

GOSPEL PRECEPTS

THE BELIEVER'S RULE OF CONDUCT



DOCTRINES OF GRACE **J C PHILPOT**

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Joseph Charles Philpot

Originally published as:

Meditations on various points of our most holy faith.

II. Meditations on the preceptive part of the Word of God

And this is his commandment, That we should
believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and
love one another, as he gave us commandment.

1 John 3:23

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Preface

As is well-known, Joseph Charles Philpot was joint-editor with John M'Kenzie of the Gospel Standard magazine from 1840 to 1849 and sole editor from 1849 until his death in 1869 at the age of 67. He had been pastor at Stamford and Oakham from 1838 but had to relinquish this work in 1864 through ill-health. He spent the remainder of his life at Croydon, where he sat under the ministry of Mr Francis Covell. He writes around this time: 'As the Lord has been pleased, for his own wise purposes, to lay us aside, for a time at least, from the active work of the ministry, we feel doubly bound to avail ourselves of the privilege still granted to us to communicate with his dear people by our pen, and thus be neither idle ourselves, nor wholly unprofitable to the church of God.'

In 1864 he commenced his series of monthly articles in the Gospel Standard magazine entitled *Meditations on Various Important Points of Our Most Holy Faith*. Through most of 1864 he addressed the 'important point' of *The Authority and Power of the Word of God upon the Heart*. His next 'important point of our most holy faith' was

The Preceptive Part of the Word of God. This subject was commenced in February 1865 and continued each month until the final instalment in October. It is this series which is presented in this book.

Not only had he been encouraged by the reception of his meditations on the word of God, but J C Philpot gives as one of his reasons for addressing the subject of the precepts his belief that it was a subject ‘into which of late years we seem to have been more particularly led.’ (p.13.) He says ‘Now we confess that for some years after we had received the love of truth we did not clearly or fully see the connection of the precept with the doctrines of grace and the experience of the saints.’ (p.16.) And again, ‘But for the last few years we have been called to walk in a somewhat different path. We have had much affliction of body, and with it much exercise of mind upon the things of God, with many searchings of heart . . . And yet we cannot but acknowledge that light upon the precept seems to have come gradually into our mind, and its place in the word of truth to have been more clearly opened to our understanding, and larger room made for it in our heart and conscience.’ (p.19.)

He then gives more detailed reason for his addressing the precepts: ‘We have never seen any work on the precept which has given us full satisfaction; and for this simple reason. No man of truth, that we are aware of, has treated the subject fully and systematically. Owen, Bunyan, and most of the old Puritan writers have entered largely and fully into the preceptive part of the word of truth; but as they held the law for the believer’s rule of life, their views were necessarily from that circumstance legal, confused, and imperfect. Mr. Huntington and Mr. Gadsby have both of them most clearly and beautifully unfolded the spiritual character of the precept, and shown its full and thorough harmony with the grace of the gospel; and from

the “Posthumous Letters,” and other works of the former, whole pages might be selected in which the immortal Coalheaver has, in his most masterly manner, described the fruits and effects of the gospel in heart, lip, and life; in other words, has drawn out the precept in all its living features as a rule of Christian obedience. But neither of these great men has handled the subject in a full and systematic manner, so as to enter into it in its length and breadth, and thus present it as a full, compact, and consistent whole to the consideration of the church of God. It was not, indeed, necessary for them to do this, as their object was rather to overthrow the current doctrine that the law was the believer’s rule of life, and to establish the gospel, the perfect law of liberty, as the rule, than devote their attention to a minute consideration of the precept, which was but a part of their subject. It seemed, therefore, laid upon our mind to take up the subject as we had seen it revealed in the word of truth and in the experience of the saints, and handle it in a more full, clear, and systematic form than we believe has been yet attempted by any man of truth.’ (p.85.)

The systematic form in which he wished to address this subject had to be tailored to its presentation as monthly instalments in the Gospel Standard. With each instalment he required opening and closing statements to give coherence to the whole. Sections of his sub-division of the subject overlapped months, that is, were split up by the monthly divisions. Our aim has been to convert all this into systematic presentation in a single book. This should be a better vehicle for communicating truth in the orderly way he wished than monthly instalments. We have, therefore, omitted or amended some of the month-beginning and month-ending elements. We have also subdivided the work according to the subject matter and in line with his various heads rather than reflect the original monthly format.

The original punctuation and capitalisations have been retained. Apart from the connecting sections already mentioned there has been no editing of the text. To try to make for easier reading, headings and sub-headings— in bold type or italic to distinguish them from the original work—have been introduced to give logical articulation to this edition. Following his introduction, J C Philpot divides the subject into four main sections, the second of which, on *The nature of the precept*, is far longer and more complex than the others. Sections one, three and four are each presented in their own chapters. To simplify the formatting, section two has been split into two chapters which reflect his handling of *The nature of the precept* under two heads—the *Letter* and the *Spirit*.

In some things the work is a product of its times. England was a great world power; Turner's paintings were a cultural phenonemon; stereoscopes were remarkable inventions to that generation; readers were addressed who had domestic servants; there is the consciousness of difference between the educated scholar with the 'trained mind' and the humble reader; the Romanisation of the Church of England had begun in earnest with the corrupting influence of Newman and his colleagues. Victorian England is no more, but the gospel here proclaimed by J C Philpot continues to the end of time.

Timothy Abbott
Committee member
Gospel Standard Trust

Introduction

Encouraged by the kind way in which our “Meditations on Various Important Points of our Most Holy Faith” have been thus far received by many of our gracious readers, we feel a willing mind to continue following onward in the same track; and as hitherto we have found, we hope, seasonable help from the only Source of all light and life, so would we now at the opening of another year, and the commencement of a fresh subject, lift up our soul in unison, we trust, with theirs, that “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, would give unto us the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him, the eyes of our understanding being enlightened,” that as the Lord the Spirit may be pleased to bring before our mind and lay upon our heart any portion of his precious word which may seem to us to be of vital importance, or of an edifying nature, we may unfold it with that “demonstration of the spirit and of power” which shall, as “seasoned with salt,” not only minister grace unto our readers, (Col. 4:6; Eph. 4:29,) but shall, “by

manifestation of the truth, commend itself to every man's conscience in the sight of God." (Eph. 1:17–18; 1 Cor. 2:4; 2 Cor. 4:2.)

It is indeed a high privilege conferred upon us, a favour from on high for which we cannot feel sufficiently thankful, that the Lord should condescend to make any use of so weak and worthless an instrument to communicate any measure of instruction, comfort, or encouragement to any of those whom he has eternally loved, and whom he is leading through many a painful path of trial and affliction to a knowledge of his love here, that they may enjoy it in its full fruition hereafter. And as the Lord has been pleased, for his own wise purposes, to lay us aside, for a time at least, from the active work of the ministry, we feel doubly bound to avail ourselves of the privilege still granted to us to communicate with his dear people by our pen, and thus be neither idle ourselves, nor wholly unprofitable to the church of God.

We purpose, therefore, with God's help and blessing, to bring before our readers in this and several following Numbers some thoughts upon the preceptive part of the word of truth, and especially as contained in and enforced by the Scriptures of the New Testament.

Why this subject of the precept?

