

They Are Attended With a Christian Tenderness of Spirit.

by Jonathan Edwards

Gracious affections soften the heart and promote a holy love, hope, and fear, leading to a Christian tenderness of spirit.

Scripture: Exodus 34:8, Psalm 2:11, Psalm 33:18, Psalm 51:17, Psalm 147:11, Proverbs 28:14, Isaiah 66:2, Hosea 13:1, Romans 11:20, 1 Peter 3:15

Topics: "True Conversion", "Christian Sanctification"

Description

Jonathan Edwards preaches about the contrast between gracious affections that soften the heart and false affections that harden it. Gracious affections lead to a Christian tenderness of spirit, promoting a deep sense of sin, a dread of displeasing God, and a humble reverence in worship. True grace increases convictions of conscience, making the heart tender towards sin, while false conversions diminish conscientiousness. Gracious affections, including godly sorrow, joy, and hope, all contribute to this Christian tenderness of heart, fostering a balance of holy assurance and reverential fear.

Transcript

IX. Gracious affections soften the heart, and are attended and followed with a Christian tenderness of spirit. False affections, however persons may seem to be melted by them while they are new, yet have a tendency in the end to harden the heart. A disposition to some kind of passions may be established; such as imply self-seeking, self-exaltation, and opposition to others. But false affections, with the delusion that attends them, finally tend to stupify the mind, and shut it up against those affections wherein tenderness of heart consists: and the effect of them at last is, that persons in the settled frame of their minds, become less affected with their present and past sins, and less conscientious with respect to future sins, less moved with the warnings and cautions of God's word, or God's chastisements in his providence, more careless of the frame of their hearts, and the manner and tendency of their behavior, less quicksighted to discern what is sinful, less afraid of the appearance of evil, than they were while they were under legal awakenings and fears of hell.

Now they have been the subjects of such and such impressions and affections, and have a high opinion of themselves, and look on their state to be safe; they can be much more easy than before, in living in the neglect of duties that are troublesome and inconvenient; and are much more slow and partial in complying with difficult commands; are in no measure so alarmed at the appearance of their own defects and

transgressions; are emboldened to favor themselves more, with respect to the labor, and painful care and exactness in their walk, and more easily yield to temptations, and the solicitations of their lusts; and have far less care of their behavior, when they come into the holy presence of God, in the time of public or private worship.

Formerly it may be, under legal convictions, they took much pains in religion, and denied themselves in many things: but now they think themselves out of danger of hell, they very much put off the burden of the cross, and save themselves the trouble of difficult duties, and allow themselves more in the enjoyment of their ease and their lusts. Such persons as these, instead of embracing Christ as their Savior from sin, trust in him as the Savior of their sins; instead of flying to him as their refuge from their spiritual enemies they make use of him as the defense of their spiritual enemies, from God, and to strengthen them against him.

They make Christ the minister of sin, and great officer and vicegerent of the devil, to strengthen his interest, and make him above all things in the world strong against Jehovah; so that they may sin against him with good courage, and without any fear, being effectually secured from restraints, by his most solemn warnings and most awful threatenings. They trust in Christ to preserve to them the quiet enjoyment of their sins, and to be their shield to defend them from God's displeasure; while they come close to him, even to his bosom, the place of his children, to fight against him, with their mortal weapons, hid under their skirts.[67] However, some of these, at the same time, make a great profession of love to God, and assurance of his favor, and great joy in tasting the sweetness of his love.

After this manner they trusted in Christ, that the Apostle Jude speaks of, who crept in among the saints unknown; but were really ungodly men, turning the grace of God into lasciviousness, Jude 4. These are they that trust in their being righteous; and because God has promised that the righteous shall surely live, or certainly be saved, are therefore emboldened to commit iniquity, whom God threatens in Ezek. 33:13: "When I shall say to the righteous, that he shall surely live; if he trust to his own righteousness, and commit iniquity; all his righteousness shall not be remembered, but for his iniquity that he hath committed, he shall die for it."

Gracious affections are of a quite contrary tendency; they turn a heart of stone more and more into a heart of flesh. A holy love and hope are principles that are vastly more efficacious upon the heart, to make it tender, and to fill it with a dread of sin, or whatever might displease and offend God, and to engage it to watchfulness, and care, and strictness, than a slavish fear of hell. Gracious affections, as was observed before, flow out of a contrite heart, or (as the word signifies) a bruised heart, bruised and broken with godly sorrow; which makes the heart tender, as bruised flesh is tender, and easily hurt. Godly sorrow has much greater influence to make the heart tender, than mere legal sorrow from selfish principles.

