

SERMON X.

RECEIVING CHRIST BY FAITH.

But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God; even to them that believe on his name.—JOHN i. 12.

It is a wonderful fact, that though the Jewish nation were looking for their Messiah, yet, when Jesus of Nazareth appeared, and completely answered the predictions of the prophets, the great body of the nation rejected him, persecuted him, and ceased not their malice, until they saw him crucified. "He came to his own, and his own received him not." But while he was contumeliously rejected by the great body of the people, there were a few, even of that wicked and adulterous generation, who received him. "Many were called, but few were chosen." The truth and glory of the Messiah were hidden from the wise and prudent, but were revealed unto babes. The Scribes and Pharisees proudly rejected the Son of God, but publicans and sinners flocked around him and were accepted; so that it was said by way of reproach, "This man receiveth sinners!"

But rich grace was conferred on all those who did receive him. However deeply involved in guilt and crime, they received a free pardon, and acquired the privilege of becoming the sons of God. Let us, then, first inquire what it is to receive Christ; and secondly, what is the exalted privilege conferred on such.

1. What are we to understand by receiving Christ? The Evangelist explains his own meaning in the latter part of the verse, by saying, "even as many as believed on his name." Receiving Christ, and believing on his name, are substantially the same thing. But do not many believe that Christ is the Son of God and Saviour of sinners, who continue in sin and never subject themselves to his easy yoke? We do read of some, in our Saviour's time, who believed in him, yet would not confess him, because they loved the praise of men more than the honour which cometh from God; and of some who received the word with joy, and believed, but their faith was temporary; and of one, who believed and was baptized, and yet was pronounced by an inspired apostle, to be "in the gall of bitterness and bond of iniquity." The apostle James, also, speaks of those whose faith was dead; that is, such a faith as neither worked by love, nor produced the fruits of righteousness and peace.

From all these cases we learn that there is a species of faith which is not connected with salvation. Such believers did never truly receive Christ as their Saviour; and did never believe on him with that faith which is of the operation of

the Holy Spirit, which is "not of ourselves, but is the gift of God." It is not strange that there should be in those educated in a Christian country, a common traditionary faith in the Christian religion; for we find a similar faith prevalent among all nations, whatever may be the nature of their religion. They believe in what they have been taught; they believe as their fathers did before them. We may be sure, then, that that faith, among Christians, which has no higher origin than the faith of a Pagan or a Mussulman, is not that faith which is so often declared by our Lord to be connected with salvation.

Let us then inquire what it is to receive Christ, for this is the faith mentioned in our text.

1. And here we may apply the proverb of our Saviour, "They that be whole need not the physician, but they that are sick." Christ came "to seek that which was lost." "He came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." It is plain, therefore, that none will apply to Christ as the Physician of souls, until they become sensible that they are diseased; that none will receive him as a Saviour, but those who feel that they are lost. Men are very averse to being dependent on others for what they imagine they already possess, or can obtain by their own efforts. Even when in some measure convinced of sin, their first effort almost always is to save themselves; and these legal strivings in their own strength, they do not give up until by experience they find that their case grows worse and worse, and that they have no ability to do any thing for their own deliverance.

If Christ is truly received by any, they must view him in his true character, as the only begotten Son of God. If a king should send his own son to negotiate a treaty of peace with subjects in a state of rebellion, and should make it a condition of his pardoning their treason, that they should receive his son as his ambassador; if any, notwithstanding the credentials which he bore, should deny that he was the son of the king; or that he was invested with a plenipotentiary commission to grant pardon to such as submitted, it could not be said, that they received the royal messenger, although they should admit that he had been sent to communicate the will of the sovereign. So, unless men acknowledge Christ to be indeed THE SON OF GOD, "the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his Person," they cannot properly be said to receive the Messiah, or believe to the salvation of their souls; although they may extol him as a perfect man, or even as an exalted angel. We can only be said to receive an ambassador when we acknowledge him in that character, in which he professes to come, and ascribe to him that power and dignity which he claims. They, therefore, who deny the divinity of the Saviour are to be considered as really unbelievers, as if they rejected him altogether. All who truly receive Christ, do believe in him as THE SON OF GOD, who claims equality of knowledge, power, and honour with the Father.

