

An excerpt from a letter entitled,

Man in His Fallen Estate

by John Newton

We hear much in the present day of the dignity of human nature. And it is allowed that man was an excellent creature as he came out of the hands of God; but if we consider this question with a view to fallen man, as depraved by sin, how can we but join with the Psalmist in wonder that the great God should make any account of him?

Fallen as man is from his state of original happiness and holiness, his natural faculties and abilities afford sufficient evidence that the hand that made him is divine. He is capable of great things. His understanding, will, affections, imagination and memory are noble and amazing powers. But view him in a moral light, as an intelligent being, incessantly dependent upon God, accountable to Him, and appointed by Him to a state of existence in an unchangeable world; considered in this relation, man is a monster, a vile, base, stupid, obstinate, and mischievous creature; no words can fully describe him. Man, with all his boasted understanding and attainments, is a fool: so long as he is destitute of the saving grace of God, his conduct, as to his most important concerns, is more absurd and inconsistent than that of the meanest idiot; with respect to his affections and pursuits, he is degraded far below the beasts; and for malignity and wickedness of his will, can be compared to nothing so properly as the devil.

The question here is not concerning this or that man, a Nero or a Heriogabolus, but concerning human nature, the whole race of mankind, the few excepted who are born of God. There is indeed a difference among men, but it is owing to the restraints of Divine Providence, without which earth would be the very image of hell. A wolf or a lion, while chained, cannot do so much mischief as if they were loose, but the nature is the same in the whole species. Education and interest, fear and shame, human laws, and the secret power of God over the mind, combine to form many characters that are externally decent and respectable; and even the most abandoned are under a restraint which prevents them from manifesting a thousandth part of the wickedness which is in their hearts. But the heart itself is universally deceitful, and desperately wicked.

Man is a fool. He can indeed measure the earth and almost count the stars; he abounds in arts and inventions in science and policy; and shall he then be called a fool? The ancient heathens, the inhabitants of Egypt, Greece and Rome, were eminent for this kind of wisdom. They are to this day studied as models by those who aim to excel in history, poetry, painting, architecture, and other exertions of human genius, which are suited to polish the manners without improving the heart. But their most admired philosophers, legislators, logicians, orators, and artists, were as destitute as idiots or infants of that knowledge which alone deserves the name of true wisdom. Professing themselves to be wise they became fools. (Rom. 1:22) Ignorant and regardless of God, yet conscious of their own weakness, and of their dependence upon a power above their own, and stimulated by a principle of inward fear, of which they knew neither the origin nor right application, they worshiped the creature instead of the Creator, yea, placed their trust in stocks and stones, in the works of men's hands, in non-entities and chimeras. An acquaintance with their mythology, or religious fables passes with us, for a considerable branch of learning, because it is drawn from ancient books, written in languages not known to the vulgar; but in point of certainty of truth, we might receive as much satisfaction from a collection of

dreams, or from the ravings of lunatics. If, therefore, we admit these admired sages as a tolerable specimen of mankind, must we not confess that man, in his best estate, while uninstructed by the Spirit of God is a fool? But are we wiser than they? Not in the least, till the grace of God makes us so. Our superior advantages only show our folly in a more striking light. Why do we account any persons foolish? A fool has no sound judgment; he is governed wholly by appearances, and would prefer a fine coat to the writings of a large estate. He pays no regard to consequences. Fools have sometimes hurt or killed their best friends, and thought they did no harm. A fool cannot reason, therefore arguments are lost upon him. At one time, if tied with a straw, he dares not stir; at another time, perhaps, he can hardly be persuaded to move, though the house were on fire. Are these the characteristics of a fool? Then there is no fool like the sinner, who prefers the toys of earth to the happiness of heaven, who is held in bondage by the customs of the world, and is more afraid of the breath of man, than the wrath of God.

Again, Man in his natural state is a beast, yea below the beasts that perish. In two things he strongly resembles them; in looking no higher than to sensual gratifications, and in that selfishness of spirit which prompts him to propose himself and his own interest as his proper and highest end. But in many respects he sinks sadly beneath them. Unnatural lusts, and the want of natural affection toward their offspring, are abominations not to be found among the brute creation. What shall we say of mothers destroying their children with their own hands, or of the horrid act of self-murder! Men are worse than beasts likewise, in their obstinacy; they will not be warned. If a beast escapes from a trap he will be cautious how he goes near it again, and in vain is the net spread in the sight of any bird. But man, though he be often reprov'd, hardens his neck; he rushes upon his ruin with his eyes open, and can defy God to his face, and dare damnation.