The tenderness of the heart of a true Christian, is elegantly signified by our Savior, in his comparing such a one to a little child. The flesh of a little child is very tender; so is the heart of one that is new born. This is represented in what we are told of Naaman's cure of his leprosy, by his washing in Jordan; which was undoubtedly a type of the renewing of the soul, by washing in the laver of regeneration. We are told, 2 Kings 5:14, "That he went down, and dipped himself seven times in Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God; and his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child."

Not only is the flesh of a little child tender, but his mind is tender. A little child has his heart easily moved, wrought upon and bowed: so is a Christian in spiritual things. A little child is apt to be affected with

sympathy, to weep with them that weep, and cannot well bear to see others in distress: so it is with a Christian, John 11:25, Rom. 12:15, 1 Cor. 12:26. A little child is easily won by kindness: so is a Christian. A little child is easily affected with grief at temporal evils, and has his heart melted, and falls a weeping: thus tender is the heart of a Christian, with regard to the evil of sin.

A little child is easily affrighted at the appearance of outward evils, or anything that threatens its hurt: so is a Christian apt to be alarmed at the appearance of moral evil, and anything that threatens the hurt of the soul. A little child, when it meets enemies, or fierce beasts, is not apt to trust its own strength, but flies to its parents for refuge: so a saint is not self-confident in engaging spiritual enemies, but flies to Christ. A little child is apt to be suspicious of evil in places of danger, afraid in the dark, afraid when left alone, or far from home: so is a saint apt to be sensible of his spiritual dangers, jealous of himself, full of fear when he cannot see his way plain before him, afraid to be left alone, and to be at a distance from God: Prov. 28:14, "Happy is the man that feareth alway: but he that hardeneth his heart shall fall into mischief."

A little child is apt to be afraid of superiors, and to dread their anger, and tremble at their frowns and threatenings: so is a true saint with respect to God: Psal. 119:120, "My flesh trembleth for fear of thee, and I am afraid of thy judgments." Isa. 66:2, "To this man will I look, even to him that is poor, and trembleth at my word." ver. 5, "Hear ye the word of the Lord, ye that tremble at his word." Ezra. 9:4, "Then were assembled unto me everyone that trembled at the words of the God of Israel."

Chap. 10:3; "According to the counsel of my Lord, and of those that tremble at the commandment of our God." A little child approaches superiors with awe: so do the saints approach God with holy awe and reverence: Job 13:2, "Shall not his excellency make you afraid? And his dread fall upon you?" Holy fear is so much the nature of true godliness, that it is called in Scripture by no other name more frequently, than the fear of God.

Hence gracious affections do not tend to make men bold, forward, noisy, and boisterous; but rather to speak trembling: Hos. 13:1, "When Ephraim spake trembling, he exalted himself in Israel; but when he offended in Baal, he died;" and to clothe with a kind of holy fear in all their behavior towards God and man; agreeably to Psal. 2:11, 1 Pet. 3:15, 2 Cor. 7:15, Eph. 6:5, 1 Pet. 3:2, Rom. 11:20.

But here some may object and say, is there no such thing as a holy boldness in prayer, and the duties of divine worship? I answer, there is doubtless such a thing; and it is chiefly to be found in eminent saints, persons of great degrees of faith and love. But this holy boldness is not in the least opposite to reverence; though it be to disunion and servility. It abolishes or lessens that dispositions which arises from moral distance or alienation; and also distance of relation, as that of a slave; but not at all, that which becomes the natural distance, whereby we are infinitely inferior.

No boldness in poor sinful worms of the dust, that have a right sight of God and themselves, will prompt them to approach to God with less fear and reverence, than spotless and glorious angels in heaven, who cover their faces before his throne, Isa. 6, at the beginning. Rebecca (who in her marriage with Isaac, in almost all its circumstances, was manifestly a great type of the church, the spouse of Christ) when she meets Isaac, lights off from her camel, and takes a vail and covers herself; although she was brought to him as his bride, to be with him in the nearest relation, and most intimate union, that mankind are ever united one to another.[68] Elijah, that great prophet, who had so much holy familiarity with God, at a time of special nearness to God, even when he conversed with him in the mount, wrapped his face in his mantle.

Which was not because he was terrified with any servile fear, by the terrible wind, and earthquake, and fire; but after these were all over, and God spake to him as a friend, in a still small voice: 1 Kings 19:12, 13, "And after the fire, a still small voice; and it was so, when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle." And Moses, with whom God spake face to face, as a man speaks with his friend, and was distinguished from all the prophets, in the familiarity with God that he was admitted to; at a time when he was brought nearest of all, when God showed him his glory in that same mount where he afterwards spake to Elijah: "He made haste, and bowed his head towards the earth, and worshipped," Exod. 34:8.

