

put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter?" and thus they "err in vision, and stumble in judgment."

But to return to the inquiry, "What may we understand by conscience?" In addition to what has already been stated in answer to this inquiry, it may be observed, with Locke, that "conscience is nothing else but our own opinion or judgment of the moral rectitude or pravity of our own actions." It is not a faculty or principle distinct from the understanding and judgment, as is sometimes represented, except as it relates to man's moral nature; but it is the decision of a man's own mind in the exercise of his understanding and judgment, concerning the morality of his own actions, with reference to some rule, attended with corresponding emotions of pleasure or pain. The Hebrew language furnishes no name for conscience; the writers, therefore, of the Old Testament sometimes term it "the mind," and the "heart." We are told that "David's heart smote him after he had numbered the people." St. John, also, speaking of conscience, says, "If our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things. If our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence towards God." When we decide concerning the right or wrong, the merit or demerit, of the moral actions of others, it is simply called the decision of our judgment in the case, and is attended with pleasing or painful emotions proportioned to the knowledge by which our judgment has been influenced, the rectitude of our own minds, and the interest we feel in the parties concerned. The same act of the mind, when it has respect to ourselves, is properly designated conscience; and "pleasure or pain is excited with a degree of intensity, proportioned to the importance which we always assign to our own interests and feelings." It follows, therefore, that those decisions concerning ourselves and others will be uniform, according as the same rule of judgment is applied, and correct according to the just perception of the mind concerning the truth and will of God as that rule. And hence arise all the errors of conscience, in not making the will of God, so far as it is made known to us by the light of nature or revelation, or both, the rule of judgment: and, above all, the necessity of the enlightening influences of the Holy Ghost, that that divine rule may in every case be recognised, understood, and faithfully applied.

Let us now apply these principles to several views of conscience, as furnished to us in the Holy Scriptures.

In 1. Corinthians, viii. 7, 10, 12, we read of a weak and defiled conscience: weak, or erroneous, from want of more light, instruction and experience: and defiled, or polluted and guilty, through those sins which originate in its ignorance or perversity. This was the case with some of the Corinthians to whom the Apostle wrote, who were not yet fully convinced that "an idol is nothing in the world," and therefore are things sacrificed to idols with some consciousness of religious regard to them, as real though inferior deities, and thereby defiled their consciences with the sin of idolatry. "Howbeit there is not in every man that knowledge: for some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat it as a thing offered unto an idol; and their conscience being weak, is defiled." In 1. Timothy, iv. 2, we read of a cauterised conscience: or of a "conscience seared with a hot iron." This is spoken of hypocrites, whose consciences are branded in the sight of God with their impostures and lies: "they bear the marks of their hypocrisy as evidently and indelibly in their conscience in the sight of God, as those who have been cauterised for their crimes do in their bodies in the sight of men." The hypocrite is conscious to himself before God that he is a deceiver: that the character he has assumed does not belong to him; yet, though self-condemned, he continues to practice the imposture, urged on by pride or covetousness, or some other evil disposition. The Apostle, in Romans i. 28, speaks of a "reprobate mind," or a dead, unfeeling conscience, which allows men "to do those things which are not convenient;" as also to the Ephesians, iv. 18, 19, "Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart: who being past feeling, have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness." And why are we exhorted not to grieve or quench the Spirit, but

because of the awful possibility and certainty of being involved in his hardened state, should His sacred light and influence be withdrawn? Hebrews x. 22, the Apostle speaks of an "evil conscience," by which we may understand a guilty, accusing, condemning conscience—the consciousness which the awakened sinner has of guiltiness before God—a painful and alarming conviction of having sinned and exposed himself to the wrath of God, and which fills and burdens the mind with sorrow, shame, and fear. But we also and frequently read of a "good conscience;" the conscience of a good man, which is neither weak nor defiled, nor seared, nor dead, nor guilty, but enlightened and guided in its decisions by the Spirit and word of God; for no conscience can be good but in connexion and agreement with that law which is holy, and just, and good—"a heart sprinkled from an evil conscience,"—"a conscience purged from dead works,"—"a conscience that beareth witness in the Holy Ghost," and to which the "Spirit itself beareth witness,"—"a conscience void of offence toward God and toward men,"—a conscience which becomes a source of peace and joy to the Christian believer: "For our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our conversation in the world." This is a good conscience; of which we may say, as Solomon did of wisdom, of which indeed it forms a part, "She is more precious than rubies, and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her."