Several reasons have concurred to direct our mind to this particular point of heavenly truth:

1. First, it is a branch of divine revelation which, without wishing to speak harshly or censoriously, has in our judgment been sadly perverted by many on the one hand, and we must say almost as sadly neglected, if not altogether ignored and passed by, by many on the other. The probable causes of this neglect, or, to speak more decidedly, of this serious omission, we shall presently consider.

2. But a second reason for our taking up this subject is, if we may speak with all humility of ourselves, that it is one into which of late years we seem to have been more particularly led.

3. And thirdly, the consideration of the preceptive part of the word will, we think, form a not inappropriate sequel to our late papers on its power and authority on the heart.

Definition of the precept

But let us now, by way of introduction to our subject, for the sake of clearness, first define and explain what we understand by “the precept,” or, according to our title, “the Preceptive Part of the Word of God.” Great clearness and precision are needed on this point, that we may so run not as uncertainly, so fight not as one that beateth the air, but, as a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, may rightly divide the word of truth. (1 Cor. 9:26; 2 Tim. 2:15.) To make, then, our meaning as clear and as distinct as we can, we will view the point from two sides—its negative and its positive aspect.

The precept is not the Mosaic covenant

1. First, then, *negatively*. By the precept we do not mean any part of the old “Do and live” covenant, but we carefully and rigidly exclude every point, fact, or consideration which springs out of, is connected with, or bears upon the law of works, either as a covenant or as a rule, either as justifying or as sanctifying, either as binding upon the conscience or as influencing the heart and life. Here we wish to stand particularly clear and decided, and to give place, no, not for an hour, to any men or measures, doctrine or experience, principle or practice, letter or spirit, word or work, which would bring us into bondage, or put a legal yoke on the neck of Christ’s true disciples.

No; let us be clear here; let us stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and not, in our zeal for the precept, put ourselves under the curse of the law, or mingle the smoke and flame of Mount Sinai with the bright and glorious light of Mount Zion.

Let us keep a clear distinction between “Do and live” and “Live and do;” between the spirit of bondage and the spirit of adoption; between the forced task of a convict in chains and the willing obedience of a loving son; between the thief skulking in the pantry and the child sitting at the table; between the grudging eye-service of a slave under the fear of the lash and the affectionate offices of a wife whose best reward is a smile and a kiss. If we cannot keep these things distinct, we had better put our fingers into the fire than handle with them the precepts of the New Testament.

O, in considering this weighty subject, for some small measure of the grace and wisdom which so shine forth in the epistles of blessed Paul, in keeping distinct the law and the gospel, in separating between the ministration of condemnation, bondage, and death, and the ministration of righteousness, liberty, and life. Who so fervid as he against binding the legal yoke upon the neck of those whom the truth has made free, and confounding the children of promise with the children of the bond-woman? Hear his thunders, which, as armed with all the authority and power of an apostle of God, he launches against the Galatian teachers who, by their legal doctrines, would trouble the believing disciples of Jesus, and pervert the gospel of Christ. (Gal. 1:7–9.) And yet mark how the same man of God could, with the grace of the gospel in his heart and the precepts of the gospel in his hand, be as gentle as a nurse and as loving as a father: “But we were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherisheth her children;” “As ye know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged

every one of you, as a father doth his children, that ye would walk worthy of God, who hath called you unto his kingdom and glory.” (1 Thess. 2:7, 11–12.)

The precept is found in the new covenant

2. But, having denied what we do *not* mean by the precept, in other words, having viewed it negatively, let us now define what we *do* mean by it, in other words, let us view it *positively*. We mean, then, by “the precept,” or the “preceptive part of the word of God,” those exhortations, injunctions, commands, entreaties, admonitions, call them by what name you will, so long as you attach to the word which you use a definite meaning, which the Holy Ghost has revealed in the new covenant as claiming our attention and our obedience, and as thus addressed to our heart, and intended to be influential upon our life. The precept is not doctrine, though founded upon it, nor experience, though connected with it, but stands apart from each, as possessing a peculiar, distinctive character of its own. All the three are equally a part of the same gospel, have the same Author, the same sanction, the same authority; and therefore are all three to be received by the same faith, with the same reverence, and in the same love. He that rejects or despises the one rejects or despises the other; and he who by divine power and influence truly believes the doctrine, will spiritually feel the experience, and graciously perform the precept.

Why has the precept been neglected?

Why, then, has the precept been so neglected among the churches of truth? Friends and brethren, is it so, or is it not so? Guilty or not guilty, servants of the living God, members of churches founded

upon the love of truth in its purity and power? We are not speaking here, mind you, of a man tying at the end of a sermon the precepts together into a bundle of rods and flogging with them Christ's sheep and lambs. That is legality. That is not preaching the precept as Paul preached it, and as the Holy Ghost has revealed it. To handle the precept properly, is to handle it spiritually, in the love and spirit of the gospel, with a broken heart and a melted soul broken by a sense of sin, and melted by a sense of mercy. This, not to anticipate future explanation, this is what we mean by preaching the precept. But are there no reasons for this omission? Surely there are, or it would not be so general. Have we not ourselves been guilty here? We freely confess our fault this day, and perhaps we have but to look into our own breast to find why others have been faulty too.

Now we confess that for some years after we had received the love of truth we did not clearly or fully see the connection of the precept with the doctrines of grace and the experience of the saints. We saw, what was obvious enough, that the precept occupied a large and prominent place in the New Testament, and as such we received it. But two difficulties seemed to stand in the way of its cordial and hearty reception, and a right view of its beauty and blessedness as a part of divine revelation. These were, 1, the sinfulness; 2, the inability of the creature, and of ourselves in particular. The consciousness of utter inability to perform the precept made it as if too inaccessible to the hand to reach it; the holiness of the precept made it as if too pure for the hand to touch it. Thus, if passed by, it was not from contempt, but reverence; if not handled, it was not from wilful neglect, but from not properly seeing its place in the gospel of the grace of God.

Allow us a few words on this point. All truth, especially revealed

truth, must be consistent with itself harmonious in every part. But to see this consistency and harmony, not only must the eye be duly instructed, but must look at it from the right point of view. Will our readers permit us to use a figure or two to illustrate our meaning? In some gallery of art* take your stand before a beautiful picture, say one of Turner's grand sea-views. Look at it near at hand; what is it? A mass of blotches and smears, with dabs of white paint here and there. Go back a few steps, and view it from the right point. What a change! What beauty, what harmony, what colouring! The blotches and smears resolve themselves into a sea heaving with life and motion, and the dabs of paint are waves, curling with foam as if they would dash at your very feet.

Take a more familiar figure. Look through a stereoscope at a photograph. What do you see? Something like a building, but all confusion. Wait a moment. Now you have got the focus. What do you see now? The front of a palace or a cathedral, with every architectural detail so clear and distinct that you might fancy yourself looking upon the very building itself. So in divine truth. Let the eye be spiritually opened, let the right point of view be gained, and then every part falls into its right place, full of beauty and harmony.

