

On Grieving the Holy Spirit

by John Wesley (1733)

"Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption." - Eph. 4:30.

There can be no point of greater importance to him who knows that it is the Holy Spirit which leads us into all truth and into all holiness, than to consider with what temper of soul we are to entertain his divine presence; so as not either to drive him from us, or to disappoint him of the gracious ends for which his abode with us is designed; which is not the amusement of our understanding, but the conversion and entire sanctification of our hearts and lives.

These words of the Apostle contain a most serious and affectionate exhortation to this purpose. "Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption."

The title "holy," applied to the Spirit of God, does not only denote that he is holy in his own nature, but that he makes us so; that he is the great fountain of holiness to his church; the Spirit from whence flows all the grace and virtue, by which the stains of guilt are cleansed, and we are renewed in all holy dispositions, and again bear the image of our Creator. Great reason, therefore, there was for the Apostle to give this solemn charge concerning it, and the highest obligation lies upon us all to consider it with the deepest attention; which that we may the more effectually do, I shall inquire,

I. In what sense the Spirit of God is said to be grieved at the sins of men:

II. By what kind of sin he is more especially grieved.

III. I shall endeavour to show the force of the Apostle's argument against grieving the Holy Spirit, -- "By whom we are sealed to the day of redemption."

I. I am, First, to inquire, in what sense the Spirit of God may be said to be grieved with the sins of men. There is not anything of what we properly call passion in God. But there is something of an infinitely higher kind: Some motions of his will, which are more strong and vigorous than can be conceived by men; and although they have not the nature of human passions, yet will answer the ends of them. By grief, therefore, we are to understand, a disposition in God's will, flowing at once from his boundless love to the persons of men, and his infinite abhorrence of their sins. And in this restrained sense it is here applied to the Spirit of God in the words of the Apostle.

And the reasons for which it is peculiarly applied to him are, First, because he is more immediately present with us; Second, because our sins are so many contempts of this highest expression of his love, and disappoint the Holy Spirit in his last remedy; and, Third, because, by this ungrateful dealing, we provoke him to withdraw from us.

We are said to grieve the Holy Spirit by our sins, because of his immediate presence with us. They are more directly committed under his eye, and are, therefore, more highly offensive to him. He is pleased to look upon professing Christians as more peculiarly separated to his honour; nay, we are so closely united to him, that we are said to be "one spirit with him;" and, therefore, every sin which we now commit, besides its own proper guilt, carries in it a fresh and infinitely high provocation. "Know ye not your own selves," saith St. Paul, "that your bodies are the temples of the Holy Ghost?" And how are they so, but by his inhabitation and intimate presence with our souls? When, therefore, we set up the idols of earthly inclinations in our hearts, (which are properly his altar,) and bow down ourselves to serve those vicious passions which we ought to sacrifice to his will, -- this must needs be, in the highest degree, offensive and grievous to him. "For what concord is there between" the Holy Spirit "and Belial? or what agreement hath the temple of God with idols?"

We grieve the Holy Spirit by our sins, because they are so many contempts of the highest expression of his love, and disappoint him in his last remedy whereby he is pleased to endeavour our recovery. And thus every sin we now commit is done in despite of all his powerful assistances, in defiance of his reproofs, -- an ungrateful return for infinite lovingkindness!

As the Holy Spirit is the immediate minister of God's will upon earth, and transacts all the great affairs of the Church of Christ, -- if while he pours out the riches of his grace upon us, he finds them all unsuccessful, no wonder if he appeals to all the world, in the words of the Prophet, against our ingratitude: "And now, O ye men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What could have been done more to my vineyard that I have not done in it? Wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes?" These, and many more such, which we meet with in the Holy Scriptures, are the highest expressions of the deepest concern; such as imply the utmost unwillingness to deal severely even with those whom yet, by all the wise methods of his grace, he could not reform. The Holy Spirit here represents himself as one who would be glad to spare sinners if he could; and therefore we may be sure it is grievous to him that by their sins they will not suffer him.

For men thus to disappoint the Holy Spirit of Love, -- for that too is his peculiar title, -- to make him thus wait that he may be gracious, and pay attendance on us through our whole course of folly and vanity, and to stand by, and be a witness of our stubbornness, with the importunate offers of infinite kindness in his hands, -- is a practice of such a nature that no gracious mind can hear the thoughts of it. It is an argument of God's unbounded mercy, that he is pleased to express, that he is only grieved at it; that his indignation does not flame out against those who are thus basely ungrateful, and consume them in a moment.

