No. 72.

On Conscience
Acts xxiv. 16. "And herein do I exercise myself, to have a conscience void of offence toward God and toward men."

It is impossible to read the speech from which this declaration is selected, without feeling a deep reverence for the sincerity, integrity, and piety of St. Paul's character. He was brought speechless alone before the Roman Governor, who was doubtless disposed to consider him, as at least no better than a disturber of the peace of a wild enthusiast. Around him were enemies, whose malice had long been fostering in their hearts, who had come to the tribunal prepared to determine to sacrifice him to their vengeance. Yet he stood unmoved from. Instead of being terrified at
the formidable hostile, wh. gathered around him, he was not even moved to bitterness. He replied to the false charges with the utmost coolness & dignity, yet resolutely asserted & defended his innocence. He declares that he had made no disturbance among the people, or in the synagogue, or in the city. For the truth of this he appeals to those who had witnessed his conduct. He proceeds to assure them, that if to be a fellow of a crime, to that crime he would cheerfully plead guilty. On this point he does not wish to equivocate for a moment. He promptly acknowledges, that according to the way, or that call be rotary, so much is to the God of his fathers, for the Jews too, as well as some in modern times, knew how to shut the eye of hatred, when they wished to crush a good, an innocent man. He then states his firm belief in that fundamental doctrine of faith, the doctrine of a resurrection from the dead. And herein, says he, as it should be, on this account, or account of my belief in this doctrine, I assure myself to have always & conscientiously void of offence, towards God & towards men. And this

is precisely the effect, what a belief in the doctrine of a future life should have; it should excite us to preserve that purity of heart, or in the eye of God. We can carry with us to the unseen world.

A reverence void of offense towards God & towards men, is the highest heaven, we can acquire. Man is growing distinguished more, than by his ability to master & guide his affections, & to mould his character. If we look to the immanent creation, we find it under the sway of certain laws, although they are in fact only the way in which God chooses to dictate, are yet fixed & altered; yet these they are called mechanical laws. This is no variation because there is no motion, no choice. In the moment, when the planets were launched forth into the mighty expanse where they now revolve, that point moment, their motions have been governed by the same laws without deviation without change; so it is with every part of the material creation; it proceeds unimpaired from the hand of omnipotence, when it was first fashioned by that impress it has ever since retains. When we rise one step higher & come to the animal world,
we find them directed by appetites & instincts, proper to seek preservation or gratification in the several ways adapted to their natures. Some of them contend with something wh. we can scarcely distinguish from reason. But we must ascendent still higher in the scale of creation, & come to man, before we can find a being who has faculties capable of making infinite combinations of infinite improvements, & who is able to exercise an ample judgment on his own actions. Man is not only capable of acting from choice & deliberately, but of knowing when he acts well. There is implanted within his breast a power of quick & subtle intuitive judgment on his own moral conduct: this is the bond of conscience. This it is: that quite as much as any other faculty distinguishes him from the beast, the worm, the fish & the reptile that creepeth on the ground. There is a law written on the heart. The heart, & it is written by the finger of God. & with this law there is likewise a power to commit sin, & to make our thoughts & actions are governed by it. This too is from God. We may define that law & duties, the character in wh. it is enounced, & so we may weaken or corrupt that power; but they are both given by the Almighty, & they are among his best & noblest gifts.