Whilst then we view the precept from a legal standing, we must see it distorted and out of place. It is what we may call out of perspective; we do not see it from the same point of view as the Holy Ghost has drawn it in the word, and as he intended it to be looked at with a believing eye. But when we see, as represented in the gospel, doctrine and experience, promise and precept, love and obedience,

* It will be observed that this is merely an illustration, and does not imply that we sanction Christians visiting the exhibition or public picture-galleries.

motive and action, receiving Christ and walking in him, the grace which saves and the grace which sanctifies, the blood that cleanses and the water that washes, Christ as Priest to atone, Christ as Prophet to teach, Christ as King to rule, all forming one harmonious whole, all combining in one glorious plan for the glory of God and the present and future blessedness of his people, then we view “the truth as it is in Jesus” almost as Moses gazed on the land of promise from Pisgah’s height, or as John “saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” (Rev. 21:2.)

But there was another reason, perhaps, why we did not see the beauty and harmony of the precept. Having had our fleshly holiness and creature piety knocked to pieces, having passed for several years through much inward exercise and temptation, and having learnt in that school the thorough helplessness of the creature; then being delivered from the galling yoke of legality and self-righteousness, and having tasted the sweetness and the freeness of gospel grace, our mind revolted from everything which seemed legal, Pharisaical, or self-righteous. Thus there was a going to the opposite extreme; and, to avoid one evil, there was not a falling into, but too near an approach to the other. Repelled and almost disgusted by the way in which Arminians, moderate Calvinists, and the whole race of man-made preachers handled the invitations and precepts of the gospel, holding them out to dead men to act upon and perform, there was a shrinking from any confederacy with such doings and dealings, such teachings and preachings, such a turning of things upside down, such a fouling of the waters, such a treading down of the pastures of the flock of slaughter. Besides which we saw in even some good men (men of whom we had hoped better things) a legal

bias, which led them to use the precept more as a rod for others than as a rule for themselves, and rather to feed a spirit of bitterness in their own minds and of those whom they influenced than as the pure milk of the word that they might grow thereby, the result being rather spiritual pride and self-exaltation among many of the real people of God than humility, brokenness, brotherly kindness, and love. Hence separation between ministers of truth and divisions in churches, being just the contrary effect to the real spirit and intention of the precept.

These things all combined to produce an injurious effect; and thus the precept, being thrust out of its place, lost a good measure of its comeliness, and seemed rather beside the building than a glorious part of it. "As in water face answereth to face, so the heart of man to man." Thus it may be that some of our experience on this point may have been the experience of others; and if so, it may explain why the precept has been too much neglected by them as well as by us.

*The relation to growth in grace
and the need for the Spirit's teaching*

But for the last few years we have been called to walk in a somewhat different path. We have had much affliction of body, and with it much exercise of mind upon the things of God, with many searchings of heart. We wish to speak upon this point very cautiously, knowing the hypocrisy and deceitfulness of our wretched nature; but we trust that through these afflictions and accompanying exercises there has been wrought in our heart a greater, as well as a more earnest and abiding desire to walk more closely with the Lord, to live more in his fear, and to know more of his Person and work, mind and will in the revelations of himself through the word of his

grace. Not that we are one whit better; not that we find our nature less corrupt, or our heart less deceitful above all things, or less desperately wicked. Not that we can move forward a single step with any more life or power; not that our barren seasons are not many and long, and our fruitful seasons few and short. Nay, all this we may but more increasingly feel, and yet not be wholly given up to carelessness and carnality, but only all the more bend our back to the word which smites it, or our neck to the word which yokes it. And yet we cannot but acknowledge that light upon the precept seems to have come gradually into our mind, and its place in the word of truth to have been more clearly opened to our understanding, and larger room made for it in our heart and conscience. How far this light is from above let our gracious readers judge, when we shall have accomplished our task, from the truth and savour of our communication, and the weight and power with which it may be commended to their conscience as harmonizing with the word of God and their personal experience.

But as we have confessed our fault in not at one time clearly seeing the place of the precept in the gospel of the grace of God, so we have thought it best to state as simply as we could the way in which we have been led to our present views and feelings on this important part of divine truth. In thus speaking, we have not, through rich mercy, any past error to acknowledge, any wrong or perverted view, any wilful or unseemly neglect, any delusive experience as a Christian man, any false teaching as a Christian minister to confess, but we have rather thankfully to record a greater enlargement of desire at least after, if not of fuller attainment unto, “the knowledge of God’s will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding.” (Col. 1:9.) And as we are bidden to “grow in grace and in the knowledge of our

Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ,” we should certainly desire and aim both for ourselves and others not to be ever fixed as a post at one and the same spot, or lie like a dead man at the same point of knowledge and experience, as if we already knew all that was to be known, and having reached the goal, were only waiting for the conqueror’s crown, but rather with blessed Paul, forgetting the things which are behind, should reach forth unto those things which are before, and thus press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

As we advance onward in the divine life, we usually see and feel more and more of the thick darkness and gross ignorance which brood by nature over our mind, and we become more fully convinced of our utter inability to understand or realise the certainty and power of spiritual things, except by a gracious revelation of them to our soul. “The things of the Spirit of God” we feel can only be, as the apostle says, “spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14;) for being high, heavenly, and holy, they are, from their very nature, far beyond the sight, far out of the reach of our natural understanding, strain itself as much as it may, let it be cultivated to the utmost of its powers. As it is only in God’s light that we see light, (Ps. 36:9,) and as whatsoever doth make manifest is light, (Eph. 5:13,) the very sight and sense that we have of our darkness springs from the light of life in our soul. As, then, we grow in light and life, for there is or should be a growth in grace, (2 Pet. 3:18,) there is a growing discovery and a deeper feeling of the darkness of carnal mind in the things of God.

But all is not darkness with those who have been “delivered from the power of darkness”—for darkness is one thing and the power of darkness another—and been “translated into the kingdom of God’s dear Son.” (Col. 1:13.) Every now and then there are favoured moments

when glimpses and glances of heavenly realities, in their brightness and glory, break in upon their soul; and then, perhaps, they are as suddenly withdrawn, much almost, if we may use such comparisons, as the sheet which Peter saw in vision was received up again into heaven, or as the cloud received the ascending Lord out of the sight of his gazing disciples. (Acts 1:9; 10:16.) But from these breakings in of divine light we obtain those spiritual views of heavenly realities which not only reveal their nature to the enlightened understanding, and seal their blessedness on the heart, but deeply convince us also what a veil there is over our mind when it is not thus graciously lifted up.

Will our readers permit us to use a figure* to illustrate this? On a misty day, when thick fog hides from view the surrounding landscape, the sun will sometimes suddenly burst forth; in a moment the veil is lifted up, and the whole prospect shines out bright and clear. The lofty mountain chain, or the smiling valley, or the long, winding sea coast, with all its rocky headlands, which had been shrouded in mist, stands out at once to view like a sudden apparition of beauty, and

* We crave this indulgence, because some, whose judgment in divine things we much respect, object to the use of figures for the purpose of illustrating scriptural truth, on the ground that spiritual things cannot be explained by natural comparisons. Admitting to some degree the force of this objection, we still find, as a matter of continual experience, that an appropriate figure, cautiously and temperately used, and not pressed beyond its legitimate bearing, will often convey an explanation of a truth where reasoning seems to fail; for many can understand a comparison who cannot comprehend an argument. Argument is much more forcible and much less fallacious than figure, but demands a more trained mind. We, therefore, to meet different readers, seek to blend both; and whilst we base our views and our explanation of them upon scriptural argument, we intersperse, as occasion serves, illustrations and comparisons, not only to enliven, but to throw light upon our subject.

the whole landscape presents itself fully and clearly to the eye as a lovely, harmonious whole. But the mist returns almost as suddenly as it was drawn up; one object after another becomes wrapped up in cloud, until the whole view is again buried out of sight. And yet all is not gone. We can remember what we have seen. An impression has been made on the mind, which remains fixed as a durable recollection, though the vivid clearness is vanished and gone, and what we see now is but mist and fog.