Again, Christ comes as a Prophet, as the prophet concerning whom Moses spoke; or rather the Lord to Moses, "I will raise them up a prophet like unto thee." Christ was demonstrated by his works to

be "a Teacher sent from God." When he appeared in glory on the mount of transfiguration, the voice which proceeded from "the excellent glory," said, "This is my beloved Son, hear him." If we receive him, we must receive him as our divine TEACHER, and submit our minds to the instructions which he gives. And as man is not only blind, but indisposed to learn, Christ first convinces him of his extreme ignorance, and next endows him with a teachable disposition. As long as men think highly of their own wisdom, they will not come to Christ, to learn of him. Such are given up to their own blindness, and commonly, become more and more confirmed in their errors. In this sense we must understand what Christ says, "For judgment am I come into this world, that they which see not might see, and that they which see might be made blind." And this is confirmed by the answer which he gave to some of the Pharisees, who, on hearing the words already cited, said, "And are we blind also? Jesus said unto them, if ye were blind, ye should have no sin; but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth." One of the things which the Holy Spirit is sent to convince men of is, the blindness of their minds, which is not essentially different from unbelief. "And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment. Of sin, because they believe not in me." This conviction of unbelief goes before the reception of Christ. At first, under the illumination of the Holy Spirit, gross sins, and sins of commission affect the conscience, but as the light increases,

the soul is made deeply sensible, that it has not only sinned by positive, external acts, but that there is a corrupt fountain within, and that as much guilt has been contracted by sins of omission, as by overt acts of transgression. And when all hope of justification by the law of works is relinquished, and it begins to turn toward the gospel for relief, it finds in itself no more ability to obey the gospel than the law. Eternal life is offered to every one that believeth; that is, to every one that will come to Christ; and in theory, believing seems to be a very easy thing; so that almost every careless sinner thinks that he can exercise faith whenever he wills to do so. But not so with the convinced sinner. He feels that nothing is more out of his power, than one act of saving faith. He is deeply sensible that he never shall be truly willing to turn to God, until he is made so by divine power. And yet, he does not excuse himself; he is conscious that he is culpable for his unbelief, and for want of a heart to believe. He, therefore, despairs of all help, except from the sovereign mercy of God; and no one can assure him that this will be vouchsafed. He is now in a situation to acknowledge that salvation is altogether of grace. And when God is pleased to reveal himself to such a soul, the blessing comes as a free gift. The object now presented to the believing soul is Christ, as a Mediator, as exhibited in the word of God; for Christ is no where else to be found but in the word. And as he is the lesson to be learned, so he is the great and effectual teacher, by the Spirit whom he sends, not only to convince

men of sin, but of righteousness. Henceforth, the humbled sinner desires to sit, like Mary, at Christ's feet, and learn of him. No salutary instruction is expected from any other quarter. The sincere believer continually comes to Christ for instruction, and receives all his words as infallibly true.

But blindness is not the only malady under which the human soul labours; and from which it needs to be delivered. There is a heavy burden of guilt sufficient to sink it to the lowest hell. When this comes to be felt, then, indeed, the condition of the soul is deplorable. All its own exertions and sufferings cannot atone for the smallest sin. "The blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sin." The inquiry may then be, Wherewith shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the high God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my first born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" However careless once, now the cry is extorted, "What must I do to be saved?" Without some conviction of the ill-desert of sin, we are never prepared to view Christ as "the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world." The death of Christ has little or no meaning to a careless sinner. The soul must be deeply wounded by the stroke of the law, before it is ready to appreciate the precious balm intended as a remedy for the pained conscience. But when it is fairly slain by the law, and all hope of satisfying its demands is gone, then to see by

