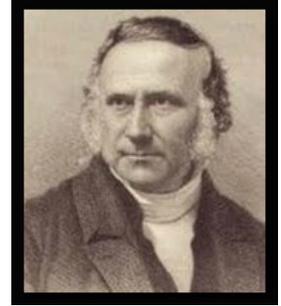


The Miserable Heart



My duty required of me, as I thought, to preach, at one time, upon the subject of church discipline. Late in the evening of the day on which the sermon was preached, my door-bell rang; and as my family had all retired, I went to the door, supposing some sick person had probably sent for me. As I opened the door, I was surprised to behold a young lady, a member of my church. I instantly thought some one of the family must have been taken suddenly ill, or some calamity must have occurred, to bring her to my house at such a late hour. I instantly inquired what was the matter; and I felt the more anxious, because I noticed that she was very much agitated. She did not answer very readily. She said the family were well, and nothing sad had happened. I could not conjecture what had brought her there. She refused to come in. As she stood trembling in the hall, I told her she must tell me what was the matter, offered her any service I could render, and tenderly endeavored to soothe her agitation. Finally, she tremblingly and hesitatingly said:—

“I have come to ask if you are going to discipline me.”

“Discipline you! my dear girl; what do you mean? No. Why should you be disciplined?”

“Why,” says she, “you have been preaching to-day about church discipline, and I thought you were going to discipline me.”

“No, no! Why discipline you? What have you done to deserve it?”

She gave me no answer, but trembled so greatly, that I thought she would fall upon the floor. I was astonished. She belonged to one of the most respectable families of the place, was a very modest and amiable girl not twenty years old, and I had never heard a syllable against her. I could not induce her to take a seat in the parlor, nor could I persuade her to tell me why she had thought, that she was to be disciplined. I assured her, that I had never thought of such a thing—had never heard a lisp against her, and kindly intreated her to tell me all her thoughts, promising her the most inviolable secrecy. But she would not tell me. I soothed her agitation all in my power, I accompanied her home to her own door, and begged permission to call and see her the next day.

I went. But still she refused to tell me what led her to suppose, that she was to be made the subject of discipline. And I did not succeed in getting the explanation, till I had conversed with her in private, more than once; had gained her entire confidence, and had promised her, that, be her case what it might, I never would make use of anything she should say to me, in any manner whatever, without her permission. She appeared so unhappy every time I saw her, so agitated and gloomy, that I pitied her very much. I thought she needed some friend to lean upon; and offering her all I could do, I had no hesitation in promising to keep her dreadful secret. She told me it was a secret. She had never told her mother, or anyone else: it was known only to herself.

She then told me, that she had no religion, no hope! She knew, that she ought not to be a communicant, while in her unbelief; and she thought, that I had had penetration enough to discover her state of mind in some way that she knew not of, and was determined to have her cast out of the church. She wondered at my supposed discovery; for she had never till that moment, as she said, “uttered a word about her feelings to any person on earth.”

This disclosure surprised me; but it greatly relieved me. I thanked her for it, and assured her of my fidelity to her, and the affectionate interest I felt in her.

But as I began to exhort her to seek God and explain religion to her, according to the scriptures; I soon discovered, as I thought, that I had not yet reached the bottom of the matter. Something seemed to be locked up in her own mind. I told her so. I begged her to tell me, if it was not so. After much hesitation on her part and urgency on mine, she confessed it was so. Most affectionately I entreated her to tell me all, so that I might be able to comfort her unhappiness, if possible; and might counsel her, in a manner appropriate to her case.

I treated her so affectionately and tenderly, that she became evidently much attached to me; and, little by little, she opened her mind to me very reluctantly, because, (as she said,) she knew it would give me pain; and I had “been so kind to her, that she felt very unwilling to give me any unhappiness, on a matter wherein I could do her no good.”

I found, that she was. entirely an infidel. She did not believe in the Bible—she did not believe in any religion—she did not believe in the immortality of the soul, or in the existence of a God. She thought, that man died and went to nothing, just as a tree dies—its trunk and its leaves and its living principle perishing together. And the failure of mind in old age, she deemed a strong indication of its falling into non-existence at death.

