No. 2. —

On the means of religious improvement.
"If thou seest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasure; then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God."

Every observation on life must forcibly convince us, how much happiness and improvement depend on our own exertion. To find ourselves in a world, where we have opportunities to embrace, and obstacles to remove; much to avoid, and much to pursue; evils, that must be encountered or born, and incumbrants, that should animate to watchful vigilance. Industry, indeed, is necessary, not only as it leads to the possession of whatever is good or estimable; but as it gives a relish for enjoyment, which is never known in the luxuriance of indolence. Exertion, at once, secures the prize, and stamps it with a high and attractive value. The same general principle constitutes a prominent trait in the character of Christianity. The religion of Jesus is simply a religion of means, and among the numerous precepts, it is admirably fitted for men, as rational and moral agents, there are few more impressive, than it demands unwearyed exercise of our own industry, the unremitting application of our own powers. The same sedulous and careful attention, which does so much towards ensuring success in the common affairs of life, is necessary to the Christian's improvement. The Gospel, indeed, presents him with motives and incitements to duty; it gives him rules and precepts. But it still remains for him to make the or use of all these means. Our religion does not confine to be good; it does not convert us into machines, who
to be moved, at certain times, by some indescribable in-
stance. Christianity opens the path to Heaven, but it is the bu-
iness of her followers, with a willing heart, to perform the
journey. It is happy for us, that the noble enjoyments and
rewards of virtue are not to be purchased by an idle wish,
or an empty ejaculation. The consciousness of
having struggled in the contest, increases the pleasure of
victory; and so far as the accomplishment of the hopes and
the fulfillment of promises of our sacred religion depend on
our own good intentions and vigorous exertions, we have a
new motive to bind our affections to that Being, who at
the same time, that he bids us be industrious, bids us be
happy.

As we value the obligations of duty, or the hope of
immortality and endless happiness, we have a deep and
lively interest in the consideration of the nature and ten-
dency of the means of religious improvement.

I. It is natural to observe, that we should view our ob-
tions for moral advancement in their proper light. We
should consider them as means leading to an important and
valuable end; not as the objects for which we live, but as the
methods, by which we are directed to the best object
which can excite the diligence, or animate the hopes of
man. There are few errors into which we are more easily fall
than that of mistaking the ceremony for the spirit of duty.
How much more frequently is the Bible read, than the Chi-
tian temper and disposition, which it inculcates, displayed?
The most will carry with him to the house of God all his
grasping and avaricious affections; the ambitious man will
not leave behind his proud hopes, his fierce and impatient
anger; and the sensualist will retain a heart, tainted w
diseased with base passions and impure inclinations. Yet they mingle in the Christ assembly, and appear to avail themselves with joy of the high and holy privilege of worshipping their God. The voice of prayer may be uttered by him, whose heart is hardened by inhumanity or agitation by the contention of vitiating propensities, and all the bitterness of malignity may be displayed by him who has frequently before his eyes the blessed Jesus, in the agony of death, praying for his enemies. Here then is an essential error. We rest in the means, and forget the end. It was to be easy to persuade ourselves of the importance of attending to the institutions of religion, while we never think of the object. This error of the same kind, though not of so general nature, as that of taking religion by parts and fragments. We sometimes carry out duty into various provinces, and choose to cultivate, as our own, that which happens to please us, and find excuses for neglecting the rest. In the same manner, insincerity or indolence may make the faithful performance of ceremonies, or punctilious attendance on positive institutions, a substitute for purity of heart, and virtue. The power of habit is mighty indeed: and when it is strengthened by the special appearance of being fixed on proper objects, the illusion becomes complete.

