

GENERAL LITERATURE.

EVIL COMMUNICATIONS CORRUPT GOOD MANNERS.

BY THE REV. ROBERT HALL.

In the next place, suppose the society into which we enter be vicious in the sense before adverted to; that it be impure society, distinguished by the prevalence of indelicate jests and lascivious association; such communication, it is unnecessary to say, must corrupt good manners. Must not the primary effect be, at least, gradually to pour the mind to the contemplation of vicious objects, without horror and disgust? Are you not aware that familiarity tends to weaken all impressions? As the mind is passive in receiving them, there is nothing so disgusting at the first view but it may be rendered indifferent, or even an object of complacency. Vicious objects, though they revolt a pure and chaste mind, though every well-disciplined spirit turns aside from them with strong disrelish, yet they have such an alliance with the corrupt propensities of our nature, which always remain with us (for even the best are but partially sanctified), that the effect of bringing such objects frequently before the mind must be to subvert the antipathy, to wear off the impression of disgust, and soften the features of deformity; to teach us to contemplate such objects with indifference, till at length we shall certainly come to regard them with a greater or less degree of complacency.—The horror of vice gradually subsides, till, before men are aware, they find themselves affected with the most impure conversation very differently from what they were at first. The chastity of the mind is violated; they have lost that instinctive recoil of disgust which such objects naturally inspire, and are become capable of partaking of them with that guilty zest with which their association with the corrupt tendencies of our nature is too apt to invest them. This is a process perpetually going on. There are persons perpetually receiving the contamination of impurity by this channel. If, then, you meet with persons of this description, who delight to communicate the taint of impurity, and seek to draw down the minds of others to that gross element of sensuality in which they themselves are grovelling, avoid them, pass not by them, “turn from them and pass away;” recollect that such conversation is most essentially evil, and will, before you are aware, corrupt your “good manners.”

Suppose, in the next place, that the society into which we enter be of an impious nature, distinguished by a rejecting of Christianity, of its great and leading doctrines, and has in it, consequently, the contagion of impiety; such communication cannot fail, in the strongest degree, to “corrupt good manners.” To hear objections against Christianity continually repeated without being answered, to hear the cause of Christ attacked in every possible form without being in a situation, in a becoming manner, to undertake its defence, must have an injurious tendency. Conversation, if we intend to please and be pleased, should never be a scene of continual dispute; we must either relinquish such society or hold our peace. That person who feels himself called upon on every occasion to defend his religion, will grow weary of contention, and seek repose in another kind of society. But if he continues in it, he will at length learn to be silent, silence will lead to acquiescence, and finally he will adjust his opinions to the standard of those with whom he associates. Every man makes the esteem of his companions a great and leading object. When a person, therefore, from that motive, learns to suppress his convictions, he will easily pass from thence to that guilty shame of Jesus Christ before men which is one of the most baseful elements of corruption and degeneracy. It is dangerous to be in that society where all is against Christianity, and nothing in its favour; where it is perpetually assailed in a variety of forms, and nothing said in a serious, argumentative manner to sustain its interests and vindicate its sanctity. If any man supposes that he has strength of mind to continue in such society without having the foundations of his confidence in the truths of Christianity weakened, that man is entirely unacquainted with his own heart. You may feel conscious of no change of opinion, you may relinquish no article of faith, but the practical assent of the mind is capable of

all sorts of varieties possible; the degree of conviction, the strength of that hold which religious principle has upon you, may be weakened in a most essential manner before you have altered the speculative articles of your belief. The speculative belief in the great truths of Christianity is, in pious minds, continually changing itself into practical belief, producing that sense of the reality of eternal things which justifies the definition given of faith, as “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Infidel society has the effect of weakening that practical conviction, of estranging the mind from the evidences of Divine truth, and bringing it into a state of obscurity; it is an element of darkness, and no person can preserve, within its sphere, a permanent and abiding conviction of such truths as are only seen by the eye of faith, and are the best realised in the calmness of the sanctuary, and solitude of the closet. Besides, we shall always find that those who have rejected the yoke of Christianity are anxious to propagate their disbelief; they have not the tranquility of innocence, the confidence of truth; and they feel themselves strongly fortified, secure, and fearless, in proportion as they have swelled their contumacy, extinguished the conviction, and put out that light of faith in others which is a condemning light to them, and holds out to them a fearful misgiving in the prospect of eternity. Those who are determined to bid farewell to Christianity have not done it in consequence of a serious process of conviction, but in consequence of consulting their passions, not their reason, determining to gratify their appetites without restraint or control, and indulging in the pleasures and honours of this world without check. Conscious of this, in a greater or less degree, they fear that the foundation they are resting upon may prove insecure; they wish, therefore, to be strengthened by the co-operation of others, and feel a guilty satisfaction in proportion as they multiply disciples among their associates, and are thus enabled to hear an echo in every voice, and see the reflection of infidelity in every breast. Is it not extraordinary that men who can only boast that they have discovered that man is nothing,—that this world is the whole of his existence,—that his destiny is withheld, and shrunk to the smallest possible compass,—is it not extraordinary that they cannot at least be silent; that they should be desirous to propagate a discovery so full of shame and reproach? The reason is, that they have fears on the side of religion, though they have not its hopes; they dread the truth of it, having given up all prospect of benefit from it, having relinquished all part in its consolations; therefore they feel their fears allayed, their perturbation subside, in proportion as they swell their numbers by an extensive confederation. They are “deceiving and deceived.”