We usually consider conscience as a distinct & independent faculty of the mind, like the reasoning powers, memory, imagination &c. We speak of it as exercising a power has given to us. If we do not conceive a power, we are invested with power, we say it as exercising an influence, not give it a claim to be ranked entirely by itself. This perhaps is not strictly correct. If we attend to the definition of what we call conscience, we shall probably be convinced that it is not a distinct power, that it is nothing else, than reason existing in the office of passing judgment, according to its sentiments, of comparing conduct with some standard, &c. It is the same process, by which we judge of the actions of others, & by which we estimate the character of our fellow-men; the difference is, in the accompanying feelings; in the one case, the judgment, in the other
attended with deep sensation. quick sensation; in the other it is a matter of cold and indifference. What concerns others is a mere matter of speculation. If you know that your neighbor has committed a crime, you immediately pass a moral judgment upon his action, and after you have condemned it in your own mind, think no more of it; at least your indignation is excited only in proportion to the interest you feel in the general welfare of society, or to the particular person, whose have sustained in the injury—but when it is yourself who has committed the crime, the case is far different; you then feel that the guilt is imputed to you on your heart, the bad consequences of our present themselves in a thousand array before your soul—vice thrusts its sting—repentance quakes both from its deep springs in the heart. So it is likewise with a good action. When another has done a deed of virtue, your praise it, and perhaps your remembrance of it dies with the voice, that utters the praise, unless your general sentiment of admiration of goodness or your particular interest in the act, urges to keep it alive; yet, in yourself, you do not immediately communicate the deed, till it is followed by a strong moral sensation. The heart knows what it is to taste the pleasure of doing good, as a joy, which seems like a foretaste of the bliss of angels, and like a drinking-soup of the outskirts of heaven, spreads through the soul. Thus we see the difference between the judgments which we pass on ourselves, and those which we pass on others; the latter are unattained by any particular strong feeling of interest. But the former are almost inseparably connected with some of the deepest emotions of pain or pleasure which can agitate the heart; yet it is from this circumstance that they become so distinguished, as to receive the appellation of conscience. Thus it appears that the power of humanity of conscience, some have it, consists in two things: a judgment which pronounces sentence on our actions, a feeling which carries that sentence home, and makes it touch the heart. And it is from this latter part of the decision, i.e., from the moral sensibility, the feeling which accompanies the perception of
good or evil actions, that conscience derives its peculiar
value from it. It is indeed highly important, that the
judgment of moral conduct should be true and right.

- but usually the danger is not so great there;
there is more reason to fear a bad heart, than an un-
common head; we can all judge better, than we can feel.
We are ever more ready to acknowledge we are wrong, than
to feel regret for the wrong. When conscience wounds
the heart, that has sinned, it calls forth from its cham-
bers the fresh feelings of penitence; it when it pours
the tide of gladness into the heart, that has pulsa-
ted to a new & victorious deed, it gives it a transcendent
elation, a purifying joy. When it thus faithfully
executes its office, it is in a sound & healthy & vig-
orous state.

It has been disputed, whether the power of conscience
be a natural power or not. Doubtless it is as much
natural, as any of the operations of our minds are. It
acts seems sometimes spontaneously & almost im-
voluntarily, & its operations are too rapid to be arrested
of too sudden to be suspended. It is the avenger of God
on earth. It consists in man the withering lightening
of its effects; it sheds with its calm, an animating
shine. It detects the sinner in the midst of his sin.
His soul shudders under its rebuke. It finds
the good man in the midst of his benevolence of helpi-
sy, & speaks to him in whispers of peace & joy, in
language understood only by those who have felt the
"luxury of doing good." In short it is the monarch of
the breast, & he himself hath there erected its throne
up to him, who has laid that throne in dreams.

While we acknowledge, that the powers of conscience
are thus important, & that its voice, when uncomplimented,
may be considered as the voice of God, we see at once
that we are laid under a strong obligation, like that-
the to exercise ourselves to have a conscience void of
defense toward God? How may we then keep up a
true conscience? How may we make this monitor
within the herald of peace & joy?

If we would keep a clear conscience, we must listen
to it as well as we can, we must obey its
injunctions in topics of apparently minor import.
as well as on those, whose evidence is of great consequence.