the eye of faith, Christ crucified, and to learn that "He was wounded for our transgressions, and bruised for our iniquities," and that he was thus made a curse for us, that we might be redeemed from the curse of the law, new feelings begin to spring up in the soul. Here, indeed, is a fountain opened for sin and uncleanness, a fountain of precious blood. Now it is understood how God can be just, while he justifies the believing sinner. The law, indeed, does not relinquish its demands; this is impossible, but here they are all satisfied. It is more; they are honoured. "Mercy and truth have met together, righteousness and peace have kissed each other." The sword of divine justice has indeed been turned aside from us, but we behold it piercing the heart of our Surety; for when he stepped into our place under the law, there was no remission of the penalty, but the stern demand was laid upon him. Then was fulfilled the word of the prophet, "Awake, O sword, against the man that is my fellow; smite the shepherd and the sheep shall be scattered." According to the covenant engagements of the Son, he assumes our place, and drinks the cup of wrath which the Father put into his hands. When a convicted sinner beholds Christ lifted up, he receives a salvation similar to that which the Israelites, bitten by the fiery serpents, obtained by looking on the brazen serpent, which Moses was directed to elevate upon a pole. For as every one of these received immediate deliverance from his painful and envenomed wound; so, every one who by faith looks to a Saviour exalted on the cross, receives redemption

from the guilt of sin. When his faith is strong he is conscious that his deliverance is effected, and that the curse is removed. But faith follows Christ to his exaltation to heaven also, and there sees him still officiating as a great High Priest. Still he appears as "a Lamb that had been slain." Still he exhibits his meritorious propitiation, and sprinkles the blood of the great sin-offering before the mercy-seat in the temple above. "He is able, therefore, to save to the uttermost all who come unto God by him; seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them." "Such an High Priest becomes us." The believing sinner feels his conscience purified by the sprinkling of this atoning blood. Christ is, therefore, received as a Priest, and the penitent sinner places his whole confidence in him, and cheerfully commits all his eternal interests into his hands, believing that what he thus confides, will be safely kept unto the day of redemption. Thus is Christ received as a Priest.

He is also, at the same time, received as a King. Christ, as God, has an indefeasible right to our allegiance; but he is also King, as our Mediator. All power in heaven and in earth, is committed unto him. To him every knee should bow and every tongue confess. But having purchased a peculiar people, a chosen generation, not with silver and gold, but with his own precious blood, he has a right founded in redemption to rule over them. And though they long resisted his authority, and often said in their hearts, "We will not have this man to reign over us;" yet, by his powerful

grace he subdues their proud and rebellious hearts, and in the day of his power, makes them willing to take his yoke upon them. The soul humbled in penitence at the foot of the cross, cries, "Lord, what wouldest thou have me to do?" Other lords have had dominion over it, but now it renounces them all, and voluntarily submits to the authority of the King of Zion, and cheerfully resolves to keep his commandments, and to observe all his ordinances. Christ is now placed on the throne of the affections, and reigns as supreme; and the earnest and continual desire of the believer is, that every thought and imagination may be brought into subjection to the law of Christ. And grief is felt whenever a failure of due obedience is observed. Thus Christ is received in his threefold office of Prophet, Priest, and King; and in these offices he is able to accomplish the salvation of all who put their trust in him. For, "of God he is made unto us wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption."

Before we proceed to the consideration of the latter part of the text, let us reflect on what has been already said, and endeavour to derive some improvement from it.

1. Let us beware of imitating the ungrateful conduct of the unbelieving Jews. By their unbelief, they forfeited all the rich privileges and blessings which appertained to them, as the covenanted people of God. They gloried in being the children of Abraham; in being of the circumcision; in having the oracles and promises of God among them. But what did all these privileges avail them, when they rejected him in whom Abraham

firmly believed; and refused to receive Him in whom all the predictions and promises concen-tered? However descended from the father of the faithful according to the flesh; yet they were not the true children of Abraham, according to the promise; "For they are not all Israel who are of Israel. He is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit and not in the letter, whose praise is not of men but of God." While we are thankful for external privileges, let us beware of trusting in them. They will all avail nothing without "faith, which worketh by love."

2. We learn from what has been said, the true nature of saving faith; it is the "receiving Christ as he is offered in the gospel," as a divine Person, even the well-beloved and only begotten Son of God, who thought it not robbery to be equal with God. It is to receive him as our Prophet, Priest, and King, understandingly and cordially; and renouncing every other foundation of hope, and every other Teacher and Master. It is, in short, to believe firmly all that God has testified of his Son. It is so to apprehend these truths by the illumination of the Spirit, that our supreme affections may be attracted to Christ, and our wills be resolved to follow the Lamb through evil and good report.