May we not apply this illustration to our views of spiritual things, both as regards light and darkness? For the most part we groan and sigh under a sense of the thick darkness of our mind, for though the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun, yet the days of darkness are many. (Eccles. 11:7–8.) This is the dense mist and fog. But there are times and seasons when the Sun of righteousness suddenly arises upon the soul, with healing in his wings. (Mal. 4:2.) Then the mist and fog are immediately dispersed. Light beams into the heart; and at once the whole plan and scheme of salvation from grace to glory, from before the foundation of the world to the ages to come, from the original purposes of God to their full and final accomplishment in a blissful eternity, shines forth. This is produced sometimes by reading the word, sometimes by the power of a passage of Scripture applied to the heart, sometimes in secret meditation, sometimes when on one's knees before the Lord seeking his gracious face. At these favoured moments there is an entrance of divine light into the soul, for "the entrance of thy words giveth light;" (Ps. 119:130;) and this light spreads itself, as it were, over the word of truth, lighting up every part on which it shines with an indescribable beauty and glory.

Let us read, for instance, under such a divine power and influence,

Ephesians 1, or Romans 8, or the discourses of our blessed Lord with his disciples before his sufferings and death, or that wondrous prayer, (John 17,) in which he interceded for them, and for us too who believe in his name, (ver. 20,) as the great High Priest over the house of God. As we read these heavenly truths, and faith is drawn out upon and mixed with what we read, what beauty and blessedness shine through every sentence; and how the glorious gospel of the grace of God beams forth, as with light from heaven, to connect every part into one grand harmonious whole. As the soul becomes softened and melted under the power and influence of the word thus made to it spirit and life, all seeming difficulties vanish; and not a jarring note interrupts the harmony of the heavenly choir of gospel truths, making sweet melody in the heart.

At such moments and in such a frame what we cannot fully understand we are content to leave; cavilling and contention with either God or man, with both ourselves and others, die away, for they cannot live in this heavenly atmosphere; and the majesty and power of the word of the living God both awe the mind with reverence, and draw forth the affections into love. All doctrine, all experience, all precept are then seen to centre, as one grand harmonious whole, in the glorious Person of the Son of God. From him they all come; to him they all flow. Severed from him, doctrine is seen to be but a withered branch, experience but a delusive dream, precept but a legal service. But his light enlightening, his life quickening, his power attending the word of his grace, doctrine is seen to be no longer doctrine dry and dead, but glorious truth; experience to be not a mere matter of fluctuating feeling, but a blessed reality, as the very kingdom of God set up with a divine power in the heart; and obedience not a legal duty, but a high, holy, and acceptable service.

But we must not anticipate our subject, for it will be found that in the channel thus briefly sketched our views and thoughts will chiefly run. And yet we have ventured to give this preliminary sketch, as feeling desirous, on the one hand, to disarm at the very outset all suspicions which might arise in the mind of friend or foe, that by taking up the precept we were swerving from the truth into legality, and, on the other, to prepare the way for a fuller consideration of the point which we have undertaken to elucidate.

Without further preface, then, we purpose, in handling the subject before us, to consider the precept mainly under these four heads:

1. Its *importance*.
2. Its *nature*.
3. Its place in *the word*.
4. Its place in *the heart and life*.

1

Importance of the precept

1. Precept importance indicated by its *bulk* in the Epistles

One very simple proof of the importance of the precept is what we may call its *bulk*. Let us examine this point by looking at several of the Epistles of the New Testament. We particularly mention these, because as being addressed to Christian churches, the precept occupies in the epistles its distinctive and peculiar place as a harmonious part of the revelation of grace and truth in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Take, then, as our first instance, the Epistle to the Ephesians, the fullest and richest, and what we may perhaps call the highest in doctrine, of all that Paul, under divine inspiration, wrote to the churches. Out of six chapters in this epistle three are preceptive, mingled indeed with and based upon doctrinal and experimental truth, for in this channel the precept always runs; but assuming the form of

clear, positive exhortation, admonition, warning, and direction.

Consider this point, ye ministers, who Lord's day after Lord's day preach nothing but doctrine, doctrine, doctrine; and ask yourselves whether the same Holy Ghost who revealed the first three chapters of the Epistle to the Ephesians did not also reveal the last three? Is not the whole Epistle equally inspired, a blessed part of that scripture of which we read: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works?" (2 Tim. 3:16–17.) How, then, can you be "a man of God perfect," (that is, complete as a minister,) and "thoroughly furnished unto all good works," if you wilfully neglect any part of that Scripture which God has given to be profitable to you, and to others by you?

But let us examine this point a little more closely. "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (Eph. 4:1–3.) In the preceding chapters the apostle had set before the believing Ephesians their eternal election in Christ, their predestination unto the adoption of children, their redemption through the blood of Jesus, even the forgiveness of their sins, their sealing by the Holy Spirit of promise as an earnest of their inheritance, their being built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, and that for a habitation of God through the Spirit. What a cluster of heavenly blessings, and all theirs as saints and believers in Christ Jesus!

What then? "I *therefore*." What a "therefore!" How it throws us back upon those spiritual blessings wherewith God has blessed us

in heavenly places in Christ Jesus, (Eph. 1:3,) and brings them all to bear upon our walk and conduct! “I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called,” etc.

But not content with this general exhortation, the apostle follows up the precept for three successive chapters, pressing upon their heart and conscience every godly fruit, such as lowliness, meekness, longsuffering, forbearance, love and union, mutual forgiveness; and mingles his exhortations with solemn warnings against every sin, such as uncleanness, lying, anger, theft, bitterness, wrath, evil speaking, etc. Observe, too, how special and practical he is, taking up not only our individual walk and conduct, but enters also into all our family relationships, urging on husbands, wives, children, servants, masters, every relative duty, and the whole grounded on the highest motives, and based on heavenly and spiritual principles.

Thus, in this epistle we have the highest doctrine and the highest practice, the most exalted views of the sovereign, eternal grace of God the Father, (1:3–12, 19–23,) of the unspeakable love of God the Son, (3:17–19,) and of the quickening, sealing, strengthening work of God the Holy Ghost, (1:13, 17; 2:1, 18, 22; 3:16;) and following up this full and glorious exposition of the deepest doctrinal truth we find the closest precept, bringing before our eyes, as the fruit of all this sovereign grace, the most active obedience of heart, lip, and life, with every inward grace and every outward fruit.

Look at this point, dear readers. Examine it for yourselves. You have your Bibles before you. You want no learning, no great education to understand this. You only want two eyes—the natural eye, the eye of the body, to read the letter, and the spiritual eye, the eye of the soul, to read the spirit of your Bible. When, then, you are a little

favoured in your soul; when you feel your heart softened and melted by a sense of God's goodness and mercy, get alone for a little while, enter your closet and shut your door, the outward and the inward door, (Matt. 6:6,) and prayerfully read the Epistle to the Ephesians; and as your faith embraces, with a holy joy and heavenly sweetness, the glorious truths of the first three chapters, read on, and by the same faith embrace the wise and holy precepts in the last three, which flowed from the same Holy Spirit who inspired and indited the first.