It is very dangerous to disregard the admonitions of conscience on little things, for it is very dangerous to suppose that any thing can be little, which affects the character of our moral affections, general conduct. If conscience be pure, it will find it

by its acts, for the cases of small duties, whether it be one, or a thousand. For the sake of the

when it is known to the world of men, of oneself, and only by the heart, and conscience is the hand,

executed it. But such is the unhappy propensity of

man, to become an enemy to his own conscience and

disgrace the admonitions of conscience in one case, and then disregard them in another. In all that part of conduct, with to extend its effects to others, what to be

one public, is to be seen, as well as the world around us; we are perhaps sufficiently willing to appeal to the

authority of this internal monitor; but there are many

parts of our conduct, in which we would not hear the

liberty of considering it as a matter of indifference,

once, whether we do good or ill, since the consequences

of the action are perhaps to affect only ourselves. As

it never is one can be a limit of indifference, whether

you regard the dictates of conscience in private

acts of no evil come from acting against her admonitions

in any particular case, but the habit which is formed

in us, is more powerful to moral goodness. For he can

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prophet Elijah. If you cannot hear the still small voice, it is to be feared you will lose none of the awful terrors of the day. The flames may burn, but you, the Lord will not be there; the earth quake, the wind may rush through the plain, but the Lord will not be there; the mighty winds may rend the mountains, and over the cock, but the Lord will not be there. If you would keep a conscience void of offence, pay a scrupulous and overbearing regard to its dictates in every case, the most trifling subject, do not once try the fatal experiment of resisting its dictates. Let every scruple, as soon as you have once begun, feel it is not for yourself to say where you stand. If you would preserve a conscience void of offence, strive to have a conscience perfectly enlightened and informed. This direction is of primary importance, for the neglect of it may often the more to great, if gross abuses. It is incumbent on us to observe how readily mankind will convert the best thing into an instrument for the most unholy purposes. There is scarcely a crime, and in no age, that man has not been accused as justified under the plea of con-

science. If it is a plea, or every one can make, why ignore it? We cannot, because the glance of man does not reach the heart; we cannot deny to any one the motives he chose to claim. Man may act in defiance of the laws of God and society; he may break down every barrier of principle and of the most solemn obligation. We may assert that his conduct is according to the dictates of his conscience, or that of the law. If he acted otherwise, he should ordain his sense of right and duty. St. Paul says that before he became a Christian he thought within himself that he ought to do many things contrary to the name of Christ and the darkness. He says, "Be not corrupted from the things of this life," and the devil. He believed it to be his duty to destroy all the sins, and he accordingly did execute his command with relentless perseverance. Shall we then allow that, because a crime seems not to have been done in compliance with the dictates of conscience, it ceases to be a crime? Shall we allow this idea, that if it be once allowed to apologize for vice? By no means. If it is remembered, the guilt is consigned to an everlasting curse, to fall into this state of corruption. It is a duty to
by the commands of conscience, it is no less a duty to enlighten & instruct in conscience, that its commands may be such as can be obeyed with innocence. What would one think of the man, who should dash his vessel on rocks on which he might have avoided, & then endeavor to excuse himself by saying that he was blemished by the mind's disease? And yet why is not his defense as good as that of the man, who sins, because conscience prompts to him to sin, when he has permitted his moral judgment to be overruled & perverted by all the bad influences of passion, of pride, of selfish interest, or the love of pleasure or of gain? God has given us abundant means of knowing our duty; by the light of reason, by the light of Scripture, we are enabled to discern the path in which we should walk; if there are any for its standing or its narrow parts, that we may not escape if we will. scarcely a case can be mentioned in which, if we have an erroneous conscience, it is not our own fault, if there is even the idea of such a conscience we ourselves have conducted, or the attempt to avenge from one fault, by stating another fault as the cause from which it sprang. There may be instances, where circumstances by themselves are so overbearingly bad, as almost necessarily to make & correct the moral judgment; where is mercy for insensible temptation, but in cases of compulsion where are few, very few, of this sort. The darkness of an erroneous conscience does not, too often come from the corruption of a bad heart, but us makes for us use of all the means of enlightening our minds, informing our judgment, & God will be pleased to use them to little danger that we shall be held for acting. But if we neglect to use these sources of instruction, conscience may become to us a minister of evil instead of good. If that light within us should turn clear, then its beams shining around us, may be so clouded, as to send only a feeble & wandering ray, that will serve but to hinder & mislead.

