No. 5.

On worshipping God in spirit & truth.

Aug 22, 1814
John iv. 24. "God is a spirit, and they that worship him, must worship him in spirit and truth."

One of the last and highest efforts of the human mind is to form sufficiently elevated, and at the same time consistent, notions of an Almighty and Infinite God. The subject seems too vast for our powers: and we are compelled to return from the investigation of it with the confession that weakness and ignorance cannot comprehend omnipotence and omniscience, that "God is in heaven, and we are on earth." The reasoning, by which we are led to the existence and character of the Great First Cause, is attended with all the convincing force of moral certainty; but when we wish to realise the sublime result of our reasoning, and to bring it intimately within the grasp of the understanding, when we endeavour to embody in a fixed, determinate form the thoughts of infinity and eternity, we then find our views clouded with that indefiniteness, which arises from the unintelligible greatness of the object of contempla...
tion, and are compelled to say with Helvius in his admonition to Job, "touching the Almighty, we cannot find him out." - But, however, little we may know of the real nature of God, and the manner of his operations, we do know enough of his relation to us, and to other parts of his creation, to make him the object of the most profound reverence, of the most deserved con- dence and love. We see him in the character of a Father, Benefactor, and Judge; and what more, in this state of frailty and ignorance, can we desire or expect?

Natural religion, at least in its present state of refinement, teaches us to believe the Divine cause of all things to be a spiritual being (let us take for granted the infinite intelligence of God, which admits of the most complete proof, and we can deduce from it his immateriality. For if there be nothing but matter in existence, then intelligence must be the effect of the motion and modifications of matter. But even finite intelligences, as that of man, for instance, show so much skill and design in their constitutions, as also to show that their cause, i.e. the appropriated motions and modifications of matter, must be apprized, and conducted by a prior and superior intelligence. The infinite intelligence of God, therefore, since it results from the motions and modifications of matter, requires another infinite intelligence to direct these motions, which is assigned God is therefore an immaterial being.) The same thing may be proved thus. The idea of God as a self-existent and necessary being, absolutely leads us to think of his immutability. These three ideas are so ex- traordinarily connected, that we must either admit to reject the whole. Now the idea of immutability is in direct contradiction to that of a compound substance of matter; so that we must either allow immateriality to the unchangeable being, or if we suppose him to be material, we must renounce the fundamental notions we have of God’s self-existence, necessity, immutability, and this would be to reject all rational ideas of him. This conclusion is sanctioned by the scripture. It is true, it may be doubled here, for the teach the spirituality of God on a strictly philosophical sense (for that style is in general popular, and adapted to popular ignorance); but it does not detract from the immateriality of God, but is the best and natural interpretation of many sub-
to convince us that our God is a spiritual Being—a being far removed from the grossness and immensity of material substance. He is not "altogether such a one as thyself," and while we tread the path of life surrounded by the contaminating influence and deplorable state of sensible objects, let us never forget that our God exists in all the spotless purity of a spiritual nature.

We may consider: 1. What is comprehended in "worshipping God in spirit and truth," and 2. What motives we have to offer us to this worship.

1. It is obvious to remark, that he who would "worship God in spirit and in truth" must do it with sincerity and earnestness. It is a service, whose very nature consists in the humble devotion of the soul, the unreserved homage of the heart. Think not it is enough to retire to your closet or to resort to the house of prayer; be not satisfied even when you have left behind the noisy and tumultuous passions which have held their dominion in your breast, or when you have ceased to think of your gains, your pleasures, and your designs. The worship which man owes to his Creator, though it requires all this, requires too more than this. It has not arrived at its perfection till it has grasped, expounded, and ele
voted the heart, till it has not only raised the soul from earth, but exerted it to heaven. We must consider it as something more than a duty, should be our delight. The worship of God, as we are assured both by reason and Scripture, may not only be the source of the most refined pleasure, which man can enjoy. What sentiment, in the intercourse of life, is attended with more been and permanent delight, than the respect and gratitude which a dutiful child feels to a kind and indulgent parent? And shall we say these feelings be for more powerful excited, the relation of man to his God? Nor often does the Book of sacred truth direct us to find rest and joy in praise and prayer, in facing out with the humility of devotion on Him who made us, and who is the Author of our salvation. Now how is this celestial pleasure to be obtained, certainly not by the coldness and formalit of ceremonies and hypocrisy, not by going to God, half your thoughts, and forms of your affections, not by punctual attendance on stated forms and ordinances. - As well might you enjoy the delicious fruits and fragrant flowers of the