She had become a member of the church, when she was very young, attending school, a girl about fifteen or sixteen years old. She said she was excited, in a time of revival, as others were; wept as they wept; attended the religious meetings appointed by the minister for those of her age, (ordinarily in the school;) listened to his exhortations; was affected by

what he said; had fears of punishment and then hopes of heaven; and when a time was appointed for the examination of those who desired to join the church, she went with the rest of the girls. She thought then, that she was doing rightly, and never dreamed of any error or deception. But she thought now, that all those feelings were the mere effect of sympathy, fear and imagination. The examination for her reception into the church was very little, except an exhortation. Only one question was put to her, “how long have you had a hope?” to which she replied, “about four weeks.” This, she said, was the only question, that any person ever asked her at all about her religious feelings; till years afterwards, when I first saw her, and finding she was a member of the church asked her, if she thought she was growing in grace. She joined the church; and had been regularly to the communion ever since, a period of about five years. She had not stayed away, because of the great repugnance she felt to being made the subject of remark; and for the same reason, she had not mentioned the state of her mind to any person whatever. She had been exceedingly miserable all the time; had felt the need of some one to talk with; and now, for the two or three weeks since she first began to open her mind to me, sad and gloomy as she still was, she was happy, beyond anything she ever expected to be. She had long felt conscious, that she was unfit to be a communicant; that there was a wrong and a meanness in professing what she did not believe; and she despised herself for it. But she supposed, if she should reveal her feelings and opinions, they would make her a subject of discipline, or at least, everybody would be talking about her, or pointing at her, as an apostate; which disgraceful notoriety and soon, she felt that she could not bear—her whole nature shrunk from it. And this was the afflictive idea, which had compelled her to go to my house, at that late hour of the evening, when she thought no one would know it, and when she came to me, with such a burden on her heart. “Oh!” said she; “if I could have borne it, I never should have gone there. It was a hard trial!”

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y this time I had become well acquainted with her, and could judge of the power and character of her mind, and the natural turn of her disposition. She was no ordinary girl. She had an uncommon degree of intellectual power, and especially of keen discrimination. She was a severe reasoner. She grasped the points of an argument with the hand of a giant, after she had discerned them with the eye of an eagle. Often afterwards I had occasion to be humbled before the penetration and strength of her uncommon mind. She was modest and timid to a fault. Mind—reason, was her forte. She had not much poetry about her. Her taste, however, was correct, not only, as might be expected from the severe correctness of her intellect, but it was gentle and refined also, as might be expected from ‘the amiableness of her affectionate disposition. A truer heart never beat or bled. She was all woman, all affection. A stranger might not think so; because she was timid and reserved in her manners, which cast over her an aspect of coldness. She had a fine education, moved in polite society, and was universally esteemed. The more I knew of her mind and heart, the more I esteemed and loved her.

She was now perfectly miserable. She was ashamed of being in the church, and would be ashamed to leave it. What to do she did not know; and saying, with a flood of tears, “Now, my dear pastor, I have told you all,—what I supposed I never should tell anybody, but carry it with me, (a dreadful secret,) to my grave;” she cast herself upon my kindness and sense of duty, to treat her as I pleased. “Disgrace me if you will. I know you will do right!”

Being resolved to spare no pains to do her good, if God would deign to bless my poor attempts; and fearing, that her sensitive mind would be too much diverted from the one thing needful, if she should have her feelings excited by the idea, that people were talking of her, I enjoined upon her to say nothing to anyone about her religious feelings,—to keep on just as she had been doing,—to attend church,—to go to the communion,—and not be troubled about anything but her own private

religion. I had some doubts about giving her this advice, to attend the communion. But she was a member of the church,—her covenant called her there,—now, she was going there only for a season, unless her mind became different,—and if she did not go, I was fully convinced, that she would become too much agitated and diverted in mind, for a just consideration of the matters which I was going to urge upon her attention. She was peculiarly sensitive. Her feelings were very delicate. She had been tormented for years, with the idea of her condition. She had despised herself for going to the Lord's supper; and thus deceiving other people by professing to be a Christian, while she did not believe in any religion; and yet she could not endure the idea of being exposed, and made the subject of remark. Moreover, she felt, that it was not her fault that she was a member of the church. She had only done what her minister, and others older than herself, had urged her to do; and if anybody was to be blamed for her being in the church, the blame was not hers, but theirs.—I thought so too, and frankly told her so.

In order to be as well prepared as possible, to lead her mind out of its dark and miserable error, into the light and cheering of truth; I wished her to tell me how her mind had been led into this infidelity,—an infidelity which really was just atheism; for she did not believe in the existence of God.—Her account was as follows:—

A few months after she became a member of the church, her excitement having worn off, she found herself just the same that she always had been. Her mind was the same; her taste, her heart, her delights and desires were the same. Instead of finding in religion the peace of mind, the delight in God, and the love of prayer, which—she had been taught to expect, “if she would go forward and do her duty,” as it was called; she found nothing at all. With her, at least, religion was all a delusion.