Let, then, these scriptural views of conscience be considered in connexion with those principles which we have shown to be involved in the nature and functions of this inward monitor, and we shall arrive at the following conclusions:—That conscience is an essential part of the moral constitution of man: that, divinely instructed, it is "the candle of the Lord" in man, designed to be the great principle of moral actions, and guide in matters of sin and duty:—that, however, through the blindness of the human mind, the alienation of the heart from God, and the perverting influence of sinful passions and worldly interests, the verdict of conscience, on many moral questions, is often very erroneous: and that, therefore, the rectitude of our moral judgments concerning ourselves may be relied upon only so far as we are conscious of having carefully and impartially examined the whole case; so far only as our minds are enlightened by the Spirit of God, and conscience is guided and influenced in its sanctions by a solemn recognition of the authority of the will and law of God, as the supreme rule of human conduct. If in these conclusions we are justified by the views of conscience which are unfolded in those passages of Scripture to which we have referred, the following practical reflections seem naturally to arise out of the whole subject:—

1. That, aware of the darkness of the human mind through sin, and its liability and proneness to err on matters of personal interest and eternal moment to man, we should earnestly implore the illumination of the Holy Spirit, and diligently and prayerfully read and study the oracles of God, that they may become "a lamp unto our feet, and a light unto our path," and that we may be enabled, in our own case and in the case of others, at all times, to "judge righteous judgment."

2. We should learn to value a good conscience as a source of inward comfort and support, which may remain when all earthly and outward comforts are withdrawn. What was it that supported Job amidst his complicated trials, and personal and domestic afflictions, and that enabled him patiently to bear the cruel and groundless suspicions, censures and charges of his professed friends? It was a good conscience: the testimony of "a conscience void of offence,"—"the answer of a good conscience toward God." It was this that enabled him, amidst the darkness of the divine dispensations, to say of his Maker, who alone could read his heart, "He knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold;" and to resolve, "Till I die I will not remove mine integrity from me; my righteousness I hold fast, and will not let it go; my heart shall not reproach me so long as I live." Great, indeed, and unparalleled were Job's losses, afflictions and sufferings; but greater than them all would have been the forfeiture of a good conscience. It was

the conscious approval of his Maker alone that sustained and comforted him while sitting among the ashes, and while scraping his diseased and encrusted body with a potsherd.

3. We should take care never to rely upon or plead the decisions of conscience in self-approbation, or self-justification, but as we are at the same time conscious that we have decided, not according to prejudice, passion, or worldly interest, but according to reason and those principles of action which revealed religion authoritatively asserts. For a man, for instance, who, in the management of his temporal concerns, is influenced by the example and proceedings of the world around him, may say that he feels himself justified in the manner in which he conducts his business; while his speculations and transactions are such, that if the rule of Christian morality be applied to them, they will be found to involve principles and procedure of very questionable rectitude, honour and honesty. Or, a man may say, that his conscience bears him witness that he gives as much as he ought to do for the relief of the poor, or for the support of the cause of God; while his judgment, in this case, is influenced by the penurious example of others, or by his own covetousness and love of money; and thus he "withholdeth more than is meet," and gives a penny when he ought to give a pound. Other persons there are, and some of them, perhaps, professors of religion, who err in judgment and conscience in other respects; for, instead of "comparing spiritual things with spiritual," they are like those Corinthians spoken of by the Apostle, who "commend themselves; but they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise." Such persons may say that they can, with a good conscience, indulge in fashionable or expensive dress, worldly amusements, splendid equipages, &c. But whence do they get those good consciences that will authorise such indulgences? Is it not rather from "the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life," and the example of others, than from the sanctions of religion and the rule of God's word? "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world;"—"Be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed;"—"Whether, therefore, ye eat or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God." How important, then, that we should closely and seriously examine our consciences in the light of God's word, and in the exercise of prayer, in order that we may be directed to a right judgment! "For if a man think himself to be something when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself. But let every man prove his own work; and then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another."

1. Let us remember that there exists an awful possibility of "putting away" a good conscience, as of making a "shipwreck of faith;" that a peaceful and approving conscience may, by disregarding or violating its dictates, become a guilty and an accusing conscience; or, what is worse, the light of truth and life that is in it may be obscured and extinguished. And, O, the blindness, darkness, and confusion, which follow upon the extinction of such a light! "If the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!" And, O, the insensibility and stupidity of a conscience lulled to sleep; or dumb, that speaks not, warns not, condemns not, that will allow the sinner to "hide wickedness under his tongue as a sweet morsel," that will allow him to go on in his backslidings unchecked and unalarmed! Or, at best, a conscience still awake, but up in arms, filled with upbraidings and remorse, tossing him with tempest by day, and scaring him with dreams of terror by night; his light, and peace, and hope, all fled, and a dark and stormy region of mind all around! Think of a guilty conscience, too, in the dying hour and in the judgment-day: the blinding and stupifying influence of captivating lusts and earthly passions no longer operating, her indignant reproaches and rebukes are then felt with accumulated and agonizing force, while she—

"Shows with a pointing finger, but no noise,
A pale procession of past sinful joys,
All witnesses of blessings foully scorn'd,
And life abused, and not to be suborn'd:
'Mark these,' she says; 'these, summon'd from afar,
Begin their march to meet thee at the bar;
There find a Judge inexorably just,
And perish there, as all presumption must.'"