

Sect. III

What method we ought to take, in order to find out whether we do not live in some way of sin

This, as hath been observed, is a difficult thing to be known; but it is not a matter of so much difficulty, but that if persons were sufficiently concerned about it, and strict and thorough in inquiring and searching, it might, for the most part, be discovered; men might know whether they live in any way of sin, or not. Persons who are deeply concerned to please and obey God, need not, under the light we enjoy, go on in the ways of sin through ignorance.

It is true, that our hearts are exceedingly deceitful; but God, in his holy word, hath given that light with respect to our duty, which is accommodated to the state of darkness in which we are. So that by thorough care and inquiry, we may know our duty, and know whether or no we live in any sinful way. And every one who hath any true love to God and his duty, will be glad of assistance in this inquiry. It is with such persons a concern which lies with much weight upon their spirits, in all things to walk as God would have them, and so as to please and honour him. If they live in any way which is offensive to God, they will be glad to know it, and do by no means choose to have it concealed from them.

All those also, who in good earnest make the inquiry, *What shall I do to be saved?* will be glad to know whether they do not live in some sinful way of behaviour. For if they live in any such way, it is a great disadvantage to them with respect to that great concern. It behoves every one who is seeking salvation, to know and avoid every sinful way in which he lives. The means by which we must come to the knowledge of this, are two; viz. the knowledge of the rule, and the knowledge of ourselves.

1st, If we would know whether we do not live in some way of sin, we should take a great deal of pains to *be thoroughly acquainted with the rule.*—God hath given us a true and perfect rule, by which we ought to walk. And that we might be able, notwithstanding our darkness, and the disadvantages which attend us, to know our duty, he hath laid the rule before us abundantly. What a full and abundant revelation of the mind of God have we in the Scriptures! And how plain is it in what relates to practice! How often are rules repeated! In how many various forms are they revealed, that we might the more fully understand them!

But to what purpose will all this care of God to inform us be, if we neglect the *revelation* which God hath made of his mind, and take no care to become acquainted with it! It is impossible that we should know whether we do not live in a way of sin, unless we know the rule by which we are to walk. The sinfulness of any way consists in its disagreement from the rule; and we cannot know whether it agree with the rule or not, unless we be acquainted with the rule.

Rom. 3:20. “*By the law is the knowledge of sin.*”

Therefore, lest we go in ways displeasing to God, we ought with the greatest diligence to study the rules which God hath given us. We ought to read and search the Holy Scriptures much, and do it with the design to know the whole of our duty, and in order that the word of God may be “*a lamp unto our feet, and a light unto our paths.*” **Psal. 119:105.** Every one ought to strive to get knowledge in divine things, and to grow in such knowledge, to the end that he may know his duty, and know what God would have him to do.

These things being so, are not the greater part of men very much to blame in that they take no more pains or care to acquire the knowledge of divine things? in that they no more study the Holy Scriptures, and other books which might inform them? as if it were the work of ministers only, to take pains to acquire this knowledge. But why is it so much a minister's work to strive after knowledge, unless it be, that others may acquire knowledge by him?—Will not many be found inexcusable in the sinful ways in which they live through ignorance and mistake, because their ignorance is a wilful, allowed ignorance? They are ignorant of their duty, but it is their own fault they are so; they have advantages enough to know, and may know it if they will; out they take pains to acquire knowledge, and to be well skilled in their outward affairs, upon which their temporal interest depends; but will not take pains to know their duty. We ought to take great pains to be well informed, especially in those things which immediately concern us, or which relate to our particular cases.

2dly, The other mean is the *knowledge of ourselves*, as subject to the rule.—If we would know whether we do not live in some way of sin, we should take the utmost care to be well acquainted with ourselves, as well as with the rule, that we may be able to compare ourselves with the rule. When we have found what the rule is, then we should be strict in examining ourselves, whether or no we be conformed to the rule. This is the direct way in which our characters are to be discovered. It is one thing wherein man differs from brute creatures, that he is capable of self-reflection, or of reflecting upon his own actions, and what passes in his own mind, and considering the nature and quality of them. And doubtless it was partly for this end that God gave us this power, which is denied to other creatures, that we might know ourselves, and consider our own ways.