Her next step was to examine into the case of her associates, those of her own age, who had joined the church when she did. She said nothing to anyone of them, but she watched them. What they did, what they said, where they went, how they felt, where they sought their pleasures, and placed their affections, were all matters of her continued and close observation and study. She saw that they were under some restraint, indeed; but so was she; and she thought it was the same with them, as she knew it was with herself; consistency with her profession restrained her. So far as she could judge, they were just like herself. If she had no religion there was no evidence that they had any. "Why," said she, "do you believe that Miss Susan M— is what you call a Christian?"

"No," said I; "not at all."

"Or Miss Sally E— ?" said she.

"No," said I; "not at all."

"Or Elizabeth C— ?"

"No," said I.

"Or Miss D— ? or Martha F— ? or :Miss B— ?"

"No, not one of them."

"Oh!" said she suddenly; "what have I said! I beg your pardon. I did not mean to mention any one's name. I forgot myself. I am very sorry. Since I have become so well acquainted with you, and told you all my heart; I feel, when I am talking with you, just as if I was thinking alone."

“I should be sorry and half offended, if you did not feel so. You did right to call their names; and you perceive I answered promptly. To you, I can say anything. I can trust you. And I want you to trust me.”

These persons, whom she named, were all members of the church; were her friends and associates; had become church members about the time she became such; and I am sure she would not, on any account, have done them any injustice or injury. In my opinion, she judged rightly of them. I did not wish her to judge of religion, by their exemplification of it; and therefore answered her frankly, because I could trust her, and because I knew, if I did not give her my confidence, I could not secure hers.

Her next step had been, to look a little farther. She thought of all the members of the church whom she knew; to see, if it was not with them, just as she knew it was with herself, and had inferred it was with her young companions. On this point she found great difficulty. She studied it for weeks. Some of these people really seemed to be different from those called unbelievers. They seemed to be above the world, to have joy in religion, to be conscientious, to love prayer and other religious duties, and evidently they were sincere. It did appear, that there might be some propriety in saying, that such persons had a new heart. She could not account for these things, on the supposition that religion was to them what it was to her. But she remembered, that most of them were old people, who had not any longer a taste for the pleasures of life; and on this ground, she could account for their sobriety and much else in them, which distinguished them from other people. They expected to die soon; and it was natural, that they should not greatly set their affections upon the world. “You might expect that my mother, at her age, would not feel about the world as I do.” But then, there was a difficulty—she could not believe them insincere—hypocrites, like herself. They evidently believed in religion, and evidently had some felicity in its exercises and hopes. But she recollected, that it was so with herself once; that she used to love

prayer, as she thought; and enjoy the Sabbaths and the sermons. She had now found out, that this was all a delusion with her; and therefore, came to the conclusion, that it was all a delusion with them. “The difference,” said she, “betwixt myself and them seems to me to be this—they have been so fortunate as not to find out, that religion is all a deception; and I have been so unfortunate as to find it out fully.” On the whole, she came to the conclusion, that other members of the church had really no new heart, any more than she had—that they were just like herself, only, they were in a happy delusion which, unhappily for her, she had found out to be a delusion.—All other churches and Christians, she disposed of in the same way—“happy dreamers,” was her description of them.

The next step was to examine, where this delusion, called religion, came from. It manifestly came from the Bible. She then examined the Bible very carefully for weeks, and she found it so. Ministers preached the Bible. Christians talked about repentance, faith, prayer, regeneration, peace, and all religion, just as the Bible talked. But she had now discovered, that all this personal, experimental religion was a falsehood; and therefore concluded, that the Bible it came from, must be a falsehood also. The religion, her own and that of other people, was only a delusion; and as it originated in the Bible and was what the Bible asked for; the Bible itself must be a delusion. She therefore discarded it, at a single dash.

