

LETTERS FROM THE HON. JOHN Q. ADAMS TO HIS SON, ON THE BIBLE AND ITS TEACHINGS.

LETTER V.

In the promise with which my last letter to you upon the Bible was concluded, I undertook a task from the performance of which I have been hitherto deterred by its very magnitude and importance: the more I reflected upon the subject, the more sensibly did I feel my incompetency to do it justice, and by a weakness so common in the world from the apprehension of inability to accomplish as much as I ought, I have hitherto been withheld from the attempt to accomplish anything at all. Thus more than a year has elapsed, leaving me still burdened with the load of my promise; and in now undertaking to discharge it, I must premise that you are only to expect the desultory and indigested thoughts which I have not the means of combining into a regular and systematic work. I shall not entangle myself in the controversy which has sometimes been discussed with a temper not very congenial either to the nature of the question itself or the undoubted principles of Christianity, whether the Bible, like all other systems of morality, lays the ultimate basis of all human duties in self-love, or whether it enjoins duties on the principle of perfect and disinterested benevolence. Whether the obligations are sanctioned by a promise of reward or a menace of punishment, the ultimate motives for its fulfillment may justly be attributed to the selfish considerations. But if obedience to the will of God be the universal and only foundation of all moral duty, special injunctions may be binding upon the consciences of men, although their performance should not be secured either by the impulse of hope or fear.

The law given from Sinai was a civil and municipal as well as a moral and religious code; it contained many statutes adapted to that time only, and to the particular circumstances of the nation to whom it was given; they could, of course, be binding upon them, and only upon them, until abrogated by the same authority which enacted them, as they afterward were by the Christian dispensation; but many others were of universal application, laws essential to the existence of men in society, and most of which have been enacted by every nation which ever professed any code of laws. But the Levitical was given by God himself; it extended to a great variety of objects of infinite importance to the welfare of men, but which could not come within the reach of human legislation; it combined the temporal and spiritual authorities together, and regulated not only the actions but the passions of those to whom it was given. Human legislators can undertake only to prescribe the actions of men; they acknowledge their inability to govern and direct the sentiments of the heart; the very law itself is a rule of civil conduct, not of internal principles, and there is no crime in the power of an individual to perpetrate which he may not design, project and fully intend without incurring guilt in the eye of human law. It is one of the greatest marks of divine favor bestowed upon the children of Israel, that the Legislator gave them rules not only of action but for the government of the heart. There were, occasionally, a few short sententious principles of morality issued from the oracles of Greece; among them, and undoubtedly the most excellent of them, was that of self-knowledge, which one of the purest moralists and finest poets of Rome expressly says came from heaven. But if you would remark the distinguishing characteristics between true and false religion, compare the manner in which the ten commandments were proclaimed by the voice of the Almighty God, from Mount Sinai, with thunder and lightning, and earthquake, by the sound of the trumpet, and in the hearing of six hundred thousand souls, with the studied secrecy, and mystery, and mummerly with which the Delphic and other oracles of the Grecian gods were delivered. The miraculous interpositions of Divine power recorded in every part of the Bible were invariably marked with grandeur and sublimity worthy of the Creator of the world, and before which the gods of Homer, not excepting his Jupiter, dwindle into the most contemptible pigmies; but on no occasion was the manifestation of the Deity so solemn, so awful, so calculated to make indelible impressions upon the imaginations and souls of the mortals to whom He revealed Himself, as when He appeared in the character of their Lawgiver.

The law thus dispensed was, however, imperfect; it was destined to be partly suspended and improved into absolute perfection many ages afterward by the appearance of Jesus Christ upon earth. But to judge of its excellence as a system of laws, it must be compared with human codes which existed or were promulgated at nearly the same age of the world in other nations. Remember that the Law was given 1,490 years before