& He who would keep a conscience void of offense must cultivate & cherish a keen moral sensibility; he must endeavor to feel deeply as well as to think correctly; he must be able to a quick sense of right & wrong of
purity & impurity. It is here indeed that the power of conscience, strictly speaking, is found. The cease to feel our duty, much more, than our cease to perceive it. We know that there are those, who can reason about virtue most forcibly & clearly, & describe its claims & its rewards with all the eloquence of natural talent — men whose powerful minds have penetrated into the sources of moral obligation, have traced the passions to their springs — & marked the first signs of the waters, as they flow from various points to form the stream of society, with all itsinterests, all its pleasures, & all its vices; & yet these men, with respect to the exercise of the good qualities, which they know so well how to delineate, will help more coldly & heartless, than the most igniscent & mean of mankind. There are some, whose moral feelings can be raised only by strong excitement, & whose moral perceptions are not exercised to discern between good & evil in affairs of apparently small importance; others are still, the edge of whose sensibility has been so blunted by depraved indulgence, that vice must press hard upon them, or appear in some very disgusting form, before it can startle their feelings or drive them to mortise. Now of all such pains it may be feared that the power of conscience is already weak. & will still grow weaker, it needs so much to awaken it, that its force will not often be distinguish'd. If then we would keep alive the quickness of this internal monitor, let us enter with peculiar care all the best of parts, of our moral sensibilities.

We have seen that conscience derives its office & its authority from God himself; where therefore shall we find a higher or greater than the Law, which God has established in the heart of man? For who can any principle be in the heart of a man? The power of conscience reached a fearful point of rashness; the power of conscience is usually the last good principle, that exists in a man. One principle after another may fall away; but this usually remains, as the core of the plant, & the wreck has left us to stand upon; so when this is gone, where is our hope, where is our refuge? He who has foreseen the need to seat on the progress of guilt, that conscience
has lost its force over him, & he can no longer feel the power of remove, is truly to be pitied. For though this internal favorite may be now indulged, broken down, yet in some terrible moment for the sinner, she will recover her power, & will rise like an angry indignant at an affront, & bent upon retaliation. She will not be slighted with impunity: in the language of one of our moral poets, "while she seems to sleep, "in weary sighs, the echoes with agonized "While the scene, nothing was to change, to shift. "in heaving appetite the blacken'd moon, "And give up the licence unexampled. "Unmasked: see from behind her secret stand. "The sky in terror minutes every fault. "The black clay dirty with burning fields!"

Many a crime, many a sin has wept for the years after years, till at last conscience flecked the remembrance on the mind, & the most harden'd heart has been wrung with remorse... If then we would avoid, on the one hand, the torture of agonizing recollections, & on the other, the fearful instability of a crumbling eminence, let us, like the Apostle, strive to keep a conscience void of offense.
Father of Mercies, source of all good, we thank
for all those faculties with which thou hast digni-
\[sic\]ed our natures, for all those means of moral &
spiritual improvement, with all those that surround
us. We thank thee especially for the powers of con-
science, for the faculty of moral judgment, the
capacity for moral feeling. We praise thee, that
we are enabled to compare our actions with the stand-
ard of truth & of thy holy word, & thereby to deter-
mine what we have transgressed or obeyed thy will. We pray
that we may ever strive to have a conscience void of
fear towards God & towards man, that we may listen
to the voice of this internal monitor wh. thou hast
placed within our breasts, & obey its dictates. May
we seek to have an enlightened & instructed conscience;
your blessed law, for light to conduct.
no tears duty in this world, is to guide us to the
mansions of heaven.  

At home.  Aug. 27th, 1820.  forenoon.  
At home.  June 9th, 1822.  forenoon.  
At Mrs. Reynolds, July 7th, 1822.  afternoon.  
At Boscohine.  Sept. 8th, 1822.  forenoon.