She then found herself entirely afloat, on an ocean of midnight. She had no guide, and no certainty. All she could do, was to reason; and reason very much in the dark. And as she went on from one thing to another, she saw no satisfactory proofs of the future existence of the soul; and expected soon to die and cease to exist, just like a beast or a tree. She thought it more reasonable to believe, that the world was eternal, than that it had been created; and that it would always go on, as it does now, than that it would ever come to an end. She saw no proofs of the existence of God, and could give no account of the existence of anything else; only, that it happened to be so. When urged to tell how it came

about, that all these chance operations were such regular operations, and so strongly indicative of intellect and design—to tell how conscience, (for example,) comes to be such a liar about a future and fearful accountability, since it is so truthful about things here—to tell how it came about, that—the very ideas about God and immortality ever got abroad among men, if they are only fictions and dreams—to account for the existence of the Bible, which told her with unerring accuracy the very inside of her heart, as no human being could tell; she could only reply, that she had “no answer to give; it seemed to her, that she knew nothing. All was in the dark.”

I then besought her, to take up this subject, and reason upon one thing at a time most carefully—not to be afraid to reason upon anything—not to let anything go, till she was satisfied about it—and not to dismiss the matter, till she had an established faith, and a hope fit to die with. I proposed to reason with her; and would not blame her but commend her, for overthrowing every argument, if she could. I offered to be an infidel and an atheist with her, if reason and truth would make me so; and I promised to lead her mind out of this darkness, if she would only attend to me. I did not care what she denied or where she began. She might deny her own existence, if she pleased; and, I would beat her, till she believed in it, by the evidence of her own senses. But I wanted her to get some one thing settled first, as a foundation, on which to build another thing, or a way, by which to reach another. I wanted she should have a bog to stand upon, in order to jump to another, and thence to another, till she got out of this dreary morass, with her feet upon solid ground. And I assured her, that my only doubt, about her perfect and happy success, rested on the fear, that her mind would not stick to a conclusion or a truth, when once demonstrated to her. If it would, I knew she would arrive, (perhaps not soon,) at an intellectual certainty upon religion, as clear, strong and full, as she had or could have, upon any other subject. And I entreated her to commence in an instant a careful examination.

She was very reluctant to do so. She said it would only make her unhappy; and she did not wish to think of the matter. It would do no good. She besought me to let her alone, not to care for her, but leave her to her own way; and I have always supposed, that she was finally led to the examination and study I urged upon her, more for my sake, than her own. She had become greatly attached to me. I had treated her kindly, had sympathized with her; and she had found it, as she declared, “a precious relief, if not a delight, to have one human being, to whom she could open her heart.” She finally consented to examine the matter of religion again.

I at first attempted to convince her of the truth of the Bible, as the shortest way of settling the whole matter; but I soon found, that some other things must for her be settled first.

By a course of reasoning I succeeded in convincing her of the existence of God. This took some time. She was a whole week over the subject. As I could not spend so much time with her in conversation, as I thought she needed; and as I found that she would sometimes waver afterwards, about a conclusion which she had once reached; I wrote down for her the condensed arguments, that she might examine them at her leisure, and refute them if she could, or tell me if they were not fully satisfactory. I had no need to expand them. She had fully mind enough to do all that for herself, and to understand all that they contained. I continued to do this for weeks, going over one subject after another; and she continued to examine and scrutinize, with an intellectual acumen which astonished me. She fought every inch of ground, and never retreated a single step till she was fairly compelled to it, and never suffered a weak or unsatisfactory argument to escape her detection. In this mode,—she first suggesting her doubts or difficulties, I writing for her the arguments and proofs on the point, she reading them, and then, in conversation stating her conclusions or her doubts to me, and I responding; we went over a wide field. I demonstrated to her satisfaction,

such things as the existence of God, his infinity, eternity, immutability, omniscience, omnipotence, wisdom, justice, truth, and goodness, his creation of all things, and his providence over all things.—To copy here what I wrote for her would make this sketch too long.—As soon as she became fully convinced of God's existence and dominion, I insisted upon it that she should pray to him, and convinced her reason that this was her duty, and one which she ought to love. In this mode, all along, I aimed to bring in religious practice, as soon as I had established a doctrine or truth to found it upon. And when she made objections to prayer, which she had never attempted for years; it gave me an opportunity to show by argument addressed to reason, that her heart, instead of being as it ought to be, filial towards God, was just what the Bible says it is, enmity against him. "And here is one proof that the Bible is true." And thus I prepared the way for preaching the gospel to her by-and-by, when she should have become fully convinced that it came from God.

By arguments addressed to her reason, I convinced her of the accountability of man, of a future life and future judgment. There were some points on which I tried in vain to satisfy her fully, aside from the sacred scriptures; such as the goodness of God, and the certainty of eternal existence. But she had now gone far enough to examine whether the Bible is God's word. Of this she became convinced in a few weeks, mainly by the evidence which it carries along with it. I preferred the internal to the external evidences, as lying nearer the heart of religion, and as constituting, after all, the real ground on which the great majority of mankind must ever receive the Bible, as from God. And when she had come to receive the Bible as God's word, all the rest was easy, so far as the reality and nature of religion were concerned. Thus, after months of examination and study, she became fully settled in the belief, that the Christian religion is true.

