

Sunday Reading.

For the Christian Messenger. Flower and Thorn.

Our moods are various, we are often sad, And sometimes gay, Grief steals our joy and joy returning takes Our grief away; And thus these two play their inconstant parts, And wanton with our restless human hearts. Our deeds are various, mingled good and ill, Still mark our life; To-day we conquer and to-morrow fail Amidst the strife; And warriors who would steadily advance, Must grasp the broken spear, and shiver lance. O earthly life! teach us to prize the joy, So often won By those who use thee well, and nobly earn The glad "Well done"; And when we fail those lessons may we learn, Which wise men in thy sorrows can discern. Thus shall we find life's joy and pain to be, Our teachers here; Sent to prepare us for the perfect work Of that high sphere, Where all that earth but shadows forth shall be To us, a constant blest reality. THOS. JAMES. Huddersfield, England.

My Prayer.

I wonder if there may not be, Somewhere in God's eternity, A work-day season, long and bright, For souls beloved—whom the night Surprises ere their tasks are done— Who grieve o'er golden threads unspun, Because of weariness and set of sun. I know not, yet it seems more blest, More blissful, were the soul's sweet rest, That sometime, somewhere shall have wrought Entire, life's purpose—deed or thought— And so I pray, "Oh, if there be A place in God's immensity, Where life may be rounded—give it me!" HANNAH A. FOSTER.

Praying for what we do not expect.

I happened once to be staying with a gentleman—a long way from here—and a very religious kind of a man he was. In the morning he began the day with a long family prayer that he might be kept from sin, and might have a Christ-like spirit, and the mind that was also in Christ Jesus; and that we might have the love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost given unto us. A good prayer it was, and I thought, "What a good kind of a man you must be!" But about an hour after I happened to be coming along the farm, and I heard him hallooing, and scolding, and going on finding fault with everybody and everything. And when I came into the house with him he began again. Nothing was right, and he was so impatient and so quick-tempered. "Tis very provoking to be annoyed in this way, Daniel. I don't know what servants in these times are good for but to worry and vex one with their idle, slovenly ways!" I did not say anything for a minute or two. And then I said, "You must be very much disappointed, sir?" "How so, Daniel—disappointed?" "I thought you were expecting to receive a very valuable present this morning, sir, and I see it hasn't come." "Present, Daniel?"—and he scratched his head, as much as to say, "Whatever can the man be talking about?" "I certainly heard you talking about it, sir," I said, coolly. "Heard me speak of a valuable present! Why, Daniel, you must be dreaming. I've never thought of such a thing." "Perhaps not, sir; but you've talked about it; and I hoped it would come whilst I was here, for I would dearly love to see it." He was getting angry with me now so I thought I would explain. "You know, sir, this morning you prayed for a Christlike spirit, and the mind that was in Jesus, and the love of God shed abroad in your heart." "Oh, that's what you mean, is it?" and he spoke as if that weren't anything at all. "Now, sir, wouldn't you be rather surprised if your prayer was to be answered?—if you were to feel a nice, gentle, loving kind of spirit coming down upon you, all patient and forgiving and kind? Why, sir, wouldn't you come to be quite frightened like? and you'd come in and sit all in a faint, and reckon as you must be a going to die, because you felt heavenly-minded." "He didn't like it very much," said Daniel, "but I delivered my testimony, and learned a lesson for myself, too. You're right, Captain Joe, you're right. We should stare very often if the Lord was to answer our prayer."—Daniel Quorn and his Religious Notions.

Is Perfection possible?

AN ESSAY READ BEFORE THE ANNAPOLIS COUNTY MINISTERIAL AND MISSIONARY CONFERENCE, HELD AT MELVERN SQUARE, ON THE 4TH OF NOVEMBER, 1884.

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"Whoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God."—1 John iii. 9.

This passage, on account of its apparently positive character, has given rise to a variety of interpretations. I say apparently, because, after all, the words may not have such a strict and uncompromising a meaning as some would have us believe.

There are three principal ways of looking at this text. (1). Some take the words in a figurative sense, supposing that the Apostle refers to what is elsewhere called by a figure of speech, "the new man," or the new nature, which does not, cannot sin. (2). Others take them in their strictest literal sense, and, accordingly maintain that it is possible for the believer to live in thought, in word, and action, altogether above sin; or as it is sometimes said, "in a state of sinless perfection." (3). Others again believe that the words are to be taken in a comparative or qualified sense, arguing that they apply to those whose general tendency is towards holiness, in opposition to those whose general tendency is towards sin.

Perhaps it will be well to examine these three modes of interpretation in the order in which they have been named.