southern to flourish amidst the snow and ice of the harsh regions. - No, my friends, it is only when the worship is the expression of deep earnest and heart felt sincerity, that it can be made the source of delight; - and surely it is then only that it can be acceptable to God. He is a being who cannot be deceived, and who will not be mocked. - Remember what he has said of the false worshipers of former days. "This people honoreth me their lips, but their heart is far from me. Before him we must stand in all the nakedness of our true thoughts and real feelings; and no inquiry insincerity, no evidence of indifference and unconcern, however latent, will escape the eye of omniscience. God claims what we can never deny; he has a right to claim, the tribute of deep and unreserved devotion, that devotion which is paid "with all the heart, with all the soul, with all the strength, and with all the mind;" and we may be certain that our Lord will require of his creatures no more, than a wise and beneficent legislator would require of subjects for their own ultimate good. - If, therefore, we have a mind for the most noble and exalted happiness, if we have an approving sense of the most solemn and affecting obligations, we
which the human mind can be placed; surely we
shall keep back no part of the price we owe to our
Heav. Benefactor, and our final Judge.

2. Pure and spiritual worship is that which be-
god alone for its object. "Thou shalt have no "
gods before me" was one of the holy commands
claimed from Sinai, and it was the denomina-
tive and distinguishing feature of the Jewish religion
that it recognised none but one, Supreme Being
to whom were due the homage and devotion of all
creatures. Not has this doctrine an inferior place
in that system of truth and love, which the De-
rine Instructor of the N. T. came into the
world to promulgate and establish. In that
bright array of sacred truths, which shine with
heavenly lustre on the pages of the sacred Scrip-
tures, the doctrine of the unity of God, and of
his supreme claim to our affections and service,
seems in a manner eminently peculiar to occupy
the first place. To the sly and malicious ten-
et, soliciting his homage, x replied "it is written
"Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him
only shalt thou serve," and to one who insolently
asked him "which is the first commandment of
all?" he answered, by repeating the forcible in-
junction, which stands at the head of the moral law. There is scarcely a page of the Bible, where this principle is not either expressly announced and enforced, or easily inferred, more or less directly from the strain of reasoning or illustration; and surely it is the dictate of enlightened and unbiased reason. Indeed, the doctrine has become so familiar to us, by being interwoven with our first principles of religion and being made the starting point of our reflections and reasoning concerning the character of God, that we deem it almost unnecessary to be reminded of its sacred importance. It is true, there is little dan-

ger that we may not consecrate too the one De-

time Being those high and holy affections, of which alone is worthy. For different feelings, than those

the devout worshipper, may have the habitual, the

most constant, ascendency in our hearts. Sometim-

perhaps, the impressive and subduing reflection, that there is a Being, "in whose hand is your breath, and hence all your ways," has drawn from you the sen-

ture of adoration and gratitude. But how

many rival claims upon you warmest affec-

cions and most zealous service have you admitted?
How often have you turned aside the energy of your thoughts from God and religion, to employ it in idle chase after pleasures, which when caught are not worth the keeping? How often have the good things of this world been the supreme objects of your love and devotion? In our present state, we must indeed, much under the influence of circumstance, but let us ever remember, that in proportion as we shake off the gross and selfish affections, the tendency the pure and spiritual worship will be increased and strengthened.