Let me earnestly impress it on every one who wishes to be saved;—and if you do not, why approach the sanctuary of God, why hear the words of his book, why lift up a prayer to the throne of heaven in the name of the Great Redeemer?—if you wish to be saved, go not into such society; or, if you enter it unawares, remain not in it. To choose such persons as confidants of your hours of affectionate and social intercourse is to live in an element of contagion; it is to go into a pest house; it is to take up your abode in the midst of the most virulent and destructive diseases. “Evil communications” will “corrupt good manners.” No experience of our own,—no extent of observation may go to invalidate or impair the truth of this maxim, which is confirmed by the experience of all ages.

“A MESSAGE FROM GOD UNTO THEE.”

“I HAVE a message from God unto thee,” was the language of Ehud to the King of Moab. The message with which the future Judge of Israel was charged, was one of vengeance and of blood; but though Jehovah still, at times, speaks in thunder to guilty individuals and to a guilty world, “judgment is his strange work,” and his messages to sinful and erring mortals are usually couched in the still small voice of tender and pathetic admonition, or of earnest, anxious, importunate entreaty.

Through how many channels, also, and by how many objects are these messages of grace and mercy addressed to us! We speak not now of those warnings and exhortations which meet the eye in every page of the oracles of God, and

are pressed upon our attention by the ministers of his word. These, in a land of Bibles and of ordinances, must have been often listened to, and if not to the benefit of our own souls, the greater will be our condemnation. We allude to a class of monitors less obtrusive, it may be, and too frequently altogether overlooked or despised by the indolent, the thoughtless, and the reckless, but not the less truly the bearers of a message from God to every individual among us, “whether we will hear or whether we will forbear.”

The messengers to which we refer are the works of creation and the dispensations of divine providence; from each and from all of which the intelligent and awakened Christian hears, as it were, a voice addressing him in the words of heavenly wisdom; “Unto you O men we call, and our voice is to the sons of men?” To a few of these heaven-appointed monitors, and to some of the messages which they urge upon our attention, it is our present purpose briefly to advert.

The first which we shall mention, because the most striking and obvious, are the heavenly bodies.—The Sun, the source of light and life and heat to the planets by which he is surrounded; “the moon walking in brightness;” and the numberless stars which stud the canopy of heaven, each of them we have good reason to believe, a sun, the centre of a system much more complicated and extensive perhaps than that of which our earth forms a part. When therefore we “lift up our eyes and consider who hath created these things, who bringeth out their host by number, who calleth them all by names, and by the greatness of whose might not one of them faileth,” what is the purport of the message which they address to us? “The hand that made us is divine. He is wise in heart and mighty in strength; who hath hardened himself against him and hath prospered? Acquaint thyself,” therefore, “with him and be at peace with him.—Kiss the Son lest he be angry and ye perish from the way. Blessed are all they that put their trust in him.”

But while of the countless worlds which roll throughout the immensity of space we can know but little, and can form no conjecture of the nature, capacities or destinies of the beings by whom they are inhabited, let us briefly turn our attention to the sentient tenants of our own globe. And, beginning with ourselves, whether we consider the mechanism of our bodies, the incomprehensible nature of our immortal spirits and the mysterious union between them and the earthly tabernacles which they animate, we must be indeed far gone in stupid insensibility if we do not feel ourselves constrained to exclaim, “I will praise thee, O Lord, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made?”—if the admonitory voice of conscience, speaking through every organ of our frame, does not whisper in our ear, “He that planted the ear shall he not hear? He that formed the eye shall he not see? He that teacheth man knowledge shall not he know?”

Let us descend a step lower in the scale of creation, and turn our attention for a moment to the inferior animals. And, whether we contemplate the gigantic elephant or the meanest and most insignificant insect, the leviathan or the “minnow of the brook,” the enormous condor of the Andes or the minute and delicate humming bird, so diminutive as to be hidden in the flower-bell from which it steps the dew, what is the lesson which they irresistibly inculcate when we consider the wonderful adaptation of each species to the place which it is destined to occupy in the sphere of creation, and the means provided for the sustenance, preservation and perpetuation of the whole? Is it not that “the Lord is good to all and his tender mercies are over all his works—that the eyes of all his creatures wait upon Him and he giveth them their meat in due season.”

Even the inanimate creation lifts up a silent, it may be, but not the less unequivocal testimony to the wisdom, the power and the goodness of its divine Creator, whether the subject of our contemplation be the lofty and wide spreading oak, which for centuries has existed the patriarch and monarch of the forest, or the most tiny and ephemeral flowret that blossoms beneath its shade. But it is to the truths which the latter especially are calculated to enforce that we would more immediately direct attention.—Are we captivated by the splendours of dress and inclined to