Christ was born, at the time the Assyrian and Egyptian monarchies existed; but of their government and laws we know scarcely anything save what is collected from the Bible. Of the Phrygian, Lydian, and Trojan States at the same period, little more is known. The President Gorget, in a very elaborate and ingenious work on the origin of letters, arts and sciences among the ancient nations, says that "the maxims, the civil and political laws of these people are absolutely unknown; that not even an idea of them can be formed, with the single exception of the Lydians, of whom Herodotus asserts, that their laws were the same as the Greeks." The same author contrasts the total darkness and oblivion into which all the institutions of these mighty empires have fallen, with the fullness and clearness, and admirable composition of the Hebrew code, which has not only descended to us entire, but still continues the national code of the Jews (scattered as they are over the whole face of the earth), and enters so largely into the legislation of almost every civilized nation upon the globe. He observes "that these laws have been prescribed by God himself: the merely human laws of other cotemporary nations cannot bear any comparison with them. But my motive in forming the comparison, is to present to your reflection as a proof—and to my mind a very strong proof—of the reality of their divine origin. For how is it that the whole system of government and administration, the municipal, political, ecclesiastical, military and moral laws and institutions which bound in society the numberless myriads of human beings who formed for many successive ages the stupendous monarchies of Africa and Asia, should have perished entirely and been obliterated from the memory of mankind, while the laws of a paltry tribe of shepherds, characterized by Tacitus, and the sneering infidelity of Gibbon, as "the most despised portion of their slaves," should not only have survived the wreck of those empires, but remain to this day rules of faith and practice to every enlightened nation of the world, and perishable only with it? The reason is obvious: it is their intrinsic excellence which has preserved them from the destruction which befalls all the works of mortal man. The precepts of the decalogue alone (says Gorget) disclose more sublime truth, more maxims essentially suited to the happiness of man, than all the writings of profane antiquity put together can furnish. The more you meditate on the laws of Moses, the more striking and brighter does their wisdom appear. It would be a laborious but not unprofitable investigation, to reduce into a regular classification, like that of the Institutes of Justinian or the Commentaries of Blackstone, the whole Code of Moses, which embraces not only all the ordinary subjects of Legislation, together with the principles of religion and morality, but laws of ecclesiastical directions concerning the minutest actions and dress of individuals. This, however, would lead me too far from my present purpose, which is merely to consider the Bible as a system of morality; I shall therefore notice those parts of the law which may be referred particularly to that class, and at present must confine myself to a few remarks upon the decalogue itself, which, having been spoken by the voice, and twice written upon the stone tables by the finger of God, may be considered as the foundation of the whole system—of the ten commandments, emphatically so called, for the extraordinary and miraculous distinction by which they were promulgated.

The first four are religious laws. The fifth and tenth are property and peculiarly moral and domestic rules. The other four are of the criminal department of municipal laws. The unity of the Godhead, the prohibition of making graven images to worship, that of taking lightly (or in vain) as the English translation expresses it) the name of the Deity, and the injunction to observe the Sabbath as a day sanctified and set apart for His worship, were all intended to inculcate the reverence for the one only and true God—that profound and penetrating sentiment of piety which, in a former letter, I urged as the great and only immovable foundation of all human virtue. Next to the duties toward the Creator, that of honoring the earthly parents is enjoined. It is to them that every individual owes the greatest obligations; and to them that he is consequently bound by the first and strongest of all earthly ties. The following commands, applying to the relations between man and his fellow mortals, are all negative, as their application was universal to every human being; i. e. it was not required that any positive acts of beneficence toward them should be performed, but only to abstain from wronging them; either: 1st—in their persons; 2nd—in their property; 3rd—in their conjugal rights; 4th—in their good name; after which, all the essential enjoyments of life being thus guarded from voluntary injury, the tenth and closing commandment goes to the very source of all human actions—the heart—and positively forbids all those desires which first prompt and lead to every transgression upon the property and right of our fellow-creatures. Vain indeed would be the search among the writings of profane antiquity (not merely of that remote antiquity, but even in

the most refined and philosophical ages of Greece and Rome,) to find so broad, so complete and so solid a basis for morality, as this decalogue lays down. Yet I have said it was imperfect—its sanctions, its rewards, its punishments, had reference only to the present life, and it had no injunctions of positive beneficence toward our neighbors. Of these the law was not entirely destitute in its other parts; but, both in this respect and in the other, it was to be perfected by Him who brought life and immortality to light in the gospel. Upon which subject you shall hear more.

From your affectionate Father  
JOHN QUINCY ADAMS.

REGENERATION.

BY DR. CHANNING.

"Is a man a Christian by his first birth, or do his early propensities impel him to the cultivation of Christian virtues in proportion as they are known? Do sensual and earthly desires hear the voice of conscience, shrink at once within the limits which reason assigns, and leave the throne of the heart to the Creator? How many desires and habits which conscience forbids are indulged! How many deviations from the path of God's commands are registered in the memory of every man who practises the duty of self-recollection! A religious character, then, is an acquisition, and implies a change; a change which requires labor and prayer—which requires aid and strength from heaven; a change so great and important that it deserves to be called a "new birth." The Christian is a new man. Once the dictates of conscience might have been heard; now they are obeyed. Once an occasional gratitude might have shed a transient glow through his heart; now the Divine goodness is a cherished thought, and he labors to requite it by an obedient life. Once his passions were his lords; now he bows to the authority, and waits to hear the will of God. Once human opinion was his guide, and human favor the reward he proposed; now he feels that another eye is upon him, that his heart and life are naked before God, and to approve himself to this righteous and unerring witness and judge his highest ambition. Once he was ready to repine and despond when his wishes and labors were crossed; now he sees a providence in life's vicissitudes, the discipline of a father in his sufferings, and bears his burdens, and performs his duties, with cheerful resignation to Him who assigns them. Once he was sufficiently satisfied with himself, or unwilling to feel his deficiencies; now he is humble, conscious of having sinned, desirous to discover his errors, contrite in his acknowledgments, earnest in his application to Divine mercy, and resolute in his opposition to temptation. Once the thought of a Saviour suffering for human pardon, and rising from the dead to confer immortality, excited little interest; now the promises, love, cross, and resurrection of Jesus come home to him with power, and awaken gratitude and hope. Once he lived chiefly for himself; now he has learnt to love his fellow-beings with a sincere and an efficient kindness, to lose sight of himself in the prosecution of benevolent designs, to feel for the misery, for the sins, of those around him, and to endure labors and sacrifices, that he may give relief to the frail body, and peace and health to the immortal mind. To conclude,—once he was alive to injury, and suffered anger and revenge to direct his treatment of an enemy; now his indignation is tempered by mercy, and he is ready to forgive.