3. To worship God in spirit and in truth implies the necessity of correct views of his character, and of the relation existing between him and his creatures. Man kind have ever been found disposed to acknowledged something superior to themselves in the scale of being. It seems to be a spontaneous testimony to a most grand and exalting truth. But respecting the character of their deities, and their connexion with men beings, men have formed ideas as absurd and cowardly as the wildness of a fertile imagination and inventions; the stupidity of ignorance receive; and the history of religion shows that their errors have had a fatal influence on their worship. The dejected votaries of blind superstition have arrayed their gods in all that is terrible or ridiculous, and then have offered them that homage which fear or folly might dictate. The worshippers of Moloch sacrificed what are: we are...
children to a furious and vindictive deity, and the foul and fantastick rites of Pagan theology were worthy of Gods, who differed from their worshippers only by pos sessing a greater power to gratify cruelty and revenge, a more unrestrained licence to be impure. But it is our happiness that where knowledge is limited an reason weak, light from heaven illuminates, and gla dens our arcens of the Divine character and govern ment. Revelation has shed over our views of the at tributes of God a soft and solemn lustre, which makes him at once the object of love and awe. We are his children, and we are assured he careth for us; he pre serves the sparrows and clothes the lilies, and are ye not much better than they?” “He is kind to the un thankful and to the evil,” and sendeth his rain on the just and the unjust.” “Virtue is his law.” “What doth the Lord thy God require of thee, but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with thy God.” But as there is a reward for the righteous, so there is a terrorifying punishment for the wicked, and we have reason to tremble at the recollection of our sins. The God of the Bible is likewise an unpit i tual and universal God. His favour is not confined to the spot on which we live, or to the sect whose dogmas we receive. Neither the mountain of Samaea, nor Jerusalem is the place where alone “men ought to worship.” The humble and grateful heart is the only
purer altar for the offering of devotion and praise. If then such be, as revelation assures us, the character of God is it not of the highest importance, that we have hitherto these views deeply impressed on our minds, when we come before him to acknowledge his mercies, to ask for his assistance, and to supplicate his pardon? If the spirit and feelings, which our usual notions of God’s government, and his relation to mankind, excite, will be carried into our worship. How can you love an angry and vindictive, or a partial and capricious Deity? How can you look upon filial confidence and gratitude to God, when you believe that he has selected a few of his creatures for his favor, and condemned the rest, for his own glory, to eternal misery? How can you feel the glow of devout gratitude to him, if you believe that his government is conducted without any reference to the ultimate good of the beings he has made? No, my friends, such of God we cannot worship in spirit and in truth. In this notion of our views of the character of our God, to degrade him to the grossness of matter, and to the passion and inconsistency of humanity, we shall mingle with our feelings of devotion, if indeed we have any the impure and degrading sentiments of human vanity, and shall find ourselves hardly able to make him who claims our service, the object of love, reverence, and adoration.

II. Such are some of the requisites to true and spirit-ual worship. And do we wish to be invited to this
duty? Do we enquire for the motives by which it is
prompted and enforced?

Consider for a moment the influence, which a habit
of sincere worship has in giving a tone of serenity and
happiness to our thoughts and feelings in this life.
Consider how much enjoyment is elevated, and afflic-
tion soothed, by coming to the throne of grace, to
acknowledge the goodness and mercy of our R.D.
to beseech his loving justice, and to entreat his aid and favour. These are truths, of which the
force and influence are observed only on particular occa-
sions, and perhaps at long intervals. We are very much
the creatures of surrounding circumstances. The world
does not present its busy cares, and visionary pleasure,
in vain. While the high road, in which we have been
accustomed to travel, remains smooth and unobstructed,
and every thing goes on in the ordinary course; while
desire is succeeded by gratification and hope by enjoy-
ment, the thoughtless at least, if not sometimes the
good, may be seduced into a neglect of the Giver of
every good and perfect gift. But when the wintry
minds of adversity are abroad, and the world scarce
by presents an allotment of delight, we may then
learn how animating and consoling it is to elevate the
mind to the thought, not only that there is a God,
but that this God is our Father; that we may have
access to Him in the new and living way, which he
hath appointed," and rest upon his promises the
hopes and wishes of an anxious and anxious heart.
But, though the good effects of the habit of devout
worship may be most strikingly perceived when atten-
tion is most powerfully excited, yet it is a habit
which, when strong and deeply rooted, exerts an influ-
ence as constant and permanent, as it is happy. It
gradually purifies and invigorates the soul, while fre-
haps we are scarcely aware of its operation. It com-
municates to our hearts and feelings a tone of more
than earthly confidence and animation. It smooths
down all that is rough and irritant in our charac-
ters; quenches the angry and bitter passions; and lays
under the restraint of religious principle every vicious
inclination or unlawful desire. While it softens and
refines the social affections, it affords a refuge in
all the storms of life, by teaching us to "look for a
better, even a heavenly country." In short, it makes us
more fit for the world, and more fit for heaven.
If such be its influence, does not a regard to our own
happiness, if there were no other motive, prompt us
to the habitual and sincere worship of God? In
proportion as you value peace and serenity of mind, in
proportion to the habitual and sincere worship of God, will you not desire to maintain
that intercourse with your Maker, from which may
spring such happy effects? Will you not gladly
go to the sanctuary and kneel before the altar, since
you may return to the world better prepared for your duty and for happiness, with greater strength to struggle with the tempests, and with a more full and feeling heart to enjoy the sunshine of life? In this as in other cases, we are taught, and let it be a source of grateful admiration,—how intimately our duty and felicity are united; and we shall do well to remember, that the sincere and humble worshipper is the most prudent, as well as most religious man.

