

SERMON XVIII.

OF A LIVING AND A DEAD FAITH.

For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.— James ii. 26.

WHOEVER has read the scriptures with attention, must have observed several passages, which, at first view, and till thoroughly examined and compared, appear hard to reconcile to each other. No instance of this sort is more remarkable than the seeming difference of judgment between St. Paul and St. James on the point of justification. St. Paul having said, "That a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law," (Rom. iii. 28,) produces the example of Abraham to confirm his assertion. St. James, (in the chapter before us,) from the example of the same Abraham, draws a conclusion which seems directly to contradict this: "Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only," James ii. 24. Can any two opinions be more opposite in appearance? How then can both be true, or how can we believe both writers infallible in their doctrine, and influenced by the unerring Spirit of God? Must we cleave to the one, and reject the other? and if so, how shall we know which is the real truth?

We may confidently answer, The apostles are both right: their doctrine is equally from God, and does not clash in any particular. The darkness and difficulty is in the apprehensions of men, and not in the word of God. Yet a difficulty there is, and I hope I shall not detain you unprofitably at this time, by endeavouring to clear it, and afterwards to press upon you the words of my text as a proper inference from the whole.

When men who are strangers to christian experience, and who trust more to their own sagacity and learning than to the word and Spirit of God, attempt to resolve cases of this sort, they make strange work. And it is no wonder; for how can any one explain what he does not understand? It would tire you if I should relate a tenth part of the conjectures of learned men upon this very subject. I shall mention one or two as a specimen. A writer of some eminence in the world confesses the difficulty I have noticed in its full strength. He allows and affirms that it is not only hard, but impossible, to reconcile the apostles to each other, and concludes that, since it is impossible to hold both their sentiments, we must abide by him who wrote the last. This, from many arguments his learning furnished him with, he thinks to have been St. James. Accordingly, he gives up the other, and his doctrine of faith without works, to shift for themselves. He supposes that St. Paul, in the heat of his argument, carried

the matter a little too far, and that St. James wrote afterwards to correct him.

But to show you (excuse a familiar expression) how doctors differ, and at the same time to warn even true believers against hastily judging beyond the line of their experience, I would observe, that that great servant of God, Luther, soon after he began to preach the gospel, made a mistake no less bold and presuming on the other side of the question. He had felt the power of St. Paul's doctrine in his own soul, and would have defied an angel that would have dared to oppose it; therefore, when his adversaries pressed him with the authority of St. James, not having at that time light to give a more solid answer, he ventured to deny the authenticity of the whole epistle, and rashly insisted, both in his sermons and books, that St. James never wrote it. But Luther, though mistaken in this point, was under the Lord's teaching; he went on from strength to strength, increasing in knowledge and grace; and when his judgment was better informed, he publicly retracted his former unguarded assertion.

Leaving, therefore, the authority of men, let us betake ourselves to the word of God, and humbly seek the light of his Spirit, who is promised to guide his people in their sincere inquiries after truth.

Now, if you consider the scope and design of our apostles, and take in the context, I hope this seeming opposition will be soon removed. St. Paul is evidently treating on the great point of a sinner's justification in the sight of God; he shows that it cannot be of the law, because by the law all men were already condemned, and because then boasting could not be excluded, but that it was freely by grace, through the redemption that is by Christ Jesus. His reasoning will appear to greater advantage by perusing the whole passage, than by producing a few detached sentences. After he had summed up the evidence with respect both to Jews and Gentiles, and pronounced his verdict, that every mouth must be stopped, and that the whole world stood guilty before God, he proceeds thus: "Therefore by the deeds of the law, there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all, and upon all them that believe; for there is no difference: For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God: Being justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus; Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation, through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; to declare, I say, at this

time his righteousness; that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus. Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works! Nay; but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude, that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law," Rom. iii. 20—28. And because the Jews had a high opinion of Abraham, he proceeds in the next chapter to show that Abraham was justified in the same way. "For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. Now to him that worketh, is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness," Rom. iv. 3—5. The circumstance in Abraham's life referred to is, when he believed the promise of God, that though he was then childless, he should be the father of many nations, (Gen. xii. 3; xvii. 4,) and that particularly from him should proceed the Messiah, the promised seed, in whom both he himself, and all the families of the earth should be blessed.

