

The Precepts of the Word of God

by J. C. Philpot



Introduction

Encouraged by the kind way in which our "Meditations on Various Important Points of our Most Holy Faith" have been thus far received by many of our gracious readers, we feel a willing mind to continue following onward in the same track; and as hitherto we have found, we hope, seasonable help from the only Source of all light and life, so would we now at the opening of another year, and the commencement of a fresh subject, lift up our soul in unison, we trust, with theirs, that "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, would give unto us the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him, the eyes of our understanding being enlightened," that as the Lord the Spirit may be pleased to bring before our mind and lay upon our heart any portion of his precious word which may seem to us to be of vital importance, or of an edifying nature, we may unfold it with that "demonstration of the spirit and of power" which shall, as "seasoned with salt," not only minister grace unto our readers, ([Col 4:6](#); [Eph 4:29](#);) but shall, "by manifestation of the truth, commend itself to every man's conscience in the sight of God." ([Eph 1:17-18](#); [1Co 2:4](#) : [2Co 4:2](#).)

It is indeed a high privilege conferred upon us, a favor from on high for which we cannot feel sufficiently thankful, that the Lord should condescend to make any use of so weak and worthless an instrument to communicate any measure of instruction, comfort, or encouragement to any of those whom he has eternally loved, and whom he is leading through many a painful path of trial and affliction to a knowledge of his love here, that they may enjoy it in its full fruition hereafter. And as the Lord has been pleased, for his own wise purposes, to lay us aside, for a time at least, from the active work of the ministry, we feel doubly bound to avail ourselves of the privilege still granted to us to communicate with his dear people by our pen, and thus be neither idle ourselves, nor wholly unprofitable to the Church of God. We purpose, therefore, with God's help and blessing, to bring before our readers in this and several following papers some thoughts upon the preceptive part of the word of truth, and especially as contained in and enforced by the Scriptures of the New Testament.

Several reasons have concurred to direct our mind to this particular point of heavenly truth—

1. First, it is a branch of divine revelation which, without wishing to speak harshly or censoriously, has in our judgment been sadly perverted by many on the one hand, and we must say almost as sadly neglected, if not altogether ignored and passed by, by many on the other. The probable causes of this neglect, or, to speak more decidedly, of this serious omission, we shall presently consider.
2. But a second reason for our taking up this subject is, if we may speak with all humility of ourselves, that it is one into which of late years we seem to have been more particularly led.
3. And thirdly, the consideration of the preceptive part of the word will, we think, form a not inappropriate sequel to our late papers on its power and authority on the heart.

But let us now, by way of introduction to our subject, for the sake of clearness, first define and explain what we understand by "the precept," or, according to our title, "the Preceptive Part of the Word of God." Great clearness and precision are needed on this point, that we may so run not as uncertainly, so fight not as one that beats the air, but, as a workman that needs not to be ashamed, may rightly divide the word of truth. ([1Co 9:26](#); [2Ti 2:15](#).) To make, then, our meaning as clear and as distinct as we can, we will view the point from two sides—its negative and its positive aspect.

1. First, then, negatively. By the precept we do not mean any part of the old "Do and live" covenant, but we carefully and rigidly exclude every point, fact, or consideration which springs out of, is connected with, or bears upon the law of works, either as a covenant or as a rule, either as justifying or as sanctifying, either as binding upon the conscience or as influencing the heart and life. Here we wish to stand particularly clear and decided, and to give place, no, not for an hour, to any men or measures, doctrine or experience, principle or practice, letter or spirit, word or work, which would bring us into bondage, or put a legal yoke on the neck of Christ's true disciples. No! let us be clear here; let us stand fast in the liberty with which Christ has made us free, and not, in our zeal for the precept, put ourselves under the curse of the law, or mingle the smoke and flame of Mount Sinai with the bright and glorious light of Mount Zion.

Let us keep a clear distinction between "Do and live"—and "Live and do;" between the spirit of bondage—and the spirit of adoption; between the forced task of a convict in chains—and the willing

obedience of a loving son; between the thief skulking in the pantry—and the child sitting at the table; between the grudging eye-service of a slave under the fear of the lash—and the affectionate offices of a wife whose best reward is a smile and a kiss.

If we cannot keep these things distinct, we had better put our fingers into the fire than handle with them the precepts of the New Testament. O, in considering this weighty subject, for some small measure of the grace and wisdom which so shine forth in the epistles of blessed Paul, in keeping distinct the law and the gospel, in separating between the ministration of condemnation, bondage, and death—and the ministration of righteousness, liberty, and life. Who so fervid as he against binding the legal yoke upon the neck of those whom the truth has made free, and confounding the children of promise with the children of the bond-woman? Hear his thunders, which, as armed with all the authority and power of an apostle of God, he launches against the Galatian teachers who, by their legal doctrines, would trouble the believing disciples of Jesus, and pervert the gospel of Christ. ([Gal 1:7-9](#).) And yet mark how the same man of God could, with the grace of the gospel in his heart and the precepts of the gospel in his hand, be as gentle as a mother, and as loving as a father—"but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children." "As you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father does his children, that you would walk worthy of God, who has called you unto his kingdom and glory." ([1Th 2:7](#); [1Th 2:11-12](#).)

2. But, having defined what we do not mean by the precept, in other words, having viewed it negatively, let us now define what we do mean by it, in other words, let us view it positively. We mean, then, by "the precept," or the "preceptive part of the word of God," those exhortations, injunctions, commands, entreaties, admonitions—call them by what name you will, so long as you attach to the word which you use a definite meaning, which the Holy Spirit has revealed in the New Covenant as claiming our attention and our obedience, and as thus addressed to our heart, and intended to be influential upon our life.

The **precept** is not **doctrine**, though founded upon it, nor **experience**, though connected with it, but stands apart from each, as possessing a peculiar, distinctive character of its own. All the three are equally a part of the same gospel, have the same Author, the same sanction, the same authority; and therefore are all three to be received by the same faith, with the same reverence, and in the same love. He who rejects or despises the one rejects or despises the other; and he who by divine power and influence truly believes the doctrine, will spiritually feel the experience, and graciously perform the precept.

Why, then, has the precept been so neglected among the Churches of truth? Friends and brethren, is it so—or is it not so? Guilty or not guilty, servants of the living God, members of Churches founded upon the love of truth in its purity and power? We are not speaking here, mind you, of a man tying at the end of a sermon the precepts together into a bundle of rods and flogging with them Christ's sheep and lambs. That is legality. That is not preaching the precept as Paul preached it, and as the Holy Spirit has revealed it. To handle the precept properly, is to handle it spiritually, in the love and spirit of the gospel, with a broken heart and a melted soul—broken by a sense of sin, and melted by a sense of mercy. This, not to anticipate future explanation, this is what we mean by preaching the precept. But are there no reasons for this omission? Surely there are, or the omission would not be so wide-spread. Have we not ourselves been guilty here? We freely confess our fault this day, and perhaps we have but to look into our own bosom to find why others have been faulty too.

Now we confess that for some years after we had received the love of truth we did not clearly or fully see the connection of the **precept** with the **doctrines** of grace and the **experience** of the saints. We saw, what was obvious enough, that the precept occupied a large and prominent place in the New Testament, and as such we received it. But two difficulties seemed to stand in the way of its cordial and hearty reception, and a right view of its beauty and blessedness as a part of divine revelation. These were, 1, the sinfulness; 2, the inability of the creature, and of ourselves in particular.

The consciousness of utter inability to perform the precept made it as if too inaccessible to the hand to reach it; the holiness of the precept made it as if too pure for the hand to touch it. Thus, if passed by, it was not from contempt—but reverence; if not handled, it was not from willful neglect—but from not properly seeing its place in the gospel of the grace of God. Allow us a few words on this point. All truth, especially revealed truth, must be consistent with itself—harmonious in every part. But to see this consistency and harmony, not only must the eye be duly instructed, but must look at it from the right point of view. Will our readers permit us to use a figure or two to illustrate our meaning? In some gallery of art*

take your stand before a beautiful picture, say one of Turner's grand sea-views. Look at it near at hand; what is it? A mass of blotches and smears, with dabs of white paint here and there. Go back a few steps, and view it from the right point. What a change! What beauty, what harmony, what coloring! The blotches and smears resolve themselves into a sea heaving with life and motion, and the dabs of paint are waves, curling with foam as if they would dash at your very feet. *It will be observed that this is merely an illustration, and does not imply that we sanction Christians visiting the exhibition, or public picture-galleries.

Take a more familiar figure. Look through a microscope at a photograph. What do you see? Something like a building, but all confusion. Wait a moment. Now you have got the focus. What do you see now? The front of a palace or a cathedral, with every architectural detail so clear and distinct that you might fancy yourself looking upon the very building itself. So in divine truth. Let the eye be spiritually opened, let the right point of view be gained, and then every part falls into its right place—full of beauty and harmony. While then we view the precept from a legal standing, we must see it distorted and out of place. It is what we may call out of perspective; we do not see it from the same point of view as the Holy Spirit has drawn it in the word, and as he intended it to be looked at with a believing eye. But when we see, as represented in the gospel, doctrine and experience, promise and precept, love and obedience, motive and action, receiving Christ and walking in him, the grace which saves and the grace which sanctifies, the blood that cleanses and the water that washes, Christ as Priest to atone, Christ as Prophet to teach, Christ as King to rule—all forming one harmonious whole, all combining in one glorious plan for the glory of God and the present and future blessedness of his people, then we view "the truth as it is in Jesus" almost as Moses gazed on the land of promise from Pisgah's height, or as, John "saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." ([Rev 21:2.](#))

But there was another reason, perhaps, why we did not see the beauty and harmony of the precept. Having had our fleshly holiness and creature piety knocked to pieces, having passed for several years through much inward exercise and temptation, and having learned in that school the thorough helplessness of the creature; then being delivered from the galling yoke of legality and self-righteousness, and having tasted the sweetness and the freeness of gospel grace—our mind revolted from everything which seemed legal, Pharisaical, or self-righteous. Thus there was a going to the opposite extreme; and, to avoid one evil, there was not a falling into, but too near an approach to the other. Repelled and almost disgusted by the way in which Arminians, moderate Calvinists, and the whole race of man-made preachers handled the invitations and precepts of the gospel, holding them out to dead men to act upon and perform, there was a shrinking from any confederacy with such doings and dealings, such teachings and preachings, such a turning of things upside down, such a fouling of the waters, such a treading down of the pastures of the flock of slaughter. Besides which we saw in even some good men (men of whom we had hoped better things) a legal bias, which led them to use the precept more as a rod for others, than as a rule for themselves, and rather to feed a spirit of bitterness in their own minds and of those whom they influenced—than as the pure milk of the word that they might grow thereby—the result being rather spiritual pride and self-exaltation among many of the real people of God—than humility, brokenness, brotherly kindness, and love. Hence separation between ministers of truth and divisions in Churches, being just the contrary effect to the real spirit and intention of the precept.

These things all combined to produce an injurious effect; and thus the precept, being thrust out of its place, lost a good measure of its loveliness, and seemed rather alongside the building, than a glorious part of it. "As in water face answers to face, so the heart of man to man." Thus it may be that some of our experience on this point may have been the experience of others; and if so, it may explain why the precept has been too much neglected by them as well as by us.

But for the last few years we have been called to walk in a somewhat different path. We have had much affliction of body, and with it much exercise of mind upon the things of God, with many searchings of heart. We wish to speak upon this point very cautiously, knowing the hypocrisy and deceitfulness of our wretched nature; but we trust that through these afflictions and accompanying exercises there has been wrought in our heart a greater, as well as a more earnest and abiding desire to walk more closely with the Lord, to live more in his fear, and to know more of his Person and work, mind and will in the revelations of himself through the word of his grace. Not that we are one whit better; not that we find our nature less corrupt, or our heart less deceitful above all things, or less desperately wicked. Not that we can move forward a single step with any more life or power; not that our barren seasons are not many and long, and

our fruitful seasons few and short.

No, all this we may but more increasingly feel, and yet not be wholly given up to carelessness and carnality, but only all the more bend our back to the word which smites it, or our neck to the word which yokes it. And yet we cannot but acknowledge that light upon the precept seems to have come gradually into our mind, and its place in the word of truth to have been more clearly opened to our understanding, and larger room made for it in our heart and conscience. How far this light is from above, let our gracious readers judge, when we shall have accomplished our task, from the truth and savour of our communication, and the weight and power with which it may be commended to their conscience as harmonizing with the word of God and their personal experience.

But as we have confessed our fault in not at one time clearly seeing the place of the precept in the gospel of the grace of God, so we have thought it best to state as simply as we could the way in which we have been led to our present views and feelings on this important part of divine truth. In thus speaking, we have not, through rich mercy, any past error to acknowledge, any wrong or perverted view, any willful or unseemly neglect, any delusive experience as a Christian man, any false teaching as a Christian minister to confess—but we have rather thankfully to record a greater enlargement of desire at least after, if not of fuller attainment unto, "the knowledge of God's will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding." ([Col 1:9](#).) And as we are bidden to "grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ," we should certainly desire and aim both for ourselves and others not to be ever fixed as a post at one and the same spot, or lie like a dead man at the same point of knowledge and experience, as if we already knew all that was to be known, and having reached the goal, were only waiting for the conqueror's crown—but rather with blessed Paul, forgetting the things which are behind, should reach forth unto those things which are before, and thus press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

Let, then, this suffice for an introduction to our subject, as to commence it in our present paper would either require more space than we can well afford, or compel us to break off abruptly soon after we had made a beginning.

As we advance onward in the divine life, we usually see and feel more and more of the thick darkness and gross ignorance which brood by nature over our mind, and we become more fully convinced of our utter inability to understand or realize the certainty and power of spiritual things, except by a gracious revelation of them to our soul. "The things of the Spirit of God" we feel can only be, as the Apostle says, "spiritually discerned;" ([1Co 2:14](#);) for being high, heavenly, and holy, they are, from their very nature, far beyond the sight, far out of the reach of our natural understanding, strain itself as much as it may, let it be cultivated to the utmost of its powers. As it is only in God's light that we see light, ([Psa 36:9](#),) and as whatever does make manifest its light, ([Eph 5:13](#),) the very sight and sense that we have of our darkness springs from the light of life in our soul.

As, then, we grow in light and life, for there is or should be a growth in grace, ([2Pe 3:18](#),) there is a growing discovery and a deeper feeling of the darkness of our mind in the things of God. But all is not darkness with those who have been delivered from the power of darkness—for darkness is one thing and the power of darkness another—and been "translated into the kingdom of God's dear Son." ([Col 1:13](#).) Every now and then there are favored moments when glimpses and glances of heavenly realities, in their brightness and glory, break in upon their soul; and then, perhaps, they are as suddenly withdrawn, much almost, if we may use such comparisons, as the sheet which Peter saw in vision was received up again into heaven, or as the cloud received the ascending Lord out of the sight of his gazing disciples. ([Act 1:9](#); [Act 10:16](#).) But from these breakings in of divine light we obtain those spiritual views of heavenly realities which not only reveal their nature to the enlightened understanding, and seal their blessedness on the heart—but deeply convince us also what a veil there is over our mind when it is not thus graciously lifted up. Will our readers permit us to use a figure to illustrate this? (We crave this indulgence, because some, whose judgment in divine things we much respect, object to the use of figures for the purpose of illustrating scriptural truth, on the ground that spiritual things cannot be explained by natural comparisons. Admitting to some degree the force of this objection, we still find, as a matter of continual experience, that an appropriate figure, cautiously and temperately used, and not pressed beyond its legitimate bearing, will often convey an explanation of a truth where reasoning seems to fail; for many can understand a comparison who cannot comprehend an argument. Argument is much more forcible and much less

fallacious than figure, but demands a more trained mind. We, therefore, to meet different readers, seek to blend both; and while we base our views and our explanation of them upon scriptural argument, we intersperse, as occasion serves, illustrations and comparisons, not only to enliven, but to throw light upon our subject.)

On a misty day, when thick fog hides from view the surrounding landscape, the sun will sometimes suddenly burst forth; in a moment the veil is lifted up, and the whole prospect shines out bright and clear. The lofty mountain chain, or the smiling valley, or the long, winding sea coast, with all its rocky headlands, which had been shrouded in mist, stands out at once to view like a sudden apparition of beauty, and the whole landscape presents itself fully and clearly to the eye as a lovely, harmonious whole. But the mist returns almost as suddenly as it was drawn up; one object after another becomes wrapped up in cloud, until the whole view is again buried out of sight. And yet all is not gone. We can remember what we have seen. An impression has been made on the mind, which remains fixed as a durable recollection, though the vivid clearness is vanished and gone, and what we see now is but mist and fog.

May we not apply this illustration to our views of spiritual things, both as regards light and darkness? For the most part we groan and sigh under a sense of the thick darkness of our mind, for though the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun, yet the days of darkness are many. ([Ecc 11:7-8](#).) This is the dense mist and fog. But there are times and seasons when the Sun of righteousness suddenly arises upon the soul, with healing in his wings. ([Mal 4:2](#).) Then the mist and fog are immediately dispersed. Light beams into the heart; and at once the whole plan and scheme of salvation from grace to glory, from before the foundation of the world to the ages to come, from the original purposes of God to their full and final accomplishment in a blissful eternity, shine forth.

This is produced sometimes by reading the word, sometimes by the power of a passage of Scripture applied to the heart, sometimes in secret meditation, sometimes when on one's knees before the Lord seeking his gracious face. At these favored moments there is an entrance of divine light into the soul, for "the entrance of your words gives light;" ([Psa 119:130](#);) and this light spreads itself, as it were, over the word of truth, lighting up every part on which it shines with an indescribable beauty and glory. Let us read, for instance, under such a divine power and influence, Ephesians 1, or Romans 8, or the discourses of our blessed Lord with his disciples before his sufferings and death, or that wondrous prayer, (John 17,) in which he interceded for them, and for us too who believe in his name, (ver. 20,) as the great High Priest over the house of God.

As we read these heavenly truths, and faith is drawn out upon and mixed with what we read, what beauty and blessedness shine through every sentence; and how the glorious gospel of the grace of God beams forth, as with light from heaven, to connect every part into one grand harmonious whole. As the soul becomes softened and melted under the power and influence of the word thus made to it spirit and life, all seeming difficulties vanish; and not a jarring note interrupts the harmony of the heavenly choir of gospel truths, making sweet melody in the heart. At such moments and in such a frame, what we cannot fully understand we are content to leave; caviling and contention with either God or man, with both ourselves and others, die away, for they cannot live in this heavenly atmosphere; and the majesty and power of the word of the living God both awe the mind with reverence, and draw forth the affections into love.

All **doctrine**, all **experience**, all **precept** are then seen to center, as one grand harmonious whole, in the glorious Person of the Son of God. From him they all come; to him they all flow. Severed from him, doctrine is seen to be but a withered branch, experience but a delusive dream, precept but a legal service. But his light enlightening, his life quickening, his power attending the word of his grace—doctrine is seen to be no longer doctrine dry and dead, but glorious truth; experience to be not a mere matter of fluctuating feeling, but a blessed reality, as the very kingdom of God set up with a divine power in the heart; and obedience not a legal duty, but a high, holy, and acceptable service.

But we must not anticipate our subject, for it will be found that in the channel thus briefly sketched our views and thoughts will chiefly run. And yet we have ventured to give this preliminary sketch, as feeling desirous, on the one hand, to disarm at the very outset all suspicions which might arise in the mind of friend or foe, that by taking up the precept we were swerving from the truth into legality; and, on the other, to prepare the way for a fuller consideration of the point which we have undertaken to elucidate. Without further preface, then, we purpose, in handling the subject before us, to consider the **precepts of the Word of God** mainly under these four heads:

- I. The IMPORTANCE of the precepts.
- II. The NATURE of the precepts.
- III. The place of the precepts in the WORD.
- IV. The place of the precepts in the HEART and LIFE.

The Precepts of the Word of God

by J. C. Philpot

The IMPORTANCE of the precepts

1. One very simple proof of the importance of the precept is what we may call its BULK. Let us examine this point by looking at several of the epistles of the New Testament. We particularly mention these, because as being addressed to Christian Churches, the precept occupies in the epistles its distinctive and peculiar place as a harmonious part of the revolution of grace and truth in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Take, then, as our first instance, the Epistle to the **Ephesians**—the fullest and richest, and what we may perhaps call, the highest in doctrine, of all that Paul, under divine inspiration, wrote to the Churches. Out of six chapters in this epistle three are preceptive, mingled indeed with and based upon doctrinal and experimental truth, for in this channel the precept always runs; but assuming the form of clear, positive exhortation, admonition, warning, and directive. Consider this point, you ministers, who Lord's day after Lord's day preach nothing but doctrine, doctrine, doctrine; and ask yourselves whether the same Holy Spirit who revealed the first three chapters of the Epistle to the Ephesians did not also reveal the last three? Is not the whole epistle equally inspired, a blessed part of that Scripture of which we read—"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." ([2Ti 3:16-17.](#)) How, then, can you be complete as a minister and thoroughly equipped for every good work—if you willfully neglect any part of that Scripture which God has given to be profitable to you, and to others by you?

But let us examine this point a little more closely. "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that you walk worthy of the vocation with which you are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love; endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." ([Eph 4:1-3.](#)) In the preceding chapters the Apostle had set before the believing Ephesians their eternal election in Christ, their predestination unto the adoption of children, their redemption through the blood of Jesus, even the forgiveness of their sins, their sealing by the Holy Spirit of promise as a pledge of their inheritance, their being built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, and that for a habitation of God through the Spirit. What a cluster of heavenly blessings, and all theirs as saints and believers in Christ Jesus!

What then? "I therefore." What a "therefore!" How it throws us back upon those spiritual blessings with which God has blessed us in heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ([Eph 1:3,](#)) and brings them all to bear upon our walk and conduct! "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that you walk worthy of the vocation with which you are called," etc. But not content with this general exhortation, the Apostle follows up the precept for three successive chapters, pressing upon their heart and conscience every godly fruit, such as humility, meekness, patience, forbearance, love and union, mutual forgiveness; and mingles his exhortations with solemn warnings against every sin, such as uncleanness, lying, anger, theft, bitterness, wrath, evil speaking, etc.

Observe, too, how special and practical he is, taking up not only our individual walk and conduct, but entering also into all our family relationships, urging on husbands, wives, children, servants, masters, every relative duty, and the whole grounded on the highest motives, and based on heavenly and spiritual principles. Thus, in this epistle we have the highest doctrine and the highest practice, the most exalted views of the sovereign, eternal grace of God the Father, (1:3-12, 19-23,) of the unspeakable love of God the Son, (3:17-19,) and of the quickening, sealing, strengthening work of God the Holy Spirit, (1:13, 17; 2:1, 18, 22; 3:16.) And following up this full and glorious exposition of the deepest doctrinal truth we find the closest precept, bringing before our eyes, as the fruit of all this sovereign grace, the most active obedience of heart, lip, and life, with every inward grace and every outward fruit. Look at this point, dear readers. Examine it for yourselves. You have your Bibles before you. You need no learning, no great education to understand this. You only need two eyes—the natural eye, the eye of the body, to read the letter, and the spiritual eye, the eye of the soul—to read the spirit of your Bible. When, then, you are a little favored in your soul; when you feel your heart softened and melted by a sense of God's goodness

and mercy, get alone for a little while, enter your closet and shut your door—the outward and the inward door, ([Mat 6:6](#);) and prayerfully read the Epistle to the Ephesians; and as your faith embraces, with a holy joy and heavenly sweetness, the glorious truths of the first three chapters, read on, and by the same faith embrace the wise and holy precepts in the last three, which flowed from the same Holy Spirit who inspired and indited the first.

As there is but "one Spirit" and "one faith," ([Eph 4:4-5](#);) depend upon it, if the blessed Spirit enlightens the eyes of your understanding to see the doctrine, and anoint your heart to feel the power of sovereign grace, the same blessed Spirit will anoint your eyes and heart to see and feel the power of effectual grace; and will shine upon the inspired precept as well as upon the inspired promise. Nor will your faith which embraces salvation be less willing to embrace the things which accompany salvation. ([Heb 6:9](#).) We know, indeed, that to do this requires a spiritual mind; but we write for spiritual readers—for those who know something of the power of the word upon the heart, as well as the meaning of the letter of the word in their understanding.

Take next the Epistle to the **Colossians**, which we may call a sister epistle of that to the Ephesians, as written about the same time, (A.D. 61, when Paul was a prisoner at Rome,) and dwelling chiefly on the same glorious truths. This epistle contains four chapters. Of these, two are preceptive, that is, half of the epistle. Is not this a significant fact? and can it be safe or consistent with becoming reverence to the word of God's grace tacitly to set aside half an epistle as of little or no significance? Next look at **1 Thessalonians**. This contains five chapters, of which the last two are wholly preceptive; and if, instead of reckoning by the chapters, we count the verses, we shall find that somewhat more than half (46 out of 89 verses) are devoted to the subject of practice and the claims of Christian obedience.