Once more, let us observe how man resembles the devil. There are spiritual sins and these, in their height the scripture teaches us to judge of Satan's character. Every feature in this description is strong in man; so then what the Lord said to the Jews is of general application, "Ye are of your father, the devil, and the lusts of your father you will do." Man resembles Satan in pride; this stupid, weak creature values himself upon his wisdom, power, and virtue, and will talk of being saved by his good works; though if he can, Satan himself need not despair. He resembles him in malice. and this diabolical disposition often proceeds to murder., and would daily if the Lord did not restrain it. He derives from Satan the hateful spirit of envy. He is often tormented beyond expression, by beholding the prosperity of his neighbors; and proportionally pleased with their calamities, though he gains no other advantage from them than the gratification of this rancorous principle. He bares the image, likewise, of Satan in his cruelty. This evil is bound up, even in the heart of a child. A disposition to take pleasure in giving pain to others appears very early. Children, if left to themselves, soon feel a gratification in torturing insects and animals. What misery does the wanton cruelty of men inflict upon cocks, dogs, bulls, bears, and other creatures, which they seem to think were formed for no other end than to feast their savage spirits with their torments! If we form our judgment of men, when they seem most pleased, and have neither anger nor resentment to plead in their excuse, it is too evident, even in the nature of their amusements, whose they are and whom they serve; and they are the worst of enemies to each other. Think of the horrors of war, the rage of duelists, of the murders and assassinations with which the world is filled, and then say, "Lord, what is man!" Further if deceit and treachery belong to Satan's character, then surely man resembles him. Is not the universal observation, and complaint of all ages, an affecting comment upon the prophet's words, "Trust ye not in a friend, put not confidence in a guide, keep the doors of thy mouth from her that lieth in thy bosom, for they hunt every man his brother with a net." How

many at this moment have cause to say with David, "The words of his mouth were smoother than butter, but war was in his heart; his words were softer than oil, yet were they drawn swords." Again, like Satan, men are eager in tempting others to sin; not content to damn themselves, they employ all their arts and influence to draw as many as they can with them into the same destruction. Lastly, in direct opposition to God and goodness, in contemptuous enmity to the Gospel of His grace, and a bitter persecuting spirit to those who profess it, Satan himself can hardly exceed them. Herein, indeed they are his agents and willing servants; and because the blessed God himself is out of their reach, they labor to show their despite to him in the persons of His people.

I have drawn but a sketch, a few outlines of the picture of fallen man. To give an exact copy of him, to charge every feature with it's full aggravation of horror, and to paint him as he is, would be impossible. Enough has been observed to illustrate the propriety of the exclamation, "Lord, what is man!" Perhaps some of my readers may deny or extenuate the charge, and may plead that I have not been describing mankind but some of the most abandoned of the species, who hardly deserve the name of "men". But I have already provided against this exception. It is human nature I describe; and the vilest and most profligate individuals can not sin beyond the powers and limits of that nature which they possess in common with the more mild and moderate. Though there may be a difference in the fruitfulness of trees, yet the production of one apple, decides the nature of the tree upon which it grew, as certainly as if it had produced a thousand: so in the present case, should it be allowed that these enormities cannot be found in all persons, it would be a sufficient confirmation of what I advanced, if they can be found in any; unless it could be likewise proved, that those who appeared more wicked than others, were of a different species from the rest. But I need not make this concession; they must be insensible indeed who do not feel something within them so very contrary to our common notions of goodness, as would perhaps make them rather submit to be banished from human society, than to be compelled to be *bona fide* to disclose their fellow-creatures every thought and desire which arises in their hearts.