St. James expressly treats of those who rested in a notion which they called faith, and accounted sufficient for their salvation, though it had no influence upon their hearts, tempers, and conduct. He shows that their hope is vain, because such a faith as this the devils have. And he proves, by the example of Abraham, that his faith was very different from theirs, because it enabled him to perform the hardest and most painful act of obedience, the offering up of his only son. "What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can (this)* faith save him? If a brother or a sister be naked, and destitute of daily food; and one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed, and filled: notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: show me thy faith without thy works, and I will show thee my faith by my works. Thou believest that there is one God; thou dost well: the devils also believe and tremble. But wilt thou know, O vain man! that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham, our father, justified by works, when he had offered Isaac, his son, upon the altar? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And the scripture was fulfilled (confirmed), which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness; and he was called the friend of God. Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only, James ii. 14—24. It is exceedingly plain that he had not

the same thing in view which St. Paul had; for the incident to which he here refers, happened a great many years after Abraham had been declared justified in the sight of God.

The sum is, the one declares that nothing renders us acceptable to God but faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; the other, that such a faith, when true and genuine, is not solitary, but accompanied with every good work. The one speaks of the justification of our persons; this is by faith only: the other, of the justification of our profession; and this is by faith also, but not alone, for it works by love, and produces obedience.

St. James has the same view in speaking of Rahab; (James ii. 25:) and by producing her as a confirmation, it is still more evident, that he is only considering works as the proofs of our sincerity. We have no sure ground to conclude, that Rahab, in the act of receiving the spies, and at that time, had any saving faith, or any view to the Messiah and the covenant of grace; though it is most probable she had, after she was joined to the people of Israel, and became acquainted with divine revelation. But in Jericho her thoughts seem to have been confined to a temporal deliverance; and the profession of faith which she made to the spies implies no more. "And she said unto the men, I know that the Lord hath given you the land, and that your terror is fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land faint because of you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the waters of the Red-sea for you, when you came out of Egypt; and what you did unto the two kings of the Amorites.—And as soon as we had heard these things, our hearts did melt; neither did there remain any more courage in any man, because of you: for the Lord your God, he is God in heaven above, and in earth beneath. Now, therefore, I pray you, swear unto me by the Lord, since I have showed you kindness, that you will also show kindness unto my father's house; and give me a true token," Joshua ii. 9—12. Had she said thus, and yet delivered the spies up to the king of Jericho, it would have proved, that she did not speak from her heart; but her profession was justified by receiving them into her house, concealing them from the search made after them, and sending them away in peace. Surely this conduct of Rahab will be sufficient to condemn many who would be thought christians.

We may, therefore, deduce two propositions, perfectly consistent with each other, from the passage in question.

1. That there is no acceptance for any of the sons of Adam with the just and holy God, but through Jesus Christ as our righteousness received by faith; and that in this concern works of every kind are absolutely excluded.

This is the capital doctrine of the gospel;

* η πίστις, this faith.

it is not only clearly asserted in innumerable passages both of the Old Testament and the New, but is St. Paul's express subject and design in his epistles to the Romans and the Galatians. Though he was yielding and compliant in many things of less importance, and was willing to become all things to all men, yet he would not give place, no not for an hour, to any who offered to invalidate this foundation-truth. He declares, that to mix any thing, to contend for any qualification or observance, as of necessary influence, to concur with the perfect work of Christ in the justification of a sinner, is to darken, alter, and destroy the gospel which he preached; and denounces an anathema against every one who should be guilty of this presumption, yea, though he should be (if such a thing were possible) an angel from heaven, Gal. i. 8, 9. How cordially he rested his own hope upon the truth which he proposed to others, he declares elsewhere: "Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss, for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung that I may win Christ; and be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of* the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness of God by faith," Phil. iii. 8, 9.