But an objection may be here started, that we have picked the epistles, and have omitted two of the longest and most important, that, namely, to the Romans, and that to the Hebrews, to neither of which our test of bulk will apply. It is perfectly true that in neither of these epistles is the proportion of precept to doctrine, measured by bulk, so great as in those which we have examined. But there is a sound and valid reason for this apparent disproportion in both cases. In setting forth, for instance, the grand doctrine of justification by faith in the blood and righteousness of the Son of God, which forms the chief subject of the Epistle to the **Romans**, it was necessary to be full and ample, that so important a truth might be placed upon a broad and permanent basis. A short epistle, like that to the Philippians, could not have adequately set forth, in all its various bearings, that foundation doctrine which Luther calls "the article whereby the Church stands or falls." A certain degree, therefore, of drawn out, argumentative proof (for the doctrinal part of the Epistle to the Romans is a most masterly and logical piece of sustained reasoning) was necessary to place upon an unshaken foundation the Church's grand bulwark against error for all time.

Similarly the priesthood of the Lord Jesus, which forms the subject of the Epistle to the **Hebrews**, could not be treated in all its fullness and bearings except at considerable length; for it was necessary to trace in it the fulfillment of the Levitical dispensation, with its types and sacrifices, in the Person and work of the God-man Mediator. We see, therefore, at once, from these considerations, sufficient reasons why these two epistles form an apparent exception to our test of bulk. And yet in both of them the precept, if measured, not by actual bulk but by weight, by quality not by quantity, which surely is an admirable test, is not less strong and powerful.

Read, for instance, Romans 12, 13, 14. What a weight of precept; how condensed, and yet how comprehensive. What firm and strong gospel principles are laid down. The mercies of God; (12:1;) the property which Christ has in us; (14:7-9;) our membership with him and with one another; (12:4, 5;) the spiritual nature of the kingdom of God; (14:17, 18;) the example of Christ; (15:3-6;) the claims of brotherly love; (13:8-10;) the near approach of full and final salvation; (13:11;) and our accountability to God; (14:12;) what a foundation is thus laid. And upon this broad basis of Christian privilege what a godly superstructure of Christian precept. Read from [Rom 12:1](#) to 15:7. What a weight of precept. How close and condensed, and yet how full is chapter 12; and with what a weighty, influential principle it begins—"I beseech you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world; but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God." The body to be presented a living sacrifice unto God; non-conformity to the world; but a transformation of the renewed mind into the image of Christ, with a sensible experience and proof

thereby of the perfect will of God. What a foundation for all vital, practical godliness.

But we must not forestall our subject, as these things will have to be considered at length as we proceed. Let it suffice for the present to ask ourselves this simple question, "Can it be right, can it be safe, can it be scriptural, to treat all this fullness and weight of precept with no more attention than an obsolete Act of Parliament? or, to speak less harshly, to receive it as the word of God much as we might do the last chapters of Ezekiel, which we little read and less understand, though we have no doubt of its being a part of the inspired Scriptures?"

The same observations will apply to the Epistle to the Hebrews. Measured by bulk, the amount of the preceptive part of the epistle falls short of the doctrinal; but who that reads the two last chapters can deny the weight of exhortation, admonition, warning, and direction with which these are filled, but which our limits will not allow us to do more than point out?

But it will be observed that we have merely indicated bulk as one proof of the importance of the precept. If our readers feel disposed to follow up our argument, let them examine in this point of view the Epistle to the Galatians, of which two chapters out of six (5, 6) are preceptive; the Epistle to the Philippians, in which precept is so prominent a feature, and so blended with doctrine, (1:6; 2:5-11; 3:20, 21,) and with experience (1:21-23; 3:7-14,) that it may be called a model of preceptive writing; the Epistles to Timothy and Titus, which are nearly all precept; and the Epistles of Peter and James, which are filled with precept from first to last. The amount of precept in the epistles, measured only by the simple test of quantity, would surprise a person whose attention had not been directed to that point, if he would but carefully examine it. But it is sad to say how little the Scriptures are read among us with that intelligent attention, that careful and prayerful studiousness, that earnest desire to understand, believe, and experimentally realize their divine meaning, which they demand and deserve, and which the word of God compares to seeking as for silver, and searching as for hidden treasure. ([Pro 2:4.](#))

2. But the importance of the precept will be evident from another consideration. **Were there no precepts in the New Testament, we would be without an inspired rule of life, without an authoritative guide for our walk and conduct before the Church and the world. We rightly discard and reject the 'law of Moses' as the believer's rule of life.** What, then, is our rule? Are we a set of lawless wretches who may live as we desire, according to the libelous charge of the enemies of truth? God forbid! We have a divine, authoritative rule of life, a code of directions of the amplest, fullest, minutest character, intended and sufficient to regulate and control every thought, word, and action of our lives; and all flowing from the eternal wisdom and will of the Father, sealed and ratified by the blood of the Son, and inspired and revealed by the Holy Spirit.

When, then, it is thrown in our teeth that, by discarding the 'law of Moses' as our rule of life, we prove ourselves licentious, lawless Antinomians, this is our answer, and let God and his word decide whether it be not a sufficient one. Not so. We have a rule of life as far exceeding the 'law of Moses' as the new covenant of grace and truth in the glorious Person of the Son of God exceeds and outshines the old covenant of works; and as much as the ministration of the Spirit, of life, and of righteousness excels in glory the ministration of the letter, of death, and of condemnation. ([2Co 3:6-11.](#)) In a word, **the precepts of the New Testament, in all their fullness, minuteness, and comprehensiveness, are our rule of life.**

But mark what would be the consequence if the preceptive part of the New Testament were taken out of its pages as so much useless matter. It would be like going on board of a ship bound on a long and perilous voyage, and taking out of her, just before she sailed, all her charts, her compass, her sounding-line, her chronometer; in a word, all the instruments of navigation needful for her safely crossing the sea, or even leaving the port. But you may say, "If there were no precept, the Church would still have the Holy Spirit to guide her safely over the sea of life to her heavenly haven." It is true; and so the first Christians, as Stephen the martyr, who lived before the epistles were written, had the Holy Spirit to guide them, in the absence of the precept. But in those early days, first, the Holy Spirit was poured out in large measure, and, secondly, they had in their midst apostles and prophets, ([1Co 12:4-11](#); 14; [Eph 2:20](#); [Eph 4:11-12](#);) directly and immediately inspired to guide and direct them, which gifts have been withdrawn since the canon of Scripture was closed. Besides which, as the Holy Spirit, who then wrought immediately by the lips of inspired men, ([1Co 14:21](#);) now works mediately by the inspired page, the argument is neither sound nor safe that we could do very well without the letter of the precept as still

having the Spirit. The question is not what God might do, but what God does; not what we think, but what God says. If God has mercifully and graciously given us rules and directions whereby to walk, let us thankfully accept them, not question and cavil how far we could have done without them.

See, too, what a wide field would be laid open for wild enthusiasm to range in, were there no direct and positive lines laid down, as we now have them in the precept. How every deluded fanatic might come forward as inspired by the Holy Spirit to instruct us how to act, and what to do, and how to live, how many wives he might have, and how much money we must give to keep him and them in luxury and ease. What a mercy for us that we have God's precepts and not man's; God's holy, wise, and gracious directions how to glorify him in heart and life, how to walk in love and union with his dear people, how to keep ourselves unspotted from the world, how to know his will and do it, with his own blessed approbation in our conscience; and thus, by taking heed to our way according to God's word, ([Psa 119:9](#);) not become the prey of every vile Mormonite, every sleek impostor, every wily monk or crafty nun, every Papist, Puseyite, or sister of mercy who might seek to impose upon us with their pretended revelations, or bind us hard and fast with their stern, austere rules of fleshly holiness. What heavy burdens would they fasten on our shoulders, as we see in the case of the Pharisees of old, who made the word of God of none effect by their traditions, and in the self-imposed austerities of the Trappist and Carthusian orders among the Papists, and the Fathers and the Brothers Ignatius now among us, with their sandals and Benedictine dress, like "a rough garment to deceive."

Left to such blind or wilfully-deceiving guides, we would, but for the precept as the rule of our lives, as the inspired guide of our steps, have no word of the Lord to set against their delusions or their hypocrisies, and would pass our lives in continual bondage and fear, awed by their pretended revelations, or bowed down by their austere regulations. We have enough, God knows, of those would-be teachers and directors of conscience; some coming with their crafty impostures to deceive, others with their forms and ceremonies, preparations for the sacrament, manuals of religious instruction, practices of piety, aids to devotion, all drawn out to rule and pattern, to teach us how to live and how to die; and all as full of error as a blind understanding can devise, and as full of legality and lip-service as a superstitious, self-righteous, Pharisaical heart can make them. What a torrent of Popery seems fast coming in under what is now called "ritualism;" that is, a setting up of rites and ceremonies, mediaeval observances, and traditional rules, instead of the doctrines of grace and the precepts of the gospel. What a mercy, then, for the living Church of God that we have not only the Holy Spirit as our inward Teacher, to show us by his divine light these errors and delusions, but that the same blessed Spirit has given us in the word of truth the sweetest, soundest, safest directions to lead us into, and keep us in the way of eternal life; and that he from time to time sheds upon them his own benevolent unction, grace, and savour to make them spirit and life to our soul, and thus become a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. What a holy, happy liberty; what a free service; what a tender, affectionate, filial obedience do the precepts of the gospel set before us, as far removed from legal exactions and Pharisaic righteousness as from Antinomian licentiousness and loose, careless ungodliness.

O you, who see and feel these things, and have tasted the blessedness of serving God in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter, ([Rom 7:6](#);) lift up your heart and hands with the writer of these lines, and say with him, "Bless God for the precept." May grace be given us more clearly to understand it, more carefully to heed it, more closely to obey it.

But here for the present we pause, lest we should not only engross too much space for our own pen, but, by dwelling upon one subject at too great length, rather weary than edify our readers.

In our last paper we attempted to direct the attention of our readers to the importance of the preceptive portion of the word of truth, as being well convinced that if we could but once establish that point firmly in their hearts, it would, with God's help and blessing, much prepare the way for a close and careful consideration of the whole subject, both on their part and our own. A moment's thought will make this sufficiently obvious. If any part of God's truth be viewed as of little importance by writer or reader, by minister or hearer, the almost necessary consequence is that it becomes either wholly neglected, or is loosely and carelessly slurred over by both. Why need we devote time or thought to a matter of little moment? Why carefully and prayerfully examine a subject which will scarcely repay us for the trouble of our attention? We might, from a reverence to the word of God, forbear such thoughts or such expressions, and yet the practical effect might be what we have pointed out. But, on the other hand, if,

through the teaching and testimony of the blessed Spirit, any portion of the word of truth is opened with divine light to our understanding, or laid with peculiar weight and power upon our heart, its solemn importance is at once seen and felt; it engages the whole of our attention, and we wonder how we could have been so blind to what is now so clear, or treated with neglect what is now so weighty.

But as snares await us on every hand, a temptation here presents itself, from falling into which we must desire to be kept. As all true wisdom is from above, the free gift of God, who gives to all who ask him liberally, and upbraids not; ([Jam 1:5](#); [Jam 3:17](#);) and as the very reason why the Lord grants to any "a knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding" is that they "might walk worthy of him unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God," ([Col 1:10-11](#);) we must watch against being betrayed into a censorious spirit, lest, in our zeal for the precept, we ourselves be the very first to break it. Thus, while we may accept with thankfulness any communication of light, any opening of the word of truth for our comfort or edification, we must carefully guard against making a rod for others out of any grace to ourselves. That were not to use, but to abuse the goodness of God, and to turn the grand precept of the gospel, the new commandment of the Lord, that we love one another as he has loved us, ([Joh 15:12](#);) into a matter of strife and division. It is, in fact, the working of this censorious spirit in the minds of most who have attempted to handle the precept, which has made the whole subject distasteful to many of the real children of God, they not being able clearly to distinguish between the precept itself, and the carnal, legal way in which it has been thrust upon them.

But if preserved from this snare, if in the spirit and love of the gospel we can point out to our believing brethren from the word of truth the importance of the preceptive part of the New Testament, and the Lord shall be pleased to commend it to their conscience, we shall hope thereby to approve ourselves to them, as not seeking to have dominion over their faith, but as helpers of their joy. ([2Co 1:24](#).)

Our readers will remember that in our last paper we pointed out to their notice two considerations, which seemed to us much to establish the importance of the precept. One of these was drawn from the large amount which it occupies in the Epistles of the New Testament, or, to use our own words, its bulk and quantity. The second consideration derived its weight from the fact that, in the absence of the precept, we should have no authoritative rule of life.

3. Closely connected with the last point is another consideration, to us of no less weight in establishing the importance of the precept, to which we shall now call the observation of our readers. It is this; that, as **without a special revelation of the precept in the word of truth we would not know what was the will of God as regards all spiritual and practical obedience, so, without it as our guide and rule, we would not be able to live to his glory.** As this consideration must be, to all who fear God, a matter of deep importance, we shall endeavor to unfold it somewhat fully, and especially to point out its connection with the preceptive part of the word of truth.

As the glory of God is the grand end and object of all the manifestations of himself in creation, in providence, and in grace, so should it be the end and object of all our knowledge of him, of all our faith in him, of all our obedience to him. Such was the end and aim of our blessed Lord, the object for which he came, for which he lived, for which he died, for which he rose again, and for which he now lives at the right hand of the Father. He therefore could say, in his intercessory prayer before he offered himself up—"I have glorified you on the earth; I have finished the work which you gave me to do." ([Joh 17:4](#).) And having thus glorified his heavenly Father on earth by doing his will, ([Heb 10:7](#);) not seeking his own glory, but the glory of him who sent him, ([Joh 7:18](#); [Joh 8:50](#);) he is himself now glorified in heaven, for he has "entered into his glory," ([Luk 24:26](#);) being glorified with the glory which he had with the Father before the world was. If, then, he has left us an example that we should follow his steps; ([1Pe 2:21](#);) if we are to glorify him here that we may be glorified with him hereafter, it must be by our faith and obedience. How plain is this from the word. But let us trace out its successive steps.

First, then, we "glorify God for his mercy;" ([Rom 15:9](#);) that is, when we receive salvation as flowing to our guilty souls from his pure mercy, we praise and bless his holy name, as sinners saved by grace. We therefore read—"Whoever offers praise glorifies me." ([Psa 50:23](#).) This is the first step, as salvation by grace is the grand foundation of our living to his praise. But as this mercy and grace are only manifested in his dear Son, it may be said that the first step which we take in glorifying God is when we believe in Jesus. By raising him from the dead, and setting him at his own right hand, God has glorified him; ([Act 3:13](#);) for he has highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name. ([Phi 2:9-10](#);

[Eph 1:20-21](#); [1Pe 1:21](#).) When, then, we believe in Jesus by that faith which is of the operation of God, ([Col 2:12](#)), we glorify the Father. We read of Abraham—"He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strong in faith, giving glory to God." ([Rom 4:20](#).) As, then, we walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham, ([Rom 4:12](#)), we in our measure glorify God as he did.

But this work of faith is internal—seen of God, but not seen of men; and, therefore, though glorifying God, yet not giving him that glory outwardly before the world which he deserves and demands. Here, then, comes in the next step, which is Christian obedience, or that living to his honor and praise whereby God is glorified in the world. The world cannot see our faith, but it can see what that faith does. It cannot understand the union between Christ and his people, but it can understand good fruit when it grows on the vine. The Lord, therefore, said to his disciples, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." ([Mat 5:16](#).) And again more particularly, in his parting discourse—"Herein is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit; so shall you be my disciples." ([Joh 15:8](#).) Thus also speaks the Apostle—"Being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God." ([Phi 1:11](#).)

But now comes the connection between the precept, and living to the praise and glory of God; and as this point is not often explained, or at least not often insisted upon, we shall endeavor to set it in its true and scriptural light. Be it, then, observed, and ever borne in mind that, as the glory of God is the end of all our obedience, **it must be an obedience according to his own prescribed rule and pattern.** In this point lies all the distinction between the obedience of a Christian to the glory of God—and the self-imposed obedience of a Pharisee to the glory of self. Take a survey of the wide field of what are called religious duties, religious observances, decided piety, active exertions, and the whole movements of the religious world. What are they as weighed in the balances of the sanctuary? What is there of God or of his word in them? When God gave directions to Moses about the tabernacle and all its vessels, he said unto him—"And look that you make them after their pattern, which was showed you in the mount." ([Exo 25:40](#).) According to this pattern were all the vessels made, and as such, and as such only, were they accepted and approved. "The Israelites had done all the work just as the Lord had commanded Moses. Moses inspected the work and saw that they had done it just as the Lord had commanded. So Moses blessed them." ([Exo 39:42-43](#).) So in a spiritual sense it is now. **The pattern for our guidance in doing the will of God and living to the glory of God is laid down for us, not only in the example of Christ—but in the rule of the precepts.**

Thus we see that if there were no precept as our guiding rule, we could not live to the glory of God, or yield to him an acceptable obedience; and for this simple reason, that we would not know how to do so. We might wish to do so; we might attempt to do so; but we would and must fail, as Moses must have failed in building the tabernacle, for lack of a guiding pattern. As, then, without a revelation of the doctrine of salvation we would not know how a sinner could be saved, and thus could not glorify God by our faith; so without a revelation of the precept we would not know how to serve God, and thus could not glorify him by our obedience.

Look at this point, believing child of God. You long to glorify God in your body and your spirit, which are his. ([1Co 6:20](#).) You desire, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, to do all to the glory of God. ([1Co 10:31](#).) There are times and seasons with you when you sigh and mourn over your barren, unprofitable heart and life, and earnestly long to think and speak, and act to his honor and glory who has done so much for you in providence and grace. At least, if you have no such desires you are no Christian, and are at the best but a poor, worldly, dead professor. When, then, and how far do you live to God's glory? Only then, and **only so far as your life, and walk, and conduct harmonize with, and are guided by the precepts of the word.** For see the connection. We can only glorify God outwardly by doing his will; we can only know that will, as regards our practical obedience to it, by the express revelation which he has given of it. Where is that revelation? In his word, and chiefly in the preceptive part of it. It is this which makes it "a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path." ([Psa 119:105](#).) David therefore cried—"Order my steps in your word;" "Make me to go in the path of your commandments;" "O that my ways were directed to keep your statutes;" as feeling that it was only by walking in the word and by the word that he could please God and live to his praise. We find thousands in this land who, as they think, are doing God service by plans and schemes of their own devising, priding themselves on their good works. But we may say of all these their duties and doings what Augustine said of the ancient Roman virtues, that they are but "splendid sins"—or, to use the language of the 23rd Article of the Church

of England, entitled, "Works before Justification," "for that they are not done as God has willed and commanded them to be done, we doubt not but they have the nature of sin."

4. We are unwilling to weary our readers by dwelling too long on one point, and yet we cannot forbear adding another reason to show the importance of the precept. **On its fulfillment turns the main test of distinction between the believer and the unbeliever, between the manifested vessel of mercy and the vessel of wrath fitted to destruction.** To show this point a little more clearly, let us examine the test which our Lord in various places has given us between those who are really and truly his by vital union and regenerating grace, and those who have a name to live and are dead.

First look at the parable of the sower. Out of four kinds of hearers of the word, one only is saved and sanctified thereby. Now, what is the test given of this saved hearer? Is it not that he brings forth fruit? "But he who received seed into the good ground is he who hears the word, and understands it; which also bears fruit, and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty." ([Mat 13:23](#).) Can any one deny, in the face of these words, that the grand distinguishing test of the good-ground hearer is, that he bears fruit—and that none of the others bear it? But now comes the question, What is fruit? Is it not inward and outward—the inward fruits of the Spirit in the heart, and the outward fruits of godliness in the life? But what rule guides and regulates these fruits, so as to distinguish them from the "splendid sins" of which we have been speaking? Evidently the precept, for by that, and in harmony with that, the Spirit works. Is there, then, heart fruit, such as "love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance?" ([Gal 5:22-23](#).) It is wrought by the blessed Spirit, according to the precepts, "Walk in love, as Christ has also loved us;" ([Eph 5:2](#);) "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, rejoice;" ([Phi 4:4](#);) "Live in peace;" ([2Co 13:11](#);) "Be at peace among yourselves;" ([1Th 5:13](#);) "With long-suffering, bearing with one another in love," ([Eph 4:2](#);) etc. Is there not here a blessed harmony between the inward work of the Spirit and the outward word of the precept? Again, is there outward fruit? It is needless to show that this too is in harmony with the precept; for all will acknowledge the practical character of the precepts of the New Testament.

But now take another test of a similar character from the Lord's own lips, as brought before us in the parable of the Vine and the branches. What distinguishes the branches in Christ by living union from the branches in him by nominal profession? Fruit! "I am the true Vine, and my Father is the Husbandman. Every branch in me that bears not fruit he takes away; and he prunes every branch that bears fruit, that it may bring forth more fruit." ([Joh 15:1-2](#).) The sentence against "every branch that bears not fruit" is that the Father "takes it away"—casts it forth as a barren branch. And how deals he with the branch that bears fruit? "He prunes it." Why? "That it may bring forth more fruit." Who, with these words of the Lord before his eyes, can deny that fruit is the distinguishing test of life, of grace, of salvation? But this fruit must and will be in harmony with the precept; for in the bosom of that is lodged all inward and outward godliness, all spiritual and practical obedience.

Take one more test from the Lord's own lips. Read the solemn conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount—that grand code of Christian precept—"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash." ([Mat 7:24-27](#).)

What is the Lord's own test of distinction between the wise man who builds on the rock, and the foolish man who builds on the sand? The rock, of course, is Christ, as the sand is self. But the test, the mark, the evidence, the proof of the two builders and the two buildings is the hearing of Christ's sayings and doing them, or the hearing of Christ's sayings and doing them not. We may twist and wriggle under such a text, and try all manner of explanations to parry off its keen, cutting edge; we may fly to arguments and deductions drawn from the doctrines of grace to shelter ourselves from its heavy stroke, and seek to prove that the Lord was there preaching the law and not the gospel, and that as we are saved by Christ's blood and righteousness, and not by our own obedience or our good works, either before or after calling, all such tests and all such texts are inapplicable to our state as believers. But after all our questions and cavilings, our nice and subtle arguments to quiet conscience and patch up a false peace, there the words of the Lord stand, and, what is more, will stand forever, backed as they are by that solemn declaration

from the same lips of eternal truth—"Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." ([Mat 7:19-21](#))

To draw, then, our argument into a short compass; if gospel fruit be the test of gospel grace; if, as God's workmanship, we are as much "created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God has before ordained that we should walk in them," as we are made new creatures in Christ by spiritual regeneration, and are foreordained unto eternal life; ([Eph 2:10](#);) if we are as much elected unto obedience as unto the blood of sprinkling; ([1Pe 1:2](#);) and if these good works and this obedience are all in the closest harmony with, and regulated by the precept, nothing can be more obvious than its great importance. And if it be thus important, it certainly has the strongest claim upon our attention and obedience.

The Precepts of the Word of God

by J. C. Philpot

The NATURE of the precepts

This is the most important part of our whole subject, and will therefore require the most careful handling on our side, and corresponding attention, and we may add, kind consideration, on the side of our spiritual readers. We would, therefore, say to them in all friendliness—deal fairly by us; judge of our views as a whole. Do not cavil at little points, or quarrel with isolated expressions; but compare our views and statements with the Scripture and the experience of the saints, and receive or reject them as they are or are not in harmony with both these tests of truth. If they do not agree with them both, they cannot stand; nor would we wish them to stand, as our only object is truth—truth in its purity, truth in its power.

We lay this down, then, as a broad foundation principle, that the precept, being an integral part of the gospel, must thoroughly harmonize with it. If it clashes, or rather, if our views of it clash with salvation by grace, personal election and predestination unto eternal life, particular redemption by the blood and righteousness of the Son of God, and the final perseverance of the saints—there must be something wrong somewhere.

Again, if the precept, or our views of the precept, clash with the work of grace on the heart, the teachings and witness of the Holy Spirit, and the inward kingdom of God, as set up by a divine power in the soul—there must be something wrong somewhere. We hope, indeed, clearly and fully to show that there is the sweetest harmony between the **doctrines** of the gospel, the **experience** of the gospel, and the **precepts** of the gospel; but for the present we wish to lay it down as a broad, fundamental principle that only those views of the precept can be right, which make it thoroughly harmonize with the gospel of the grace of God in all its fullness, in all its freeness, in all whereby it brings glory to God, in all whereby it brings salvation to man.

In considering the **nature** of the precept, we shall examine,

First, the LETTER of the precept.

Secondly, the SPIRIT of the precept.

I. The LETTER of the precept.

Our readers will easily understand the distinction thus drawn between the letter and the spirit, if they will view the former as the body and the latter as the soul of the precept; for it is with the precept as with ourselves; the body cannot act without the soul, nor the soul usually without the body. Without the soul the body is dead. So the letter of the precept is dead without the spirit of the precept, and the spirit of the precept usually acts by the letter of the precept. We say "usually," because there was the spirit of the precept acting, beautifully acting, as in the case of those who "were of one heart and one soul" ([Act 4:32](#)) before any part of the New Testament was written, and, consequently, before the precept was given in its present form; and even now the Holy Spirit may move unto love and good works, and often does so without any special use of the letter of the precept. But his movements will always be in harmony with the letter of the precept, even where he does not particularly employ it for that purpose.

We shall first, then, examine the **LETTER** of the precept, and in so doing shall consider it under five distinct heads:

1. The people to whom the precept is addressed.
2. The connection of the precept with the doctrines of the gospel.
3. The things which the precept specially inculcates.
4. The motives by which the precept is enforced.