The nature of fallen man agrees to the description the apostle has given us of his boasted wisdom: it is earthly, sensual, devilish. I have attempted some general delineation of it in the preceding letter; but the height of its malignity cannot be properly estimated, unless we consider its actings with respect to the light of the Gospel. The Jews were extremely wicked at the time of our Lord's appearance upon earth; yet he said of them, " If I had not come and spoken to them, they had not had sin;" that is, as the light and power of his ministry deprived them of all excuse for continuing in sin, so it proved the occasion of showing their wickedness in the most aggravated manner; and all their other sins were but faint proofs of the true state of their hearts, if compared with the discovery they made of themselves, by their pertinacious opposition to Him. In this sense, what the apostle has observed of the law of Moses, may be applied to the Gospel of Christ: it entered, that sin might abound. If we would estimate the utmost exertions of human depravity, and the strongest effects it is capable of producing, we must select our instances from the conduct of those to whom the Gospel is known. The Indians, who roast their enemies alive, give sufficient proof that man is barbarous to his own kind; which may likewise be easily demonstrated without going so far from home; but the preaching of the Gospel discovers the enmity of the heart against God, in ways and degrees of which unenlightened savages and heathens are not capable.

By the Gospel, I now mean not merely the doctrine of salvation as it lies in the holy Scripture, but that public and authoritative dispensation of this doctrine, which the Lord

Jesus Christ has committed to his true ministers; who having been themselves, by the power of his grace, brought out of darkness into marvellous light, are by his Holy Spirit qualified and sent forth to declare to their fellow-sinners what they have seen, and felt, and tasted, of the word of life. Their commission is, to exalt the Lord alone, to stain the pride of all human glory. They are to set forth the evil and demerit of sin, the strictness, spirituality, and sanction of the law of God, the total apostasy of mankind; and from these premises to demonstrate the utter impossibility of a sinner's escaping condemnation by any works or endeavours of his own; and then to proclaim a full and free salvation from sin and wrath, by faith in the name, blood, obedience, and mediation of God manifest in the flesh; together with a denunciation of eternal misery to all who shall finally reject the testimony which God has given of his Son. Though these several branches of the will of God respecting sinners, and other truths in connection with them, are plainly revealed and repeatedly inculcated in the Bible; and though the Bible is to be found in almost every house, yet we see, in fact, it is a sealed book, little read, little understood, and therefore but little regarded, except in those places which the Lord is pleased to favour with ministers who can confirm them from their own experience, and who, by a sense of his constraining love, and the worth of souls, are animated to make the faithful discharge of their ministry the one great business of their lives: who aim not to possess the wealth, but to promote the welfare of their hearers; are equally regardless of the frowns or smiles of the world; and count not their lives dear, so that they may be wise and successful in winning- souls to Christ.

When the Gospel, in this sense of the word, first comes to a place, though the people are going on in sin, they may be said to sin ignorantly; they have not yet been warned of their danger. Some are drinking down iniquity like water; others more soberly burying themselves alive in the cares and business of the world; others find a little time for what they call religious duties, which they persevere in, though they are utter strangers to the nature or the pleasure of spiritual worship; partly, as thereby they think to bargain with God and to make amends for such sins as they do not choose to relinquish; and partly because it gratifies their pride, and affords them (as they think) some ground for saying, " God, I thank thee I am not as other men." The Preached Gospel declares the vanity and danger of these several ways which sinners choose to walk in. It declares, and demonstrates, that, different as they appear from each other, they are equally remote from the path of safety and peace, and all tend to the same point, the destruction of those who persist in them. At the same time it provides against that despair into which men would be otherwise plunged, when convinced of their sins, by revealing the immense love of God, the glory and grace of Christ, and inviting all to come to him, that they may obtain pardon, life, and happiness. In a word, it shows the pit of hell under men's feet, and opens the gate and points out the way to heaven. Let us now briefly observe the effects it produces in those who do not receive it as the power of God unto salvation. These effects are various, as tempers and circumstances vary; but they may all lead us to adopt the Psalmist's exclamation, "Lord, what is man !"

Many who have heard the Gospel once or a few times, will hear it no more; it awakens their scorn, their hatred and rage. They pour contempt upon the wisdom of God, despise his goodness, defy his power; and their very looks express the spirit of the rebellious Jews, who told the prophet Jeremiah to his face, " As to the word which thou hast spoken to us in the name of the Lord, we will not hearken to thee at all." The ministers who preach it, are accounted men that turn the world upside down; and the people who receive it, fools or hypocrites. The word of the Lord is a burden to them, and they hate it with a perfect hatred. How strongly is the disposition of the natural heart manifested, by the confusion which

often takes place in families, where the Lord is pleased to awaken one or two in a house, while the rest remain in their sins ! To profess, or even to be suspected of, an attachment to the Gospel of Christ, is frequently considered and treated as the worst of crimes, sufficient to cancel the strongest obligations of relation or friendship. Parents, upon such a provocation, will hate their children, and children ridicule their parents: many find, agreeable to our Lord's declaration, that from the time a sense of his love engaged their hearts to love him again, their worst foes have been those of their own household; and that they who expressed the greatest love and tenderness for them before their conversion, can now hardly bear to see them.