If this is the scriptural doctrine, let each of you examine on what ground you stand. Has God appointed one way of salvation? and will any of you dare to propose another? This would be both wicked and dangerous: "Other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ," 1 Cor. iii. 11. You may please yourselves now with what you account your good works; but when God shall "lay judgment to the line, and righteousness to the plummet," (Isa. xxviii. 17,) none will be able to abide his appearance, but those who can plead a righteousness perfectly answerable to the law's demands, which can only be found in Jesus Christ, the righteous one.

And as this doctrine is of so great and essential importance, beware how you listen to any other. Take heed how you hear; (Mark iv. 24; Luke viii. 18,) be not influenced by the names, characters, or stations of men, when the salvation of your souls is at stake. Prize the liberty, which as protestants and Britons you enjoy, of bringing every doctrine to the trial of God's word, and freely use it. I account it my honour and happiness that I preach to a free people, who have the Bible in their hands. To your Bibles I appeal. I entreat, I charge you to receive nothing upon my word, any farther than I prove it from the word of God; and bring every preacher, and

every sermon that you hear to the same standard. If this is the truth, you had need to be well established in it; for it is not the current and fashionable doctrine of the times. Let me then farther recommend to you, (it is a direction our Lord has given,) to examine doctrines by their effects: "By their fruits ye shall know them," Matth. vii. 16. The truths of God, when faithfully preached, in humble dependence upon his blessing, will be attested by his power. At such times, and in such places, a visible change will soon be observable in some one or other of the hearers; they cease to do evil, they learn to do well; they acknowledge God in all their ways, and glorify him before men, by living according to his precepts. And if you ask them the reason of this change, they will freely ascribe it to the blessing of God upon that sort of preaching, which by too many is accounted foolishness, 1 Cor. i. 21.

On the other hand, we are not afraid to challenge those who are most acquainted with men and books, to produce instances of the same effects wrought by any other doctrine than that which commends the Lord Christ in his person, offices, and power, as the only object of a sinner's hope. How much is said and wrote to tell people what they should be, and what they should do! yet where these principles are not enforced, there is nothing effectually done, nothing indeed attempted, beyond a formal round of dull and heartless service; a little something that looks like religion, on the Lord's day to appear in church at the summons of the bell, to repeat words because other people do the same, to hear what is delivered from the pulpit with little attention or affection, unless something occurs that is suited to exalt self, or to soothe conscience, and then to run with eagerness into the world again.

Or if here and there a person is truly touched by the secret influence and guidance of the Spirit of God, where this evangelical doctrine is not publicly maintained, the consequence always is, that they renounce the things which they before held for truths, are brought into that way of thinking which is agreeable to St Paul's doctrine, and receive it gladly whenever it comes in their way.

It must be allowed, however, at the same time, that there are counterfeit professors, whose religion lies in notions, and who, while they profess to believe in God, in works deny him; by reason of whom the ways of truth are evil spoken of, 2 Pet. ii. 2. This the apostles have taught us to expect; nay, it was so from the beginning, even while the apostles were themselves personally with the churches. To such St. James addresses the passage I have been reading to you, of which my text is the conclusion; and as I dare not hope that there are none such in this great assembly, it is highly proper that, before I

* *Ex vobis*, of law; that is, of any law whatsoever, not of the law, as if he only meant the Jewish law. The article *τῶ* seems here to be purposely left out.

conclude, I should take notice of a second proposition which naturally offers from the subject we have had in hand; and more especially from the reasoning of St. James, and from the words of my text.