As there is but "one Spirit" and "one faith," (Eph. 4:4–5,) depend upon it, if the blessed Spirit enlighten the eyes of your understanding to see the doctrine, and anoint your heart to feel the power of sovereign grace, the same blessed Spirit will anoint your eyes and heart to see and feel the power of effectual grace; and will shine upon the inspired precept as well as upon the inspired promise. Nor will your faith which embraces salvation be less willing to embrace the things which accompany salvation. (Heb. 6:9.) We know, indeed, that to do this requires a spiritual mind; but we write for spiritual readers—for those who know something of the power of the word upon the heart, as well as the meaning of the letter of the word in their understanding.

Take next the Epistle to the Colossians, which we may call a sister Epistle of that to the Ephesians, as written about the same time, (A.D. 61, when Paul was a prisoner at Rome,) and dwelling chiefly on the same glorious truths. This epistle contains four chapters. Of these, two are preceptive, that is, half of the epistle. Is not this a significant fact? And can it be safe or consistent with becoming reverence to the word of God's grace tacitly to set aside half an epistle as of little or no moment?

Next look at 1 Thessalonians. This contains five chapters, of which the last two are wholly preceptive; and if, instead of reckoning by the chapters, we count the verses, we shall find that somewhat more than half (40 to 43) are devoted to the subject of practice and the claims of Christian obedience.

But an objection may be here stated, that we have *picked* the epistles, and have omitted two of the longest and most important, that, namely, to the Romans, and that to the Hebrews, to neither of which our test of bulk will apply. It is perfectly true that in neither of these epistles is the proportion of precept to doctrine, measured by bulk, so great as in those which we have examined. But there is a sound and valid reason for this apparent disproportion in both cases. In setting forth, for instance, the grand doctrine of justification by faith in the blood and righteousness of the Son of God, which forms the chief subject of the Epistle to the Romans, it was necessary to be full and ample, that so important a truth might be placed upon a broad and permanent basis. A short epistle, like that to the Philippians, could not have adequately set forth, in all its various bearings, that foundation doctrine which Luther calls “the article whereby the church stands or falls.”* A certain degree, therefore, of drawn out, argumentative proof (for the doctrinal part of the Epistle to the Romans is a most masterly and logical piece of sustained reasoning) was necessary to place upon an unshaken foundation the church’s grand bulwark against error for all time. Similarly the priesthood of the Lord Jesus, which forms the subject of the Epistle to the Hebrews, could not be treated in all its fulness and bearings

* “*Articulus stantis aut cadentis ecclesiæ*”; literally, “The article of a standing or a falling church.”

except at considerable length; for it was necessary to trace in it the fulfilment of the Levitical dispensation, with its types and sacrifices, in the Person and work of the God-man Mediator.

We see, therefore, at once, from these considerations, sufficient reasons why these two epistles form an apparent exception to our test of bulk. And yet in both of them the precept, if measured, not by actual bulk but by weight, by quality not by quantity, which surely is an admirable test, is not less strong and powerful.

Read, for instance, Romans 12, 13 and 14. What a weight of precept; how condensed, and yet how comprehensive. What firm and strong gospel principles are laid down. The mercies of God; (12:1;) the property which Christ has in us; (14:7–9;) our membership with him and with one another; (12:4–5;) the spiritual nature of the kingdom of God; (14:17–18;) the example of Christ; (15:3–6;) the claims of brotherly love; (13:8–10;) the near approach of full and final salvation; (13:11;) and our accountability to God; (14:12;) what a foundation is thus laid. And upon this broad basis of Christian privilege what a godly superstructure of Christian precept.

Read from Romans 12:1 to 15:7. What a weight of precept. How close and condensed, and yet how full is chapter 12; and with what a weighty, influential principle it begins: “I beseech you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God.” The body to be presented a living sacrifice unto God; non-conformity to the world; but a transformation of the renewed mind into the image of Christ, with a sensible experience and proof thereby of

the perfect will of God. What a foundation for all vital, practical godliness.

But we must not forestall our subject, as these things will have to be considered at length as we proceed. Let it suffice for the present to ask ourselves this simple question, “Can it be right, can it be safe, can it be scriptural, to treat all this fulness and weight of precept with no more attention than an obsolete Act of Parliament? or, to speak less harshly, to receive it as the word of God much as we might do the last chapters of Ezekiel, which we little read and less understand, though we have no doubt of its being a part of the inspired Scriptures?”

The same observations will apply to the Epistle to the Hebrews. Measured by bulk, the amount of the preceptive part of the epistle falls short of the doctrinal; but who that reads the two last chapters can deny the weight of exhortation, admonition, warning, and direction with which these are filled, but which our limits will not allow us to do more than point out?

But it will be observed that we have merely indicated *bulk* as one proof of the importance of the precept. If our readers feel disposed to follow up our argument, let them examine in this point of view the Epistle to the Galatians, of which two chapters out of six (5, 6.) are preceptive; the Epistle to the Philippians, in which precept is so prominent a feature, and so blended with doctrine, (1:6; 2:5–11; 3:20–21.) and with experience (1:21–23; 3:7–14,) that it may be called a model of preceptive writing; the Epistles to Timothy and Titus, which are nearly all precept; and the Epistles of Peter and James, which are filled with precept from first to last.

The amount of precept in the epistles, measured only by the simple test of *quantity*, would surprise a person whose attention had not

been directed to that point, if he would but carefully examine it. But it is sad to say how little the Scriptures are read amongst us with that intelligent attention, that careful and prayerful studiousness, that earnest desire to understand, believe, and experimentally realise their divine meaning, which they demand and deserve, and which the word of God compares to seeking as for silver, and searching as for hid treasure. (Prov. 2:4.)

2. Without the New Testament precepts there is no rule of life for us

But the importance of the precept will be evident from another consideration. Were there no precepts in the New Testament, we should be without *an inspired rule of life*, without an authoritative guide for our walk and conduct before the Church and the world. We rightly discard and reject the law as a rule of life to a believer. What, then, is our rule? Are we a set of lawless wretches who may live as we list, according to the libellous charge of the enemies of truth? God forbid. We have a divine, authoritative rule of life, a code of directions of the amplest, fullest, minutest character, intended and sufficient to regulate and control every thought, word, and action of our lives; and all flowing from the eternal wisdom and will of the Father, sealed and ratified by the blood of the Son, and inspired and revealed by the Holy Ghost.

When, then, it is thrown in our teeth that, by discarding the law as our rule of life, we prove ourselves licentious, lawless Antinomians, this is our answer, and let God and his word decide whether it be not a sufficient one. Not so. We have a rule of life as far exceeding the law as the new covenant of grace and truth in the glorious Person of the Son of God exceeds and outshines the old covenant of works;

and as much as the ministration of the Spirit, of life, and of righteousness excels in glory the ministration of the letter, of death, and of condemnation. (2 Cor. 3:6–11.) In a word, the precepts of the New Testament, in all their fulness, minuteness, and comprehensiveness, are our rule of life.