I. It is thought by some that the Apostle refers to the new nature which is given in regeneration by the Holy Spirit, and which consequently cannot sin. Such look upon the Christian as a dual being, and conclude that all that is good in him is the outcome of the spiritual man, and all that is evil as the outcome of the natural man, as if there were some mysterious union of two distinct individuals in the same person. This theory, they think, is supported by language used by the Apostle Paul in the 7th chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, where he describes his struggles and conflicts with sin. Note his words: "For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that I do not; but what I hate that I do. If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not; but the evil which I would not that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. I find then a law that when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members." Here, you will notice, the Apostle Paul does not speak of himself in a figurative or non-natural sense. And later on, after his shout of victory, he concludes by saying, "So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin." "I myself." It is not the new nature that speaks; not a mystical, but a real man—the veritable human Paul. He "delights in the law of God after the inward man;" and yet he says, "I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin." The same person delighting in the law of God, and yet brought into captivity! Well may Dr. Hodge remark: "In every believer, and in no one else, there are these two principles,—grace and sin, the flesh and the spirit, the law in the members and the law in the mind; these are contrary the one to the other." The two cases are scarcely parallel. The Apostle Paul is describing the difference between the two natures in the same individual, while John is describing the difference between two classes of character, namely, the regenerate and the unregenerate. He does not say whatsoever, but "who-

soever is born of God doth not commit sin." It seems to me that this construction of John's meaning is forced and unnatural, and hence I am not satisfied with it. Indeed, I scarcely find a commentator that maintains this theory, and such as appear to favor it, in reality merge it in the third view, to which I shall refer at greater length presently.

II. It is held by others, (and they found their opinion largely upon the words now under consideration,) that it is possible for the Christian to live a sinless life in the present world. This opinion was strongly advocated by John Wesley. In his sermon on "Christian Perfection," he says, "In conformity, therefore, both with the doctrine of St. John, and to fix the whole tenor of the New Testament, we fix this conclusion, 'a Christian is so far perfect as not to commit sin;' and farther on he says, "his Master was free from all sinful tempers. So therefore is His disciple, even every real Christian." Further on he says that Christ "had no evil or sinful thought, nor indeed was capable of having any. And even hence it follows, that neither have real Christians: 'for every one that is perfect is as his Master.'—Luke vi. 40. Therefore, if He were free from evil or sinful thoughts so are they likewise." Other quotations might be given of the same nature, but probably you will consider these sufficient. Nor was John Wesley alone in teaching this doctrine. Others have taught it since; and in recent years it has been somewhat loudly proclaimed in certain quarters of the religious world. Still it is far from clear to my mind that the Apostle John meant us to gather this idea from his words. 1. It is opposed to the general experience of Christians. I do not mean to deny the fact that some believers have been privileged to live very near to God, and that consequently sin became thoroughly distasteful to them, and that holiness seemed to be the very element in which they lived; but I feel persuaded that every Christian finds that he has within himself an evil nature that is ever striving for the mastery, and often takes him at unawares and makes him cry out in the bitterness of his soul, "O wretched man that I am!" Indeed, the holiest saints are those who mourn oftenest and most over their sins and failings, confessing to God their transgressions with shame and confusion of face. It is a well known but oft forgotten fact that Satan endeavours to make sin appear to be a comparatively small thing in order that it may be committed. It is to be remembered that the "commandment is exceeding broad," and, according to the Lord Jesus Christ, there may be the darkest and blackest sins within the heart, even though they may not break out into open transgressions. Although we may be unconscious of many of our offences, we must not forget that it is written: "Thou hast set our iniquities before Thee, our secret sins in the light of Thy countenance." Persons have been heard to say that they have lived days, weeks, months, and even years without sin, but who could help wondering whether such were not sinning even while they were professing not to have sinned? A truly perfect life must have no sin either of omission or commission; and who, of all the sons of men, has ever come up to the full standard of the divine requirements?

2. It is opposed to actual fact, as seen in every-day life. Give honor to whom honor is due; give credit for all the honesty, uprightness and piety you witness; but when did you ever meet with a perfect man? With one who did not and who could not sin? What was his name? What was his creed? Where does he live? Such a person, if existing, ought to be known and copied after. A lady who had long thought she was living a model Christian life, was brought to feel during her last illness that, notwithstanding all her profession and all her religiousness, she had a heart that was "deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked." "Oh! Nancy," she said to her colored servant, "Oh, Nancy! I have been a great sinner all these years, and I did not know it." "Why, Missus," was the reply, "I knowed it all along!" A person may be more unconscious of his failings than those around him are. No, none of us, I will venture to say,

has yet seen a person living in this present world entirely free from sin; and more, we do not expect to do so, while we sojourn in a land where the purest lily has its shadow, and where

"The very fount and source of day Is dashed with wandering isles of night." The appearance of a perfect man upon the earth would attract more attention than the appearance of a new king upon the throne, or a new planet in the heavens.