2. That true faith in the Lord Jesus Christ has a prevailing and habitual influence upon the hearts and lives of those who possess it; and that they are vain men, and deceivers of themselves, who pretend to faith in him, while their lives and conversations show them to be enslaved to the love of the world, and the dominion of sin. The apostle, to inspire us with a just abhorrence of this false profession, makes use of two comparisons, which are exceedingly striking. May God open the eyes of those who are concerned in it, to perceive and tremble at the justness and horror of the resemblance!

1st, He compares it to the faith of devils. "Thou believest there is one God; thou dost well. The devils also believe, and tremble," James ii. 10. Are there any here whom it is needful to address in this harsh manner? My dear brethren, bear with me; I wish you well, and would willingly rejoice in every good appearance; but, alas! how little does it signify what you believe, or what you say, unless your acknowledged principles have an effect upon your conduct!

Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ? so does Satan. Do you believe the election of God, the sovereignty of grace, the perseverance of the saints? it is possible the devil may have a more extensive knowledge in these doctrines than the wisest of men; yet this benefits him not; it is not want of knowledge, but want of love, that makes him what he is.

The only effect mentioned of the faith of devils is, that it increases their terror and aggravates their guilt. They believe (there are no sceptics in hell,) and tremble. Is not this too much the case of some of you? If you knew less, you would be easier at least, and less inexcusable; and yet perhaps you mistake your state, and think yourselves, on this account, far less blameable than you really are. Perhaps sometimes, when you reflect sincerely on your ways, and how strangely you are hurried to act contrary to the convictions which the preaching of the gospel forces upon you, you are ready to charge the Lord and his dispensations hardly, and to say, O that he would give me his grace! but if not, what can I do without it? Let conscience now speak faithfully, and it will tell you, that if you are condemned, it will not be for what you cannot do, but for wilfully refusing to improve the power already given you. When I tell you, that without holiness no man shall see the Lord with comfort, and that you must break off from your vain company and evil practices, if you expect or desire to be saved, you know that I speak the truth; and your

looks often testify that you feel the force of it. Now, while the word of God is sounding in your ears, you perhaps are thinking, "It is time, high time indeed, to break off: though the Lord has forbore me long, he will surely strike at last, if I go on thus." And yet, alas! what I have formerly seen gives me much cause to fear, that to-morrow, or the next time they entice you, you will consent again. But could I tell you, that by going a different way, you might gain a sum of money, or could I make it appear, that the next time you went to such a place, your house would certainly be robbed, I make no doubt but you would forbear. And yet gold is not grace. It is then plain that you have power, but your will is in fault. God has enlightened your conscience; but you rebel against it. O repent! while there is yet space afforded. Call upon the name of Jesus; who knows but he may even yet deliver you!

2dly, He compares it to a dead carcass, which is not only unprofitable, but loathsome and offensive. May God show you to-day, how odious your profession is in his sight! for by assenting to the truths of the gospel, and outwardly favouring the cause, and the instruments which the Lord has raised up to promote it, you are so far professors. May he enable you to be, not only almost, but altogether christians! For while you thus halt between two opinions, and stand divided between God and the world, you are an abomination to God, a grief to his people, a stumbling-block to the ignorant, and are (if this was of any weight in comparison of what I have already said) secretly despised by those who pretend to court your acquaintance. Your guilt is in some respects more aggravated, and your example unspeakably more mischievous, than either would be if you openly rejected the truth. You stand in the rank of those wicked servants who know their master's will, but do it not. The great Judge has determined concerning these, that they shall be beaten with many stripes, Luke xii. 48. Awake to righteousness, and sin not; look up to Jesus, who is exalted to bestow both faith and repentance, that you may no longer be torn in pieces by those inward contentions, but experience that peace which passes all understanding, Phil. iv. 7.

SERMON XIX.

GUILT REMOVED AND PEACE RESTORED.

O Lord, open thou my lips, and my mouth shall show forth thy praise.—Psalm li. 15.

THE history of David is full of instruction. Every thing recorded of him affords us either consolation or caution. In his example we