But mark what would be the consequence if the preceptive part of the New Testament were taken out of its pages as so much useless matter. It would be like going on board of a ship bound on a long and perilous voyage, and taking out of her just before she sailed, all her charts, her compass, her sextants, her sounding-line, her chronometer; in a word, all the instruments of navigation needful for her safely crossing the sea, or even leaving her port.

*Some say we do not need the precept,
because we have the Holy Spirit*

But you may say, “If there were no precept, the Church would still have the Holy Ghost to guide her safely over the sea of life to her heavenly haven.” It is true; and so the first Christians, as Stephen the martyr, who lived before the epistles were written, had the Holy Ghost to guide them, in the absence of the precept. But in those early days, first, the Holy Ghost was poured out in large measure, and, secondly, they had in their midst apostles and prophets, (1 Cor. 12:4–11; 14; Eph. 2:20; 4:11–12,) directly and immediately inspired to guide and direct them, which gifts have been withdrawn since the canon of Scripture was closed. Besides which, as the Holy Ghost, who then wrought immediately by the lips of inspired men, (1 Cor. 14:21,) now works mediately by the inspired page, the argument is neither sound nor safe that we could do very well without the letter of the precept as still having the Spirit. The question is not what God *might* do, but

what God *does*; not what *we* think, but what *God* says. If God has mercifully and graciously given us rules and directions whereby to walk, let us thankfully accept them, not question and cavil how far we could have done without them.

See, too, what a wide field would be laid open for wild enthusiasm to range in, were there no direct and positive lines laid down, as we now have them in the precept. How every deluded fanatic might come forward as inspired by the Holy Ghost to instruct us how to act, and what to do, and how to live, how many wives he might have, and how much money we must give to keep him and them in luxury and ease. What a mercy for us that we have God's precepts and not man's; God's holy, wise, and gracious directions how to glorify him in heart and life, how to walk in love and union with his dear people, how to keep ourselves unspotted from the world, how to know his will and do it, with his own blessed approbation in our conscience; and thus, by taking heed to our way according to God's word, (Ps. 119:9,) not become the prey of every vile Mormonite, every sleek impostor, every wily monk or crafty nun, every Papist, Puseyite, or sister of mercy who might seek to impose upon us with their pretended revelations, or bind us hard and fast with their stern, austere rules of fleshly holiness. What heavy burdens would they fasten on our shoulders, as we see in the case of the Pharisees of old, who made the word of God of none effect by their traditions, and in the self-imposed austerities of the Trappist and Carthusian orders among the Papists, and the Fathers and the Brothers Ignatius now amongst us, with their sandals and Benedictine dress, like "a rough garment to deceive."

Left to such blind or wilfully-deceiving guides, we should, but for the precept as the rule of our lives, as the inspired guide of our steps,

have no word of the Lord to set against their delusions or their hypocrisies, and should pass our lives in continual bondage and fear, awed by their pretended revelations, or bowed down by their austere regulations. We have enough, God knows, of these would-be teachers and directors of conscience; some coming with their crafty impostures to deceive, others with their forms and ceremonies, preparations for the sacrament, manuals of religious instruction, practices of piety, aids to devotion, all drawn out to rule and pattern, to teach us how to live and how to die; and all as full of error as a blind understanding can devise, and as full of legality and lip-service as a superstitious, self-righteous, Pharisaical heart can make them. What a torrent of Popery seems fast coming in under what is now called "ritualism;" that is, a setting up of rites and ceremonies, mediaeval observances, and traditional rules, instead of the doctrines of grace and the precepts of the gospel.

What a mercy, then, for the living church of God that we have not only the Holy Ghost as our inward Teacher, to show us by his divine light these errors and delusions, but that the same blessed Spirit has given us in the word of truth the sweetest, soundest, safest directions to lead us into, and keep us in the way of eternal life; and that he from time to time sheds upon them his own benign unction, grace, and savour to make them spirit and life to our soul, and thus become a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. What a holy, happy liberty; what a free service; what a tender, affectionate, filial obedience do the precepts of the gospel set before us, as far removed from legal exactions and Pharisaic righteousness as from Antinomian licentiousness and loose, careless ungodliness.

O you, who see and feel these things, and have tasted the blessedness of serving God in newness of spirit, and not in the

oldness of the letter, (Rom. 7:6,) lift up your heart and hands with the writer of these lines, and say with him, "Bless God for the precept." May grace be given us more clearly to understand it, more carefully to heed it, more closely to obey it.

A reiteration of the importance of the precept

We are well convinced that if we could but once establish the *importance* of the preceptive portion of the word of truth firmly in the readers' hearts, it would, with God's help and blessing, much prepare the way for a close and careful consideration of the whole subject, both on their part and our own. A moment's thought will make this sufficiently obvious. If any part of God's truth be viewed as of little importance by writer or reader, by minister or hearer, the almost necessary consequence is that it becomes either wholly neglected, or is loosely and carelessly slurred over by both. Why need we devote time or thought to a matter of little moment? Why carefully and prayerfully examine a subject which will scarcely repay us for the trouble of our attention? We might, from a reverence to the word of God, forbear such thoughts or such expressions, and yet the practical effect might be what we have pointed out. But, on the other hand, if, through the teaching and testimony of the blessed Spirit, any portion of the word of truth is opened with divine light to our understanding, or laid with peculiar weight and power upon our heart, its solemn importance is at once seen and felt; it engages the whole of our attention, and we wonder how we could have been so blind to what is now so clear, or treated with neglect what is now so weighty.

The danger of having a censorious spirit

But as snares await us on every hand, a temptation here presents

itself, from falling into which we much desire to be kept. As all true wisdom is from above, the free gift of God, who giveth to all who ask him liberally, and upbraideth not; (James 1:5; 3:17;) and as the very reason why the Lord grants to any “a knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding” is that they “might walk worthy of him unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God,” (Col. 1:10–11,) we must watch against being betrayed into a censorious spirit, lest, in our zeal for the precept, we ourselves be the very first to break it. Thus, whilst we may accept with thankfulness any communication of light, any opening of the word of truth for our comfort or edification, we must carefully guard against making a rod for others out of any grace to ourselves. That were not to use, but to abuse the goodness* of God, and to turn the grand precept of the gospel, the new commandment of the Lord, that we love one another as he has loved us, (John 15:12,) into a matter of strife and division. It is, in fact, the working of this censorious spirit in the minds of most who have attempted to handle the precept, which has made the whole subject distasteful to many of the real children of God, they not being able clearly to distinguish between the precept itself, and the carnal, legal way in which it has been thrust upon them. But if preserved from this snare, if in the spirit and love of the gospel we can point out to our believing brethren from the word of truth the importance of the preceptive part of the New Testament, and the Lord shall be pleased to commend it to their conscience, we shall hope thereby to approve ourselves to

* John Newton has a striking idea on this point. He asks -what we should think of blind Bartimeus, if, as soon as he had obtained sight, he should take his stick and beat the other blind men because they could not see.

them, as not seeking to have dominion over their faith, but as helpers of their joy. (2 Cor. 1:24.)

Thus far we pointed out two considerations, which seemed to us much to establish the importance of the precept. One of these was drawn from the large amount which it occupies in the Epistles of the New Testament, or, to use our own words, its *bulk and quantity*. The second consideration derived its weight from the fact that, in the absence of the precept, we should have *no authoritative rule of life*.

