

THE PULPIT.

MORAL RESPONSIBILITY.

"Lay hands suddenly on no man, *neither be partaker of other men's sins.*"—I Tim. V. 22.]

The first part of this admonition has respect to the caution that should be exercised in the admission of persons to membership, and especially to office in the Church. The text immediately following a call to such caution, is suggestive of the weighty and solemn truth, that those who give their sanction to the admission of improper persons into the Church, knowing them to be such, are partakers of their guilt, and are answerable for the dishonour done to God, and the damage done to the cause of religion, by their unworthy admission. "*Lay hands suddenly on no man, neither be partaker of other men's sins.*"

There is, then, such a thing as being partaker of other men's sins. One may not be personally a drunkard, a swearer, a Sabbath breaker, and yet he may have the guilt of these sins upon him. He may look abroad upon society, and contemplate the scenes of wickedness everywhere prevalent, and wrapped up in the mantle of his own self complacency, he may pharisaically congratulate himself that he is "not as other men"; and yet, in the sight of Him whose judgment is always according to truth, he may be a partaker of the most atrocious crimes that ever stained the annals of the human race; and from *other men's* sins as well as *his own*, he may draw motives to that repentance without which there is no salvation.

In order to understand this, it is necessary to consider that an essential element in virtue or vice is the consent of the *will*. In the administration of human laws this principle is fully recognized. One may take away the life of another, but if the deed be done unwittingly, he cannot be justly condemned as a murderer. On the other hand, one may not actually shed another man's blood, yet if it can be proved that he was accessory to the deed by giving his assent, in the eye of the law he is a murderer, and deserves to die. So it is in relation to the law of God. In His sight, taking away life without the consent of the will is no murder, whilst he that "hateth his brother is a murderer," whether he commit the overt act or not. In the Old Testament arrangements, it was enacted that, if one had killed his neighbour through malice, he must die; but if the deed was done unwittingly, there was a "city of refuge" provided, to which he might flee, and where he would be safe from the avenger of blood. So it is in regard to the external duties of religion. One may not be in such circumstances as to admit of the performance of certain prescribed duties, yet if he have a *will* to perform them, and is prevented by circumstances over which he has no control, God accepts "the purpose firm" as "equal to the deed." On the other hand, all external duties may be performed with the most scrupulous exactness, yet if it be only a "bodily exercise," without any engagement of the will and affections, the service cannot be accepted by Him who looks not merely upon the outward appearance but also upon the heart.