There is in some persons a most unsuitable and unsufferable boldness, in their addresses to the great Jehovah, in an affectation of a holy boldness, and ostentation of eminent nearness and familiarity; the very thoughts of which would make them shrink into nothing, with horror and confusion, if they saw the distance that is between God and them. They are like the Pharisee, that boldly came up near, in a confidence of his own eminency in holiness. Whereas, if they saw their vileness, they would be more like the publican, that "stood afar off, and durst not so much as lift up his eyes to heaven; but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner."

It becomes such sinful creatures as we, to approach a holy God (although with faith, and without terror, yet) with contrition, and penitent shame and confusion of face. It is foretold that this should be the disposition of the church, in the time of her highest privileges on earth in her latter day of glory, when God should remarkably comfort her, by revealing his covenant mercy to her, Ezek. 16:60, to the end: "I will establish unto thee an everlasting covenant. Then thou shalt remember thy ways and be ashamed.--And I will establish my covenant with thee, and thou shalt know that I am the Lord; that thou mayest remember and be confounded and never open thy mouth any more because of thy shame, when I am pacified toward thee for all that thou hast done, saith the Lord God."

The woman that we read of in the 7th chapter of Luke, that was an eminent saint, and had much of that true love which casts out fear, by Christ's own testimony, ver. 47, she approached Christ in an amiable and acceptable manner, when she came with that humble modesty, reverence and shame, when she stood at his feet, weeping behind him, as not being fit to appear before his face, and washed his feet with her tears.

One reason why gracious affections are attended with this tenderness of spirit which has been spoken of, is, that true grace tends to promote convictions of conscience. Persons are wont to have convictions of conscience before they have any grace: and if afterwards they are truly converted, and have true repentance, and joy, and peace in believing; this has a tendency to put an end to errors, but has no tendency to put an end to convictions of sin, but to increase them. It does not stupify man's conscience; but makes it more sensible, more easily and thoroughly discerning the sinfulness of that which is sinful, and receiving a greater conviction of the heinous and dreadful nature of sin, susceptible of a quicker and deeper sense of it, and more convinced of his own sinfulness and wickedness of his heart; and consequently it has a tendency to make him more jealous of his heart. Grace tends to give the soul a further and better conviction of the same things concerning sin, that it was convinced of, under a legal work of the Spirit of God; viz., its great contrariety to the will, and law, and honor of God, the greatness of God's hatred of it, and displeasure against it, and the dreadful punishment it exposes to and deserves. And not only so, but it convinces the soul of something further concerning sin, that it saw nothing of, while only under legal convictions; and that is the infinitely hateful nature of sin, and its dreadfulness upon that account. And this makes the heart tender with respect to sin; like David's heart, that smote him when he had cut off Saul's skirt. The heart of a true penitent is like a burnt child that dreads the fire. Whereas, on

the contrary, he that has had a counterfeit repentance, and false comforts and joys, is like iron that has been suddenly heated and quenched; it becomes much harder than before. A false conversion puts an end to convictions of conscience; and so either takes away, or much diminishes that conscientiousness, which was manifested under a work of the law.

All gracious affections have a tendency to promote this Christian tenderness of heart, that has been spoken of; not only a godly sorrow, but also a gracious joy: Psal. 2:11, "Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling." As also a gracious hope: Psal. 33:18, "Behold the eye of the Lord is upon them that fear him; upon them that hope in his mercy." And Psal. 147:11, "The Lord taketh pleasure in them that fear him, in those that hope in his mercy." Yea, the most confident and assured hope, that is truly gracious, has this tendency. The higher a holy hope is raised, the more there is of this Christian tenderness. The banishing of a servile fear, by a holy assurance, is attended with a proportionable increase of a reverential fear. The diminishing of the fear of the fruits of God's displeasure in future punishment, is attended with a proportionable increase of fear of his displeasure itself; the diminishing of the fear of hell, with an increase of the fear of sin. The vanishing of jealousies of the person's state, is attended with a proportionable increase of jealousies of his heart, in a distrust of its strength, wisdom, stability, faithfulness, &c. The less apt he is to be afraid of natural evil, having his heart fixed, trusting in God, and so not afraid of evil tidings; the more apt he is to be alarmed, with the appearance of moral evil, or the evil of sin. As he has more holy boldness, so he has less of self-confidence, and a forward assuming boldness, and more modesty. As he is more sure than others of deliverance from hell, so he has more of a sense of the desert of it. He is less apt than others to be shaken in faith; but more apt than others to be moved with solemn warnings, and with God's frowns, and with the calamities of others. He has the firmest comfort, but the softest heart: richer than others, but the poorest of all in spirit: the tallest and strongest saint, but the least and tenderest child among them.

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