5. The form under which the precept is revealed.

The Lord the Spirit enable us rightly to divide the word of truth.

1. The PEOPLE to whom the precept is addressed. These are believers, and believers only. The world has nothing to do with the precepts of the gospel. They are not addressed to it or meant for it. This will be evident from a moment's consideration. Where do we chiefly find the precepts of the New Testament? In the epistles. What are the epistles? Inspired letters written to Christian Churches or Christian individuals. Take any of the epistles, examine how they begin and to whom they are written. Is it not to "the beloved of God, called to be saints?" ([Rom 1:7](#)), or "to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus?" ([1Co 1:2](#)), or "to the saints and to the faithful in Christ Jesus?" ([Eph 1:1](#)), etc. It is not worth while to prove a point so plain—a point which any one can ascertain for himself by merely looking at the beginning of each epistle.

But what an important consequence flows from this simple fact, that is, that **spiritual precepts are only for spiritual men**; and, therefore, that to take the precepts and force them upon carnal men is to abuse them. You write a letter to your wife in all the confidence of mutual love, and you tell her you wish her to do this and that—that you are coming home on a certain day, and want her to get this and that thing ready. Is that letter for all the women of the parish to read? And do you send directions in it to all the busy-bodies of the town, who might think themselves quite as well qualified as she is to do for you what you want done? Do you even write to your servant as you write to your wife? You ask the one; you command the other. The one works for love; the other works for wages. And yet for lack of seeing this simple fact, which stares us in the face every time we open the New Testament, the precepts and directions addressed by Christ to his bride and spouse have been laid hold of by any and all of the professing women who would gladly say to him, "We will eat our own bread and wear our own apparel; only let us be called by your name, to take away our reproach." ([Isa 4:1](#).)

We all know that the only right key to a letter, especially if it be a long one, and dealing with many minute circumstances, is a knowledge of the person who wrote it, and of the person to whom it was written. When we receive a letter from a wife, a relation, a friend, however long or minute it may be, we understand every word of it. But if a letter be given us to read, written by a stranger to a stranger, especially if it embraces many minute circumstances—all is dark, mysterious, enigmatical. So **the only true key to the Epistles of the New Testament is a knowledge of him who wrote it, and of him to whom it was written.** He who wrote it is the blessed Lord, the Head and Husband of the Church; for, though indited by the pen of the Holy Spirit, it is really Jesus who sent it, and who now speaks to his people in and by it. He to whom it is written is the believer in Jesus, espoused to him by covenant ties and spiritual betrothal.

What, then, has the profane worldling, the proud Pharisee, the loose, licentious Antinomian, to do with the letters—the pure, chaste, holy love-letters of Jesus to his bride? No more than a stranger has to do with your letters to your wife, or to her whom you hope one day to make your wife! Put this key into the epistles, the preceptive part of them as well as the doctrinal, (for they are both one, both of them parts of the same love-letter, and therefore each breathe the same sweet spirit of love,) and you will easily open the lock; though we must add that so many a bungler, not to say so many a burglar, has thrust wrong keys into it, or tried to pick it, that if the wards had not been made by him "who is wonderful in counsel and excellent in working," they must have been hampered long ago.

2. Our second point in examining the letter of the precept is its connection with the doctrines of the gospel. This, above all others, is the point in which the peculiar character of the precept lies, and from which it derives its chief force and efficacy. A few examples, however, of this connection, will make this point more clear than a long explanation. "Be therefore, followers of God, as dear children; and walk in love, as Christ also has loved us, and has given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling savour." ([Eph 5:1-2](#).) We find here a precept bidding us to be "followers of God," that is, followers of the example of God, the exhortation being closely connected with the preceding verse, ([Eph 4:32](#)), from which, indeed, it should not have been separated; and to "walk in love" with the dear family of God. Now, see the connection of this precept with the doctrines of the gospel. There is no doctrine of the gospel more blessed than the forgiveness of sins, and no sweeter experience than a personal knowledge of it. Indeed, we may call it the grand doctrine of the gospel. But sin is forgiven only through the blood-shedding and sacrifice of Christ. See, then, the foundation of the precept, that we should walk in love with the people of God, and its connection with gospel doctrine. Observe the following

points of connection—

1. That we are addressed as "dear children," that is, dear to God. This connects the precept with our election and eternal predestination unto the adoption of children. ([Eph 1:5.](#))
2. Mark "the love of Christ in giving himself for us." This connects the precept with the love of Christ in dying for our sins.
3. Observe next, "the sweet-smelling savor" unto God when Christ offered himself as a sacrifice. This connects the precept with the fragrance of Christ's offering and sacrifice on the cross, and the Father's acceptance of it with infinite approbation and complacency.
4. Observe, lastly, the complete forgiveness of all our sins by God, for Christ's sake, and through this sweet-smelling sacrifice.

What a cluster of gospel doctrines—election, adoption, redemption, forgiveness; and all of them animated with life and spirit, and brought down into the heart by a personal experience of their blessedness.

Now, then, what follows? If God has so chosen us, if Christ has so loved us, if he has so bled and died for us, **if** the Father has so freely forgiven us for Christ's sake—**then** let us walk in love with those who are alike chosen, alike loved, alike redeemed, alike forgiven. Is there anything legal here? Is it not all pure gospel, in the fullest harmony with every gracious doctrine, and in the fullest harmony, too, with a sweet inward experience of the love of God, of the Spirit of adoption, of the blood of Christ, of the forgiveness of sin? The fact is this, that instead of the precept being, as many think, base and legal—it is just the contrary. It is too high; has too much of the pure gospel in it to suit and please most even of those who truly fear God. It assumes what many do not enjoy—such as the liberty of the gospel, a blessed assurance of interest in the blood of Christ, a sense of the love of God shed abroad in the heart by the Holy Spirit, and a knowledge of salvation by the remission of sins. The precept, in fact, would suit our legal, working spirit better if there were not so much gospel in it; if it would but tell us how many chapters we ought to read a day; how often and how long to pray; how much we should give away out of our income; how many times we should forgive our brother, and whether seven would not be enough? How it would suit our Pharisaical spirit to have a few such nice legal tasks set for us—that we might please ourselves with performing them, and enjoy the greater pleasure still of well flogging our brother, who was not quite so exact as we in bringing up the full weight and measure of his religious duties.

But the precept will have none of all this. It stands upon high and heavenly ground, and yet comes down to us in our lowest estate. Thus it stands upon the ground of free grace to the vilest of sinners, for such were the Ephesians, ([Eph 2:1-3,](#)) and yet chosen in Christ; blessed in him with all spiritual blessings; (1:3, 4;) sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise; (1:13;) raised up together and sitting in heavenly places in Christ Jesus; (2:6;) made near by the blood of Christ; (2:13;) and built together for a habitation of God through the Spirit. (2:22.)

The precept knows nothing of tasks or conditions, nothing of legal duties and doings; but addresses itself in the purest and highest gospel language to the sons of God, as led by the Spirit of God. It says to them, as if with a voice from heaven—"Heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ, as being thus loved, thus blessed, thus saved, thus sealed, thus forgiven—walk in love with the dear children of God, forgiving them all their unkindness, hard speeches, cold looks, cutting remarks, or even more personal and painful injuries." Is this a hard precept? Yes, very hard when we have no experience of gospel blessings. No wonder, then, that you are shy of this precept when you are nursing a revengeful, unforgiving spirit against a brother! But what does this unforgiving spirit of yours show? That you yourself know nothing experimentally of the love of God in forgiving you your sins—or at least are not now walking in the experience and enjoyment of it. But is it so hard a precept? You get the pardoning love of God into your soul, and you will find it as easy as it is sweet to perform it. No, you cannot but perform it; for if you walk in love with God, you will walk in love with your brother also.

This one example might suffice as a general key to all the other precepts, for they are all, so to speak, constructed after the same pattern; they all breathe the same pure gospel. But we will now take an example or two of what we may call family duties, or, to speak more correctly, social relationships—and see how gospel precepts are in their case also similarly based upon, similarly connected with, gospel doctrines.

Christian **husbands** are bidden ([Eph 5:25-32](#)) to love their wives. The whole of the exhortation is somewhat too long to quote fully, but we will give one verse—"Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the Church, and gave himself for it." ([Eph 5:25.](#))

Now look at the foundation of this exhortation. Why should a Christian husband, according to this precept, love his wife? Because it is his duty—or because conducive to his happiness—or because it is what she has a right to as his partner in life? None of these grounds are named, or even alluded to. But this is the foundation of the precept—Christ loved the Church as his mystical body, and gave himself for it; therefore as the believing husband holds to the believing wife as her natural head the same relative position which Christ holds to the Church as her spiritual head, he is bound to love her for Christ's sake and after Christ's example. Christ and his Church are one; she is his own flesh which he nourishes and cherishes. So a man and his wife are one flesh. When, then, he loves her he loves himself; and to nourish and cherish her is to nourish and cherish his own body, as Christ does the Church.

Is not this noble gospel ground—full of the most sublime and deepest truth? Is it not a spiritual, heavenly, and holy view of Christian marriage, and does it not baptize that social tie as with the very spirit and love of Christ? What a sanctity it throws round the marriage of Christians; how it elevates it above all worldliness and carnality, and brings down upon conjugal love the pure breath of heaven, more than reinstating it to what it was in Paradise in the days of man's primeval innocence.

Now take, as a counterpart, the precept to Christian **wives**, "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the Church; and he is the Saviour of the body. Therefore as the Church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything." ([Eph 5:22-24.](#)) This precept, perhaps, may be less palatable to those to whom it is addressed, for no wife minds how much her husband gives her of his love, but she has not always the same pleasure in giving him her obedience. But let her like it or not, the submission and subjection of a wife to her husband are here inculcated as one of the precepts of the gospel. But on what high, holy, and spiritual ground it is placed. Now the precept is based upon and connected with the glorious gospel doctrine of the headship of Christ and the Church's subjection and submission to him as such. When, then, a Christian wife seeks not her own will, but her husband's—when she submits to his desires and wishes, (and of course the Apostle assumes that as a Christian man these would be in harmony with the gospel,) her very submission is her glory, as well as her happiness.

Is it not so in our submission to Christ? Is it not our glory and happiness to know no will but his, and to yield to him the obedience of love? Thus you Christian wives, when you submit yourselves to your husbands in love and affection, you do so after the example of the Church. There is no loss of dignity or position in this, no giving up of your rights. When you can respect and love your husband as a Christian man as well as a Christian partner, and you can walk together not only in conjugal but spiritual love, as he will require nothing from you which you may not safely and scripturally yield to him, so will it be your pleasure as well as your privilege to walk with him as his equal in Christ, but now subordinate in present position.

One of the first things which opened our eyes to see more clearly and distinctly the spiritual nature of the precepts of the New Testament was, observing their close and intimate connection with the doctrines of the gospel. This, indeed, presupposes a spiritual and experimental knowledge of the doctrines of grace; for unless we clearly see and experimentally feel the blessedness of salvation by sovereign grace, it is impossible to enter into the path of obedience which the Holy Spirit has traced out for the heirs of salvation to walk in.

A son and a servant live by two very different rules. As, then, in an earthly family, none can live as a child who is not a child, so, in the heavenly family, none can live as a son who is not a son. It is for lack of seeing and knowing this for themselves that so many have stumbled over the precept—have canalized and legalized it—and, full of confusion themselves, have done little else but confuse others. As this point, then, is what we may call, in military language, the key of the whole position,* which if we gain, and on which if we firmly stand, the whole field lies open to our view, we shall, at the risk of being somewhat verbose, dwell a little further upon it.

* The key of a position is that particular spot on a field of battle, as some commanding height, on the possession and retaining of which chiefly depends the result of the engagement.

If our readers will refer to our last paper, they will see this connection traced out in several examples from the epistles. And we may observe that these are not forced or solitary instances—examples picked by us for a certain purpose, but that so particular and, we may almost add, so jealous is the Holy Spirit in enforcing and preserving this connection, that **there is scarcely a precept given which is not linked as with a golden thread to some gospel doctrine.** No, what is still more striking, this connection of gospel precept with gospel doctrine is so closely preserved that there is scarcely even a warning against vile and open sins, which is not based upon and connected with a gospel truth or a gospel blessing. As an illustration of our meaning, (for this is a very tender subject, and needs careful handling) we will give one or two instances of this connection, which will, we trust, set this point in a clear light.

There can hardly be two worse sins—that is, open sins, than lying and immorality. Would we not naturally expect that the Apostle, if he touched upon these sins at all, would come down upon them with some terrific denunciation of the wrath of God against them, cutting and hacking at them with a two-edged sword? But no! that is not his way of handling either warnings or precepts. Let us see how he warns, and whether, even in what we may almost call these extreme cases, he leaves Mount Zion for a single moment, to borrow the thunders of Mount Sinai. Not but that he does solemnly warn against such and other open sins, by declaring that those who live and die in them shall not inherit the kingdom of God. See for instance [Gal 5:21](#); [Eph 5:5-6](#); [Heb 10:29-31](#), etc. But just observe how we are warned against these two sins by the precept in connection with the doctrines of the gospel.*

* Our readers will carefully bear in mind the distinction between warning against a sin and the actual commission of it. If the sin be committed, then comes in another rule—the rule of church discipline, as is the case of the incestuous Corinthian. The warning has been neglected; then comes the rod—the rod of God in the conscience or in chastisement, ([1Co 11:30-32](#).) and the rod of the church in discipline. (1 Cor, 4:21; 5:3-5, 11-13.)

And, first, as to LYING. How does the Holy Spirit warn us against that base, low, and infamous sin—the vice of thieves and cowards? "Therefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbor—for we are members one of another." ([Eph 4:25](#).) Let us ask ourselves whether we would have ever thought of such an argument as this? Or, rather, ask yourself whether, if tempted to tell a lie, you were ever kept back by such a motive? If you say, as you probably will, "No," does not your very answer show how little we have of the mind of Christ, how low and legal are our views of gospel precepts? Is it not, then, well worth observing on what peculiar, what high and gospel ground, the Holy Spirit here bids us not to lie to one another, but always to speak truth with our neighbor? It is "because we are members one of another." If we had been asked to assign a reason why the children of God should not tell lies to each other, would we ever have thought of such a motive as this, that by so doing they would injure the union and communion which the members of the mystical body of Christ have with each other in him?

Just look for a few moments at this reason, and observe the connection (for that is the point which we are endeavoring to show) between the precept always to speak the truth—and the gospel doctrine of the oneness of the body of Christ. Why should I not lie to my brother? Because we are both members of the body of Christ. If, then, I lie to my brother, I do the same thing spiritually, as if I used my right hand to stab my left; or employed my eye to thrust my leg into a dirty ditch; or made use of my ear to put my foot under a carriage wheel. But when I speak truth to my brother, it is spiritually as when each member of my body truthfully performs its appointed function; as when my eye rightly guides my hand, when my hand rightly guards my eye, when my ear rightly warns my foot, and when my foot rightly takes my leg out of danger. Is not this high and holy ground? But what a close union it implies of the members of the mystical body of Christ, and what a spirit of communion and fellowship with their Head and with each other. A religion like this is almost lost out of the church. No wonder, then, that the precept is disregarded when its very foundation, if not wholly gone, is sunk out of sight!

Now look at the way in which the Holy Spirit warns us against SENSUAL SINS. The very nature of the subject compels us to treat it very cautiously. But, "unto the pure all things are pure;" ([Tit 1:15](#);) and if we have brought the subject forward, it is with the sole object of throwing a fuller and clearer light upon our present point. Read, then, carefully [1Co 6:13-20](#). We say this as expecting you to have your Bible in your hand when you peruse our Meditations, and to compare with it all that we advance; for, if we speak not according to the word and the testimony, there is no light in us. ([Isa 8:20](#).) Now just observe that **there are three most blessed gospel truths here brought forward by the Holy Spirit as reasons against**

all unchastity.

1. That "he who is joined unto the Lord is one spirit with him." ([1Co 6:17.](#)) What an unsearchable depth of truth is lodged in that one verse—union with Christ so close, so intimate, so near, so real as to be one spirit with him. To unfold this would be to open up the inmost heart, the deepest and warmest secrets of a living soul in its best and most favored moments. But, as an illustration of this oneness of spirit with Christ, take what you have doubtless in greater or less measure felt, oneness of spirit with some dear child of God. There are those among the living family with whom we see eye to eye and feel heart to heart in the precious things of God. What a oneness of spirit is there between us when we see alike, think alike, feel alike in what is all our salvation and all our desire, and when our very souls flow into each other like two drops of oil, or as those of David and Jonathan. Now he who is joined to the Lord is in a similar, but in a much higher degree one spirit with him; therefore sees with him, thinks with him, feels with him. But see the conclusion drawn from this precious gospel doctrine of oneness of spirit with Christ, and how peculiar it is—one we would never have thought of. This is the argument—Shall those who in soul are one spirit with Christ, be in body one flesh with the vilest of the vile? ([1Co 6:16.](#)) What high, holy, and heavenly ground is this.

2. But now view another gospel doctrine in connection with the warning against uncleanness. It is this—The body of the saint is the temple of the Holy Spirit. ([1Co 6:19.](#)) Shall we, then, pollute that temple in which dwells so sacred and holy a Visitant by allowing in it any filthiness of walk and conduct? Would not this be like offering swine's blood upon God's altar, ([Isa 66:3.](#)) or committing the sin of Zimri ([Num 25:6-15](#)) in the very presence of the Holy Spirit? Do you not think that if you carried about with you a deep and daily sense that the Holy Spirit dwelt in your body as his living temple, it would make you very careful how you spoke and acted, lest you would by polluting his temple grieve that holy and divine Guest?

3. And now observe the third gospel doctrine with which the precept is connected. "You are bought with a price," ([1Co 6:20](#)) a price no less than the blood of the Son of God. What then follows? That "you are not your own," in either body or soul, for Jesus has bought both for his own possession and his own glory. What, then, is the consequence? That you are neither your own property or at your own disposal. And if so, what follows as the practical result? That you would glorify God in your body; therefore that it would be possessed in sanctification and honor; ([1Th 4:4.](#)) and in your spirit, which are both his. Is not this high and holy ground, so high and holy that we seem scarcely able to look at it, much less to reach it? But does it not amply prove our point—the connection of gospel precepts with gospel doctrines, and that whether the Holy Spirit would warn us or exhort us, he always does so on the purest, clearest gospel ground; avoiding on the one hand, with this most holy and heavenly wisdom, the least tinge of what is legal, and yet on the other setting before us such a path of practical godliness, spiritual obedience, and Christian devotedness as to make our very hearts sink within us at the sight and sense of our inconsistencies and backslidings?

3. But we now approach our next point in examining the nature of the precept, that is, the things which the precept specially inculcates. And forgive us, dear readers, if here also we would be a little verbose. We want to bring you, as it were, face to face with the scriptures; not merely to show you the outside of the temple, the buildings and the goodly stones; ([Mat 24:1](#); [Luk 21:5.](#)) not merely to walk about Zion, and go round about her to count the towers thereof; ([Psa 48:12](#))—but to enter with you into the inner courts, no, into the very sanctuary itself; for the veil was rent asunder from the top to the bottom when the Lord of life and glory died, and we may now have boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus. ([Heb 10:19.](#)) It will be a great point gained if our Meditations bring you to a nearer and closer search into the treasures of the word—and a greater gain still if any of these treasures become experimentally your own by our laying them bare to your view, and faith being given you to embrace them in hope and love.

What, then, are the things which the precept inculcates? We may briefly answer that **there is not a good word or a good work, not a grace or fruit of the Spirit, not an act of love toward God or man to which the precept does not call and invite the living family!**

But as on this point, as well as on others connected with the nature of the precept, some misconception prevails, we will endeavor to clear it up according to the ability given us. There is an idea, then, generally prevalent, that the precept addresses itself chiefly to outward actions, and that its chief end and object is

to guide and regulate the external life and conduct. Now, though this is to a certain extent true—it is but half true. The precept addresses itself mainly to the inward life—and to the outward life only in connection with the inward life. It is thus distinguished, root and branch, from the law—the "do and live;" for its call, its sweet harmonious voice, is not, "Do and live," but "**Live and do!**" It is, therefore, not so much a code of **rules**—as a code of **principles**, a law put into the mind and written in the heart by the finger of God, according to one of the four special promises of the New Covenant, ([Jer 31:33](#); [Heb 8:10](#).) and not a stern, rigid list of doings and duties.

Thus it calls us to separation from the world; ([2Co 6:17](#);) "to set our affections on things above;" ([Col 3:2](#);) to be "transformed by the renewing of our mind;" ([Rom 12:2](#);) to live and walk in the Spirit; ([Gal 5:16](#); [Gal 5:25](#);) "to put on the whole armor of God;" ([Eph 6:11](#);) to "be anxious for nothing, but in everything, by prayer and supplication, to let our requests be known unto God;" ([Phi 4:6](#);) to "put off the old man, and to put on the new;" ([Eph 4:22-24](#);) to "prove all things, and hold fast that which is good;" ([1Th 5:21](#);) to read, meditate, and give ourselves wholly to the things of God; ([1Ti 4:13-15](#);) to flee all covetousness and ungodliness, and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness; to fight the good fight of faith, and lay hold of eternal life; ([1Ti 6:11-12](#);) not to faint under our trials and afflictions, but to run with patience the race set before us, looking unto Jesus. ([Heb 12:1-2](#); [Heb 12:5](#).)

See how the precept, in such and similar exhortations, addresses itself to our inmost being, to our heart of hearts—that it is not a cold, dry catalogue of duties to be performed, but a gracious call to a living, loving obedience of spirit, and devotedness of affectionate service to him who loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood.

But though this high and exalted character is the leading feature and peculiar blessedness of the perspective—yet it graciously comes down to details, that we may have a rule of outward conduct, a code of practice as well as a code of principles. Thus, when the Apostle has given us (Romans 12) a series of influential principles, as that "love should be without deceit;" that we should "abhor that which is evil, and cleave to that which is good;" that we should be "kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love, in honor preferring one another;" that we should "be not slothful in business, but fervent in spirit, serving the Lord;" that we should "rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, continue always in prayer," &c., when he has given us these general principles of a Christian life, he proceeds (chapter 13) to a more detailed line of conduct, such as subjection unto the higher authorities; the payment of tribute to rulers, and their officers; the rendering to all of their dues, "custom to whom custom, fear or to whom fear, honor to whom honor;" that we should "owe no man anything, but love;" that we should neither judge nor despise a Christian brother; (chapter 14;) but "follow after the things which make for peace, and things with which one may edify another."

How comprehensive, yet how simple and beautiful a rule of Christian conduct is thus traced out in various minute details, which, were it but acted upon and carried out, would make gospel churches full inwardly of love and peace, and patterns outwardly of practical godliness. Thus we see that the precept has, if we may use the expression, an ascending and a descending voice. When it says, "Set your affections on things above;" "Let us cast off the works of darkness and let us put on the armor of light;" "Stand fast in the liberty with which Christ has made us free;" "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, rejoice," &c., it has an ascending voice, for it calls our hearts and affections upward to heavenly things.

But when it says, "Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake;" "Honor all men, love the brotherhood, fear God honor the king;" "Servants, be subject to your masters with all fear;" "Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes", it has a descending voice, for it comes down to the very minutiae of practical obedience, and issues directions for our daily walk and conversation.

O what wisdom and grace shine forth in the precept when viewed in that light whereby all things are made manifest. ([Eph 5:13](#).) What a spirit of holiness, and yet what tender, affectionate condescension to our infirmities breathe through it. How graciously it blends the highest freedom and the deepest obedience; how it consults the glory of God and the good of man; how gently it leads us along in the only path where true peace can be found, and yet never scolds nor reproaches, though it sometimes reproves

us; how it never winks at the least sin, ever maintaining the same undeviating line of gospel purity, and yet stoops down to the poorest sinner that lies at the footstool of mercy. And surely we may add that the more this perfect law of liberty is looked into, the more its beauty and blessedness become manifest; for we can truly say that even since we began our Meditations upon it, fresh light seems to have beamed upon our mind to see and feel the impress of the holy Spirit visibly and powerfully stamped upon it, and to give us fresh proof that in it the living God speaks to the hearts and consciences of his people.

4. But now let us consider the next point which we proposed to examine, that is, the MOTIVES by which the precept is enforced.

Actions spring from motives. What the wind is to a ship at sea, what steam is to an engine on the rail, or, to speak more correctly, what love is to a youthful lover, what honor is to the military officer, what ambition is to the statesman—such is motive to action. To take away love from the lover is like taking wind from the sail, and steam from the locomotive. No more longing for the appointed hour of meeting, no more swift and speedy step to the appointed place. So the precept has attached to it motives which give both wings to the soul and wings to the feet. We shall by and by hope to show how the Holy Spirit puts life into and applies these motives, for without his gracious breath they are ineffectual—but at present we shall merely speak of the motives themselves.

If, then, you carefully examine the preceptive part of the epistles, you will find that the blessed **Spirit, in giving a precept, almost always gives a motive with it.** Take a few instances. Look at what we may almost call the first gospel precept—"Come out from among them, and be separate," and see what a motive is attached to it—"And I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty." ([2Co 6:17-18.](#)) It is as if the Lord said, "You shall be no losers by coming out of the world, even if you must leave father and mother for my sake. I will receive you into my kind care and tender embrace, and be a Father unto you, adopting you into my own family, and bestowing upon you every mercy and blessing which I give to my dear children." What a motive to take the step of coming out from among them, whatever sacrifices it may entail, and at once to plunge into the sea of mercy and love thus opened in the promise; instead of dallying with the world, like Lot's wife, or standing shivering on the brink, afraid to turn back, and afraid to go forward.