It was such ingratitude as this in the Jews, after numberless experiences of his extraordinary mercies towards them, that made infinite love, at last, turn in bitterness to reward them according to their doings; as we find the account given by the Prophets, in the most affecting and lively manner. And surely, considering the much greater obligations he hath laid on us, who enjoy the highest privileges, we may be sure that our sinful and untoward behaviour will, at last, be as great as the mercies we have abused.

There is no doubt but God observes all the sons of men, and his wrath abides on every worker of iniquity. But it is the unfaithful professor who has known his pardoning love, that grieves his Holy Spirit; which implies a peculiar baseness in our sins. A man may be provoked, indeed, by the wrongs of his enemy; but he is properly grieved by the offences of his friend. And, therefore, besides our other obligations, our very near relation to God, as being his friends and children, would, if we had a spark of gratitude in our souls, be a powerful restraint upon us, in preserving us from evil.

But if arguments of this kind are not strong enough to keep us from grieving our best Friend, the Holy Spirit of God, let us consider, that, by this ungrateful conduct, we shall provoke him to withdraw from us.

The truth of this, almost all who have ever tasted of the good gifts of the Holy Spirit must have experienced. It is to be hoped that we have had, some time or other, so lively a sense of his holy influence upon us, as that when we have been so unhappy as to offend him, we could easily perceive the change in our souls, in that darkness, distress, and despondency which more especially follow the commission of wilful and presumptuous sins. At those seasons, the blessed Spirit retired and concealed his presence from us, we were justly left to a sense of our own wretchedness and misery, till we humbled ourselves before the Lord, and by deep repentance and active faith obtained a return of divine mercy and peace.

And the more frequently we offend him, the more we weaken his influences in our souls. For frequent breaches will necessarily occasion estrangement between us; and it is impossible that our intercourse with him can be cordial, when it is disturbed by repeated interruptions. So a man will forgive his friend a great many imprudences, and some wilful transgressions; but to find him frequently affronting him, all his kindness will wear off by degrees;

and the warmth of his affection, even towards him who had the greatest share of it, will die away; as he cannot but think that such a one does not any longer either desire or deserve to maintain a friendship with him.

II. I come now to consider by what kinds of sin the Holy Spirit is more especially grieved. These sins are, in general, such as either at first wholly disappoint his grace of its due effect upon our souls, or are afterwards directly contrary to his gracious and merciful assistances. Of the former sort, I shall only mention, at present, inconsiderateness; of the latter, sins of presumption.

The First I shall mention, as being more especially grievous to the Holy Spirit, is inconsiderateness and inadvertence to his holy motions within us. There is a particular frame and temper of soul, a sobriety of mind, without which the Spirit of God will not concur in the purifying of our hearts. It is in our power, through his preventing and assisting grace, to prepare this in ourselves; and he expects we should, this being the foundation of all his after-works. Now, this consists in preserving our minds in a cool and serious disposition, in regulating and calming our affections, and calling in and checking the inordinate pursuits of our passions after the vanities and pleasures of this world; the doing of which is of such importance, that the very reason why men profit so little under the most powerful means, is, that they do not look enough within themselves, they do not observe and watch the discords and imperfections of their own spirit nor attend with care to the directions and remedies which the Holy Spirit is always ready to suggest. Men are generally lost in the hurry of life, in the business or pleasures of it, and seem to think that their regeneration, their new nature, will spring and grow up within them, with as little care and thought of their own as their bodies were conceived and have attained their full strength and stature; whereas, there is nothing more certain than that the Holy Spirit will not purify our nature, unless we carefully attend to his motions, which are lost upon us while, in the Prophet's language, we "scatter away our time," -- while we squander away our thoughts upon unnecessary things, and leave our spiritual improvement, the one thing needful, quite unthought of and neglected.

There are many persons who, in the main of their lives, are regular in their conversation, and observe the means of improvement, and attend upon the holy sacrament with exactness; who yet, in the intervals of their duties, give too great liberty to their thoughts, affections, and discourse: They seem to adjourn the great business of salvation to the next hour of devotion. If these professors lose so much in their spiritual estate for want of adjusting and balancing their accounts, what then must we think of those who scarce ever bestow a serious thought upon their eternal welfare? Surely there is not any temper of mind less a friend to the spirit of religion, than a thoughtless and inconsiderate one, that, by a natural succession of strong and vain affections shuts out everything useful from their souls, till, at length, they are overtaken by a fatal lethargy; they lose sight of all danger, and become insensible of divine convictions; and, in consequence, quite disappoint all the blessed means of restoration. If, therefore, we measure the Holy Spirit's concern at the sins of men by the degrees of his disappointment, we may conclude, that there is no state of mind that grieves him more, unless that of actual wickedness.