We should examine our hearts and ways, until we have satisfactorily discovered either their agreement or disagreement with the rules of Scripture. This is a matter that requires the utmost diligence, lest we overlook our own irregularities, lest some evil way in us should lie hid under disguise, and pass unobserved. One would think we are under greater advantages to be acquainted with ourselves, than with any thing else; for we are always present with ourselves, and have an immediate consciousness of our own actions: all that passeth in us, or is done by us, is immediately under our eye. Yet really in some respects the knowledge of nothing is so difficult to be obtained, as the knowledge of ourselves. We should therefore use great diligence in prying into the secrets of our hearts, and in examining all our ways and practices. That you may the more successfully use those means to know whether you do not live in some way of sin; be advised,

1. Evermore to join self-reflection with reading and hearing the word of God. When you read or hear, reflect on yourselves as you go along, comparing yourselves and your own ways with what you read or hear. Reflect and consider what agreement or disagreement there is between the word and your ways. The Scriptures testify against all manner of sin, and contain directions for every duty; as the apostle saith, **2 Tim. 3:16.** “*And is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.*” Therefore when you there read the rules given us by Christ and his apostles, reflect and consider, each one of you with himself, *Do I live according to this rule? Or do I live in any respect contrary to it?*

When you read in the historical parts of Scripture an account of the sins of which others have been guilty, reflect on yourselves as you go along, and inquire whether you do not in some degree live in the same or like practices. When you there read accounts how God reprov'd

the sins of others, and executed judgments upon them for their sins, examine whether you be not guilty of things of the same nature. When you read the examples of Christ, and of the saints recorded in Scripture, inquire whether you do not live in ways contrary to those examples. When you read there how God commended and rewarded any persons for their virtues and good deeds, inquire whether you perform those duties for which they were commended and rewarded, or whether you do not live in the contrary sins or vices. Let me further direct you, particularly to read the Scriptures to these ends, that you may compare and examine yourselves in the manner now mentioned.

So if you would know whether you do not live in some way of sin, whenever you hear any sin testified against, or any duty urged, in the preaching of the word, be careful to look back upon yourselves, to compare yourselves and your own ways with what you hear, and strictly examine yourselves, whether you live in this or the other sinful way which you hear testified against; and whether you do this duty which you hear urged. Make use of the word as a glass, wherein you may behold yourselves.

How few are there who do this as they ought to do! who, while the minister is testifying against sin, are busy with themselves in examining their own hearts and ways! The generality rather think of others, how this or that person lives in a manner contrary to what is preached; so that there may be hundreds of things delivered in the preaching of the word, which properly belong to them, and are well suited to their cases; yet it never so much as comes into their minds, that what is delivered any way concerns them. Their minds readily fix upon others, and they can charge them, but never think whether or no they themselves be the persons.

2. If you live in any ways which are generally condemned by the better, and more sober, sort of men, be especially careful to inquire concerning these, whether they be not ways of sin. Perhaps you have argued with yourselves, that such or such a practice is lawful; you cannot see any evil in it. However, if it be generally condemned by godly ministers, and the better and more pious sort of people, it certainly looks suspicious, whether or no there be not some evil in it; so that you may well be put upon inquiring with the utmost strictness, whether it be not sinful. The practice being so generally disapproved of by those who in such cases are most likely to be in the right, may reasonably put you upon more than ordinarily nice and diligent inquiry concerning the lawfulness or unlawfulness of it.

3. Examine yourselves, whether all the ways in which you live, are likely to be pleasant to think of upon a deathbed. Persons often in health allow and plead for those things, which they would not dare to do, if they looked upon themselves as shortly about to go out of the world. They in a great measure still their consciences as to ways in which they walk, and keep them pretty easy, while death is thought of as at a distance: yet reflections on these same ways are very uncomfortable when they are going out of the world. Conscience is not so easily blinded and muffled then as at other times.

Consider therefore, and inquire diligently, whether or no you do not live in some practice or other, as to the lawfulness of which, when it shall come into your minds upon your death-bed, you will choose to have some further satisfaction, and some better argument than you now have, to prove that it is not sinful, in order to your being easy about it. Think over your particular ways, and try yourselves, with the awful expectation of soon going out of the world

into eternity, and earnestly endeavour impartially to judge what ways you will on a death-bed approve of and rejoice in, and what you will disapprove of, and wish you had let alone.

4. Be advised to consider what others say of you, and improve it to this end, to know whether you do not live in some way of sin. Although men are blind to their own faults, yet they easily discover the faults of others, and are apt enough to speak of them. Sometimes persons live in ways which do not at all become them, yet are blind to it themselves, not seeing the deformity of their own ways, while it is most plain and evident to others. They themselves cannot see it, yet others cannot shut their eyes against it, cannot avoid seeing it.