3. It is opposed to Bible teachings and Bible records. "There is no man that sinneth not;" "who can say, 'I have made my heart clean, I am pure from my sin?'" "There is not a just man upon earth that doeth good and sinneth not." "In many things we offend all." Job confesses that he is "vile;" David "acknowledges" his "transgression;" Isaiah grieves because he is "a man of unclean lips;" Daniel deplors his own sins and those of his fathers; Peter says, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" Paul exclaims, "What I hate that I do. . . . When I would do good evil is present with me;" "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect; but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus." Who can doubt that those who uttered these words were men of God? Men who were born again? Yet, if the words we are considering are to be taken in their strictest interpretation, these very men,—men whom God has honored; men whose voices are echoing through the ages; men into whose souls was poured the light from the Fountain of everlasting life; men who lived on the mountain top of fellowship with Christ; men who lived near the heavens, near the Great Eternal; men whose utterances cannot die; men, moreover, who were inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit; these men, according to the view referred to, lacking sinless perfection during life, are shut out from the kingdom of God. Alas! alas! who shall find his way to the Better Land, if these have failed? The word "whoever" in the passage before us is just as broad, just as comprehensive, as any other "whoever" in the Bible. It is "whoever," no matter where; "whoever," no matter when; no matter what the profession, no matter what the name. And the word "cannot" is just as positive and just as unalterable, according to this theory, as any other "cannot" in the Word of God.

4. It is opposed to the sentiments and statements of the Apostle John himself. This argument might have been blended with the last; but it is of such importance that it demands a separate consideration. In the first chapter of this Epistle, the Apostle says, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and His word is not in us." These words are plain enough, to say nothing of others in the same Epistle which directly or indirectly teach the same thing. Surely the Apostle was consistent with himself, and after making these statements, he evidently cannot mean us to understand that the Christian cannot ever be guilty of a single sin, in thought, word or deed.

III. One other theory remains to be considered. It is the opinion of some that, in the passage now under consideration and similar ones in the same Epistle, the Apostle means, not that the Christian cannot sin at all, but that he cannot sin characteristically and habitually. That is to say, that owing to his spiritual birth, his connection with Christ, and his having within him the principle of righteousness, he cannot and will not continue in the regular practice of sin.

1. In considering this part of the subject it may be well to inquire whether the Apostle uses words elsewhere which are to be understood in a qualified sense. Examples are at hand. The closing words of the Gospel which bears his name present us with an instance. He says: "And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written;" John xxi. 25. Here it is very evident that the words are to be

taken in a qualified sense, and, indeed, they cannot be taken in any other way. Take another example from the 1st Epistle of John ii. 20. Addressing those whom he calls "Little children," he says: "Ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things." "Ye know all things!" Surely, some limitation or qualification must be understood here. Again, in the same Epistle 5th Chap. 19:h v., he says: "We know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness," or rather, "in the wicked one." "The whole world!" If all the world was in "the wicked one," where was the Apostle himself? Where were his brethren? Where were the churches planted by the Apostles? Where were the thousands converted on the day of Pentecost and afterwards? From these examples we see that it is no unusual thing for the Apostle John to state facts which have to be looked at in the light of other facts; and hence we are justified in limiting the meaning of a passage when a limitation of some kind is necessary. Such a limitation is evidently required in the case before us, and hence we conclude that the Apostle does not mean to teach the doctrine of absolute perfection; but simply that the Christian cannot continue in the course and practise of sin.

2. This theory is strengthened and confirmed by the text and context. The Apostle is contrasting two characters, the children of God, and the children of the devil. "He that doeth righteousness is righteous;" here we have conduct and character. "He that committeth sin (or "doeth sin," as Dean Alford and the Revised Version render it.) "is of the devil." Here we have conduct and character again, but of a different sort. The Apostle does not say, "Whoever is born of God doth not commit an act of sin;" but, "doth not commit sin," or to use the foregoing rendering, "doeth not sin." The word implies continuance, and evidently conveys the idea the Christian cannot continuously and habitually sin; this is prevented by the holy and gracious principle which abides within him. In the same way the word "sinneth" is used; it does not refer to a single act, but to a course of action. And in the 8:h verse, we have the words, "He that committeth sin, (or, rather, 'doeth sin,') is of the devil;" here we have the idea of continuance again—continuance in evil. It is not necessary to consider every instance of this kind in the context, as each can do this for himself; enough, however, has been said to indicate the line of thought pursued by the Apostle. The general tendency of the unregenerate is toward sin, and the general tendency of the believer is toward holiness, even as the whole strength and current of the river is toward the ocean, although there may be here and there a back eddy by the river banks. The life of the Christian is, in the main, a godly, and a holy life. To quote from Bengel: "The regenerate man does not sin: he purposes to himself, as far as possible, a life free from sin, nor does he ever spontaneously give himself up to sin. And if at any time, contrary to the purpose of his mind, he shall have offended, he neither rushes headlong into sin, nor does he continue in it; but having acknowledged his error, he immediately returns in haste to his former course, as soon as, and as far as he is able." The same writer illustrates this thought "by the similitude of the magnetic needle, which always points to the pole, is easily turned aside from this direction, but always re-seeks the pole." The whole bent and bias of the believer is toward God and holiness.