But take another instance of the connection between the precept and the motive attached to it—"Set your affections on things above, not on things on the earth." Why? For what motive? "For you are dead, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall you also appear with him in glory." ([Col 3:3-4.](#)) What an influential motive to set our affection on things above, that when Christ shall appear, we shall also appear with him in glory.

Take another instance—"Therefore let us not sleep as do others; but let us watch and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep in the night; and those who be drunken are drunken in the night. But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for a helmet the hope of salvation." ([1Th 5:6-8.](#)) Here is a call to watchfulness and sobriety, and that, let it be observed, wholly of a gospel nature, as distinguished from mere legal watchfulness and sobriety; for it is by putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. But what is the motive attached to the precept? "For God has not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him." ([1Th 5:9-10.](#))

We hope we shall not weary our readers if, as a further illustration of this point, we show how relative duties are similarly urged, as backed and influenced by gospel motives. "Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eye-service as men-pleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God. And whatever you do, do it heartily as to the Lord, and not unto men." ([Col 3:22-23.](#)) Now, see the motive to influence and animate the servant to obey his master with a single heart and single eye, in the fear of God, and with a view to his glory—"Knowing that of the Lord you shall receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ." ([Col 3:24.](#))

To see the full force of this, consider for a moment the case of the poor **Roman slave**, for to such was the precept originally addressed. He was at the entire disposal of his master, who could imprison, scourge, or crucify him at his pleasure, without interference or redress. The state of slaves has been, and ever must be, miserable and wretched in every climate, and in every age; but it has never been anywhere, or at any time, so thoroughly wretched as under the Roman empire. Now just picture to yourself this poor slave

called by grace, and serving a heathen master. See how he is bidden to obey in all things his master, not for fear of the lash, but from the fear of God; and mark the motive which is to support and cheer him under his daily toil, his slave's garb, his miserable food, his hourly exposure to the prison and the scourge. There was a blessed inheritance reserved for him, which would make ample amends for all his earthly servitude; for he was serving in spirit the Lord Christ, who would one day put him into possession of "an incorruptible and undefiled inheritance, which does not fade away."

Now take the believing **master**. He shall have a precept too, and a motive also. "Masters, give unto your servants that which is just and equal, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven." ([Col 4:1](#).) The master must do what is just and equitable to the servant. Why? Because he also has "a Master in heaven" to whom he is bound, by every tie of Christian obedience, to do that which is just and right.

But we need not further pursue this part of our subject. Our object is not to dictate to our readers, but to put them, so to speak, on the right track, that, like the noble Bereans, they may search the Scriptures for themselves, to see whether these things be so. ([Act 17:11](#).) **The Scriptures are much read, but for the most part little searched into, and less understood.** If, then, the Lord will kindly use us to throw some little light upon his word, and especially the preceptive part of it, and if our spiritual readers, aided by this light, will prayerfully and carefully examine for themselves this portion of divine truth, they may, with God's help and blessing, derive both instruction and profit from it. We are nothing, and have nothing; but as the Lord works by instruments he can employ even our pen for the edification of his dear family. If our views of the precept are scriptural, the more they are examined, the more their agreement with the word of God will appear. Light will break more and more on the mind of the spiritual reader, as we hope it has on that of the writer; faith will be more and more strengthened as it becomes more fed and nurtured with the pure word of his grace; hope will cast forth her anchor more firmly in the glorious truths and promises as they are opened to the heart; and love will more warmly and tenderly embrace the truth, and especially Him who is the Truth itself, in whom center all the promises and all the precepts, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last.

Our readers will, perhaps, remember that, in examining the nature of the precept, we proposed to consider it under two distinct heads:

The **LETTER** of the precept.

The **SPIRIT** of the precept.

And that under the first head, that is, the **LETTER** of the precept, we named five distinct points as worthy of our attentive consideration. These were—

1. The persons to whom the precept is addressed.
2. The connection of the precept with the doctrines of the gospel.
3. The things which the precept specially inculcates.
4. The motives by which the precept is enforced.
5. The form under which the precept is revealed.

Four of these points we have already examined. There remains, therefore, but one point more for our present examination, the fifth and last head under the **LETTER** of the precept—

5. The FORM under which the precept is revealed.

But as we wish to make every point which we attempt to handle as clear as we possibly can, let us first explain what we intend by the expression "form," as used by us in reference to the letter of the precept. We understand, then, by it that peculiar mode or strain of language which the Holy Spirit has made use of, in revealing and enforcing the precept as a part of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, and by which he has impressed upon it that distinctive shape which it bears as an inspired rule for the obedience of faith.

The word "form" is a scriptural expression, and is twice used by the Apostle Paul in much the same sense as we have thus affixed to it. Observe, for instance, the following passage—"But God be thanked, that you were the servants of sin, but you have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was

delivered you." ([Rom 6:17](#).) "The form of doctrine" here spoken of as being delivered unto the Roman saints means the model or pattern of apostolic teaching, according to which their hearts were modeled. This seems evident from the marginal, and, we may add, preferable reading, "whereto you were delivered," as a coin or a die, and which, therefore, stamped upon them its peculiar impress, producing an obedience from the heart. (The word translated "form" here, literally means the stamp of a seal, or impress of a coin, (as produced by a blow,) and thence a model or pattern. Thus taking the idea of a coin, divine teaching is the die, and the heart of the believer the medal; the one being produced by, and the exact counterpart of the other.)

So again we find the Apostle speaking—"Hold fast the form of sound words, which you have heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus." ([2Ti 1:13](#).) This "form of sound words" which Timothy was to hold fast was the model or pattern, according to which the Apostle had delivered to Timothy the truths which had been revealed to his own soul by the Holy Spirit, as he speaks—"Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teaches, but which the Holy Spirit teaches; comparing spiritual things with spiritual." ([1Co 2:13](#).) Or, as the words might be rendered, "combining spiritual things with spiritual;" that is, uniting spiritual truths to spiritual words—the things revealed by the Spirit, ([1Co 2:10-12](#),) being the truths of the gospel, and the words which the Holy Spirit taught, (verse 13,) being the form under which these truths were delivered to the Church by the Apostle.

The Holy Spirit, then, has stamped upon the precepts of the New Testament a peculiar character or impress, which we call their "form," and the nature of which we shall now endeavor more fully to unfold.

The main, the leading form of the precept is of course that of **INJUNCTION or DIRECTION**; that is, it authoritatively bids us do or not do this or that thing, pursue or not pursue this or that line of action. (The definition of a precept, as given in our best dictionaries, is, "A commandment or order intended as an authoritative rule of action."—Webster) It is thus distinguished from an **invitation**, such as, "Come unto me all you that labor," etc. ([Mat 11:28](#).) "If any man thirsts, let him come unto me and drink;" ([Joh 7:37](#);) and from a **rebuke**, such as, "And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you." ([1Co 5:2](#).) "You observe days, and months, and times, and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have bestowed upon you labor in vain." ([Gal 4:10-11](#).)

But though its main form is necessarily one of injunction, without which, indeed, it would not be precept at all, it assumes various shades of direction, and yet every shade in the fullest harmony with the grace and spirit of the gospel. By way of introduction to the point before us, we may briefly mention that these varied forms of preceptive direction are chiefly—

1. command
2. injunction
3. entreaty or beseeching
4. admonition

(According to our translation there is another, that is, "exhorting;" but as this in the original is the same word as that rendered "beseeching," we shall not notice it as a distinct form.)

1. Thus sometimes it assumes the language of **COMMAND**. "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw yourselves from every brother who walks disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us." ([2Th 3:6](#).) And again—"For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat." ([2Th 3:10](#).) So also—"And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband." ([1Co 7:10](#).) This is, so to speak, the highest note of the precept—its strongest, loudest, and most authoritative voice.

If we examine the passages in which the precept assumes the form of a command; we shall find it employed for the most part in the four following cases—

1. When some danger is near.
2. Or when some flagrant evil or error is denounced.

3. Or when a strong injunction is laid on a man of God to invest him with peculiar authority.
4. Or when some important precept is urged.

To each and all of those cases the voice of command, as we shall see if we examine them, is eminently suitable.

1. Take the first case—the voice of warning against some advancing danger or imminent **DANGER**. It seems thus used by the Apostle Peter in his second epistle—"That you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us the Apostles of the Lord and Savior; knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts." ([2Pe 3:2-3](#).) The Apostles of the Lord knew that there would come in the last days ungodly scoffers, and therefore in the strong language of command they warned the people of God against these perilous times and these perilous men. Is there anything out of place in the language of command here? A low, soft voice, a gentle whisper, would not do were you to see a man about to cross the line as a railway train was coming in, or if in the dead of night it were needful to give an alarm of "fire" to your next door neighbor. The voice, then, of authoritative command is not out of harmony with the grace and love of the gospel, when the precept warns the people of God against coming dangers and advancing perils, and shouts to them, as if from the top of the mountains, to take close heed to their steps.

2. But now take the case of denouncing **EVIL** or **ERROR** in the professing Church. Is sin or error to be sprinkled with rose-water, or dealt with lovingly and tenderly, as if in a lover's whisper on a moonlight eve? Look at the almost parallel case of the ministry. Does not God bid his servants "lift up their voice like a trumpet, to show his people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins!" ([Isa 58:1](#).) There is an allusion here to the two silver trumpets which, at the command of the Lord, were made by Moses for the priests to blow, for the calling of the assembly and the journeying of the camps. ([Num 10:1-2](#).) As, then, it was still the same silver trumpet which, "in the days of their gladness and in their solemn days," was blown over their burnt offerings and their peace offerings that sounded, when needful, an alarm, so it is still the same gospel precept which sometimes speaks in the language of the tenderest entreaty, and at others denounces sin and error as with trumpet voice.

Thus the word "command" is used when the evil is denounced of not withdrawing from a brother that walks disorderly; ([2Th 3:6](#);) or of living lazily, without working, upon other people's bounty; ([2Th 3:10-12](#);) or of a woman's abandoning her husband, or the husband's divorcing his wife, as not being a believer; ([1Co 8:10](#);) or of warning against some gross sin. ([1Th 4:2-7](#).) In these instances wisely and graciously does the Holy Spirit employ the language of command, as thus impressing upon the precept a firmer and more authoritative character than mere entreaty. The evil of a wife's forsaking her husband, or of a husband's divorcing his wife, is surely to be dealt with by a firmer hand than the lack of a forgiving spirit among brethren. Command is too strong for the latter; entreaty too mild for the former. Each has its place in the precept; and each is suitable and beautiful according to its use, and according to its place.

3. The next case in which the word command is used is the **AUTHORITY which a servant of Christ possesses as mouth for God**. For instance—"Those things command and teach." ([1Ti 4:11](#).) "Let the people know and feel," says Paul to Timothy, "that you speak with authority. Deal with them firmly when needful. God has put into your hands weapons mighty to pull down strongholds." ([2Co 10:4](#).) Speak out in the voice of command when evils arise, errors spring up, or dangers threaten. In this sense it much approaches the nature of another ministerial weapon—the language of rebuke. "Those who sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear." ([1Ti 5:20](#).)

It is a great mistake to think that the servants of Christ have no authority in the Church; no power to command, as well as to teach. The Apostle expressly says to Titus, "These things speak, and exhort, and rebuke with all authority. Let no man despise you." ([Tit 2:15](#).) Paul well knew that there were those in the churches who would seek to exalt themselves and depress the minister; consider him their servant, or try to make him their tool. He, therefore, meets this leveling spirit by bidding Timothy command as well as teach, and by telling Titus to speak, exhort, and rebuke with all authority.

Of course this authority is wholly spiritual; but it is derived from the Lord, not from the Church. Those churches, and, we may add, those officers of churches, therefore, greatly err who treat their pastors as if they were rather their servants than the Lord's servants; and instead of obeying those who have the rule

over them, and submitting themselves to their authority, ([Heb 13:1.7.](#)) rather seek to domineer, and even tyrannise over them by carnal weapons, and by that worst and basest of all—the purse.

4. The next and last case where the precept assumes the language of command is when **PECULIAR IMPORTANCE** is attached to the command. Now, what is the grand precept of the New Testament; in fact, the sum and substance of all the precepts? Is it not love? Need we, then, be surprised if this best, this sweetest and greatest of all the precepts, should, above all others, be enforced with authority? How blessedly did this precept fall from the lips of our Lord with the voice of command! "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." ([Joh 15:12.](#)) And again—"These things I command you, that you love one another." ([Joh 15:17.](#)) So also—"A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another." ([Joh 13:34.](#)) In a similar spirit writes the beloved disciple—"And this is his commandment, that we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another." ([1Jo 3:23.](#)) "And this commandment have we from him, that he who loves God love his brother also." ([1Jo 4:21.](#))

Our readers will doubtless think with us that we have said quite enough upon this point. We shall, therefore, now proceed to consider the other forms of the precept of which we have already given a short summary.

2. Sometimes, then, it takes the form of **INJUNCTION**, that is, it simply and plainly bids us do or not do this or that thing. This is its leading form, and that which mainly constitutes it precept. Thus when it says, "Put off the old man, and put on the new." "Pray without ceasing—in everything give thanks." "Provide things honest in the sight of all men." "Husbands, love your wives." "Servants, obey your masters in all things," and so on. It simply bids us, as Christian men, do those things which befit the gospel, and bring forth those fruits which are by Jesus Christ unto the glory and praise of God. As one of the simplest and most marked instances of this injunctive form of the precept, take what we may call that comprehensive code of directions given us [Rom 12:6-21](#), or that line of Christian walk and conduct which is laid down [1Th 5:15-22](#). The main feature stamped upon each of these concise yet clear lists of directions is that of injunction—in other words, **the Holy Spirit simply bids or enjoins upon us to pursue a certain course of Christian conduct.**

This, in fact, is the precept in its simplest form—a kind of medium between the voice of command, which is the highest, and the voice of entreaty, which is the lowest note in the scale. It therefore specially appeals to our spiritual understanding. Let us explain this point a little more clearly.

Assuming, then, that a believer possesses these four things, as parts or members of the new man of grace—a good or pure **conscience**; ([1Ti 1:19](#); [1Ti 3:9](#);) an enlightened **understanding**; ([Eph 1:18](#);) a new, tender, and broken **heart**; ([Eze 36:26](#); [2Ki 22:19](#); Psalm, 51:17;) and spiritual **memory**, or recollection of the Lord's dealings with the soul; ([Deu 8:2](#); [Joh 14:26](#); [Heb 10:32](#);) the four distinctive forms of precept which we have already enumerated address themselves severally to each of them. Thus,

"command" addresses itself to the conscience,

"injunction" to the understanding,

"entreaty" to the heart, and

"admonition" to the memory.

Not that each of these forms does not take in, and address itself to, the whole of a believer's new man of grace—not that there is any real separation of his conscience from his heart, or of his understanding from his memory—for our spiritual as well as our natural faculties are so combined in thought and action that they cannot be separated; but for the sake of clearness we may view them as distinct both in themselves and in their action.

Thus the precept under the form of "injunction," which we are now considering, addresses itself chiefly to our spiritual understanding. It thus becomes "a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path." ([Psa 119:105.](#)) In that beautiful psalm just referred to, in which the yearnings of a living soul towards, the actings of a believing heart upon the word of God are so vividly portrayed, we may very plainly see the connection between the precept and an enlightened understanding. "Give me understanding, and I shall

keep your law." ([Psa 119:34](#).) "Open my eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of your law." (18.) Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes." (33.) "Make me to understand the way of your precepts." (27.) How such and similar petitions show the existence of a gracious connection between understanding the precept and doing it. Indeed, how can we do the will of God unless we know the will of God? How can I tell how to act in this or that case agreeably to his revealed will—unless my eyes are spiritually enlightened to see what that revealed will is? This is not head knowledge, or "the knowledge that puffs up," but that gracious light in the understanding whereby it is divinely illuminated to know the truth as it is in Jesus—the fruit of that "anointing which teaches of all things, and is truth, and is no lie," ([1Jo 2:27](#)), enabling its favored possessor to say, "We know that the Spirit of God has come, and has given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true." ([1Jo 5:20](#).)

It is then to this gracious, this enlightened understanding that the precept, under its simplest form of injunction, chiefly addresses itself. We have rather lingered on this point, as having long felt that so few see the distinction between what the Apostle calls "the form of knowledge," ([Rom 2:20](#)), or "the knowledge which puffs up," ([1Co 8:1](#)), or "that understanding of all mysteries and of all knowledge" which a man may have and "be nothing," ([1Co 13:2](#)), and that gracious understanding of the things of God which springs out of the teaching of the Holy Spirit, ([1Co 2:12](#)), and the shining of God himself into the heart to give the light of the knowledge of his glory in the face of Jesus Christ. ([2Co 4:4](#).) When we come to the spirit of the precept, we shall see how this enlightened understanding acts in sweet harmony with the conscience, heart, and memory.

3. A. third form of the precept is **ENTREATY**. This is the tenderest form of the precept—its lowest, softest note, addressing itself immediately to the heart, as softened and melted with a sense of the goodness and mercy of the Lord. "I beseech you, therefore, brethren by the mercies of God;" ([Rom 12:1](#)); "Now I Paul myself beseech you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ." ([2Co 10:1](#).) "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that you walk worthy of the calling with which you are called." ([Eph 4:1](#).) What a tenderness there is in these earnest entreaties of the man of God; and to show that he used this language not of his own personal authority—but as the commissioned servant of God, he says in one place—"Now, then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us. We implore you in Christ's stead, be reconciled to God." ([2Co 5:20](#).)

How these tender appeals to our heart prove the true character of the precept, that it is gospel—not law; mercy—not judgment; grace—not works; liberty—not bondage; life—not death; salvation—not damnation; love—not fear; which animate it and breathe through it. O how this sweet spirit of gospel grace, breathing through the precept, distinguishes it on the one hand from the hard bondage of legal service, and on the other from that looseness of lip and life which has done more than anything else to throw discredit on the glorious gospel of the grace of God. But we are anticipating another part of our subject, and shall, therefore, now proceed to the last form of the precept proposed for consideration.

4. This is that of **ADMONITION**. To admonish is a part of the ministry of the gospel—"And we beseech you, brethren, to know those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord, and **admonish** you." ([1Th 5:12](#).) And as it is a part of the ministry of the gospel, so it is also an appointed means of the mutual edification of believers by one another—"And I myself also am persuaded of you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another." ([Rom 15:14](#).) So also—"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and **admonishing** one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." ([Col 3:16](#).)

We have already intimated that the voice of **admonition** addresses itself chiefly to the spiritual **memory**. We do not say that it does not appeal also to the understanding, to the conscience, and to the heart, for all these work and act together; but it chiefly and mainly addresses itself to our recollection. Thus when Paul says to his son Timothy, "Of these things put them in remembrance;" ([2Ti 2:14](#)); "If you put the brethren in remembrance of these things;" ([1Ti 4:6](#)); or when he appears to his Hebrew brethren—"But call to remembrance the former days," ([Heb 10:32](#)), he evidently addresses himself to their spiritual memory—the recollection of the Lord's mercies towards, and his claims upon them. So when Peter says—"Therefore I will not be negligent to put you always in remembrance of these things, though you know them, and be established in the present truth;" ([2Pe 1:12](#)); and again—"Moreover, I will endeavor that you may be able after my decease to have these things always in remembrance," ([2Pe 1:15](#)), he evidently appeals to their recollection of truths formerly laid before them, and of their own experience of

their reality and blessedness in knowing that they had "not followed cunningly-devised fables."

This mode of appeal singularly distinguishes the second epistle of Peter, and seems especially suitable to an aged Apostle, and one about shortly to put off his tabernacle. ([2Pe 1:14](#).) A dying man may well write as his last affectionate appeal to his beloved children—"This second epistle, beloved, I now write unto you; in both which I stir up your pure minds by way of remembrance, that you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us the Apostles of the Lord and Savior." ([2Pe 3:1-2](#).) This is admonition of the strongest, and yet tenderest kind.

If an affectionate father on a death-bed had said to his weeping children—"Be mindful of my last wishes; remember my dying request, that you should live in peace and union with each other," would it be out of place if those children were admonished of their father's words by their mother or a friend when they seemed disposed to quarrel? Would it not stir up their minds by way of remembrance, and appeal to their hearts through their memory? And similarly do not our minds need stirring up by way of remembrance? Observe, it is our "pure minds," that is, our new man of grace—"the mind with which we serve the law of God," ([Rom 7:25](#).) (not our carnal mind, our flesh, our body of sin and death,) which the precept stirs up by way of remembrance, when we call to memory the goodness and mercy of God, and feel warmed by a recollection of his past favors. Is there anything legal here? Anything like bondage, guilt, fear, wrath, hell, and damnation? O how the voice of the precept is misunderstood, when Sinai's thunders are heard in it, or when wretched legalists shake it over the poor distressed people of God, as though they would gladly tie them up to the post, and flog with it their bleeding backs!

No, dear friends, there is no terror in the precept as revealed by the Holy Spirit in the word, and as revealed by the same Holy Spirit to the soul. It is all pure gospel, as pure as the grace from which it flows; and if it sometimes address itself to your conscience, sometimes to your understanding, sometimes to your heart, sometimes to your memory; if it commands, or enjoins, or beseeches, or admonishes—it is still a Father's voice speaking to a son, and not a master's giving orders to a servant. It is the special privilege of the freeborn sons and daughters of Zion to have such a line of walk and conduct traced out for them by their heavenly Father that they may know his will and do it; and they have the greatest reason to praise and bless his holy name that he has so kindly condescended to teach and instruct them in the way which they should go, and thus ever guide them with his eye. ([Psa 32:8](#).)

The main, the leading form of the precept is of course that of **INJUNCTION or DIRECTION**; that is, it authoritatively bids us do or not do this or that thing, pursue or not pursue this or that line of action. (The definition of a precept, as given in our best dictionaries, is, "A commandment or order intended as an authoritative rule of action."—Webster) It is thus distinguished from an **invitation**, such as, "Come unto me all you that labor," etc. ([Mat 11:28](#).) "If any man thirsts, let him come unto me and drink;" ([Joh 7:37](#);) and from a **rebuke**, such as, "And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you." ([1Co 5:2](#).) "You observe days, and months, and times, and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have bestowed upon you labor in vain." ([Gal 4:10-11](#).)

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To each and all of those cases the voice of command, as we shall see if we examine them, is eminently suitable.

1. Take the first case—the voice of warning against some advancing danger or imminent **DANGER**. It seems thus used by the Apostle Peter in his second epistle—"That you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us the Apostles of the Lord and Savior; knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts." (2Pe 3:2-3.) The Apostles of the Lord knew that there would come in the last days ungodly scoffers, and therefore in the strong language of command they warned the people of God against these perilous times and these perilous men. Is there anything out of place in the language of command here? A low, soft voice, a gentle whisper, would not do were you to see a man about to cross the line as a railway train was coming in, or if in the dead of night it were needful to give an alarm of "fire" to your next door neighbor. The voice, then, of authoritative command is not out of harmony with the grace and love of the gospel, when the precept warns the people of God against coming dangers and advancing perils, and shouts to them, as if from the top of the mountains, to take close heed to their steps.

2. But now take the case of denouncing **EVIL** or **ERROR** in the professing Church. Is sin or error to be sprinkled with rose-water, or dealt with lovingly and tenderly, as if in a lover's whisper on a moonlight eve? Look at the almost parallel case of the ministry. Does not God bid his servants "lift up their voice like a trumpet, to show his people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins!" (Isa 58:1.) There is an allusion here to the two silver trumpets which, at the command of the Lord, were made by Moses for the priests to blow, for the calling of the assembly and the journeying of the camps. (Num 10:1-2.) As, then, it was still the same silver trumpet which, "in the days of their gladness and in their solemn days," was blown over their burnt offerings and their peace offerings that sounded, when needful, an alarm, so it is still the same gospel precept which sometimes speaks in the language of the tenderest entreaty, and at others denounces sin and error as with trumpet voice.

Thus the word "command" is used when the evil is denounced of not withdrawing from a brother that walks disorderly; (2Th 3:6;) or of living lazily, without working, upon other people's bounty; (2Th 3:10-12;) or of a woman's abandoning her husband, or the husband's divorcing his wife, as not being a believer; (1Co 8:10;) or of warning against some gross sin. (1Th 4:2-7.) In these instances wisely and graciously does the Holy Spirit employ the language of command, as thus impressing upon the precept a firmer and more authoritative character than mere entreaty. The evil of a wife's forsaking her husband, or of a husband's divorcing his wife, is surely to be dealt with by a firmer hand than the lack of a forgiving spirit among brethren. Command is too strong for the latter; entreaty too mild for the former. Each has its place in the precept; and each is suitable and beautiful according to its use, and according to its place.

3. The next case in which the word command is used is the **AUTHORITY which a servant of Christ possesses as mouth for God**. For instance—"Those things command and teach." (1Ti 4:11.) "Let the people know and feel," says Paul to Timothy, "that you speak with authority. Deal with them firmly when needful. God has put into your hands weapons mighty to pull down strongholds." (2Co 10:4.) Speak out in the voice of command when evils arise, errors spring up, or dangers threaten. In this sense it much approaches the nature of another ministerial weapon—the language of rebuke. "Those who sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear." (1Ti 5:20.)