2. The means of religious improvement, and of preparation for future felicity, are happily diversified. The characters of men are, in no inconsiderable degree, influenced by the situations in which they are placed. Few, perhaps, are alive at that age, in which they are placed, in which they are placed, to find out duty and our hopes, without some previous bias some preference of one mode of instruction to another. Sometimes we may be very deeply affected by the venerable and authoritative precepts, the solemn exhortations, the sublime
and animating hopes, or the fearful denunciations of the Scriptures. At other times, gratitude and admiration may be excited, by tracing the bright impressions of Divine wisdom, power, and goodness, which creation exhibits. The powerful call of adversity, or the languor or pain of disease may teach a lesson, which was never learned before. While one is tossed by the severity of chastisement, another may be allured by the mildness of mercy. The goodness of God has, indeed, shed around us beams of heavenly light; and he, who prefers darkness, gives the surest evidence, that "his deeds are evil." But though we have an almost inexhaustible variety of means for becoming wise, and good, and happy now and hereafter, yet we may not suppose, that they are all equally important, and satisfactory. He who has in his hands the book of revelation, and is convinced of its authority, can have no doubt, where he is to find his standard of action, his rule of life. It is not merely because we there find the most and sublime precepts, or the most elevated examples of virtue, and piety, but because the lessons of duty appeal to motives of the highest moment, and are enforced by sanctions most powerfully impressive. Whilst, then, we have the privilege of drinking from "the well of water, which springeth up to everlasting life," let us not be content with draughts from an impure or tasteless stream. Yet we are bound to avail ourselves of every incentive to virtue, of every thing which will excite finer affections or good purposes; and no one knows better than the humble disciple of Christ, how to seize and improve the golden opportunities of instruction, which lie scattered along the path of life.

But it may be observed, that all our religious advantages are of such a nature, as to favor constant progress in virtue, and improvement. We are not to expect, that, without Christian instruction,.)
contented with inconsiderable moral attainments, and to think
that because we have done something, there is no necessity of
doing more. The Christian's course has no limit. None is so good
that he may not become better; none has gone so far that he
cannot go further. Every day, some new passion may be susa-
ed, some vicious inclination be checked, some foolish excuse
of indolence or neglect of duty be rejected. Gratitude to God,
love and reverence for religion may be made to acquire the
permanence of habit. Nothing can be more happily fitted to
animate and encourage incessant progress in the march of
virtue, than the means of religion, with which we are sur-
circled. The strongest motives, and the brightest promises,
constant urging and alluring us to proceed. Like the angels
in the patriarch's dream, we may mount from one step of the
ladder to another, till we arrive at the Paradise of God.

II. If we enquire, what is the result of sedulous and earnest
attention to opportunities of moral improvement, we are answ-
ered, "then shall those understand the fear of the Lord, and the
knowledge of God." Duty is well understood, and the affec-
tions are engaged in its cause.

1. Man, the frail and erring child of the dust, should be
the character of his God, his Heavenly Friend, his future
e, he should fix his searching eye on the authority which has
established the laws of morality, the laws of Almighty wisdom,
and then the propriety of obedience can be no subject of doubt.

Settled conception must usually precede permanent habit.
(action. Why was reason, before the promulgation of truth, so
all her exertions, enveloped in darkness, or lost in errors? Per-
she could not trace, in lively and distinct colours, the charac-
ture of a supreme Being, or the nature of the service, which he requi-
red of man. The philosophers left in his system a mighty void,
he left it destitute of authority and sanction. It was his op-
ion, and nothing more. Happily we know, that to the discip-
ship of Chri, who humbly and earnestly asks, "Lord, what wilt
me to do," a certain and satisfactory answer can be give-
Let us then, collect instruction and improvement, with diligence, which the prospect of a bright and glorious eternal happiness ought to inspire, and we may be sure, that we shall find the knowledge of God; at least, all necessary knowledge. Observe the course of Providence; view with attention the passing scenes of life; especially read the Oracles of Revelation; search the instructions, examine the life of Jesus of Nazareth, mark the character of his religion, fitted so admirably to supply the wants, to assist the weakness, and to engage the affections of man, and then say, whether you cannot know your God, and your duty. Will you then go back to the impure, delusive, and unsatisfying pleasures of the world? Will you still grovel on earth, and turn a deaf ear to the voice, that invites you to Heaven?