For instance. Some persons are of a very proud behaviour, and are not sensible of it; but it appears notorious to others. Some are of a very worldly spirit, they are set after the world, so as to be noted for it, so as to have a name for it; yet they seem not to be sensible of it themselves. Some are of a very malicious and envious spirit; and others see it, and to them it appears very hateful; yet they themselves do not reflect upon it. Therefore since there is no trusting to our own hearts and our own eyes in such cases, we should make our improvement of what others say of us, observe what they charge us with, and what fault they find with us, and strictly examine whether there be not foundation for it.

If others charge us with being proud; or worldly, close, and niggardly; or spiteful and malicious; or with any other ill temper or practice; we should improve it in self-reflection, to inquire whether it be not so. And though the imputation may seem to us to be very groundless, and we think that they, in charging us so and so, are influenced by no good spirit; yet if we act prudently, we shall take so much notice of it as to make it an occasion of examining ourselves.

Thus we should improve what our friends say to us and of us, when they from friendship tell us of any thing which they observe amiss in us. It is most imprudent, as well as most unchristian, to take it amiss, and resent it, when we are thus told of our faults: we should rather rejoice in it, that we are shown our spots. Thus also we should improve what our enemies say of us. If they from an ill spirit reproach and revile us to our faces, we should consider it, so far as to reflect inward upon ourselves, and inquire whether it be not so, as they charge us. For though what is said, be said in a reproachful, reviling manner; yet there may be too much truth in it. When men revile others even from an ill spirit towards them; yet they are likely to fix upon real faults; they are likely to fall upon us where we are weakest and most defective, and where we have given them most occasion. An enemy will soonest attack us where we can least defend ourselves: and a man that reviles us, though he do it from an unchristian spirit, and in an unchristian manner, yet will be most likely to speak of that, for which we are really most to blame, and are most blamed by others.

So when we hear of others talking against us behind our backs, though they do very ill in so doing, yet the right improvement of it will be, to reflect upon ourselves, and consider whether we indeed have not those faults which they lay to our charge. This will be a more Christian and a more wise improvement of it, than to be in a rage, to revile again, and to entertain an ill-will towards them for their evil-speaking. This is the most wise and prudent improvement of such things. Hereby we may get good out of evil; and this is the surest way to defeat the designs of our enemies in reviling and backbiting us. They do it from ill will, and to do us an injury; but in this way we may turn it to our own good.

9. Be advised, when you see others' faults, to examine whether there be not the same in yourselves. This is not done by many, as is evident from this, that they are so ready to speak of others' faults, and aggravate them, when they have the very same themselves. Thus, nothing is more common than for proud men to accuse others of pride, and to declaim against them upon that account. So it is common for dishonest men to complain of being wronged by others. When a person seeth ill dispositions and practices in others, he is not under the same disadvantage in seeing their odiousness and deformity, as when he looks upon any ill disposition or practice in himself. He can see how odious these and those things are in others; he can easily see what a hateful thing pride is in another; and so of malice, and other evil dispositions or practices. In others he can easily see their deformity; for he doth not look through such a deceitful glass, as when he sees the same things in himself.

Therefore, when you see others' faults; when you take notice, how such an one acts amiss, what an ill spirit he shows, and how unsuitable his behaviour is; when you hear others speak of it, and when you yourselves find fault with others in their dealings with you, or in things wherein you are any way concerned with them; then reflect, and consider, whether there be nothing of the same nature in yourselves. Consider that these things are just as deformed and hateful in you as they are in others. Pride, a haughty spirit and carriage, are as odious in you as they are in your neighbour. Your malicious and revengeful spirit towards your neighbour, is just as hateful as a malicious and revengeful spirit in him towards you. It is as unreasonable for you to wrong, and to be dishonest with your neighbour, as it is for him to wrong, and be dishonest with you. It is as injurious and unchristian for you to talk against others behind their backs, as it is for others to do the same with respect to you.

6. Consider the ways in which others are blinded as to sins in which they live, and strictly inquire whether you be not blinded in the same ways. You are sensible that others are blinded by their lusts; consider whether the prevalence of some carnal appetite or lust of the mind have not blinded you. You see how others are blinded by their temporal interest; inquire whether your temporal interests do not blind you also in some things, so as to make you allow yourselves in things which are not right. You are as liable to be blinded through inclination and interest, and have the same deceitful and wicked hearts as other men, **Prov. 27:12.** "*As in water face answereth to face, so the heart of man to man.*"¹

¹ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 2* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008), 176–178.