The bulk of a people will perhaps continue to hear, at least now and then; and to those who do, the Spirit of God usually, at one time or other, bears testimony to the truth: their consciences are struck, and for a season they believe and tremble. But what is the consequence? No man who has taken poison seeks more earnestly or speedily for an antidote, than those do for something to stifle and smother their convictions. They run to company, to drink, to anything, for relief against the unwelcome intrusion of serious thoughts; and when they succeed, and recover their former indifference, they rejoice as if they had escaped some great danger. The next step is, to ridicule their own convictions; and next to that, if they see any of their acquaintance under the like impressions, to use every art, and strain every nerve, that they may render them as obstinate as themselves. For this purpose, they watch as a fowler for the bird, flatter or revile, tempt or threaten; and if they can prevail, and are the occasion of hardening any in their sins" they rejoice and triumph as if they accounted it their interest and their glory to ruin the souls of their fellowcreatures.

By frequent hearing, they receive more light. They are compelled to know, whether they will or not, that the wrath of God hangs over the children of disobedience. They carry a sting in their consciences, and at times feel themselves most miserable, and cannot but wish they had never been born, or that they had been dogs or toads, rather than rational creatures.. Yet they harden themselves still more. They affect to be happy and at ease and force themselves to wear a smile when anguish preys upon their hearts. They blaspheme the way of truth, watch for the faults of professors, and with a malicious joy publish and aggravate them. They see perhaps how the wicked die, but are not alarmed; they see the righteous die, but are not moved. Neither providences nor ordinances, mercies nor judgements, can stop them, for they are determined to go on and perish with their eyes open, rather than submit to the Gospel.

But they do not always openly reject the Gospel-truths. Some who profess to approve and receive them, do thereby discover the evils of the heart of man, if possible, in a yet stronger light. They make Christ the minister of sin, and turn his grace into licentiousness. Like Judas, they say, Hail, Master ! and betray him. This is the highest pitch of iniquity. They pervert all the doctrines of the Gospel. From election they draw an excuse for continuing in their evil ways; and contend for salvation without works, because they love not obedience. They extol the righteousness of Christ, but hold it in opposition to personal holiness. In a word, because they hear that God is good, they determine to persist in evil. " Lord, what is man ! "

Thus wilful and impenitent sinners go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. The word which they despise becomes to them a savour of death unto death. They take different courses, but all are traveling down to the pit; and, unless sovereign mercy interpose, will soon sink to rise no more. The final event is usually twofold. Many,

after they have been more or less shaken by the word, settle in formality. If hearing would supply the place of faith, love, and obedience, they would do well; but by degrees they become sermon-proof : the truths which once struck them lose their power by being often heard; and thus multitudes live and die in darkness, though the light has long shone around them. Others are more openly given up to a reprobate mind. Contempt of the Gospel makes Infidels, Deists, and Atheists. They are filled with a spirit of delusion to believe a lie. These are scoffers, walking after their own lusts; for where the principles of religion are given up, the conduct will be vile and abominable. Such persons sport themselves with their own deceivings, and strongly prove the truth of the Gospel while they dispute against it . We often find that people of this cast have formerly been the subjects of strong convictions; but when the evil spirit has seemed to depart for a season, and returns again, the last state of that person is worse than the first.

It is not improbable that some of my readers may meet with their own characters under one or other of the views I have given of the desperate wickedness of the heart, in its actings against the truth. May the Spirit of God constrain them to read with attention Your case is dangerous, but I would hope not utterly desperate -. Jesus is mighty to save. His grace can pardon the most aggravated offences, and subdue the most inveterate habits of sin. The Gospel you have hitherto slighted, resisted, or opposed, is still the power of God unto salvation. The blood of Jesus, upon which you have hitherto trampled, speaks better things than the blood of Abel, and is of virtue to cleanse those whose sins are scarlet and crimson, and to make them white as snow. As yet you are spared; but it is high time to stop, to throw down your arms of rebellion, and humble yourselves at his feet. If you do, you may yet escape; but if not, know assuredly that wrath is coming upon you to the uttermost; and you will shortly find, to your unspeakable dismay, that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.