It is a great mistake to think that the servants of Christ have no authority in the Church; no power to command, as well as to teach. The Apostle expressly says to Titus, "These things speak, and exhort, and rebuke with all authority. Let no man despise you." ([Tit 2:15.](#)) Paul well knew that there were those in the churches who would seek to exalt themselves and depress the minister; consider him their servant, or try to make him their tool. He, therefore, meets this leveling spirit by bidding Timothy command as well as teach, and by telling Titus to speak, exhort, and rebuke with all authority.

Of course this authority is wholly spiritual; but it is derived from the Lord, not from the Church. Those churches, and, we may add, those officers of churches, therefore, greatly err who treat their pastors as if they were rather their servants than the Lord's servants; and instead of obeying those who have the rule over them, and submitting themselves to their authority, ([Heb 13:1.7.](#)) rather seek to domineer, and even tyrannise over them by carnal weapons, and by that worst and basest of all—the purse.

4. The next and last case where the precept assumes the language of command is when **PECULIAR IMPORTANCE** is attached to the command. Now, what is the grand precept of the New Testament; in fact, the sum and substance of all the precepts? Is it not love? Need we, then, be surprised if this best, this sweetest and greatest of all the precepts, should, above all others, be enforced with authority? How blessedly did this precept fall from the lips of our Lord with the voice of command! "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." ([Joh 15:12.](#)) And again—"These things I command you, that you love one another." ([Joh 15:17.](#)) So also—"A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another." ([Joh 13:34.](#)) In a similar spirit writes the beloved disciple—"And this is his commandment, that we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another." ([1Jo 3:23.](#)) "And this commandment have we from him, that he who loves God love his brother also." ([1Jo 4:21.](#))

Our readers will doubtless think with us that we have said quite enough upon this point. We shall, therefore, now proceed to consider the other forms of the precept of which we have already given a short summary.

2. Sometimes, then, it takes the form of **INJUNCTION**, that is, it simply and plainly bids us do or not do this or that thing. This is its leading form, and that which mainly constitutes it precept. Thus when it says, "Put off the old man, and put on the new." "Pray without ceasing—in everything give thanks." "Provide things honest in the sight of all men." "Husbands, love your wives." "Servants, obey your masters in all things," and so on. It simply bids us, as Christian men, do those things which befit the gospel, and bring forth those fruits which are by Jesus Christ unto the glory and praise of God. As one of the simplest and most marked instances of this injunctive form of the precept, take what we may call that comprehensive code of directions given us [Rom 12:6-21](#), or that line of Christian walk and conduct which is laid down [1Th 5:15-22](#). The main feature stamped upon each of these concise yet clear lists of directions is that of injunction—in other words, **the Holy Spirit simply bids or enjoins upon us to pursue a certain course of Christian conduct.**

This, in fact, is the precept in its simplest form—a kind of medium between the voice of command, which is the highest, and the voice of entreaty, which is the lowest note in the scale. It therefore specially appeals to our spiritual understanding. Let us explain this point a little more clearly.

Assuming, then, that a believer possesses these four things, as parts or members of the new man of grace—a good or pure **conscience**; ([1Ti 1:19](#); [1Ti 3:9](#);) an enlightened **understanding**; ([Eph 1:18](#);) a new, tender, and broken **heart**; ([Eze 36:26](#); [2Ki 22:19](#); Psalm, 51:17;) and spiritual **memory**, or recollection of the Lord's dealings with the soul; ([Deu 8:2](#); [Joh 14:26](#); [Heb 10:32](#);) the four distinctive forms of precept which we have already enumerated address themselves severally to each of them. Thus,

"command" addresses itself to the conscience,

"injunction" to the understanding,

"entreaty" to the heart, and

"admonition" to the memory.

Not that each of these forms does not take in, and address itself to, the whole of a believer's new man of

grace—not that there is any real separation of his conscience from his heart, or of his understanding from his memory—for our spiritual as well as our natural faculties are so combined in thought and action that they cannot be separated; but for the sake of clearness we may view them as distinct both in themselves and in their action.

Thus the precept under the form of "injunction," which we are now considering, addresses itself chiefly to our spiritual understanding. It thus becomes "a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path." ([Psa 119:105.](#)) In that beautiful psalm just referred to, in which the yearnings of a living soul towards, the actings of a believing heart upon the word of God are so vividly portrayed, we may very plainly see the connection between the precept and an enlightened understanding. "Give me understanding, and I shall keep your law." ([Psa 119:34.](#)) "Open my eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of your law." (18.) "Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes." (33.) "Make me to understand the way of your precepts." (27.) How such and similar petitions show the existence of a gracious connection between understanding the precept and doing it. Indeed, how can we do the will of God unless we know the will of God? How can I tell how to act in this or that case agreeably to his revealed will—unless my eyes are spiritually enlightened to see what that revealed will is? This is not head knowledge, or "the knowledge that puffs up," but that gracious light in the understanding whereby it is divinely illuminated to know the truth as it is in Jesus—the fruit of that "anointing which teaches of all things, and is truth, and is no lie," ([1Jo 2:27.](#)) enabling its favored possessor to say, "We know that the Spirit of God has come, and has given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true." ([1Jo 5:20.](#))

It is then to this gracious, this enlightened understanding that the precept, under its simplest form of injunction, chiefly addresses itself. We have rather lingered on this point, as having long felt that so few see the distinction between what the Apostle calls "the form of knowledge," ([Rom 2:20.](#)) or "the knowledge which puffs up," ([1Co 8:1.](#)) or "that understanding of all mysteries and of all knowledge" which a man may have and "be nothing," ([1Co 13:2.](#)) and that gracious understanding of the things of God which springs out of the teaching of the Holy Spirit, ([1Co 2:12.](#)) and the shining of God himself into the heart to give the light of the knowledge of his glory in the face of Jesus Christ. ([2Co 4:4.](#)) When we come to the spirit of the precept, we shall see how this enlightened understanding acts in sweet harmony with the conscience, heart, and memory.

3. A. third form of the precept is **ENTREATY**. This is the tenderest form of the precept—its lowest, softest note, addressing itself immediately to the heart, as softened and melted with a sense of the goodness and mercy of the Lord. "I beseech you, therefore, brethren by the mercies of God;" ([Rom 12:1.](#)) "Now I Paul myself beseech you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ." ([2Co 10:1.](#)) "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that you walk worthy of the calling with which you are called." ([Eph 4:1.](#)) What a tenderness there is in these earnest entreaties of the man of God; and to show that he used this language not of his own personal authority—but as the commissioned servant of God, he says in one place—"Now, then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us. We implore you in Christ's stead, be reconciled to God." ([2Co 5:20.](#))

How these tender appeals to our heart prove the true character of the precept, that it is gospel—not law; mercy—not judgment; grace—not works; liberty—not bondage; life—not death; salvation—not damnation; love—not fear; which animate it and breathe through it. O how this sweet spirit of gospel grace, breathing through the precept, distinguishes it on the one hand from the hard bondage of legal service, and on the other from that looseness of lip and life which has done more than anything else to throw discredit on the glorious gospel of the grace of God. But we are anticipating another part of our subject, and shall, therefore, now proceed to the last form of the precept proposed for consideration.

4. This is that of **ADMONITION**. To admonish is a part of the ministry of the gospel—"And we beseech you, brethren, to know those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord, and **admonish** you." ([1Th 5:12.](#)) And as it is a part of the ministry of the gospel, so it is also an appointed means of the mutual edification of believers by one another—"And I myself also am persuaded of you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another." ([Rom 15:14.](#)) So also—"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and **admonishing** one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." ([Col 3:16.](#))

We have already intimated that the voice of **admonition** addresses itself chiefly to the spiritual **memory**. We do not say that it does not appeal also to the understanding, to the conscience, and to the heart, for

all these work and act together; but it chiefly and mainly addresses itself to our recollection. Thus when Paul says to his son Timothy, "Of these things put them in remembrance;" (2Ti 2:14;) "If you put the brethren in remembrance of these things;" (1Ti 4:6;) or when he appears to his Hebrew brethren—"But call to remembrance the former days," (Heb 10:32,) he evidently addresses himself to their spiritual memory—the recollection of the Lord's mercies towards, and his claims upon them. So when Peter says—"Therefore I will not be negligent to put you always in remembrance of these things, though you know them, and be established in the present truth;" (2Pe 1:12;) and again—"Moreover, I will endeavor that you may be able after my decease to have these things always in remembrance," (2Pe 1:15,) he evidently appeals to their recollection of truths formerly laid before them, and of their own experience of their reality and blessedness in knowing that they had "not followed cunningly-devised fables."

This mode of appeal singularly distinguishes the second epistle of Peter, and seems especially suitable to an aged Apostle, and one about shortly to put off his tabernacle. (2Pe 1:14.) A dying man may well write as his last affectionate appeal to his beloved children—"This second epistle, beloved, I now write unto you; in both which I stir up your pure minds by way of remembrance, that you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us the Apostles of the Lord and Savior." (2Pe 3:1-2.) This is admonition of the strongest, and yet tenderest kind.

If an affectionate father on a death-bed had said to his weeping children—"Be mindful of my last wishes; remember my dying request, that you should live in peace and union with each other," would it be out of place if those children were admonished of their father's words by their mother or a friend when they seemed disposed to quarrel? Would it not stir up their minds by way of remembrance, and appeal to their hearts through their memory? And similarly do not our minds need stirring up by way of remembrance? Observe, it is our "pure minds," that is, our new man of grace—"the mind with which we serve the law of God," (Rom 7:25,) (not our carnal mind, our flesh, our body of sin and death,) which the precept stirs up by way of remembrance, when we call to memory the goodness and mercy of God, and feel warmed by a recollection of his past favors. Is there anything legal here? Anything like bondage, guilt, fear, wrath, hell, and damnation? O how the voice of the precept is misunderstood, when Sinai's thunders are heard in it, or when wretched legalists shake it over the poor distressed people of God, as though they would gladly tie them up to the post, and flog with it their bleeding backs!

No, dear friends, there is no terror in the precept as revealed by the Holy Spirit in the word, and as revealed by the same Holy Spirit to the soul. It is all pure gospel, as pure as the grace from which it flows; and if it sometimes address itself to your conscience, sometimes to your understanding, sometimes to your heart, sometimes to your memory; if it commands, or enjoins, or beseeches, or admonishes—it is still a Father's voice speaking to a son, and not a master's giving orders to a servant. It is the special privilege of the freeborn sons and daughters of Zion to have such a line of walk and conduct traced out for them by their heavenly Father that they may know his will and do it; and they have the greatest reason to praise and bless his holy name that he has so kindly condescended to teach and instruct them in the way which they should go, and thus ever guide them with his eye. (Psa 32:8.)

Let, then, some legalize and pervert, and let others neglect and despise the precept; it still remains the possession and the privilege of the living family of God—their possession as their Father's revealed will, and their privilege as their inspired guide to the obedience of faith.

In our next section we hope, if the Lord wills, to enter upon the spirit of the precept; and may the Holy Spirit who has revealed in it the letter of the word, and who, from time to time, animates it with his vivifying breath, rest upon our spirit and our pen, and upon the spirit of our gracious readers.

In considering the **nature** of the precept, we shall examine,

II. The SPIRIT of the precept.

We come now to a very important part of our subject—indeed, we may almost say the most important, for it is that part which gives life and spirit to the whole. This is the **spirit** of the precept as distinguished from the letter.

We have never seen any work on the precepts of God's word, which has given us full satisfaction; and for this simple reason. No man of truth, that we are aware of, has treated the subject fully and systematically. Owen, Bunyan, and most of the old Puritan writers have entered largely and fully into the preceptive parts of the word of God; but as they hold the Mosaic law for the believer's rule of life, their views were necessarily from that circumstance legal, confused and imperfect. Mr. Huntington and Mr. Gadsby have both of them most clearly and beautifully unfolded the spiritual character of the precept, and shown its full and thorough harmony with the grace of the gospel; and from the "Posthumous Letters," and other works of Huntington, whole pages might be selected in which the immortal Coalheaver has, in his most masterly manner, described the fruits and effects of the gospel in heart, lip, and life; in other words has drawn out the precept in all its living features as a rule of Christian obedience.

But neither of these great men has handled the subject in a full and systematic manner, so as to enter into it in its length and breadth, and thus present it as a full, compact, and consistent whole to the consideration of the Church of God. It was not, indeed, necessary for them to do this, as their object was rather to overthrow the current doctrine—that the Mosaic law was the believer's rule of life—and to establish the gospel, the perfect law of liberty, as the believer's rule—than devote their attention to a minute consideration of the precept, which was but a part of their subject. It seemed, therefore, laid upon our mind to take up the subject as we had seen it revealed in the word of truth and in the experience of the saints, and handle it in a more full, clear, and systematic form than we believe has been yet attempted by any man of truth. And this must be our excuse if our exposition of it has been somewhat too lengthy and verbose.

Dim, superficial, confused views of the solemn, weighty truths of the gospel cannot satisfy our mind. We love, if God gives us the wisdom and ability, to go to the very bottom of a subject and turn it up for examination by the people of God, that they with us may be firmly established in the truth, and not be "children tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive." ([Eph 4:14.](#)) This, however, requires not only much careful examination and meditation, but a certain fullness of detail which, from undue length, may become wearisome. It was for this reason, therefore, that we examined fully the **letter** of the precept, which probably seemed to many dull and dry, but yet was necessary to be thoroughly gone into, to lay a deep and broad foundation for the more spiritual and experimental part of our subject to rest upon.

But having laid this foundation, we now come to those inner chambers which wisdom has filled with all precious and pleasant riches, ([Pro 24:4.](#)) to those experimental realities, where we and our spiritual readers feel most at home, and most enjoy that sweet union and unison of spirit in which we mutually delight. We come, then, now to the **SPIRIT** of the precept.

In examining, then, this part of our subject, we shall consider the spirit of the precept under three points of view—

1. The nature and character of the spirit of the precept.
2. The connection between the spirit and the letter of the precept.
3. The way in which the spirit of the precept acts in unison and harmony—not only with the letter of the precept—but with the whole tenor and current of the glorious gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

1. The NATURE and CHARACTER of the spirit of the precept.

As it is most desirable to obtain, if we do not already possess, clear ideas upon the point now before us at the very outset, (for if we start confusedly we shall proceed confusedly, and shall probably end confusedly,) we shall first attempt to define as simply and as plainly as we can, what we understand by the spirit of the precept; and then, to set the subject in a fuller, broader light, shall illustrate our definition by some experimental and practical instances.

We **DEFINE the spirit of the precept to be the life and power of the precept, as animated by the quickening breath of the Holy Spirit, and thus brought into and out of the believing heart by a divine operation and influence.** In this life and power put into the precept by the Holy Spirit, and thus made spirit and life to the soul, lies all the difference between the spirit and the letter.

This distinctive difference between the letter and the spirit we may see clearly exemplified in the Lord's own words to his disciples—"It is the Spirit who quickens; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life." ([Joh 6:63](#).) Many heard the words in the letter which the Lord spoke with pleasure and approbation; for we read that on one occasion "all the people hung on his words," and on another, that, "all who were there spoke well of him and were amazed by the gracious words that fell from his lips." But to them it was but the letter of truth; for those very same people, who were amazed at his gracious words, when the Lord began to preach the discriminating grace of God "were filled with wrath, and rose up and thrust him out of the city." ([Luk 4:22](#); [Luk 4:28-29](#).) The Spirit did not quicken his words to their souls; they were not made, as to the disciples, spirit and life. They were, therefore, to them the mere letter of truth, and what is more, the killing letter, for by those words they were to be judged and condemned. ([Joh 12:48](#).)

The spirit of the precept is, then, so to speak, **the breathing of life by the Spirit into the letter of the precept, and thus a bringing of it into the heart with a divine influence of power, and out of the heart into a gracious and practical fulfillment.** Let us illustrate this explanation by several examples; and, to make the point clearer, we will take two distinct classes of precept—

1. That class which addresses itself peculiarly to our personal walk with and before God.

2. That class which addresses itself to our walk and conduct with and before man.

1. Take the following precept as addressing itself to **our walk before God**. "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time." ([1Pe 5:6](#).) I am here directed and enjoined to humble myself under the mighty hand of God. But can I do so? No, I cannot! I may make the attempt. I may fall on my knees, confess my sins, put my mouth in the dust—at least do all this in words. But can I produce in my soul that solemn humbling of my whole spirit before God, that believing view of his mighty hand under which I reverentially bow, that self-loathing and self-abhorrence, that brokenness and contrition of heart, that lying at his feet with weeping and supplications, that giving up of myself into his hands, without which all my humbling of myself is but lip service? No! I can do none of these things! I am so thoroughly destitute and helpless that I cannot produce one grain of real humility in my own soul.

But let the Holy Spirit graciously work upon my heart; let him fill me with a deep sense of the mighty hand of God over me and under me; let him humble me in my inmost soul as the very chief of sinners under his mighty hand as able to save or destroy; let my heart be broken and my spirit made contrite under a sight of my sins, and a sight, too, of the life and blood, sufferings and death of my dear Redeemer—how can I not humble myself under the mighty hand of God? Is any spot too low for me to creep into and lie in? Where are my pride and self-righteousness now? Does not sweet humility fill and possess my soul?

Here is the spirit of the precept. Here is life and power put into it; here the Holy Spirit brings it, in the substance of it, into the heart, and out of the heart too. Here the precept is fulfilled in its spiritual import, in harmony with the grace of the gospel, according to the will of God, and, therefore, acceptably to him.

Take another instance of the same class of precept—"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." ([Phi 4:6](#).) Can you perform this precept? There it stands in the letter of the word—a gracious injunction—a holy, wise direction. But can you not be "anxious," (that is, as the word literally means, 'rent and torn in your mind,') "about anything," when you know what anxious cares about almost everything daily rack your bosom? And can you produce or maintain that prayerful spirit whereby in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God?" You know that you cannot!

But suppose that, in some unexpected moment, when full of cares, you are favored with a gracious visitation of the blessed Spirit, and faith is given you to cast all your care upon the Lord, knowing that he cares for you; and suppose that with this a spirit of grace and of supplication is poured into your bosom, can you now in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving for past mercies and favors, make your requests known unto God? You say, "I can! I do! All my requests I make known to his gracious Majesty, and he hears and answers me to the joy of my heart." This is the spirit of the precept; this is fulfilling it from the heart; this is serving God in newness of the spirit, not in the oldness of the letter.

2. Now take another class of precepts; those which prescribe and regulate **our walk and conduct before**

man, and especially with our believing brethren. There is the letter—and the spirit. We will look it both. Take the following precept from the letter of the word—"Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." ([Eph 5:1-2](#).) We are here bidden to be "imitators of God"—that is, we are enjoined to imitate the example of God, in forgiving our brethren, as he has forgiven us, as is evident from the preceding verse. ([Eph 4:32](#).) Now, can you thus imitate God in forgiving a brother who has done you a grievous wrong? You try to do so before God and your brother. But while you are trying and trying to raise up a forgiving spirit, something rankles within, which keeps you back from a full and free forgiveness. But let the Lord the Spirit but bring into your soul a sweet sense of pardoning love; let him set before your eyes and bring into your heart the suffering Son of God, as loving you and giving himself for you, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling savour—can you forgive your brother now? Can you walk in love with all the dear family of God now? How freely and fully you can forgive; how warmly and affectionately you can love! Here is the spirit of the precept—not the cold, dead, naked letter—but the very spirit of it, warmed into life and motion—brought out of the **word** into the heart—and brought again out of the **heart**, all warm and glowing—into the activity and energy of **practical obedience**. This is a doing of the will of God from the heart, ([Eph 6:6](#).) and therefore a spiritual sacrifice acceptable to God by Jesus Christ. ([1Pe 2:5](#).)

We need not pursue this point further. But if you wish to have your mind and judgment more fully formed and established in this point, in which really the very pith and marrow of the whole subject lies, take one precept after another and examine each by the light which we have endeavored to cast upon it. You will see that in every instance there is the letter and the spirit; and that the only way of fulfilling the precept is by having the life and power of it in your own soul.

2. The CONNECTION between the spirit and the letter of the precept.

In a former chapter we illustrated the distinction between the **letter**, and the **spirit** of the precept by comparing the former to the body, and the latter to the soul of a living man. The soul, at least in our present time-state, does not, as a general rule, act separately from the body; and though each one's individual consciousness sufficiently assures him of the distinctness of soul and body, yet are they so linked together that they for the most part act by and with each other. Can you, viewing the matter as a general, ordinary, everyday fact, see without your eyes, or hear without your ears, or feel without your fingers, or talk without your tongue? Yet what are eyes, or ears, or fingers or tongue separate from the soul which uses them as her instruments to gather in her ideas, and then, sitting apart in her noble citadel, forms from them her plans, which she bids them, as her ministering servants, execute? And faithfully do they execute the biddings of their mistress until old age or infirmity dims the eye and dulls the ear, stiffens the joints and weakens the active hand and nimble foot, until at length "the silver cord is loosed and the golden bowl is broken; and then the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it." ([Ecc 12:6-7](#).)

Of course our figure is but a figure, and, therefore, must not be too closely pressed; and yet there are points of resemblance which may help to **illustrate the distinction which we wish to draw between the letter and the spirit of the precept**, and at the same time show their intimate connection with each other.

1. The soul is unquestionably the nobler part of man. God has given us "a body as it has pleased him,"—a body fearfully and wonderfully made, and most admirably and beautifully adapted to our present time-state. But, as formed of the dust of the ground, it is and must be, from its very origin, inferior to the soul which God himself breathed into man's nostrils with the breath of life. ([Gen 2:7](#).)

So the letter of the precept, is necessarily inferior to the spirit of the precept—as standing merely in so many words and letters formed from the ordinary earthly language of man, as Adam's body out of the dust, and, therefore, requiring an animating breath, the very breath of God, to put a soul into them. Except, then, as animated by the Holy Spirit, the letter of the precept is cold and dead—like a man asleep or in his coffin, a man with all the limbs and features of a human being, but lifeless and motionless for lack of the living soul to inspire him into activity and movement. As, then, the soul of man is nobler than the body of man, so the spirit or soul of the precept, is nobler than the letter or body of the precept.

An example from the Scripture will show this point in a still clearer light—"And be kind one to another,

tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you." ([Eph 4:32](#).) How good, how wise, how gracious is this precept as it stands in the letter of truth. But surely the spirit of the precept, the spirit of kindness, of tenderness of heart, of mutual brotherly forgiveness, and all flowing from the sweet persuasion of being ourselves forgiven—is nobler than the letter of the precept; for it is that which animates it, carries it into practical execution, and makes it effectual to the obedience of faith. I may forgive as a duty. O how cold and worthless; how half-hearted, if not wholly insincere. But to forgive under a divine influence, as melted and softened by pardoning mercy—is not this spirit of forgiveness higher, nobler, fuller, more blessed than the mere fulfillment in the letter of a practical duty? For our obedience must be one or the other, must stand either in the letter or in the spirit—be an act of moral duty, or a fruit of special grace.

2. But on another ground the soul is superior to the body. The soul can act without the body; but the body cannot act without the soul. We think, we meditate, we pray; our active mind runs here and there; we pass in a moment from heaven to earth and from earth to heaven; we skim over the wide Atlantic to a friend in America, fly on over the broad Pacific to a relative in Australia or New Zealand, and leap at one bound from pole to pole. Spurning sea, air, earth, and sky—on, on flies the unwearied soul, more quickly than electric current or lightning stroke. And where is the poor body all the time? Ill, perhaps, in bed, lying languidly on the sofa, scarcely able, it may be, to walk across the room, chained fast with a broken leg or life-long lameness—while its ethereal mate, regardless of her clay partner, is soaring here and there swifter than light, and freer than air!

But is this not inconsistent with our previous assertion that the soul does not, as a general rule, act separately from the body? Not a whit; and that chiefly for two reasons. 1. First we qualified our assertion by the words "as a general rule;" 2. Though the soul can and does act separately from the body, yet it is only by means of those ideas which it has gained through the bodily senses that it thus acts in its rapid and varied flights. Thus in one sense the soul is dependent on, in another independent of, its sluggish companion, and yet remains in close connection with it—a connection of the past, if not a connection of the present. So with the letter and spirit of the precept. The spirit of the precept can act distinctly from the letter of the precept, and yet has gained from it its knowledge of the offices which it has to execute, its understanding of the work which it has to perform. If I love my brother, if I forgive my enemy, if I pray without ceasing, if I rejoice in the Lord, if I abhor that which is evil, if I cleave to that which is good, if I walk worthy of the calling with which I am called—assuming that I do these things, and do them in the very spirit of the gospel as taught, led, and, influenced by the Holy Spirit—I only feel, walk, and act in unison with the letter of the precept. I gather previously from the word of God what his will is and how I should walk according to it; and if the Holy Spirit opens this will to my heart, and enables me to act in obedience to it, I learn first from the letter of the precept what that will is.

Our Lord could say, "Lo, I come; in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do your will, O my God; yes, your law is within my heart." ([Psa 40:7-8](#).) Thus though his delight was to do the will of God, yet that will was written in the volume of the book—either the volume of God's eternal decrees or the volume of the inspired Scriptures.