3. It is only right to mention the fact that most orthodox theologians incline to this view—one of the continuators of Matthew Henry's Commentary—writing on the words, "He that is born of God cannot sin," says: "Here we may call to mind the usual distinction of natural and moral impotency. The unregenerate person is morally unable for what is religiously good. The regenerate person is happily disabled for sin. There is a restraint, an embargo (as we may say) laid upon his sinning powers. It goes against him sedately and deliberately to sin. We usually say of a person of known integrity, 'He cannot lie, he cannot cheat, and commit enormities.' How can I commit this great wickedness, and sin against God! Gen. 39. 9. and 20, and so of those who persist

in a sinful life sufficiently demonstrate that they are not born of God." Jonathan Edwards has a note as follows: "Whoever is born of God doth not commit sin, i. e. does not relapse or fall away from righteousness into sin again; [for his seed remaineth in him,] i. e. seed of which he is born of God remaineth in him, and therefore he does not fall away to a state or trade of sin again, out of which he was begotten and born of that seed." Burdett, Gill, and Doddridg also take the words in a qualified sense, that is to say, as meaning that the "Christian does not go on in a course and habit of sinning." Our own Andrew Fuller, of whom Dr. Cumming says, "He excelled all scholars, and yet studied at no university," has some very pertinent remarks on this verse. He says: "It seems from the context that the term (-in) is intended to denote the sin of apostacy. If we were to substitute the term apostacy for sin, from the sixth to the tenth verse, the meaning would be clear. Whoso abideth in Him apostatizeth not; Whosoever apostatizeth hath not seen him, neither know him. He that is guilty of apostacy is of the devil, for the devil hath been in apostate from the beginning. Whosoever is born of God doth not apostatize, for his seed remaineth in him; and he cannot apostatize, because he is born of God. This sense of the latter passage perfectly agrees with what is said of the "sin unto death," ver. 16-18. "There is a sin unto death. . . . We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not." It also agrees with chap. ii. 19, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for had they been of us, they would, no doubt, have continued with us. But they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us. Altogether, it affords what we might presume to call an incontestable proof of the certain perseverance of the saints." Albert Barnes, on the sixth verse of this chapter, says: "He who is born again does not sin habitually, or is not habitually a sinner. If he does wrong, it is when he is overtaken by temptation and the act is against the habitual inclination and purpose of the soul. If a man sins habitually, it proves that he has never been renewed. He that is born again does not do wrong deliberately and of design. He means to do right. He is not wilfully and deliberately a sinner." On the 9th verse he says in substance the same thing. A. R. Faussett, in the Critical Commentary, at first sight seems to favour the first theory which I have named, but in reality favours the third, and makes the following remarks: "The exceptional sins into which the regenerate are surprised, are owing to the new life principle being for a time suffered to lie dormant, and to the sword of the Spirit not being drawn instantly. Sin is ever active, but no longer reigns. The normal direction of the believer's energies is against sin; the law of God after the inward man is the ruling principle of his true self, though the old nature, not yet fully deadened, rebels and sins."

C. H. Spurgeon, speaking recently of worldly amusements, said: "But," say you, "I should greatly enjoy a little of the pleasures of sin." Judge yourselves, then to be falsely called children of God. "He that is born of God doth not commit sin, by which is not meant that he does not fall into sins of infirmity, but that it is not his delight to commit sin, it is not the way of him, he is a new creature, he finds his joy and pleasure in living as near to God as possible."

In conclusion, I can do no other than accept the theory which I have last stated, since it harmonizes with experience, with other parts of Scripture, and with the general drift and argument of the Apostle John himself. The Christian cannot sin as others sin, nor can he sin as he himself did before he was born again, since the grace of God abides within him. No one grieves over his faults and failings more than he does himself. He "Prays to be perfect, though material

leaven Forbids the spirit so on earth to be." Nevertheless by faith he looks for ultimate perfection, and ere long he will be "without fault before the throne of God." Bad books are worse than bad words. Like evil deeds, they mould the thought and will of future generations.