but unto all them who love his appearing"! If we are unable to tell what he felt when he uttered these memorable words, are we not as unable to conceive what he afterward enjoyed, and still enjoys in the mansions of bliss? None but Christian conquerors are there. Read the concluding verse of each of the Epistles to the seven churches of Asia, in the second and third chapters of the Revelation, and then estimate, if you can, their full felicity. Surely, when these "exceeding great and precious promises are fulfilled; it may be truly said, "The Lamb which is in the midst of the throne doth feed them, and lead them to living fountains of water, and that God himself doth wipe away all tears from their eyes"! Can he be a believer, who, hearing these things, doth not "reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18).

IV. BE PERSUADED, that your whole choice respecting this conflict, is bounded by two points. You must either choose the cost of victory, (for there is no victory to be obtained without cost), or you must choose to stand to the consequences of being overcome. And can you hesitate a moment which to choose? That would be to suppose, you had considered neither the consequences, nor the cost. For who that has done both, can remain irresolute? Is not hell mentioned, in the text, as the certain, and tremendous

consequence of our finally rejecting the counsel of Christ? But, whatever may be the consequence of our paying due attention to it, will it be equal to that alarming, to that tremendous idea? Nay, will our attention to the counsel of Christ, from proper motives, injure us at all? Will it not, upon the whole, be always our interest, as it certainly is, at all times, our duty to regard it? Wise men always regard the whole of things. And if we are so wise as to do this, we shall at last find, That much more pain, even in this world, is the unavoidable portion of them who gratify their lusts, than of those believers, who endeavour to mortify them; and who, "by a patient continuance in well doing, seek for glory and honour and immortality." ---Awake! Arise! "Fight the good fight of faith"! "Lay hold on eternal life"! Or confess, you are left, in every view, without excuse! If you have received strength from Christ to do His will, exert it. If that be yet wanting, seek, as directed, to obtain grace to serve God acceptably, with reverence and godly fear"! Recollecting, both for conviction and consolation, That, OUR * GOD "is a consuming fire.

* Many, it is well known, have different ideas of this sublime passage; and have said, 'That God out of Christ is a consuming fire: But is God, our God, a covenant God, out of Christ? Or is He less holy, and jealous of His own honour in Him, than under another idea? Can we suppose, that God ever did, or will consume any thing but what ought to be consumed? And will Christ prevent it? It is too evident, that the best Christians have much in them that needs to be burnt up; and our God, (let us rejoice at the thought,) is too just and kind to spare it.