So with us. If possessing any measure of the mind, grace, and spirit of Christ, we delight to do the will of God, we first see that will written in the volume of the book. For what do we know of the revealed will of God—except from the Scriptures of truth? Thus there is a connection between the letter and the spirit of the precept, analogous to the connection of our body and soul. My intellectual knowledge, my mental ideas, have all been gathered in the first instance through my bodily senses, as sight, hearing, &c., and then my mind selects, compares, combines, and otherwise uses for its own purposes the materials of thought and reasoning which have been thus sedulously and steadily gathered. That the spirit of the precept can powerfully influence and vigorously act without the medium of the letter was evidently shown in that signal day when "the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and of one soul." ([Act 4:32](#).) It is true that the precept as delivered by our gracious Lord was in the mind and memory of his immediate disciples, and was at that time also in the mouth of the Apostles, as we find Peter giving it forth; ([Act 2:38](#); [Act 10:47-48](#);) but the love of God being shed abroad in their hearts by the Holy Spirit, the spirit of the precept, "Love one another as I have loved you," was so strong and powerful that it not exactly superseded, but soared above, all written directions.

We have an instance of this point in the words of Paul to the Thessalonians—"As concerning brotherly

love, you need not that I write unto you; for you yourselves are taught of God to love one another." (1Th 4:9.) They were so taught of God to love one another that they needed no written directions to do so, no formal precept to bind it hard and fast in their consciences. And yet to show the nature and necessity of the precept, and its connection with spiritual obedience, the Apostle adds, "And indeed you do it toward all the brethren which are in all Macedonia; but we beseech you, brethren, that you increase more and more." (1Th 4:10.) Their brotherly love might flag, or there were larger measures of it to be attained unto. The spirit of the precept might seem to render the letter almost needless in their happy case; and yet the Apostle would not neglect the letter, but would still urge it upon their consciences, as a revelation of the special will of God.

We may take an almost parallel case from the precept—"Husbands, love your wives." (Eph 5:25.) A Christian husband may so dearly and fondly love his wife that he may need no precept to urge him to love her. The spirit of the precept in this case may seem almost to supersede and render useless the injunction; and yet it does not do the one or the other, for he may love her too fondly, with too much of carnal love, and this may entangle him in some of those numerous snares which ever attend idolatrous or inordinate affections.

Here, then, come in the wisdom and grace of the letter of the precept to guide, to regulate, to sanctify conjugal love, to turn it into a Christian channel, to restrain its excess, and to hold up a pattern and an example that it may not be like the gross, sensual love of carnal men to carnal women—but be purified from idolatry and everything whereby the conscience may be defiled. "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the Church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word." (Eph 5:25-26.) The purity and sanctity of Christ's love to the Church is thus offered as an example to purify and sanctify the love with which a Christian man should love his wife. Thus though the spirit of the precept can act independently of the letter of the precept, yet from the letter it gains its knowledge of the will of God, and by the letter it is guided, restrained, and regulated.

3. This, therefore, gives us another instance of the connection between the letter and the spirit of the precept and the extreme value and blessedness of this intimate connection. **The letter guides and regulates the spirit, and thus preserves it from enthusiasm and fanaticism.** What a deep debt of gratitude do we owe to the Holy Spirit for the 'letter' of the precept! What a preservative from pretended revelations or spiritual delusions! We live in a dreadful day, when the vilest impostures or the very depths of Satan are palmed off as "spiritual manifestations." Now, what an unspeakable mercy it is for the Church of God that there is a calm, sober, solid, weighty spiritual revelation of his mind and will in the New Testament, and especially in the preceptive part of it. This is at once a guide and a test, a restraint from all wild flights of what might be thought and called 'the spirit', from all erroneous views of what we might be told the Spirit dictates or enforces, and yet at the same time, a safe, wise, and holy regulator of all our walk and conduct with God and man!

We have not space to prove it; but it might be easily shown that most if not all of the abominations of the Romish Church, her pretended revelations, her monkish austerities, her conventual discipline, her secret confessional, and the power which she wields over the minds and consciences of her devotees may be traced up to her casting aside the Scriptures as the only rule of faith and obedience. O the unspeakable blessedness, then, of possessing, as God's gift—the wisest, safest, holiest instruction to guide our every step heavenward. O the greater blessedness still of having a divine teaching, power, and influence in our own bosom to quicken the precept as with new life—and to animate our heart to love and obey it, as held forth to our faith.

3. Having thus traced the connection between the letter and the spirit of the precept, we shall now attempt to show **how the spirit of the precept acts in unison and harmony, not only with the letter of the precept, but with the whole tenor and current of the glorious gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.** It thus elevates the precept out of the letter; takes it completely out of the hands of legalists and pharisees, who, by their ignorance or their self-righteousness, would pervert it into a mere moral code; brings it thoroughly away from Mount Sinai, where they would gladly fasten it on the mount which burned with fire, and was shrouded in blackness, and darkness, and tempest—and puts it under the shade and shelter of Mount Zion, as a part of that new covenant of which Jesus is the Mediator, and of which the blood of sprinkling is the dedication. (Heb 9:18-23; Heb 12:18-24.)

If you are still in doubt upon this point, ask yourself this simple question—"Is the precept a part of the New

Testament or not?" If it is a part of the New Testament, which none can deny, it is of the new covenant, for the word in the original is the same, and the meaning of the two terms but slightly differs. Now, if it is a part of the new covenant, then it must be in harmony with every other part of it, unless you suppose that the God of all wisdom and of all grace has given to the Church a broken, divided, inconsistent, contradictory covenant; a circumstance which, according even to human covenants, would vitiate the whole. It is surprising how all difficulties, and especially those which we make for ourselves or others make for us by carnal reasoning, vanish and disappear before the simplicity of truth. How Mr. Huntington was abused for nearly half a century with the vilest names, called an imposter and an Antinomian by men who stood high in an evangelical profession, for merely holding and defending a truth which is as clear as the sun at noonday, that **the gospel, not the Mosaic law, is the believer's rule of life.** Was this an error of the deepest magnitude? Was this "a heinous crime, yes, an iniquity to be punished by the judges," that in so doing he applied to God's last and best will and testament a principle known to every man who has a shilling's worth of property to bequeath, that a new will at once sets aside an old one, and that no judge or jury, court of law, or attorney would so much as look at a will dated last week when there lies before them a will dated today? And yet men and ministers, holding in their hands or laying on their pulpit cushion a Bible divided into the Old and New Testaments, in other words, God's Old and New Wills, heaped abuse on the head of a man who simply asserted that God's New Will virtually repealed and set aside his Old Will.

But as bats and owls hate the sun, because under his bright beams they cannot hunt and hawk for their insects and their mice; so do half-blind professors hate the sunlight of heavenly truth, as baffling their low and groveling appetites for everything which feeds the flesh; while new-born souls love its genial beams, and are ever crying, "Light, light, more light. Shine, Lord, into my heart; show me light in your own most blessed light, and fix my affections on things which are above, where Christ sits on the right hand of God." And the Lord answers them to the joy of their soul; for he "who commands the light to shine out of darkness shines into their hearts to give them the light of the knowledge of his own glory in the face of Jesus Christ." ([2Co 4:6.](#))

Readers, forgive this digression; but feeling our heart warmed with love to God's truth, our pen ran glidingly on. We have had some dry spots to travel over and toil through even in our present subject, when we were handling the letter of the precept. If, then, we can but get a little lying down in a green pasture, and a little leading beside the still waters, let us tarry awhile to eat and drink, and so pass on. The wilderness is still before us. Bless his holy name if the cloudy pillar there guide us, the manna feed us, and the well out of the rock follow us. Let us attempt to show, then, **HOW the spirit of the precept acts in harmony with the whole tenor of the gospel.**

1. The grand distinctive feature of the gospel is, that it is the revelation of a new covenant, the covenant of grace, made by the Father with the Son on behalf of a peculiar people. By the term "grace" we understand the pure favor of God, irrespective of all worth or worthiness in the creature, and flowing out to his people as chosen, accepted, and blessed in the Son of his love. The declaration and proclamation of this new covenant we call the gospel, that is, glad tidings—good news. And the gladness of its tidings consists in this—that it sounds forth salvation by grace. These are simple, well-known truths; but we need sometimes to be as if recalled to the simplicity of truth, especially when errors of various kinds spring up to pervert and distort it.

As a revelation, then, of pure grace, the gospel is distinguished from the law, the covenant of works. Every part, therefore, of the gospel must harmonize with this grand characteristic; and as the precept is a part of this gospel, it too must, in all its varied bearings, move in fullest accord with the grace of God, as thus revealed in his dear Son. But grace is a most comprehensive term, for it embraces the pure favor of God both in its source and in its streams, in its manifestations and in its operations, in its purposes and in its effects, in its counsels and in its consequences. The precept, of course, is not co-extensive with the grace of God, for it is but a part, and comparatively but a small part, of that wondrous plan, as being chiefly confined to this time-state; while grace not merely respects the present, but looks backward and forward—backward to the eternal purposes of God in Christ, ([Eph 1:3-11,](#)) and forward to the accomplishment of those purposes in "making known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy which he had prepared beforehand unto glory." ([Rom 9:23.](#))

Thus the **doctrines** of the gospel are doctrines of grace, the **promises** of the gospel are promises of

grace, the **invitations** of the gospel are invitations of grace, and the **precepts** of the gospel are precepts of grace. All this seems self-evident, and immediately as the gospel is seen and acknowledged to be a revelation of pure grace, it follows as an undeniable conclusion.

But it is found, as a matter of daily observation and experience, that the perverse mind of man will evade, or distort, or deny conclusions or consequences, however plain or clear they may appear, which are opposed to natural prejudices, or which press hard upon habits of self-indulgence or self-righteousness. You may, for instance, show a man, in the clearest manner from the word of God, the sin of covetousness, and he will admit the truth and force of your arguments and conclusions. But ask him the next moment for a few shillings for the poor, and you will soon see how his covetous heart evades or denies the point to which you have just brought him. So with the precept. With one breath a man will acknowledge it as a part of the gospel of the grace of God, and with the next utter words which convince you that he pays no real regard to it, holds it in no honor or estimation, and has neither seen its beauty nor felt its power.

Now, this one thing is certain to our own mind, for it has been worked out in our own experience—if we have never seen the beauty or felt the power of a truth, we have never heartily, cordially, affectionately embraced it; indeed, it is a great question with us whether we have embraced it at all. Put this point to a practical test. Why did you embrace the doctrines of grace? Because you saw their beauty and felt their power. Why did you embrace the Lord himself with true faith and hearty affection? Because you saw his beauty and felt the power of his grace and love in your heart. Then, on similar grounds, no one can embrace the precept heartily, cordially, affectionately, who has not seen its beauty and felt its power. But its beauty consists mainly in its grace. If we see beauty in its face, it is because grace has fashioned and adorned every feature, and stamped upon them its own loveliness; if we hear melody in its voice, it is because grace attunes it to its own beautiful harmony; if it attracts and draws us to follow after it, it is like the influence of a beautiful woman upon her lovers and admirers who follow her wherever she goes, pleased to do her slightest biddings, under the irresistible charm of her smile.

Thus it is **the grace of the precept**, its beautiful harmony with the love of God, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and communion of the Holy Spirit—which causes our heart to embrace it as at once holy and wise, tender and loving, savory and suitable—a faithful guide under all difficulties—a loving monitor against all evil—a gentle reprover when we go astray—and a kind friend ever at hand to give affectionate and solid counsel. Now if you have never seen anything of this beauty in the precept, and never felt anything of this power in it, one of these two is most certainly your case and state—either you have never seen the beauty or felt the power of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ in your heart—or that, as yet, you have not seen the beauty or felt the power of the grace of the precept.

We will gladly hope that the latter is the case with you, if you know not the meaning of our voice, and we are unto you a barbarian. But as this part of our subject is not yet exhausted, we will make another attempt in our next section—to reach your understanding, touch your conscience, and soften your heart.

Our readers will kindly bear in mind that the part of our subject which we are now handling is the **SPIRIT of the precept**, and that the point immediately before us is the union and harmony which the spirit of the precept possesses, not only with the letter of the precept, but with the whole current and tenor of the glorious gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To prove this point conclusively would require a close and thorough investigation of the whole current and tenor of the gospel; but, as this would be an almost interminable field, we shall content ourselves with simply stating a few leading characteristics of the gospel; and if we can show that the spirit of the precept is in union and harmony with these, it will necessarily follow that, as the gospel is a uniform, consistent whole, it will equally harmonize with all the rest.

We know no part of Scripture where the law and the gospel are more clearly, concisely, and beautifully contrasted than in that remarkable chapter, 2 Cor. 3. The whole chapter demands and will amply repay the most careful and prayerful examination and meditation; for in it the Apostle places in striking contrast the two dispensations—the main points of contrast being the peculiar glory of each covenant, but the surpassing glory of the New Covenant. Paul does not, like some uninspired teachers, disparage the law, or push it contemptuously out of the way, but gives it due honor as a revelation from God, and as such, therefore, possessing a glory of its own. Following his invariable method of basing all his assertions on Scripture, he founds his view of the peculiar glory of the old dispensation upon a remarkable occurrence

at the time of its revelation—"But if the ministration of death, written and engraved in stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not steadfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance; which glory was to be done away." ([2Co 3:7](#).) We would be glad to enter into the various circumstances and accompaniments of the giving of the law, but our limit prevents this; and we shall, therefore, merely remark that these accompaniments when "the Lord descended upon mount Sinai in fire," ([Exo 19:18](#);) were but the shadowings forth of the dreadful majesty of God, of his inflexible justice, and fiery wrath against sin, which burn to the lowest hell. Now, after these fearsome manifestations of the power, presence, and glory of God on Sinai's burning top, the Lord spoke what are sometimes called "the ten words," ([Exo 34:28](#), margin,) or ten commandments; and to impress upon them greater weight and permanency, he afterwards gave them to Moses written with his own finger on two tables of stone, at the end of his forty days' and nights' sojourn in the Mount. We read that "the glory of the Lord abode upon Mount Sinai, and that the sight of the glory of the Lord was like devouring fire on the top of the mount." ([Exo 24:16-17](#).) In the midst of this glory Moses was, as it were, wrapped up; for he was the typical mediator of that covenant. When, then, he came down from the mount a second time with the two tables in his hands, the skin of his face shone, as if the glory of God in that covenant were reflected in it. The shining of his face Paul calls "the glory of his countenance," that being the reflection of the glory of God as seen by him face to face during the forty days' sojourn.

But on this point we need not enlarge, our only object, in dwelling thus momentarily upon the glory of the law, being to draw attention to the superior glory of the gospel, as contrasted with it, which we shall find to have some bearing on our present subject. The apostle, then, in the chapter to which we have referred, mentions five points of contrast in which the glory of the gospel excels and outshines the glory of the law—

1. The law is but the ministration of the letter; that is, it stood only in so many written words or letters, engraved on tables of stone; ([2Co 3:3](#);) but the gospel is the ministration of the Spirit. ([2Co 3:3](#); [2Co 3:6](#); [2Co 3:8](#).)
2. The law is the ministration of death, for "the letter kills;" but the gospel is the ministration of life, for "the Spirit gives life." ([2Co 3:6](#).)
3. The law is the ministration of condemnation; but the gospel is the ministration of righteousness.
4. The law genders to bondage; ([Gal 4:2](#) 4;) but the gospel is the spirit of liberty.
5. The law was for a time, and then to be done away; ([2Co 3:11](#); [2Co 3:13](#);) the gospel is permanent and enduring. (2 Cor, 3:11.)

To work out these points, contrast then with one another, and to show from them the glory of each dispensation, and yet the surpassing and superior glory of the gospel, would be a subject of deep and profitable meditation. But we shall only consider them so far as they have a bearing on our subject, and shall take but three of them, adding a fourth from another quarter. **These four characteristic features of the gospel**, constituting its main, its distinguishing glory, are, that it is a ministration of the **Spirit**, of **life**, of **liberty** and of **love**. With each and all of these four features will the spirit of the precept be in the fullest harmony.

1. The first leading feature of the gospel is, that it is the ministration of the **SPiRiT**; that is, through it and by it the Holy Spirit is promised and communicated. Thus Paul asks the Galatians, "This only would I learn of you—have you received the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?" ([Gal 3:2](#).) The "hearing of faith" means that hearing of the gospel with the believing heart, whereby it becomes "the power of God unto salvation," ([Rom 1:16](#);) when it comes "not in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit, and in much assurance." ([1Th 1:5](#).) In this sense the gospel is the ministration or service of the blessed Spirit, that gracious and holy Teacher using it as a means of conveying himself into the heart. When our blessed Lord rose from the dead, and ascended on high, he "received gifts for men." ([Psa 68:18](#).) The prime and chief of these gifts was the Holy Spirit, which, being promised him by the Father as a part of the reward of his humiliation, sufferings, and death, is therefore called "the promise of the Father;" "Behold, I send the promise of the Father upon you;" ([Luk 24:49](#);) "the promise of the Holy Spirit;" ([Act 2:33](#);) and "the Holy Spirit of promise;" ([Eph 1:13](#);) the meaning of all these expressions being that the Holy Spirit, with all his gifts and graces, is the promised Comforter, Teacher, and inward Intercessor of all to whom the gospel comes with power.

Thus the chief glory of the gospel is, that it is the "ministration of the Spirit." If, then, the precept be an integral part of the gospel, it must also be a part of the ministration of the Spirit. Not that the precept communicates the Spirit, as do the truths, the promises, the invitations, the declarations of the gospel. These instrumentally communicate the Spirit, whereas the precept does but follow it, and acts in union and harmony with it. Let us explain this point a little more clearly. When a gospel truth, such as "The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin;" or a gospel declaration, as "He who believes on me has everlasting life;" or a gospel promise, as, "I will not leave you comfortless, I will come unto you," or a gospel invitation—"If any man thirsts, let him come to me and drink," comes to the heart with a divine power, the Holy Spirit is as if communicated thereby; for he comes into the heart through that truth, declaration, promise, invitation, etc.

But he does not, at least not usually, come into the heart through the precept, for the precept follows as the fruit and effect of his coming. Yet as the fruit and effect of his coming, the spirit of the precept is in the fullest harmony and union with the whole tenor and current of the gospel. Thus there is not a single precept which is not in harmony with the gifts and graces of the Holy Spirit. May we use a figure to illustrate this? Here is a piece of beautiful music—the master-piece of an eminent composer, say Handel's Hallelujah Chorus. What do you see? Several sheets of musical characters, as notes, etc., which you may or may not read and understand. But while in the mere score, there is no music in them—at least, the body is there, but not the soul of music. Now, hear this score played and sung as intended. What a soul is put into it, and what harmony! Among thousands of notes you will not hear a jarring sound. So with the precepts. Dead in the letter, when a soul is breathed into them by the Holy Spirit, they all are animated as with one harmonious voice, every note being in perfect unison with the gospel of the grace of God.

2. Another distinctive mark of the gospel is that it is the ministration of **LIFE**. "The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." ([2Co 3:6](#).) As, then, the Spirit gives life, the spirit of the precept must fully harmonize with the life given in and through the gospel. Christ is "the life;" ([Joh 14:6](#);) "in him was life;" ([Joh 1:4](#);) he "came that his sheep might have life and might have it more abundantly." ([Joh 10:10](#).) The life, therefore, of the gospel is the life of the precept. Your heart literally, naturally, is the center of your bodily life; but your hands and feet are in union with your heart through the vital blood which flows from it into them. So with the gospel and the precepts of the gospel. Christ is the life; but this life he communicates through the gospel. Call, then, the gospel the heart, as the center of this life; and call the precept the feet and hands, whereby the life of the gospel is manifested in action; and at once we see that the life of the gospel is the life of the precept, as the life of the heart is the life of the feet and hands. How thoroughly, therefore, must the spirit of the precept harmonize with the gospel as the ministration of life.

3. A third feature of the gospel is, that it is the perfect law of **LIBERTY**;" for "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty;" ([2Co 3:17](#);) and, therefore, all the precepts of the gospel, as animated by the Spirit, harmonize with this perfect liberty. Under the law, all is bondage; under the gospel, all is liberty. Whatever, therefore, does not breathe liberty, call it what you will, wrap it up and disguise it how you may, is not the gospel. Here many teachers and preachers have erred in handling and enforcing the precept. They have read and heard of the liberty of the gospel, for that is too plainly revealed and insisted upon in the New Testament to be questioned or denied, but they have been afraid of extending this liberty to the precept, as if the necessary consequence was that we were at liberty to obey it or not, just as we pleased. Now this is a thorough misconception of the nature of the liberty of the gospel, and of the liberty of the precept as a part of that gospel. To this timorous though mistaken apprehension we may trace the tenacity with which so many have held that the Mosaic law is the believer's rule of life. Their poor, timorous, servile minds, drenched and drowned in legal bondage, were afraid of the gospel, as if it were a kind of tamed lion, which would be very quiet and do nobody any harm as long as it was kept in a cage, but must not be allowed to get out, lest it should work incalculable mischief.

Or, to change the figure, they treated it almost as if it were a ticket of license. Man, who, though, from his good conduct in prison, he might be set at a kind of half liberty, yet was to be carefully watched, lest he should associate himself with thieves, or commit a burglary. And thus the free, noble, glorious gospel of the grace of God, containing in its bosom and holding forth the eternal love of the Father, the blood and righteousness of the Son, and the teaching and testimony of the Holy Spirit—this pure and precious gospel, which proclaims liberty to the captive and the opening of the prison to those who are bound, has been shut up, caged, and confined within all sorts of bars, conditions, and limitations, as if it were a wild

beast which "had three ribs in the mouth of it between the teeth of it;" and which, if let loose, would "arise and devour much flesh." ([Dan 7:5](#).) Yes, this pure and precious gospel has been suspected of all manner of evil deeds; and if, by its good and excellent behavior it has sometimes been allowed a half liberty, yet has it been most carefully watched with the jealous eyes of a whole host of clerical and lay police, lest it should plot a murder or accomplish a robbery. What so much troubles the clergyman of some quiet country parish as the appearance in it of a preacher of the gospel, and the opening of a little cottage where a few poor people meet to hear it? What an immediate outcry is raised. "O these dreadful, those dangerous doctrines! Are they come at last into my parish—my domain?" As if this poor, humble minister were come to burn down the parish rectory; or as if his few hearers, probably by his own confession the best-living people in the parish, met together to get drunk, or strengthen each other's hands in all manner of sin and wickedness.

And this terribly outcry of "dangerous doctrines" is raised by men who see no danger in the careless profanity of the rich, and the loose licentiousness of the poor; no danger in, or at least who raise no warning cry against, the stealthy advance of Popery; no danger in the rapid growth of infidelity; no danger in bishops and deans denying the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures. But they are not the first, and will not be the last, who have spared the thief and arrested the honest man, justified the wicked and condemned the righteous. But these blind judges are not the only men who bark at the gospel. How the great bulk of preachers and writers, far and near, whether they call themselves churchmen or dissenters, are of one mind either wholly to cast out the precious gospel, or, by abridging it of its liberty, to stop its vital breath. And to do this wretched work more effectually, they have constructed a cage for the gospel out of the precepts of the gospel; and thus not only made it a prisoner, but have found or fashioned chains and fetters to tie it hand and foot by strips torn from its own clothes.

But how ignorant are all such men of what the liberty of the gospel is; and that it is a liberty not to sin—but from sin—a holy, heavenly freedom of spirit which engages every willing affection of the heart to yield the obedience of faith. In fact, liberty is the very essence of the gospel—its vital breath, its animating spirit; for "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." ([2Co 3:17](#).) The gospel is "the perfect law of liberty," therefore the very perfection of liberty, and thus thoroughly and entirely free from the least taint of bondage, the slightest tincture of servitude. It is this perfect freedom which distinguishes it from the law which "works wrath" ([Rom 4:15](#)) and "genders to bondage." ([Gal 4:24](#).) It is, therefore, a freedom from sin—([Rom 6:18](#);) from the **guilt** of sin, as having "the heart sprinkled from an evil conscience;" ([Heb 10:22](#);) from the **filth** of sin, by "the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit;" ([Tit 3:5](#);) from the **love** of sin, through "the love of God, shed abroad in the heart by the Holy Spirit;" ([1Jo 5:5](#);) from the **dominion** of sin, as "not being under the law but under grace;" ([Rom 6:14](#);) and from the **practice** of sin, by becoming servants to God, so as to have our fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life." ([Rom 6:22](#).)

How, then, can this pure, holy, and precious gospel be condemned as leading to licentiousness? It is because its power, its preciousness, its happy, holy, heavenly liberty have never been experimentally known by them that some, like the Galatians, do all they can to frustrate the grace of God, by turning again to the weak and beggarly elements whereunto they desire to be in bondage; ([Gal 2:21](#); [Gal 4:9](#);) while others, like those monsters of wickedness whom Jude and Peter denounce with such burning words, pervert and abuse the liberty of the gospel unto licentiousness, "They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their pleasures," and, "while they promise others liberty, are themselves the servants of corruption." ([2Pe 2:13](#); [2Pe 2:19](#).)