3. Without the precept, we could not live to God's glory

Closely connected with the last point is another consideration, to us of no less weight in establishing the importance of the precept, to which we shall now call the observation of our readers. It is this; that, as without a special revelation of the precept in the word of truth we should not know what was the will of God as regards all spiritual and practical obedience, so, without it as our guide and rule, we *should not be able to live to his glory*. As this consideration must be, to all who fear God, a matter of deep importance, we shall endeavour to unfold it somewhat fully, and especially to point out its connection with the preceptive part of the word of truth.

As the glory of God is the grand end and object of all the manifestations of himself in creation, in providence, and in grace, so should it be the end and object of all our knowledge of him, of all our faith in him, of all our obedience to him. Such was the end and aim of our blessed Lord, the object for which he came, for which he lived, for which he died, for which he rose again, and for which he now lives at the right hand of the Father. He therefore could say, in his

intercessory prayer before he offered himself up: “I have glorified thee on the earth; I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do.” (John 17:4.) And having thus glorified his heavenly Father on earth by doing his will, (Heb. 10:7,) not seeking his own glory, but the glory of him that sent him, (John 7:18; 8:50,) he is himself now glorified in heaven, for he is “entered into his glory,” (Luke 24:26,) being glorified with the glory which he had with the Father before the world was. If, then, he has left us an example that we should follow his steps; (1 Pet. 2:21;) if we are to glorify him here that we may be glorified with him hereafter, it must be by our faith and obedience. How plain is this from the word. But let us trace out its successive steps.

First, then, we “glorify God for his mercy;” (Rom. 15:9;) that is, when we receive salvation as flowing to our guilty souls from his pure mercy, we praise and bless his holy name, as sinners saved by grace. We therefore read: “Whoso offereth praise glorifieth me.” (Ps. 50:23.) This is the first step, as salvation by grace is the grand foundation of our living to his praise. But as this mercy and grace are only manifested in his dear Son, it may be said that the first step which we take in glorifying God is when we believe in Jesus. By raising him from the dead, and setting him at his own right hand, God has glorified him; (Acts 3:13;) for he has highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name. (Phil. 2:9–10; Eph. 1:20–21; 1 Peter 1:21.) When, then, we believe in Jesus by that faith which is of the operation of God, (Col. 2:12,) we glorify the Father. We read of Abraham: “He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strong in faith, giving glory to God.” (Rom. 4:20.) As, then, we walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham, (Rom. 4:12,) we in our measure glorify God as he did.

Inward and outward glorifying of God

But this work of faith is internal, seen of God, but not seen of men; and, therefore, though glorifying God, yet not giving him that glory outwardly before the world which he deserves and demands. Here, then, comes in the next step, which is Christian obedience, or that living to his honour and praise whereby God is glorified in the world. The world cannot see our faith, but it can see what that faith does. It cannot understand the union between Christ and his people, but it can understand good fruit when it grows on the vine. The Lord, therefore, said to his disciples, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." (Matt. 5:16.) And again more particularly, in his parting discourse: "Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples." (John 15:8.) Thus also speaks the apostle: "Being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God." (Phil. 1:11.)

But now comes the connection between the precept, and living to the praise and glory of God; and as this point is not often explained, or at least not often insisted upon, we shall endeavour to set it in its true and scriptural light. Be it, then, observed, and ever borne in mind that, as the glory of God is the end of all our obedience, it must be an obedience according to his own prescribed rule and pattern.

In this point lies all the distinction between the obedience of a Christian to the glory of God and the self-imposed obedience of a Pharisee to the glory of self. Take a survey of the wide field of what are called religious duties, religious observances, decided piety, active exertions, and the whole movements of the religious world. What are they as weighed in the balances of the sanctuary? What is there of God or of his word in them? When God gave directions to Moses

about the tabernacle and all its vessels, he said unto him: “And look that thou make them after their pattern, which was showed thee in the mount.” (Exod. 25:40.) According to this pattern were all the vessels made, and as such, and as such only, were they accepted and approved. “According to all that the Lord commanded Moses, so the children of Israel made all the work. And Moses did look upon all the work, and, behold, they had done it as the Lord had commanded, even so had they done it; and Moses blessed them.” (Exod. 39:42–43.) So in a spiritual sense it is now. The pattern for our guidance in doing the will of God and living to the glory of God is laid down for us, not only in the example of Christ, but in the *rule of the precepts*.

Thus we see that if there were no precept as our guiding rule, we could not live to the glory of God, or yield to him an acceptable obedience; and for this simple reason, that we should not know how to do so. We might wish to do so; we might attempt to do so; but we should and must fail, as Moses must have failed in building the tabernacle, for want of a guiding pattern. As, then, without a revelation of the doctrine of salvation we should not know how a sinner could be saved, and thus could not glorify God by our faith; so without a revelation of the precept we should not know how to serve God, and thus could not glorify him by our obedience.

Look at this point, believing child of God. You long to glorify God in your body and your spirit, which are his. (1 Cor. 6:20.) You desire, whether you eat or drink, or whatsoever you do, to do all to the glory of God. (1 Cor. 10:31.) There are times and seasons with you when you sigh and mourn over your barren, unprofitable heart and life, and earnestly long to think, and speak, and act to his honour and glory who has done so much for you in providence and grace. At

least, if you have no such desires you are no Christian, and are at the best but a poor, worldly, dead professor. When, then, and how far do you live to God's glory? Only then, and only so far as your life, and walk, and conduct harmonise with, and are guided by the precepts of the word. For see the connection. We can only glorify God outwardly by doing his will; we can only know that will, as regards our practical obedience to it, by the express revelation which he has given of it. Where is that revelation? In his word, and chiefly in the preceptive part of it. It is this which makes it "a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path." (Ps. 119:105.) David therefore cried: "Order my steps in thy word;" "Make me to go in the path of thy commandments;" "O that my ways were directed to keep thy statutes;" as feeling that it was only by walking *in* the word and *by* the word that he could please God and live to his praise.

We find thousands in this land who, as they think, are doing God service by plans and schemes of their own devising, priding themselves on their good works. But, we may say of all these their duties and doings what Augustine said of the ancient Roman virtues, that they are but "*splendida peccata*;" (splendid sins;) or, to use the language of the 23rd Article of the Church of England, entitled, "Works before Justification," "for that they are not done as God hath willed and commanded them to be done, we doubt not but they have the nature of sin."

4. The precept is the channel and test of fruit-bearing

We are unwilling to weary our readers by dwelling too long on one point, and yet we cannot forbear adding another reason to show the *importance* of the precept. On its fulfilment turns the main *test of*

distinction between the believer and the unbeliever; between the manifested vessel of mercy and the vessel of wrath fitted to destruction.

To show this point a little more clearly, let us examine the test which our Lord in various places has given us between those who are really and truly his by vital union and regenerating grace, and those who have a name to live and are dead. First look at the parable of the sower. Out of four kinds of hearers of the word, one only is saved and sanctified thereby. Now, what is the test given of this saved hearer? Is it not that he brings forth fruit? “But he that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it; which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.” (Matt. 13:23.) Can any one deny, in the face of these words, that the grand distinguishing test of the good-ground hearer is, that he bears fruit, and that none of the others bear it?