2. But this is not enough. The affections must be engaged while the understanding is convinced. Every sentiment of religious love, every noble aspersion of virtuous enthusiasm, should be cherished and confirmed. That real, to be useful, must be according to knowledge. It is of the last importance, that the affections be pure and well directed. To be convinced of this, we need but remember the abuses, to which they have led, when fixed on improper objects. How often has the authority of Christ been alleged to sanction the rage of malice, or the capricious course of tyranny? How often has persecution lifted her scourge on boasted, that she was glorifying God, while she tortured and murdered man? How has she been seen sifting even the ruins, which her fury had scattered around, to find some fragment of heresy, on which she might fasten her horrid fangs? It is true, many of the abuses, which the history of religion presents, may be attributed to the love of power, or the spirit of revenge. But, not unfrequently, scenes of horror and dismay have occurred, for the origin of which we must look to false excitement, and erroneous zeal. Those strong feelings, by passionant passions, which have given to religion, instead
of her countenance of heavenly mildness, the last and supreme man of his kind. Night, under the direction of proper means and rational instruction, have been displayed in well regulated and vigorous affections. Let it not, however, be inferred, that religion is to be a cold and lifeless statute, recommended only by elegant symmetry of form, or dignity of posture. On the contrary, it must be entwined with every fibre of the heart; it should be the soul of the soul. Yet surely we may and ought to propose to many objects and distinct objects, on which love and feeling may fasten; the heart, unmoved, should be lost by the wild gusts of unhallowed passion. How shall we more surely acquire that firm conviction which is, at once, to excite and regulate the affections, than by serious and earnest attention to the means of improvement? with more we are furnished? None but the odious can refuse admiration and love to that God, whose character is written in creation and in Scripture, and it must be a fearful degree of heathenism, can, without the fondness of interest and delight dwell upon the foregoing pretty, the unvarnished benevolence, the heavenly instruction of the Founder of Xianty.

It is impossible to reflect on this subject without discovering the brightest evidences of Divine mercy. Very few, indeed, will deny that on God we depend for all we enjoy in this world, and for all we hope beyond the grave. Yet how seldom is this acknowledgment, the expression of a deep and sincere sentiment of gratitude, how often does it die, cold and lifeless from the lip, instead of arising ardent and fresh from the heart? The finest feelings, and most generous sensibility of which humanity is capable, may find full scope for exertion in the reflection, that man is conducted to the noblest end of being, by the most gracious means. That Being, who has made us by his law, has not left us to wander in uncertainty. We see so large a part of the economy of Providence, made up of methods of preparation for some other state of being, how does it help to strengthen the conviction, that man was not made merely to walk the round of earthly joy and suffering, and then, hopeless, to quit the unsatisfying scene. It is our happiness to have an assurance which we can never distrust, that the
ness of the grave is but a veil between this world and the
world of glory. Let then, every circumstance, which tends to ele-
vate our hopes and wishes to Heaven, be considered as a proof of
the infinite goodness of our God, who is not willing that any
should perish, but that all should come to the knowledge of
truth, and be saved." Whilst we gladly avail ourselves of rela-
tive advantages, let sincere gratitude give a pledge, that it
shall be faithfully improved.