Now the liberty of the gospel, as revealed in the Scriptures, and made experimentally known to the soul, steers, so to speak, between the two extremes, and is as perfectly free from the least intermixture of legal bondage as from the least taint of Antinomian licentiousness. It is, indeed, this holy liberty, heavenly power, and gracious influence of the precious gospel, under the teaching and testimony of the Holy Spirit, which makes it so suitable to our case and state when first convinced of sin, and cast into prison under guilt and condemnation. What release but a perfect release would suit our deplorable case as prisoner—in the pit where there is no water, shut up under wrath and guilty fear through a condemning law and an accusing conscience? This pure and precious gospel, therefore, comes down to us poor miserable captives, shut up in bondage under the law, under a guilty conscience, under the tormenting accusations of Satan, and the doubts and fears of our own trembling, misgiving heart. Yes, it comes down to our pitiable state and condition as a message of pure mercy, as revealing and proclaiming pardon and

peace through a Saviour's blood; and when, by grace, we can receive, embrace, and entertain it as a word from God to us, proclaiming liberty as with a jubilee trumpet through every court and ward of the soul.

And shall we take, or willingly allow any one else to take prisoner this heavenly messenger and shut her up in the condemned cell? Shall we stand tamely by and not lift up our voice with indignation when we see this beautiful visitant, fresh, as it were, from the very courts of heaven, and radiant with the glory of God, laid hold of by a villainous jailer, as if she came to rob and murder? What were we before this precious gospel reached our ears and hearts? Were we not bondslaves to sin, serving diverse lusts and pleasures, taken and led captive by Satan at his will—and while we talked about enjoying life, were, through fear of death, subject to bondage? When we saw the saints of God not daring to do what we did greedily, we thought that they were the slaves, and we the free men, not knowing that "to whom we yield ourselves servants to obey, his servants we are, whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness;" ([Rom 6:16](#);) not knowing that "whoever commits sin is the servant of sin," and that our boasted freedom was real servitude, while their apparent bondage was real freedom; for they had an interest in that precious declaration—"If the Son, therefore, shall make you free, you shall be free indeed." ([Joh 8:36](#).)

As, then, the spirit of liberty is the spirit of the gospel, it must be the very spirit of the precept also as an integral part of the gospel. If, therefore, you have never known the spirit of liberty in the gospel, you have never known the spirit of the precept, which is a part of that liberty; and if you have never known the spirit of the precept, you have never once performed one of the precepts aright. All your obedience has been not in newness of the spirit, but in the oldness of the letter.

O how pious and religious some of you have been, if not now are! How you have set the precepts before your eyes and tried to keep them—how harshly you have judged others who were not so strict in keeping the commandments as you believed you were—how you spied out the liberty of some of the dear family of God which they had in Christ Jesus, that you might, by your conversation, or your preaching, your letters of advice, your solemn warnings, your sharp and angry reproofs, your praying at them, and, as you thought and said, for them, bring them into bondage. ([Gal 2:4](#).) How dangerous you considered must be the liberty of the gospel if it should set anyone who professed godliness free from all those shackles and fetters which, the more self-imposed and the stricter they were, the more closely you hugged them to your self-righteous bosom! Thus you took the precepts of the gospel out of their connection with the liberty of the gospel, and turned them into moral duties to feed your legal, self-righteous spirit. And what was the consequence? Bondage, guilt, and fear in your own conscience, for you could never keep the precept even according to your own interpretation of it; harsh judgment of all who did not partake of your legal spirit, whatever might be their experience or consistency; close alliance with shallow professors held fast in the same bonds with yourself; and a gradual departure from the truths of the gospel, until a miracle of grace put you into the furnace, there to learn what your own arm could do for you, and that nothing but the gospel, in its blessed liberty and power, could save your soul.

We have rather wandered from our point, but we could not show the liberty of the precept as animated by the spirit of the precept, and its harmony with the whole tenor and current of the gospel, without entering a little into the nature of the liberty of the gospel; and, as this is a subject of great importance, and very dear to us, we have been tempted to stray somewhat from our due limits. But now observe the connection between the 'spirit of the precept' and the 'liberty of the gospel'. In order, then, that this liberty of the gospel should not be abused unto licentiousness, it is guided and regulated by the precept, and by the spirit of the precept as animating the letter. The liberty of the gospel is a living, animated principle—not a dead letter, but a gracious power and influence. This is one of its main blessings. The precept therefore, in guiding and regulating this liberty, must be animated, too, with spirit and life, or you would have the strange anomaly, the gross and palpable inconsistency, of a living body walking with dead feet, or served by paralyzed hands.

In accomplishing this office, the precept serves two important uses—

1. The spirit of the precept so far restrains this liberty, that it should not degenerate into licentiousness. We are such vile wretches, such depraved creatures, that we would very soon abuse our liberty unless we were restrained. We are like our own children; they are at liberty to come in and go out of our house, to sit at our table, to sleep under our roof; for it is their house and home, as it is our own.

Indeed, we cannot bear their absence from our table or our roof, unless we know where they are, and that they are absent by our permission; for we know that they are only safe when they are under our eye. But with all this freedom, their birthright and inheritance, they are under a restraint—a restraint absolutely needful for their good. They may not go out when they please, nor eat and drink when and as much as they please, nor go to bed and get up when they please. Why? Because they would abuse this liberty to their own injury. And yet, it being a restraint of love and affection, and for their good, it is no hindrance to the liberty which they enjoy as our children. They are not our servants, nor treated as servants, but are dear children, and treated as dear children; and it is because they are dear children they are restrained from injuring themselves; for we would feel any injury to them much more deeply than they.

Thus the precepts are to the children of God what the injunctions, commands, and declared will of a parent are to a child. And, as the happiness and well-being of a child, and, we may add, the happiness of the whole family as living together, much depend on the order and discipline of their home, and on the wise and affectionate authority and declared will of the master of the house—so the happiness and well-being of the child of God, and the happiness of the family of God, as united in church fellowship, much depend on the obedience of one and all to the precepts of the gospel as the revealed will of the Lord of the house, for the maintenance of the order and discipline of each and all its members. Happy child, who obeys the precepts of the gospel in the spirit and liberty of the gospel! Happy church, where the precepts of the gospel form its rule, the spirit of the gospel its animating principle, and the spirit of the precept its influential guide.

2. And this leads us to another important use of the precept. The spirit of the precept not only restrains liberty from degenerating into licentiousness, but **regulates its actions**. A person may not abuse his liberty, yet not know how to use it. Thus there is a using it aright, and a not using it aright. Here then, come in the value and blessedness of the precept, and especially the spirit of the precept, to teach us how to use aright the liberty of the gospel, and to enable us to walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing. ([Col 1:10](#).) Thus the liberty of the gospel and the spirit of the precept move, work, and act together in the fullest and most blessed harmony—the result being fruitfulness in every good word and work unto the glory of God. By this is accomplished liberty without licentiousness, and obedience without servitude. The union of liberty with obedience is the happiest of alliances. Liberty without obedience is licentiousness; obedience without liberty is slavery; their union guards liberty and ennobles obedience. This is true politically as well as religiously. Liberty is the Englishman's birthright. Liberty of thought, of speech, of action, of movement; liberty of public meetings, of petitioning parliament, of electing our own representatives, of worshiping God according to the dictates of our own conscience; liberty of the press, of the pulpit, of the platform. Who can enumerate, who can sufficiently prize, those civil and religious liberties which our forefathers won for us with so much toil and suffering, and which we enjoy as our birthright and inheritance?

But mark how obedience to law regulates this liberty. Where is such liberty enjoyed as in England? But where is the law of the land so respected and obeyed? All that England is and has as the freest, most prosperous, and most favored country in the world, we owe, under God, to her union of the greatest liberty with the greatest obedience. Without law an Englishman could not live; without liberty an Englishman could not breathe. Take away our laws, which all equally obey from the queen to the pauper, violence and bloodshed would fill every street; take away our liberties, and England would be one vast dungeon.

So it is in grace. Without the precepts of the gospel and spiritual obedience rendered to them, gospel liberty would degenerate into licentiousness; without the liberty of the gospel, the precepts would be turned into the greatest bondage and the most miserable legal slavery.

Those men, therefore, are utterly wrong who twist the precepts into a rod to flog the backs of those whom the truth has made free. In God's house there is a rod—"Shall I come unto you with a rod?" ([1Co 4:21](#);) but the precepts are not that rod. How plain, how clear the distinction. In a family the father's will, the rules which he lays down for the regulation of the whole house, are, so to speak, the precepts of the house. But is this will, are these rules the rod? No! that is hung up, or kept in a corner, and only brought out when these rules are wilfully broken by any of the children. The rules are of daily, hourly use for the comfort, convenience, order, happiness, and well-being of the house. But the rod comes forth only now and then, and more rarely the better, when the sad occasion, which often sets the whole family weeping, calls for it.

So in the family of God. The precepts are the rules of the house; the hidings of God's face are the inward rod for inwardly disobeying them; reproofs before all by the pastor, ([1Ti 5:20](#)), or setting aside and putting away by the church, ([1Co 5:13](#)), are the outward rod for outward disobedience. We have said enough and more than enough on this point, but, as this feature of the precept, as a part of the liberty of the gospel, is little known and less attended to, we have ventured to handle it at some length.

We trust that we have not wearied our readers by our long and protracted Meditations on the preceptive part of the word of truth. But if such unhappily be the case, the weariness will be due not to the subject itself, which must ever be of the deepest interest to all who truly fear God, and desire to walk in obedience to his will and word—but to our mode of handling it, and especially to the long and laborious consideration which we have bestowed upon it. And yet if a certain degree of length is absolutely necessary for a due examination of every important subject, how much more must this be the case in the weighty matters of divine revelation. A deep subject, like a deep river, holds in its bosom an amount of matter in proportion to its depth. Its very copiousness makes it deep. Thus while we would avoid that prosy diffusiveness which makes length wearisome, we are bound freely to say that we could not have done justice to our subject by giving it a brief, hasty, superficial consideration. This, then, must be our excuse, if we have trespassed too much upon the patience of our readers. But if the voyage has been long, and to some tedious, land is at last in sight. We are approaching the shore; and in this or our following section, we hope to furl our sails and drop our anchor. May a favorable gale speed our ship and crown our voyage with a blessing which shall make amends for a protracted passage.

In our last section, we attempted to point out a few of those prominent features of the spirit of the precept which distinguish it from the letter, and elevate obedience to the revealed will and word of God into a spiritual service. From the letter of the precept we learn "what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God." ([Rom 12:2](#).) But though we thus learn from the precept what is the acceptable will of God, we have no power in ourselves to perform it acceptably; for a mere letter obedience to the precepts of the gospel, however strict and conformable, is no more acceptable to God, than an obedience to the ten commandments. To make our obedience acceptable two things are absolutely necessary—

1. That it be presented through Jesus Christ; for as our persons, so our offerings are only "accepted in the Beloved."

2. That it be sanctified by the Holy Spirit, as the Apostle speaks—"That I should be the minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, ministering the gospel of God, that the offering up of the Gentiles might be acceptable, being sanctified by the Holy Spirit." ([Rom 15:16](#).) The Apostle Peter beautifully brings together these two points, and shows us in a small compass who are the acceptable worshipers, and what is the nature of their acceptable worship—"To whom coming, as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious. You also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ." ([1Pe 2:4-5](#).) The acceptable worshipers are the "living stones" who come to Jesus, and are built up in him as "a spiritual house," constituting them "a holy priesthood;" the sacrifices which they offer are "spiritual sacrifices," as sanctified by the Holy Spirit; and these sacrifices are "acceptable to God by Jesus Christ," as offered by faith in him and ascending up to heaven perfumed by his intercession within the veil.

Thus no mere 'letter obedience' to the precept, were such a thing possible, for the precepts of the gospel being spiritual, based upon spiritual motives and addressed to spiritual people, are out of the reach of natural obedience; no such mere obedience, were it possible, could or would be acceptable to God. It would be "another gospel," as many have preached and made it, and thus brought themselves under the curse according to that fearful denunciation of Paul—"But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!" ([Gal 1:8-9](#).) Perversion is perversion, whether men pervert the doctrines of the gospel, the promises of the gospel, or the precepts of the gospel—and for perverting the gospel of Christ they will not be held innocent.

We have already pointed out that the chief blessedness and glory of the New Covenant dispensation is, that it is the ministration of the Spirit; and that, therefore, the blessed Spirit must animate the precept as well as the promise with heavenly life, that we may believe the one and perform the other. You know what

it is to believe a promise when it comes with power; so you must know how to perform a precept when it comes with power. The power is the same; for it is the power of the Spirit acting through the word. A promise comes. I believe it, for I feel the power of it. A precept comes. I believe it, for I feel the power of it. Where, then, is the difference? Wholly in this, that by the promise I believe that it is the will of God that I should be saved; and by the precept that it is the will of God that I should forgive my brother. A letter obedience, therefore, is of no more worth or value than a letter faith; and to forgive my brother in the letter is no more real forgiveness than to believe in Christ in the letter is real faith. The precept, therefore, needs life breathed into it, that, as a word of and from Christ, it may be spirit and life to our soul. ([Joh 6:63.](#))

If, then, there were no life thus put into the precept, it would be like a dead branch in a living tree—or a paralyzed limb in our natural body; an unsightly object instead of an ornament, an incumbrance rather than a help—a withered, useless appurtenance, cut off from all life and movement, and a drag upon the gospel as a poor paralytic drags after him a leg, on which he can neither stand nor walk. Compare this poor withered limb—with a strong, healthy leg, and you may see the difference between the dragging obedience of a servant in the letter, and the gracious obedience of a son in the spirit.

Life, then, and that as breathed into it by the blessed Spirit, is one main feature of the spirit of the precept. But this life has two blessed adjuncts, Liberty and Love; for these are two special fruits of the Holy Spirit, and move together in holy concert and gracious harmony to help forward the obedience of faith.

Liberty we have already considered. Her sweet, tender, and affectionate companion we have now to present to view; and who that has seen her lovely face and heard the accents of her melodious voice, will not welcome her as she comes forth for our contemplation? Her name is "Love." And do observe how the blessed Spirit holds, as it were, Liberty with the one hand and Love with the other. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." ([2Co 3:17.](#)) "The love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit." ([Rom 5:5.](#)) And that life is his gift, is plain from the same inspired testimony—"The Spirit gives life." ([2Co 3:6.](#)) Death, bondage, and enmity, then, those evil fruits of the flesh, and the men who walk in them, have neither part nor lot in the glorious gospel of the grace of God, where life, liberty, and love animate every **truth**, every **promise**, every **privilege**, and every **precept**. As, then, we have endeavored to unfold the connection of Liberty with the spirit of the precept, so will we now attempt to show that part which is fulfilled by Love.

4. The last distinctive mark of the gospel, is that it is the ministration of **LOVE**. "God is love." That is his name, that is his nature; and what a proof, what a manifestation has he given of this love! "In this was manifested the love of God towards us, because God sent his only-begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." ([1Jo 4:9-10.](#)) The gift of his only-begotten Son, and that for these two special purposes, 1. that he might be the propitiation for our sins; 2. that we might live through him, is at once the proof and the measure of this love. To proclaim this love is to preach the gospel; to believe in this love is to believe the gospel; to taste, handle, and enjoy this love is to know and enjoy the power of the gospel; and to obey the precept under the constraints of this love is to obey the gospel.

Liberty and love must needs go together; for where there is bondage there is fear, and where there is fear there is torment, and where there is torment there cannot be love, at least not perfect love, for perfect love casts it out. ([1Jo 4:18.](#)) Love, then, is the crowning feature of the spirit of the precept, and one of its most distinctive points of difference from the letter, for the strictest obedience to the letter of the precept without love is but legal bondage—the task-work of a servant, not the compliance of a son. You may set the precepts of the gospel before your eyes, and try your utmost to observe them. You may admire the holiness which they inculcate; see the separation from the world and the devotedness to God which they enforce, and what is more than seeing it, you may try to act upon it; you may walk in the ordinances which they hold forth, and strive by diligent attention to rules and regulations, carefully framed, to regulate your own conduct and that of your family, to attain to that inward and outward holiness without which no man shall see the Lord. All this you may do for years, and be at the end what you were in the beginning—a poor self-righteous Pharisee, shut up in bondage, lip-service, and bodily exercise, as far from the spirit and love of the gospel, as much in your sins, unwashed, unjustified, unsanctified, as a monk in his cell; or a parish priest intoning the Litany to a few old women and children in his medieval

church. All this strictness, indeed, sharpens your eyes to see the defects and infirmities of others, who do not pay tithe of mint, anise, and cummin, nor tie themselves to your rules.

But what are you yourself, as weighed in the balances of the gospel? What is all your strictness without life, liberty, and love? Are you stricter in lip and life than Paul was when, "touching the righteousness which is in the law," (that is, its external righteousness,) he was "blameless?" If you turn obedience to the letter of the precept into a legal service, which you must do if destitute of life, liberty, and love—you are not a son but a servant, a child of the bondwoman; and could you read your inmost heart, you would see it full of prejudice and enmity against, and ready to persecute the children of promise, by condemning their liberty as Antinomian security, and suspecting their standing if not their state.

How different from this miserable state of bondage in which many are held, miserable in itself and miserable to all with whom it comes in contact—is that favored soul which moves in the path of obedience under the sweet constraints of love; for love is not only the fulfilling of the law but of the gospel too. Such power and influence has love in the obedience of the gospel that we may boldly say that with love every precept can be obeyed—without love not one can be rightly obeyed. How plainly does our Lord speak on this point. "If you love me, keep my commandments." "He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is that loves me." "If a man loves me, he will keep my words." "He who loves me not, keeps not my words." (John 14.) Similar is the testimony of the beloved disciple—"For this is the love of God—that we keep his commandments, and his commandments are not grievous." (1Jo 5:2-3.) We thus see that the keeping of Christ's commandments, in other words, obedience to the precepts of the gospel, is not only the test and proof but the fruit of love. No more, when this obedience is the obedience of love, it opens a blessed door for the manifestations of Christ and the indwelling of God, according to those wondrous words of the Lord himself—"Jesus answered and said unto him, If a man loves me, he will keep my words—and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him." (Joh 14:23.)

How careful, then, should we be to distinguish between obedience in the letter, which is mere lip service or legal bondage—and obedience in the spirit, which springs from love and furthers its enjoyment.

Taking a broad view of the precepts, of the gospel, and the obedience inculcated by them, we may reduce them to two leading heads—

1. What we owe unto God.

2. What we owe to the people of God.

1. What we owe unto GOD. The first will comprehend all that spiritual worship, all that devotedness of heart and life, all that submission to the will of God, all that glorifying him in our body and spirit which are his, which the precept so continually and forcibly inculcates; the second will comprehend the whole of our walk and conduct to our brethren in the Lord, whereby we manifest the power of his grace.

As instances of the first we may mention such precepts as bid us "present our bodies a living sacrifice;" "to abhor that which is evil, and cleave to that which is good;" "to rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation; to continue instant in prayer;" to "walk honestly as in the day;" to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lust thereof." These, and similar precepts with which the Epistles abound, direct us how to walk before God as dear children. They address us, therefore, not as servants, bidding us perform a stipulated task, but enjoin us as sons to yield the obedience of reverent affection to our heavenly Father. They speak to us as one with Christ by mystical union, and this as "chosen in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love."

As, therefore, dead with him, buried with him, risen with him, and blessed with all spiritual blessings, and freely justified by his grace—as reconciled to God, brought near to him, and accepted in the Beloved—the precepts of the gospel call upon us to live to his praise, and walk before him in all devotedness of heart and life, to his honor and glory. But how can this be done without love? What holy, heavenly pleasure can there be even in such common, daily acts as reading his word, and calling upon his name; in meeting with his people in the house of prayer, and in Christian conversation; in separation from the world and the spirit of it; in living a life of faith and prayer; in watching our words and actions; in seeking a growing conformity to the image of Christ, and carrying out in a practical manner our Christian profession? We say not only what real pleasure can we have in this daily walk, without attending to which we shall be but

barren, worthless professors all our days—but even what habitual attention can we pay to these things if not moved to them by love? Who will read the word, at least, as it should be read, with a believing and understanding heart, but he who loves it? Who will continually resort to a throne of grace, but he who loves there to pour out his heart before God? And who will day by day seek to walk before God in the light of his countenance, but he who has known and felt something of the power of his love? If the service of God be ever burdensome to us; if ever the word be neglected, prayer restrained, the company of God's people shunned, the new man put off, and the old man put on—it is when love has grown cold. The sacrifice may be laid upon the altar; the incense put upon the censor; but if the fire of love be not under both, there is neither flame nor fragrance.

2. And so it is with the second branch of the precept, which directs and regulates our walk with and before our believing BRETHREN. In that as in the service of God, "Love supplies all defects."

Without a loving, affectionate spirit, it is impossible to perform those precepts which inculcate mutual forgiveness and forbearance, "kindness, tenderness of heart, mercy, humbleness of mind, meekness, and long-suffering." ([Eph 4:2](#); [Eph 4:32](#); [Col 3:12-13](#).) To do all this from the heart, and not merely in lip, we must "walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given himself for us." Without this love we may have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge; we may bestow all our goods to feed the poor, and give our body to be burned—and yet be nothing and have nothing. ([1Co 13:2-3](#).) But if blessed and favored with this love, we shall obey those precepts which direct our walk with our brethren unto God and from the heart.

Who that has seen much of Christian churches does not know the difference between the hard, cold, contentious, unforgiving spirit of some—and the tender, loving, affectionate spirit of others? Who that has a feeling heart has not been cut, wounded, and grieved by the pride, obstinacy, selfishness, hardness and unkindness of the one—and been softened, melted, and blessed by the tenderness, meekness, humility, loving and affectionate spirit of the other? Love is so the spirit of the gospel, and therefore of the precept as a part of the gospel, that we may unhesitatingly say that few more break the precept than some of the very people who most contend for what is called practice. Practice is excellent, admirable, indispensable—and the lack of it grievous, lamentable, disgraceful. But let us be clear in our views as to what practice is and what it means. If it be the mere doing of what are called good works, as alms-giving, visiting the sick, strictness of life, dress, deportment, accompanied with unblemished conduct—a 'sister of mercy' will outshine us all, and father Ignatius be a pattern of holiness.

It is plain, therefore, that something more is needful for acceptable obedience than external practice, and that this something is love—love to the Lord and to his people. Nor is it less evident that this love must be made manifest by our general spirit as well as our conduct; for love is not a mere occasional spurt, a now and then warming up, like a hot fit of the fever; or the slow, relenting gripe of a miser over a charity plate—but a living principle, ever discovering itself in words and acts of kindness, forbearance, self-denial, self-restraint, consideration of the feelings of others, meekness, gentleness, and a humble, affectionate, conciliating manner and bearing. You may be outwardly very consistent—but if you are harsh, censorious, self-willed, obstinate, unforgiving—if you would sooner see the church torn to pieces with strife than give way on some point which involves neither truth nor conscience, but merely some concession of opinion, you are breaking the precept as much by your disobedience to its spirit—as others by their disobedience to its letter. God, who searches the heart and reads our inmost thoughts, feelings, and motives, observes with unerring eye our spirit as well as our conduct; and if, indeed, we see light in his light, we shall read our own heart too, and distinguish between the proud, obstinate, self-willed, contentious spirit of the old man—and the humble, forgiving, affectionate spirit of the new man.

As, then, love must animate every precept that teaches us what we owe unto the Lord for all his goodness and mercy to us—so must love equally animate every precept that guides and regulates what we owe to our believing brethren. Look at the following precepts and see if love be not the ruling, animating spirit of them all—"As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." ([Eph 4:1-3](#)) What but love can enable us to walk "worthy of the calling with which we are called?" Are we not called according to God's purpose, that we may love him? ([Rom 8:28](#).) And called also to walk in love with his people?

How plain too, are the words—"Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with

every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." ([Eph 4:31-5 :2](#))

In a similar spirit writes the same "Apostle of Jesus Christ" to the Colossians. "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity." ([Col 3:12-14](#))

O that this compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience and forgiveness more animated our spirits and guided our words and actions. There would then be no stormy church meetings, no broken friendships, no shy looks, no harsh words, no resentful memories, no magnifying and dwelling on infirmities and defects, no raking up of buried injuries, no malicious insinuations, or slanderous reportings. Having had so much forgiven us, we should freely forgive our offending brethren—and feeling ourselves to be the chief of sinners and less than the least of all saints, we should rather wonder at their forbearance of us, and admire their kindness to us, than cherish a resentful, unforgiving spirit, even against those at whose hands we may have suffered real or imaginary wrong.

We are approaching the harbor. Land was in sight in our last section, and now all that we need is a gentle yet favorable breeze to waft us on until we drop anchor, and bless God for giving us a pleasant and, we hope, not unprofitable voyage.

Two points remain for consideration, to dwell on which at any length, even at as great a length as they deserve, would set us again out to sea, and perhaps a stormy sea too; for one of them involves a subject not only of much difficulty, but of considerable strife and debate. These two points are—

1. The place which the precept occupies in the **word**.
2. Its place in the **heart** and **life**.

The Precepts of the Word of God

by J. C. Philpot

The place of the precept in the WORD

After our long and labored explanation of the nature of the precept, this point need not detain us long. But as the place of the precept in the word admits of two meanings—

- (1) Its place in the written word.
- (2) Its place in the preached word.

We shall address ourselves to the consideration of both of these significations.