This belief did not seem to comfort her at all. She had no hope in Christ, and was as far off from peace as ever. But her mind now rested

upon an undoubted certainty; and this, of itself, was an ineffable relief, though containing no comforts of hope.

She now began to seek the Lord with great steadiness of mind. It was no easy thing for her. She had been deceived once, and remembered the bitterness it cost her. She was for many tedious months an anxious inquirer, but she did not desist. She attained to a comfortable hope in Christ; and she yet lives, one of the most enlightened and established believers, one of my own most precious friends.

If these pages should ever fall into her hands, I am fully aware, that her delicate and sensitive bosom may be agitated by them; but I know, that her affectionate heart will forgive me for the publication. Only she and myself can know the original of this sketch.

She has told me, (I have it, indeed, in her own letters written to me long afterward,) that if I had not addressed her judgment as I did, if I had addressed her fears or her hopes, or exhorted her only, she did not believe, that her “mind would ever have been led into the truth.”—“Through my judgment,” says she, “you forced a way into my heart: you made my own understanding and conscience preach to me. I wish ministers in their sermons would employ this way of reasoning more than they do.”

As nearly as I could ascertain, in my judgment, her opinion of the course pursued with her in that revival of religion when she unified with the church, was a just opinion. She and her young associates in that school were very much separated from older persons, when their attention was particularly expected to be fixed upon religion. Little was said to them in the way of instruction, but much for the purpose of impression. The great doctrines, the fundamental truths of religion, on which all safety rests, were very little explained to them. “It seems to me now,” says she, “that all they wanted was to make us weep.” They were not

told what repentance is, what faith is, what regeneration is, the very things, which children, especially, need to have taught to them. They were merely led on, by excited and impulsive feelings, rendered the more dangerous by the quick sympathies of early life. Against such proceedings, her whole mind was now fixed. And in conversation with her, the idea was often suggested to my mind; how frequently ministers address children upon the subject of religion, as they ought to address those of mature age, and address those of mature age, as they ought to address children. It is children, who need instruction. It is the older, who need impression. Children are sufficiently ready to feel. The danger is, that their sensibilities will outrun their knowledge and judgment. Older persons are slow to feel. Their danger is, that they will not have feeling enough to impel them to obey their judgment.

Admission to the sealing ordinances of the church, especially in times of revival, is a point of no little danger. Our ministers and churches have too often erred on this point. It seems to be very often forgotten, that then, the popular feeling tends into the church; fashion is that way and sympathy that way; and all the common influences which the young are particularly likely to feel, tend to urge them forward in the same direction. Far better would it be for the purity of the church, and for the comfort and salvation of individuals; if some few months were allowed to pass, before the hopefully converted are received into the communion, especially in times of revival. I have no reason to think, that my young friend, of whom I have here spoken, judged wrongfully about the piety of her associates, whom she named to me; but I have much reason to know, that her judgment was just. I afterwards sought out every one of them, and alone they opened their hearts to me.

It is a very difficult and laborious thing for a minister to deal with such cases, as I have here mentioned. It will be hard for him to find time. But he ought to find it. He will seldom labor in vain; and while engaged in this field of duty, he is engaged in the best field of study. His work then

lies nearest the heart; and he cannot fail to know the human heart more accurately, and learn how to apply the powers of his mind and the truth of God, to souls ready to perish.

It is of vast importance to gain the confidence and affection of those, whom he would lead to truth and salvation. As I suppose, this young friend never would have opened her heart to me, had I not knocked at its door, with the hand of the most earnest and gentle kindness. I certainly loved her; and she certainly knew it. She yielded to love, what she would not have yielded to mere reason, or a sense of duty; and that, which began in kindness and tenderness of affection, ended in that peace of God, which passeth understanding.

It is very unhappy for us, that we have such a reluctance to disclose our religious feelings. The disclosure would often put us upon the track of a divine benefit. Convictions are often stifled, by not being confessed. Anxious sinners would always do well, to be more free to tell their troubles, to some Christian minister or friend. There is ordinarily either some great error, or some dangerous sin lingering around the mind, that sensitively seeks concealment. The communion of saints is a privilege. It is one way to attain communion with God.