But now comes the question, What is fruit? Is it not inward and outward—the inward fruits of the Spirit in the heart, and the outward fruits of godliness in the life? But what rule guides and regulates these fruits, so as to distinguish them from the “splendid sins” of which we have been speaking? Evidently the precept, for by that, and in harmony with that, the Spirit works. Is there, then, heart fruit, such as “love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance?” (Gal. 5:22–23.) It is wrought by the blessed Spirit, according to the precepts: “Walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us;” (Eph. 5:2;) “Rejoice the Lord alway: and again I say, rejoice;” (Phil. 4:4;) “Live in peace;” (2 Cor. 13:11;) “Be at peace among yourselves;” (1 Thess. 5:13;) “With long-suffering, forbearing one another in love;” (Eph. 4:2,) &c. Is there not here a blessed

harmony between the inward work of the Spirit and the outward word of the precept? Again, is there outward fruit? It is needless to show that this too is in harmony with the precept; for all will acknowledge the practical character of the precepts of the New Testament.

But now take another test of a similar character from the Lord's own lips, as brought before us in the parable of the Vine and the branches. What distinguishes the branches in Christ by living union from the branches in him by nominal profession? Fruit. "I am the true Vine, and my Father is the Husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away; and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit." (John 15:1-2.) The sentence against "every branch that beareth not fruit" is that the Father "taketh it away" casts it forth as a barren branch. And how deals he with the branch that beareth fruit? "He purgeth," or cleanseth, "it." Why? "That it may bring forth more fruit." Who, with these words of the Lord before his eyes, can deny that fruit is the distinguishing test of life, of grace, of salvation? But this fruit must and will be in harmony with the precept; for in the bosom of that is lodged all inward and outward godliness, all spiritual and practical obedience.

Take one more test from the Lord's own lips. Read the solemn conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, that grand code of Christian precept: "Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock; and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not; for it was founded upon a rock. And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand; and the rain descended, and the

floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell; and great was the fall of it.” (Matt. 7:24-27.) What is the Lord’s own test of distinction between the wise man who builds on the rock, and the foolish man who builds on the sand?

The rock, of course, is Christ, as the sand is self. But the test, the mark, the evidence, the proof of the two builders and the two buildings is the hearing of Christ’s sayings and doing them, or the hearing of Christ’s sayings and doing them not. We may twist and wriggle under such a text, and try all manner of explanations to parry off its keen, cutting edge; we may fly to arguments and deductions drawn from the doctrines of grace to shelter ourselves from its heavy stroke, and seek to prove that the Lord was there preaching the law and not the gospel, and that as we are saved by Christ’s blood and righteousness, and not by our own obedience or our good works, either before or after calling, all such tests and all such texts are inapplicable to our state as believers. But after all our questionings and cavillings, our nice and subtle arguments to quiet conscience and patch up a false peace, there the words of the Lord stand, and, what is more, will stand for ever, backed as they are by that solemn declaration from the same lips of eternal truth: “Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them. Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.” (Matt. 7:19-21.)

Conclusion on the importance of the precept

To draw, then, our argument into a short compass; if gospel fruit be the test of gospel grace; if, as God’s workmanship, we are as much

“created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them,” as we are made new creatures in Christ by spiritual regeneration, and are foreordained unto eternal life; (Eph. 2:10;) if we are as much elected unto obedience as unto the blood of sprinkling; (1 Pet. 1:2;) and if these good works and this obedience are all in the closest harmony with, and regulated by the precept, nothing can be more obvious than its great importance. And if it be thus important, it certainly has the strongest claim upon our attention and obedience.

2(i)

The nature of the precept — the letter

We now pass on to consider, as we proposed, in the second place, the *nature* of the precept.

This is the most important part of our whole subject, and will therefore require the most careful handling on our side, and corresponding attention, and we may add, kind consideration, on the side of our spiritual readers. We would, therefore, say to them in all friendliness, Deal fairly by us; judge of our views as a whole. Do not cavil at little points, or quarrel with isolated expressions; but compare our views and statements with the Scripture and the experience of the saints, and receive or reject them as they are or are not in harmony with both these tests of truth. If they do not agree with them both, they cannot stand; nor would we wish them to stand, as our only object is truth, truth in its purity, truth in its power.

We lay this down, then, as a broad foundation principle, that the precept, being an integral part of the gospel, must thoroughly harmonise with it. If it clash, or rather, if our views of it clash with

salvation by grace, personal election and predestination unto eternal life, particular redemption by the blood and righteousness of the Son of God, and the final perseverance of the saints, there must be something wrong somewhere. Again, if the precept, or our views of the precept, clash with the work of grace on the heart, the teachings and witness of the Holy Ghost, and the inward kingdom of God, as set up by a divine power in the soul, there must be something wrong somewhere. We hope, indeed, clearly and fully to show that there is the sweetest harmony between the doctrines of the gospel, the experience of the gospel, and the precepts of the gospel; but for the present we wish to lay it down as a broad, fundamental principle that only those views of the precept can be right which make it thoroughly harmonise with the gospel of the grace of God in all its fulness, in all its freeness, in all whereby it brings glory to God, in all whereby it brings salvation to man.

In considering the *nature* of the precept, we shall examine,

First, the *letter* of the precept.

Secondly, the *spirit* of the precept.

Our readers will easily understand the distinction thus drawn between the *letter* and the *spirit*, if they will view the former as the *body* and the latter as the *soul* of the precept; for it is with the precept as with ourselves; the body cannot act without the soul, nor the soul usually without the body. Without the soul the body is dead. So the letter of the precept is dead without the spirit of the precept, and the spirit of the precept usually acts by the letter of the precept. We say “usually,” because there was the spirit of the precept acting, beautifully acting, as in the case of those who “were of one heart and one soul” (Acts 4:32) before any part of the New Testament was written, and, consequently, before the precept was given in its present

form; and even now the Holy Spirit may move unto love and good works, and often does so without any special use of the letter of the precept. But his movements will always be in harmony with the letter of the precept, even where he does not particularly employ it for that purpose.

We shall first, then, examine the *letter* of the precept, and in so doing shall consider it under five distinct heads:

1. The *persons* to whom the precept is addressed.
2. The *connection* of the precept with the *doctrines of the gospel*.
3. The *things* which the precept specially inculcates,
4. The *motives* by which the precept is enforced.
5. The *form* under which the precept is revealed.

The Lord the Spirit enable us rightly to divide the word of truth.

1. The persons to whom the precept is addressed — believers

The persons to whom the precept is addressed. These are believers, and believers only. The world has nothing to do with the precepts of the gospel. They are not addressed to it or meant for it. This will be evident from a moment's consideration. Where do we chiefly find the precepts of the New Testament? In the Epistles. What are the Epistles? Inspired letters written to Christian churches or Christian individuals. Take any of the Epistles, examine how they begin and to whom they are written. Is it not to, "the beloved of God, called to be saints?" (Rom. 1:7,) or "to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus?" (1 Cor. 1:2,) or "to the saints and to the faithful in Christ Jesus?" (Eph. 1:1,) &c. &c. It is not worth while to prove a point so plain, a point which any one can ascertain for himself by merely looking at the beginning of each Epistle.