1. The place of the precept in the WRITTEN word.

One main point with us has been to show that the precept, as it stands in the written word, is an integral, that is, a real and constituent part of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and is as much a gracious revelation of the mind and will of God for our instruction and guidance as the doctrines themselves of our most holy faith are, for a knowledge of the way of salvation. We do not mean that a knowledge of the precept is saving in the same way as a knowledge of the truth is; but as a means, in the hands of the blessed Spirit, of influencing the heart and life, it is sanctifying. It is necessary to make and keep this distinction clear, lest in our zeal for the precept we should strain it beyond the place which God has assigned to it in the word of truth. We are saved by grace through faith; ([Eph 2:8](#);) are justified freely by grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus; ([Rom 3:24](#);) are reconciled to God by the death of his Son; ([Rom 5:10](#);) are blessed with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ, in whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace. ([Eph 1:3](#); [Eph 1:7](#).) These are the grand foundation truths of the everlasting gospel, are salvation matters, and as such stand apart from all works performed in us or by us.

We cannot, therefore, elevate the precept into a level with them, for we may be saved and sanctified too, as was the dying thief, without knowing or performing one gospel precept except that of love—love to the Lord for his manifested mercy. But as it is the purpose of God that his redeemed, justified, and saved people should glorify him here below, he has most graciously revealed to them how they shall learn to know his will and do it. This is the end and object of the precept. How beautifully does the Apostle pray to this effect for his Colossian brethren—"For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God." ([Col 1:9-10](#).) How blessed to be filled with a knowledge of the will of God in all wisdom and spiritual understanding, so as to walk worthy of the Lord and please him in every way.

We are also bidden "not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our mind, that we may prove," (that is, learn, ascertain, and approve of,) what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God." ([Rom 12:2](#).) To know the will of God and do it, is the desire and delight of every regenerate soul. The Apostle, therefore, says—"therefore be not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is." ([Eph 5:17](#).) So he speaks of "doing the will of God from the heart." ([Eph 6:6](#).) Our Lord also said—"For whoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and my sister, and mother." ([Mar 3:35](#).) The Apostle also prays that the God of peace would "make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is well-pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen;" ([Heb 13:21](#);) and John's testimony is, "He who does the will of God abides forever." ([1Jo 2:17](#).)

How any one who calls himself a believer in Christ Jesus can think lightly of knowing and doing the will of God, is indeed a mystery. But this all must do who ignore the precept, think lightly of it, and neglect it. It is

almost become a tradition in some churches, professing the doctrines of grace, to disregard the precepts and pass them by in a kind of general silence; and thus in a sense they "have made the commandments of God of no effect by their tradition." But when we are brought to see and feel the blessedness of knowing the will of God and doing it; when we can enter experimentally into the meaning of such words as, "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again." (2Co 5:14-15). And again—"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body." (1Co 6:19-20); when such gracious precepts fall, we say, with weight upon the heart, we see what a blessed place the precept occupies in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

When, too, we read and can enter a little into the spirit which breathes through such prayers of the Apostle as, "And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you—to the end he may establish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints;" (1Th 3:12-13;) and again, "And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ;" (1Th 5:23;) we see from these prayers what are or should be the desires of our own soul. To despise, then, the precept, to call it legal and burdensome, is to despise not man, but God, who has given unto us his holy Spirit in the inspired Scriptures for our faith and obedience.

But we have rather wandered from our point, which was to show the place which the precept occupies in the written word. This is best seen by examining the epistles of the New Testament. The three which we would select for that purpose, as being most systematically written, would be that to the Romans, that to the Ephesians, and that to the Hebrews. It would take up too much time to give even a short analysis of these blessed epistles, or even of one of them, but we may observe generally that **doctrine** occupies in them the first place, **experience** the second, and **precept** the third; and yet all these three are blended so beautifully together that they sometimes run into one another, or, if not, always harmonize with the sweetest accord.

Take, for instance, the Epistle to the **Romans**, chapters 1, 2, and part of 3 are taken up with proving the sinfulness of the Gentile and Jewish world, and the universal depravity, ruin, and condemnation of man. The Apostle then, (3:21-31,) in a few but most significant words, opens the grand remedy—justification freely by grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. This grand point of justification by faith (3:28) is proved chapter 4 by the case of Abraham, of whom the Scripture testified that "he believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness." In chapter 5 commences experience in our having peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, as being justified by faith; and this strain of living experience, ranging from the deepest conflict (7) to the highest assurance, continues, blended with doctrine and precept, to the end of chapter 8. Chapters 9, 10, and 11 are chiefly doctrinal, as opening the case of the present rejection and future restoration of Israel after the flesh. In chapter 12 commences the precept, and runs on in the most beautiful strain to 15:14, the rest of the epistle being chiefly occupied with Paul's personal matters, greetings, etc.

In the Epistle to the **Ephesians**, doctrine occupies the first place. Election, predestination, redemption, the death, resurrection, and glorification of Christ, occupy the first chapter. In chapter 2 begins experience in the quickening of the soul from its death in trespasses and sins, its spiritual resurrection with Christ and sitting together in heavenly places in him, blended with the sweetest doctrinal truth, (2:11-22,) and accompanied with the earnest prayers of the Apostle (3:14-19) that the saints to whom he wrote might know the love of Christ which passes knowledge, so as to be filled with all the fullness of God. In chapter 4 commences the preceptive part of the word sweetly blended with both doctrine (4-13) and experience, (20-24,) and occupying the rest of the epistle, with the exception of that beautiful, experimental description of the whole armor of God, (6:11-18,) and even that urged with all the earnestness of practical exhortation.

The Epistle to the **Hebrews** is constructed on the same pattern; first, doctrine in chapters 1-9; then experience, 10, 11; then precept, 12, 13. This brief sketch of the plan of these three epistles must suffice; but a longer and more detailed analysis would only more plainly show that though there is a systematic

arrangement in them all, yet **there is such a blending together of doctrine, experience, and precept, that the three form but parts of one harmonious whole, and, like a compact and beautiful building, mutually strengthen and adorn each other.**

2. The place of the precept in the PREACHED word.

But our view of the place which the precept occupies in the written word would be incomplete unless we added the place which it should occupy in the preached word. This is, we know, a difficult and delicate point, and yet we shall not shun to declare our views on it, whether they meet with the approval or disapproval of those whom they may concern. As the ministers of Christ profess to preach the same gospel that the Apostles preached, there must be some uniformity with the pattern which we have just laid out of apostolic teaching; for though preaching a sermon is not the same thing as writing an epistle, yet we may gather from the account which Paul gives us of his own ministry ([Act 20:21-27](#); [Act 20:35](#); [2Co 4:1-6](#); [1Th 1:5-6](#); [1Th 2:7-12](#)) that there was a considerable resemblance between what he spoke by tongue and what he wrote by pen. Doctrine, then—pure, sound doctrine, must be the basis of the Christian ministry—"In doctrine showing integrity and seriousness;" ([Tit 2:7](#);) "Hold fast the form of sound words, which you have heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus;" ([2Ti 1:13](#);) "Take heed unto yourself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them; for in doing this you shall both save yourself, and them that hear you." ([1Ti 4:16](#).)

Let us endeavor to keep every part of divine truth in its right place, and no more sacrifice doctrine to experience than experience to precept. He is the ablest minister who is soundest in doctrine, deepest in experience, and most godly in practice; for he preaches with heart, tongue, and feet. The servant of God, therefore, must "contend earnestly for the faith once delivered unto the saints," ([Jud 1:3](#);) and "hold fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers." ([Tit 1:9](#).) He must have also a gracious experience in his own soul of the truths which he preaches, in their savour, sweetness, and power; or how can the unction of the Holy Spirit rest on his ministry?

All this will be readily granted; but now as to the **precept**. Is he to preach that also, as well as doctrine and experience? If he does not, there would seem to be something lacking, if we take apostolic teaching as our model. Assume, then, that he ought to preach the precept. Now comes a more delicate and difficult point. How is he to preach it? For as to preaching the precept, this is done by hundreds of ministers who know no more what the precept really is as a part of the gospel of Jesus Christ than they know what is a gracious experience of truth by the teaching of the Holy Spirit. Anybody may preach the letter of the precept. But that is not what we want. It is the spirit of the precept which is needed, and which must be preached if preached at all. There is dry precept as well as dry doctrine; and as the latter is often concealed Antinomianism, so the former is open and often barefaced legality; for looseness, like Tamar, covers her face ([Gen 38:15](#)) when Pharisaism stalks abroad in open day, for she loves to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets to be seen of men. What was true of old is true now. "For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath." ([Act 15:21](#).) The preachers of Moses are to be found in every city and every church.

How, then, should the precept be preached? We answer, In the same way as doctrine and experience should be preached—from a gracious knowledge of its spirit and power, and its sensible influence on the heart and life. To preach the precept in any other way is either legality or presumption. If a man knows nothing in his own soul of the spirit of the precept, and is not under its gracious influence, he cannot handle it with the fingers of a workman, and must either legalize it, or handle it deceitfully. If he binds burdens upon the people of God inconsistent with the liberty of the gospel, he legalizes it; and if he bids others do what he himself never does or attempts to do, what is this but hypocrisy? And may God not justly say to him, "What have you to do to declare my statutes, or that you should take my covenant in your mouth, seeing you hate instruction and cast my words behind you?" ([Psa 50:16-17](#).) We see, then, what a narrow line it is—the very line of which Mr. Hart says, "The space between Pharisaic zeal and Antinomian security is much narrower and harder to find than most men imagine. It is a path which the vulture's eye has not seen, and none can show it to us but the Holy Spirit."

But you will, perhaps, say, "Then you make the preaching of the precept depend on the feelings of the minister." That is an invidious way of putting the point, and it is neither our mind nor our language. What we say is this, that no man can preach the precept as a part of the gospel of Jesus Christ who has not a gracious experience of the power and spirit of the precept in his own soul. Is not the same thing true of preaching the doctrines of the gospel? Can any man preach the doctrines of the gospel as they should be preached, who has had no gracious experience of the doctrines of the gospel? And is not this all the difference between letter preaching and letter preachers—and those who preach the gospel with the Holy Spirit sent down from heaven? Is not this the main, the real distinction between the two classes of ministers, that the one have no gracious experience of what they preach, and the others have?

Now, we carry this same distinction between letter preaching and spiritual preaching into the precept as well as into the doctrines. Can they be separated? Have we not labored again and again to show that the precept is as much a part of the gospel as the doctrines and experience of the gospel? If this be so, then the preaching of the precept must stand on precisely the same footing as the preaching of gospel doctrine and gospel experience; and to preach the letter of the precept without a gracious experience of the spirit of the precept is no more preaching the precept as it should be preached than to preach doctrines of which you never felt the power, or experience of which you know only the theory, is to show yourself approved unto God, a workman that needs not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. ([2Ti 2:15](#).)

Besides which, look at the inconsistency of a man preaching the precept who himself does not practice it, nor even know under what power and influence it should be performed. Consider the contradiction of a covetous man preaching up liberality; of a worldly professor inculcating "Love not the world;" of an unforgiving persecutor admonishing to forgiveness; of a light, trifling preacher, full of jests and jokes and foolish anecdotes, exhorting "young men (much more grey-haired ministers) to be sober-minded," for all "to put away foolish talking and jesting," and that their "speech should be always seasoned with salt, that it may administer grace unto the hearers." Such men instinctively feel that their hearers would despise, and that justly, such preaching and such preachers. They, therefore, quietly drop, not only the precept itself, as condemning their own conduct, but all allusion to it, and ignore it just as much as if it had neither part nor place in the word of truth! And as many, if not most, of such men's hearers are in precisely the same state, as unwilling to hear the precept enforced and as unable to bear it as their ministers, need we wonder that there should be a silent compact between the pulpit and the pew that the subject should never be introduced at all—and that all mention of it or allusion to it should be considered legal and inconsistent with the doctrines of grace? The consequences of this silent compact may be easily read in the state of many churches professing doctrinal truth—that they are flooded with carnal professors, who think no more of the precepts of the gospel than of an old almanac, and that even among those who are partakers of the grace of life, vital godliness is, for the most part, at a very low ebb. This sad state of things some writers and preachers have seen and sought to remedy. But how? By rushing into the opposite extreme, and urging the precepts as legal duties, separating them, if not avowedly, yet tacitly, from the spirit and grace of the gospel.

After all this fault-finding and harsh censure, as some will doubtless consider it, may we be allowed simply to declare our view of the right way of preaching the precept as a part of the ministry of the gospel of the grace of God? It is this—that no man can do so, or ought to do so, without a gracious experience of the power of the precept in his own heart. And we will go further still—that we firmly believe no man can preach the precept with any power, savour, life, or unction, unless he be at the time under a divine and gracious influence. Why does the preaching of the precept fall from some men's lips, even good men—hard, dry, and repulsive? Why does it produce bondage and death instead of life and feeling in the soul of the hearer? Principally, for the best of hearers may be much bound, very cold and dead under the warmest and most savory preaching, but principally because the preacher himself is not under a heavenly influence when he handles it, and does it more as a duty at the tail-end of his sermon than as a part of his gracious message.

But assume that his soul is warmed and melted with the life and power of the blessed Spirit, and is full of tenderness, love, and affection to the Lord and his people, how freely and fully can he exhort, admonish, entreat, and even reprove to love and good works. The people of God who sit under his ministry, for it is chiefly the pastor's office to preach effectually the precept, know the man and his communication. They esteem and love him for his work's sake. He has a place in their hearts and affections, and they look up to

him with a mixture of reverence and love. Such a man can speak with authority, and enforce the precept without legality or presumption, as a part of his message from God. His exhortations will not be legal, nor will they fall upon the people's ears and hearts as dry, harsh, or bondageing. They will see and feel that the man speaks under a gracious power and influence; that he is not binding upon their shoulders heavy burdens which he himself will not touch with one of his fingers; that if he exhorts to love and unity, he does so because love is in his heart; if he calls for separation from the world, he is separate himself in spirit from it; if he admonishes to every good word and every good work, it is because he is himself desirous to speak and perform them.

The grace of God in a man cannot be hidden. If Asher be blessed with children, and is acceptable to his brethren, it is because he dips his foot in oil. ([Deu 33:24](#).) As anointed with fresh oil, his very countenance will sometimes shine; ([Psa 92:10](#); [Psa 104:15](#);) the sweet savour of the knowledge of Christ, like ointment poured forth, will be made manifest in him; ([2Co 2:14](#); Solomon's [Son 1:3](#);) and his heart being melted and softened with the love of God, there will not be a tinge of legality or harshness in his enforcing obedience to the revealed will and word of God. The Lord's tender-hearted people will receive this ministry of the precept, will fall under it, and feel the benefit and blessing of it.

Antinomians, evil-doers, open or secret sinners, those at ease in Zion and settled on their lees, the quarrelsome and the contentious, will all make an outcry against this ministry as legal, bondageing, and burdensome. But those whose conscience is tender in the fear of God will, if not at once, yet sooner or later receive it, even though, at times, it cuts them very deeply, and reproves their inconsistencies and backslidings. They will feel at times very much searched by it, for a power attends it. This ministry of the precept will often find out hidden idols, lay bare indulged inconsistencies, and detect secret snares in which they have been long held, or allowed practices in business or in the family, which have weakened their strength and sadly marred the spirituality of their heart and life. They would resist it if they could, for it so crucifies their flesh; but they must fall under the power of the word when brought home to their conscience.

Nothing more detects hypocrites, purges out loose professors, and fans away that chaff and dust which now so thickly covers our barn floors than an experimental handling of the precept! A dry doctrinal ministry disturbs no consciences. The loosest professors may sit under it, no, be highly delighted with it, for it gives them a hope, if, not a dead confidence, that salvation being wholly of grace they shall be saved whatever be their walk or life. But the experimental handling of the precept cuts down all this, and exposes their hypocrisy and deception. It thus takes forth the precious from the vile, and becomes as God's truth. ([Jer 15:19](#).)

To do all this, indeed, as it should be done, demands wisdom and grace, such as the Lord only can give. Nor can it be done at all times and seasons. Here the Lord the Spirit can alone help and teach the servants of God. But we can say for ourselves that we have at times, especially of late years, felt such a holy influence resting upon our spirit that we could preach the precept as freely as the promise; and while we never had a deeper sense of our own sinfulness and helplessness and of the freeness and fullness of superabounding grace, yet we could urge upon our own conscience and upon all who loved the Lord the obligation laid upon us by that grace to live and act in all things according to the revealed will of God. We are, then, well convinced, both from the word of God and our own experience in the ministry, that there is a way of preaching the precept in the fullest harmony with every truth of the gospel, and every gracious, tender, and affectionate feeling of the heart; and that the right thing, spoken in the right way, will fall into its right place.

But you will say, "If this be the right way of preaching the precept, how you are limiting the men who should preach it!" With this we have nothing to do. It is not for us to say how many or how few real servants of God there are at all; for your objection equally applies to all preaching and to all preachers. Should any preach the **doctrines** of the gospel who has not felt their power and influence in his own heart? Should any preach the **experience** of the gospel who has not felt it in his own heart? Similarly, should any preach the **precepts** of the gospel who has not felt their power in his heart, and does not manifest their practical influence in his life? The difference between us and you, supposing there is a difference, is this, that we put preaching the precept precisely on the same footing with preaching the doctrines and experience of the gospel. Now if you deny this, what will be the consequence? That you put asunder what God has joined together. You allow that a man should not preach the doctrines of the

gospel or the experience of the gospel without knowing them for himself; and yet you think that he may preach the precept without a gracious experience of its power, or without living under its practical influence; or else you would strike out of his hand that part of the ministry altogether as legal or unnecessary. The Lord knows that it is neither one nor the other—not legal, but full of precious gospel; not unnecessary, for we see all around us in divided churches, loose profession, worldly conformity, and the low ebb to which practical godliness has almost everywhere sunk, the urgent necessity of its being more attended to.

But we must wait patiently for the Lord's time and way of bringing it about. A great step would be gained towards it if it were laid upon the heart and conscience of the servants of God to enforce it in the spirit of the gospel. We say "the spirit of the gospel," for there is no use flogging and spurring, scolding and censuring, setting tasks and impositions like an angry schoolmaster with school-boys, or giving extra drills, bread and water, and putting into the black hole, as an officer deals with obstinate soldiers. The precept needs the most cautious handling, or in your zeal for it you may soon turn it into the greatest legality, or drift yourself into the general preaching of the day, and getting far, far away from the experience of the Lord's tried and tempted family, may become a nurse for Pharisees. You may take the precept into the pulpit and preach it in such a hard, dry, legal, universal way that a casual hearer might well suppose he had strayed into the wrong chapel, or that you were one of the general dissenters. This will never do, and is as great, or not worse, a fault than not preaching it at all, for to pervert any part of God's truth is worse than to pass it by.

Well, then, may we say, "Who is sufficient for these things?" Certainly not the writer of these lines; for bear in mind that it is one thing to see what is spiritual and right, and in some measure strive after it, and another thing to be able to do it. The best of men and ministers must ever see and feel their miserable deficiencies and shortcomings even in the things which they see to be according to the will of God, and which they desire with all their heart to be ever found doing. But we must not lower the standard of divine truth because we ourselves cannot reach it, or handle the word of God deceitfully to please the vitiated palate of ministers or hearers, preachers or professors.

It will be seen from these remarks what are our views of preaching the precept; and as the Apostle said of the law, "We know that the law is good if a man use it lawfully," ([1Ti 1:8](#)), so we may say of the precept—the preaching of the precept is good if a man preach it spiritually. But surely there is a vast difference between a man's getting into the pulpit and preaching the precept in a hard, legal, bonding way as a kind of moral duty, whipping up the poor, distressed, exercised family of God to a fleshly holiness and to a rigid line of strict practice which he himself never performs—and a man of God setting forth the precept in a spiritual, experimental manner, from a sweet sense of the goodness and mercy of God tasted, felt, and handled in his own soul. The former kind of preaching repels, irritates, provokes, burdens, and distresses the real family of God; the latter as applied to their hearts and commended to their consciences by the Holy Spirit, softens and melts them, is received in love and affection, and even if it smites them it is in kindness, or if it reproves them it is an excellent oil which does not break their head.

A servant of God has to "reprove, rebuke, exhort," but then it must be "with all patience and doctrine;" that is, patient, experimental, gracious teaching. ([2Ti 4:2](#).) He is bidden "to exhort and rebuke with all authority," ([Tit 2:15](#).) But, to do this, he must have a strong place in the esteem and affection of the people, and his ministry must be commended to their conscience as attended with unction and power from above. His life and conduct, too, must be consistent with his profession, and he must practice what he preaches, or the people may well say, "Physician, heal yourself." The true pattern of exhortation is given us by the blessed Apostle—"For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts." ([1Th 2:3-4](#).) And again—"but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us." ([1Th 2:7-8](#).) And again—"You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory." ([1Th 2:10-12](#).)

Backed and recommended by such faithfulness, such a walk and conduct, such a tender, fatherly

affection, we should feel no more bondage under the preaching of the precept than we should under the preaching of the doctrines and experience of the gospel. But to sit and hear every and any whipper-snapper who has just jumped from the counter into the pulpit, after being ground in the academical mill, exhorting and exhorting as if he were a Paul, or some poor legal, blind Pharisee whipping and spurring, or some loose liver reproving and rebuking, or some graceless preacher admonishing to every good word and work, in whom a microscope would not detect one good word or one good work from one year's end to another—who that knows anything of doctrine, experience, or precept, in their vital influence and power, would not turn away with disgust from such preaching and such preachers? Who ever commissioned them to preach God's word? If God had sent them they would preach it faithfully; and then, like a fire, it would burn up the chaff which gathers round them, and, like a hammer, would break into repentance and contrition rocky hearts now hardened under them. ([Jer 22:28-29.](#))

We would close up our views on this part of our subject with one question to the dear family of God. Do you feel any bondage in reading the precepts as they stand in the epistles of the New Testament? We can say for ourselves that we have felt as much sweetness in the precepts as in any other part of those blessed epistles. If, then, the precept is preached as we find it in the epistles, and by men of God under the power and influence of the same blessed Spirit, it will meet with the same acceptance, and be received as a part of the same gospel. If it be otherwise, there is a fault somewhere.

The Precepts of the Word of God

by J. C. Philpot

The place of the precept in the HEART and LIFE of the child of God.

We have said so much on its place in the heart, as attended with light, life, liberty, and love, that we should only fall into wearisome repetition were we to go over that ground again. If the precept has no place in our heart, it is to us at present but a dead letter, and will either be legalized or neglected.

But if it has a place in our **heart** it will have a place in our **life**. The heart is the first seat of all obedience—"But God be thanked, that you were the servants of sin, but you have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you;" ([Rom 6:17](#);) "For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when you received the word of God which you heard of us, you received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually works also in you that believe." ([1Th 2:13](#).) Now, from this obedience of heart, this effectual working of the word of God in those that believe, spring all the fruits of practical godliness. The word of his grace, coming into the heart with a divine power, has a cleansing, purifying efficacy. "Now you are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you." ([Joh 15:3](#).) But the effect of this is to produce an abiding in Christ.

"Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abides in the vine, no more can you, except you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, the same brings forth much fruit; for without me you can do nothing. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, you shall ask what you will, and it shall be done unto you. Herein is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit; so shall you be my disciples." ([Joh 15:4-5](#); [Joh 15:7-8](#).) We thus see that Christ is the source of all fruitfulness, and that only as we abide in him can we bring forth fruit to his praise. But we abide in him by his words abiding in us, for they are spirit and life." ([Joh 6:63](#).) He himself is our life, ([Joh 16:6](#); [Col 3:4](#),) and he has most graciously promised, "Because I live you shall live also." ([Joh 14:19](#).) As our life, he is the life of the precept as well as the life of the promise, for only as he lives in us can we live by the faith of him, ([Gal 2:20](#),) whether it be to believe or to obey, to do or to suffer, to stand or to walk, to fight or to overcome.

Sadly would we miss the mark, grievously would we mistake the way, should we lay on the creature a hair's breadth of will or power. "Without me you can do nothing," finds a responsive echo in every believing heart. And yet he does work in his people both to will and to do of his good pleasure; and, by the gentle constraints of his love, enables them not to live to themselves but to him who died for them and rose again, ([Phi 2:13](#); [2Co 5:14-15](#).) His word has a place in their heart, and where this is the case it has an influence over their life. It separates them from the world and the spirit of it; makes and keeps their consciences alive and tender in the fear of God; produces uprightness and integrity of conduct; extends its influence to the various relationships of life; subdues pride, covetousness, selfishness, and contentiousness; softens and meekens the spirit; gives tender feelings and gracious affections; fosters prayer, meditation, and spirituality of mind; and makes itself manifest in the general life, walk, and conversation, that there is a grace in the precept as well as a grace in the promise, and that there is a glorifying God in our body and in our spirit which are God's. ([1Co 6:20](#).)

Our task is done. We have attempted, however weakly and imperfectly, to unfold the spiritual nature of the precepts of the New Testament as a part of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Lord graciously pardon all that he has seen amiss in our interpretation of his mind and will; and, so far as it is agreeable to his sovereign good pleasure, may he commend to the conscience and apply to the heart of our readers his precious truth, that, like his own inspired Scripture of which it is an exposition, it may be "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness." ([2Ti 3:16](#).)