From this brief sketch, from this comparison of the Christian character with that to which our nature is so prone, do we not see that a great change is required to make men Christians? I do not say that the same change is required in all. I do not say that education has no influence. I do not say that Christianity, now that it is so widely diffused, and so early enforced on the mind, may not check many passions before they have grown up into habits. But after all the benefits of discipline, we see our nature still weak, erring, yielding to temptation, negligent of known duty. Still, to be Christians, all have much to put off, to subdue, to correct, to renounce; and all have much to put on, to acquire, to cherish. So that the Christian character may still be called a second birth. The best Christians can ordinarily look back to the period, when they were governed by inferior and unworthy principles; when the world was more powerful than conscience and God; or at least when the sense of duty was comparatively faint and uninfluential. By the precepts, doctrines, motives, promises of Christianity, and by the secret influences of God's spirit on the heart, they have been raised to a faith, hope, and love, which may be called a new life. They have been born again.

The fact is, there is a general resemblance between birth and the production of the Christian character. By both, a being is

brought into a new state, and a most interesting change is produced in his conduct. Here, indeed, the analogy stops. The difference between the two changes which are here compared, proves that the mode and circumstances of their production must be very different. Scripture and experience lead us to believe that the change which makes a man a Christian is gradual, progressive. The Scriptures are very far from speaking of regeneration and conversion, in the language of human systems, as effects, which take place in a moment. On the contrary, regeneration and conversion are spoken of as if they were taking place through the whole of life. The Christian is continually experiencing the change which is expressed by these and similar terms.

"I consider that experience as well as Scripture proves the gradual production of the change of heart, or the new birth. Our observation will teach us that great changes are not often suddenly produced in the human character. There are, indeed, instances of men who are suddenly stopped in a career of sin, and seem almost in a moment to turn back and retrace their steps. But religion is generally introduced and formed in us by a gentler operation. Where religious instruction has been given in early years, there is always some conviction of duty to God, some sensibility to sin, some uneasiness at neglect of religion, some vague purpose of improvement. This seems to be the first stage of the religious character; and some never pass beyond this, beyond a feeble and deceitful purpose of being better. Others as they advance, have their attention in various methods, drawn to religion and a future life. Perhaps some gross sin, into which they are hurried, startles their consciences and forces on them the thought of their exposure to God's dreadful displeasure. Perhaps some religious companion or good example wins their affections, impresses them with the loveliness and importance of Christian virtue, and shows them by contrast their own miserable deficiency. Perhaps some affliction throws a gloom over the present state, leads them to consider the emptiness of the world, and the need of Divine support, and directs their dejected minds to that Gospel which is the only comforter of human woe. Perhaps sudden, unexpected blessings recall powerfully to them their heavenly Benefactor, and fasten on them a painful sense of their ingratitude. Perhaps an alarming providence, dangerous sickness, the near approach of death, appals, compels them to look into eternity, and to feel the necessity of preparation for another life. Perhaps a serious discourse arrests their thoughts, and convinces them that the concerns of their souls are too weighty to be trifled with. By these and other means, their attention is awakened to religion. Attention produces solicitude; for none can think seriously on the subject without feeling that they have sinned to be forsaken, to be forgiven. This solicitude produces prayer; and prayer obtains the aid and influence of our merciful Father in heaven. The Scriptures are read with new seriousness; interest, self-application. The mediation and promises of Jesus Christ are embraced with new gratitude and hope. His example appears more amiable, excellent, worthy of imitation and obedience; gross sins are forsaken; irregular desires are checked; gradually the deliberate purpose is formed of following him; and at length this becomes the strongest and most settled purpose of the soul.

"This may be considered as an outline of the general method of regeneration. I am sensible that there is a great variety in the paths by which men are brought to God. No two minds resemble each other in all their feelings. The religious history of every man is in some measure his own, peculiar to himself. The experience of each is influenced by his education, his companions, the kind of instruction he hears, and by his natural temperament. The timid mind is awakened by the terrors of the Lord; the tender and affectionate is drawn by his mercies. Amidst this great variety, the multitude of Christians agree in this, that they can point to no particular moment when a change was wrought in their hearts. Their religion has grown up by degrees, very often, as silently and imperceptibly as the tree, to which is compared—sends forth its roots and branches."

HUMILITY.—Of all trees, I observe that God hath chosen the vine—a low plant that creeps upon the helpful wall; of all beasts, the soft and patient lamb; of all fowls, the mild and guileless dove. When God appeared to Moses it was not in the lofty cedar, nor the sturdy oak, nor the spreading palm, but in a bush—an humble, slender, abject bush. As if he would, by these selections, check the arrogance of man. Nothing procreth love like humility; nothing hate like pride. We confess small faults, in order to insinuate that we have no great ones.