Presumptuous sins are, indeed, in the highest manner offensive to the Holy Spirit of God. They are instances of open enmity against him, and have all the guilt of open rebellion. The wilful sinner is not ignorant or surprised, but knowingly fights against God's express commandment, and the lively, full, and present conviction of his own mind and conscience; so that this is the very standard of iniquity. And all other kinds of sins are more or less heinous, as they are nearer or farther off from sins of this dreadful nature; inasmuch as these imply the greatest opposition to God's will, contempt of his mercy, and defiance of his justice. This, if any thing can, doubtless, must so grieve him as to make him wholly withdraw his gracious presence.

III. I come now to show the force of the Apostle's argument against grieving the Holy Spirit, -- Because we "are sealed to the day of redemption."

By "the day of redemption" may be meant, either the time of our leaving these bodies at death, or, of our taking them again at the general resurrection. Though here it probably means the latter; in which sense the Apostle uses

the word in another place: "Waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our bodies." And to this day of redemption we are sealed by the Holy Spirit these three ways: --

By receiving his real stamp upon our souls; by being made the partakers of the divine nature.

By receiving him as a mark of God's property; as a sign that we belong to Christ. And,

As an earnest and assurance to our own spirits, that we have a title to eternal happiness.

And, First, we are sealed by the Holy Spirit of God, by our receiving his real stamp upon our souls; being made the partakers of the divine nature, and "meet for the inheritance of the saints in light." This is, indeed, the design of his dwelling in us, to heal our disordered souls, and to restore that image of his upon our nature, which is so defaced by our original and actual corruptions. And until our spirits are, in some measure, thus renewed, we can have no communion with him. For "if we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth." But by the renewal of our minds in the image of Him that created us, we are still more capable of his influences; and by means of a daily intercourse with him, we are more and more transformed into his likeness, till we are satisfied with it.

This likeness to God, this conformity of our will and affections to his will, is, properly speaking, holiness; and to produce this in us, is the proper end and design of all the influences of the Holy Spirit. By means of his presence with us, we receive from him a great fulness of holy virtues; we take such features of resemblance in our spirits as correspond to his original perfections. And thus we are sealed by him, in the first sense, by way of preparation for our day of redemption.

And since we are so, and our new nature thus grows up under the same power of his hands, what do we, when we grieve him by our sins, but undo and destroy his work? We frustrate his designs by breaking down the fences which he had been trying to raise against the overflowings of corruption; so that, at last, we entirely defeat all his gracious measures for our salvation.

We are sealed by the Holy Spirit unto the day of redemption, as a sign of God's property in us, and as a mark that we belong to Christ. And this is, by his appointment, the condition and security of that future happiness, into which he will admit none but those who have received the Spirit of his Son into their hearts. But in whomsoever he finds this mark and character, when he shall come to judge the world, these will he take to himself, and will not suffer the destroyer to hurt them. To this very purpose the Prophet Malachi, speaking of those who feared God, says, "They shall be mine, saith the Lord, in the day when I make up my jewels;" -- that is to say, when I set my seal and mark upon them; -- "and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him."

Now, if the Holy Spirit be the sign, the seal, and the security of our salvation, then, by grieving him by our sins, we break up this seal with our own hands, we cancel our firmest security, and, as much as in us lies, reverse our own title to eternal life.

Besides this, the Holy Spirit within us is the security of our salvation; he is likewise an earnest of it, and assures our spirits that we have a title to eternal happiness. "The Spirit of God beareth witness with our spirits that we are the children of God." And in order that this inward testimony may be lively and permanent, it is absolutely necessary to attend carefully to the secret operation of the Holy Spirit within us; who, by infusing his holy consolations into our souls, by enlivening our drooping spirits, and giving us a quick relish of his promises, raises bright and joyous sensations in us, and gives a man, beforehand, a taste of the bliss to which he is going. In this sense, God is said, by the Apostle to the Corinthians, to have "sealed us, and to have given the earnest of his Spirit in our hearts;" and that earnest, not only by way of confirmation of our title to happiness, but as an actual part of that reward at present, the fulness of which we expect hereafter.