There is a lesson likewise, for those who teach, as well as
for those who learn. He, whose peculiar employment is mere
and theological investigation, and who is to explain and expli-
duty, needs not to be told, that he is sacredly bound to
with anxious fidelity, unbiased opinions, for he knows not
how far their influence may extend; to study the passions of
human nature, and to wind his way into the heart, that he
may know how and when most successfully. He has a part in the
management of one of the means of religious improvement, for
which Heaven has blessed mankind, and let him consider himself
as responsible, that no exertion on his part shall be wanting,
train up all within his influence to virtue and peace, and make
them the heirs of immortal glory. These are, indeed, subjects on
which we would, perhaps, be vain to expect mankind to agree. But
they are generally by no means important parts of the Chris-
system; they are too often no more than adventitious fragment
attached to it by the zeal of angry disputants. The Christian
teacher will find an employment sufficiently ample in
making men wiser, and better, and more fit for heaven. While
we travel with vigour in the path of duty, let us not turn
be each other with the bitterness of contention or the threats
of defiance; remembering that it belongs to humanity to
and to a Christian to forgive.

March 5th, 1817.
"The Bible, my f. is the only infallible source of religious knowledge, points out the only sure road to success in the search after it. The Scriptures, if we carefully peruse them, will sufficiently instruct us in the knowledge of the truth as it is in Jesus, in the purity and simplicity of this Gospel. They will not involve us in any strife about words to no profit. They will conduct us to the divine philosophy of J. No. List to the opposition of science falsely so-called. Truths of the first magnitude & moment are clearly brought to life by the ministry & doctrine of our Saviour; as to other things we may rest assured that they would not have been kept doubtful or obscure had our future welfare depended on them. Nay, all that is indispensable & essential to salvation, is clear, obvious & attainable by all. For it as the glory of God, above every other institution that the unlearned & the few have the gospel preached state them." That the most generally useful & instructive parts of scripture are brought down to the humble level of that comprehension, at the same time that this venerable book, with respect to its intrinsic excellence, is its tendency to universal good, with respect to its principles of...
doctrines, of the authority & evidences on which it rests, has approved itself to men of the highest order of intellect, to men of profound learning, nice discrimination, pains-ful research. But after all, if we expect to reap any solid advantage from the attainment to which we may make in the knowledge of duty, we must forget that it will be all in vain, if we reduce our knowledge to practice. "Who," says the Apostle James, "is a wise man & endowed with knowledge among you, let him show out of a good conversation his works with mea-nis of wisdom? Men may differ about points of speculative belief & enquiry, but if they agree in the one great point "to fear God & keep His command-ments," they cannot be essentially wrong. If the heart be honest & sincere, if the intention be pure & bright, we may rest assured, that we cannot fall into gross & fundamental errors. Our great concern is to keep ourselves free from the corrupting degradation of vices of the world, that are not drawn into the giddy vortex of the multitude, that we be not snared by the temptations of pride & ambition, of the usy enriched, of sensuality, of self-indulgence, & thus be reduced to desert our principles, to violate our consciences, & to dishonour our religious profession. Whoer-
attained this exalted degree of purity is the true x
The moral hero, who has acquired the mastery over his passions, has won a crown, a diadem of eternal brillian
ci lustre: he has a kingdom within his own breast: he
has secured to himself a glory as shall never fade
is happy in the simplest applause of his own mind,
he shall one day be elevated to that dignity, on
which shall rest the pure in heart, for he shall see
God! — Let no man complain that he is left des-
tute of practical knowledge of instruction in that
which concerns his dearest interests. "Doth not mod-
men cry understanding, but forth her voice? Unto god,
and I call, my voice is to the ears of men." The great
line of human duty is so distinctly traced in the scrip-
tures, that he who runs may read. The essential rules
of conduct, to all intelligent and accountable being
must adhere, are there laid down in so clear and sati-
factory a manner, that if we enquire, we shall not
want information, if we read we cannot but un-
derstand. — Oh happy condition of our nature! God hath
not left himself without a witness in our breasts.
He hath taught us what is his good, acceptable,
perfect will. Then listen to the voice of God. Strive
not with the dictates of reason & the perceptions of the mind. Be mindful of the intimate connection that subsists between happiness & virtue; if you would obtain the other. Be virtuous & be blest.
At home, Sept. 19th, 1819, afternoon.
At home, this. Nov. 12th, 1820, forenoon.