But there is a higher and stronger motive for offering the homage of the heart to and that is, the consideration of that Being, who is the object of religious homage. Here is more fully disclosed our obligation, which is only estimated, must animate the indifference of the thoughtless, and swell the virtuous emotion of the susceptible mind. Shall we not bow in reverence and adoration of that loveliness and grandeur, which attend every view of God’s being and perfection, in the works of nature and in the abode of revelation? He is the sovereign Lord of the universe. The laws of nature are but another name for the effects of his unremitted agency. The works of his hands are the humble expressions of his character. By what he has made, and by what he does, we may know something of what he is. Think more particularly of your own dependence on God for all that you desire or expect; how much his mercy has done, and has promised to do for you. Will you lie down to repose at night with—
out remembering, that when you shall have sunk in
forgetfulness, there will yet exist One Being who
forgets you,—One "who never slumbers nor sleeps." Oh
can you open your eyes to the joyous height of morn,
and not see the goodness of God, shining in every beam?
The constant return of wants, which must be
supplied, are invitations to remember Him who feeds
the hungry and clothes the naked. But there is some
thing much higher and noble to be grateful for: We
have faculties, by which we are allied to Him who
made us; by which we are enabled to look down on
pleasures of the world, and the enjoyments of sense,
with the elevating conviction that they do not, and
cannot, constitute the object and end of an immor-
tal mind. The social affections too speak the feeling
of that God, who has implanted them in our heart
and made them fruitful of delight. Above all, let
the highest source of our obligation be most deeply engravi
on the heart; let it be remembered that our Father has
made us through His the heirs of immortality and
the partakers of a blessed hope; that He has sent
His chosen Messenger to communicate to us the truths of
religion and the promises of grace; to teach us our duty; to
teach us the way of salvation; and to disclose beyond the
darkness which now veils the grave, the bright re-
wards of heaven. "Behold what manner of love the
Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be cal-
led the sons of God." — Is not God then, a being whom
we are bound to worship in spirit and in truth? Shall
we not adore, and love, and praise Him, who is revealed to us as our merciful and beneficent Father, our righteous and just Judge? Let us then frequently resort with hallowed affections to the house of prayer. Let us in the retirement of private devotion prostrate our souls before our God. We trust we are able to say, in the language of Christ to the woman of Samaria, "we know what we worship," and we are assured that our religious services on earth are but the introduction to a higher service and more refined devotion in the kingdom of Heaven.

Oct. 13th, 1817.
Others who in the beginning didst create the heavens and the earth, 
whereby spirit didst move 
on the face of the waters, 
we entreat thee to gain 
us thy gracious assistance, whenever we attempt to 
raise our thoughts and affections to thee our Sustainer, 
our God. 
There art the infinite, eternal Spirit 
yourselves, 
May we worship thee in spirit and truth. 
May our conceptions of thy character be pure 
and holy, 
May we feel that thou art in heaven 
and earth, 
therefore may we bow down 
in humble adoration before the throne of thy grace.
May the sense of thy glories come over our minds 
with a subduing and restraining power, 
May we frequently meditate on thine infinite perfections, 
when we think of all that mercy and grace in 
which thou hast passed before the children of 
men, 
we pray that we may learn to surrender 
ourselves to thee in the devotion of the heart, 
so consecrate the remainder of our lives to thee, that 
when thou shalt call us to another state.
At home, Aug. 22, 1819, afternoon.
At home, Jan. 7th, 1821, afternoon.