





from the author

*The Ameliorated Condition
of the Poor,*

ONE BENEFIT DERIVED TO THE WORLD
FROM CHRISTIANITY :

CONSIDERED IN

A Discourse,

DELIVERED AT THE

CHAPEL IN TRIM-STREET, BATH,

On SUNDAY Dec. 23, 1810;

*The Day on which Collections are made at the several Places
of Worship throughout the City, for the Support
of the GENERAL HOSPITAL.*

BY

JOSEPH HUNTER.

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TO those who heard this Discourse delivered, and who may honour it with a perusal, it may be proper to observe, that a few sentences have been added in the transcription of it for the press. It is published at the desire of some partial friends, who thought that the end for which it was composed might thus be more effectually answered: and is respectfully inscribed to the Society of Protestant Dissenters who assemble for religious worship at the Chapel in Trim-street, by their faithful friend and devoted servant,

THE AUTHOR.

Bath, Jan. 1811.

SERMON.

JOHN xiii. 34.

A NEW COMMANDMENT I GIVE UNTO YOU,
THAT YE LOVE ONE ANOTHER.

“IT hath become a fashionable topic among
“ political reasoners,” says a very sensible
writer, “ to celebrate the mildness and humanity
“ of modern manners, and to prefer the character
“ of present times before the ancient.” And
having produced many proofs of the superior
mildness, humanity, and happiness of modern
times, he very properly enquires, “ To what cause
“ shall we ascribe this important revolution in the
“ sentiments and dispositions of mankind? Not
“ to the influence of better instituted governments;
“ for in legislative wisdom the ancients far ex-
“ celled us: not to the effects of a better directed

" education; that duty, shamefully neglected by
 " us, was among them an object of chief at-
 " tention. Not to our superior refinements in
 " elegant and polite arts; there we must be con-
 " tent to equal, without pretending to surpass the
 " ancients." The Christian Religion, he avers,
 " is the only cause capable to produce so great an
 " effect. That wisdom which is from above is
 " pure, and peaceable, gentle, easy to be en-
 " treated, full of mercy. Genuine Christianity is
 " distinguished above all other religions, by the
 " mildness of its spirit; the enemy of every prac-
 " tice which hardens the heart; the encourager
 " of every virtue which renders the character
 " humane. Wherever it hath been established
 " in purity, and practised with zeal, kindness,
 " long-suffering, meekness, bowels of mercies,
 " charity, are the graces which accompany it.
 " Even the vices and inventions of men, which
 " have mingled themselves with the truths of
 " God, have not been able entirely to destroy
 " their effects. Under all disadvantages, the
 " genius of the gospel exerts itself, civilizing the
 " fiercest and most barbarous nations, and in-
 " spiring a gentleness of disposition, unknown to
 " any other religion. Along with the best spiritual
 " blessings, the most valuable temporal mercies
 " have been communicated to the world by
 " Christianity. It not only sanctifies our souls,

" but refines our manners; and while it gives the
 " promises of the next life, it improves and adorns
 " the present. That happy change which the wis-
 " dom of man could not effect, God in his good
 " time accomplished, by manifesting to the world
 " the mystery hid from ages and generations."*

It would be easy to verify these just and encour-
 aging remarks by a long induction of particulars,
 in which modern Christian times are far more
 blessed than were the brightest and happiest pe-
 riods of heathen story. Nor would it be difficult
 to shew in each instance how the amelioration in
 the state of society arises immediately either from
 the letter of the Christian law, or from the genius
 and spirit of our holy religion. A moment's
 reflection will convince every one how materially
 the condition of one part at least of the human
 species is improved by the laws of a religion
 which forbids polygamy, and bounds within the
 narrowest limits the grounds on which divorces
 may be claimed. We might shew the influence
 of her spirit in the disappearance of domestic
 slavery, and with it of many of the evils, its
 constant and necessary attendants: in the banish-

* Vide a Sermon " on the Situation of the World at the
 " time of Christ's appearance," &c. preached before the So-
 ciety in Scotland for promoting Christian Knowledge, on
 Monday January 6, 1755, by Dr. Robertson, then minister at
 Gladsmuir.

ing all taste for the savage diversions of the arena, where formerly men of the most benevolent and tender minds found pleasure in the sight of human beings wounding and destroying each other, or exposed to an unequal contest with furious and purposely-irritated beasts. We might point your attention to the softening the rigours of a state of warfare, and shew, that, though Christianity has not yet succeeded in so effectually subduing the evil passions of men that contests individual and national do not prevail, she has stripped war of many of its horrors, and rendered the expense of human comfort much less than in times of heathenism and barbarism: Or we might contrast the character of men, who in the best of heathen times were accounted the ornaments of human nature, with those to whom the suffrage of a Christian public would attribute the honourable distinction of being good men. We might take, for instance, that "darling and delight of mankind," as he was hailed, not in the language of court flattery, but by the unbiassed and deliberate judgment of the wisest and best of his contemporaries—that depository of every heathen grace and virtue—that being, who in all his life lost but one day,—and exhibit the humane and clement Titus Vespasian, amusing the lingering weeks of a protracted siege by daily acts of cruelty the most refined; and crowning his work of

conquest and of death by dispersing to the four winds of heaven the poor remains of those his misguided but patriotic enemies.* The triumphal arch yet remains, under which the Roman general passed on his return to Rome, followed by the acclamations of his fellow-countrymen:—But were a Christian general to come from the field, his victorious banners stained with the blood of but one such murder, no triumph would grace his return; he would be met by the execrations, not of the good and gentle only, but those who had been nursed in camps would declare the man unworthy of the name of soldier, who had destroyed one life but in open and honourable conflict. These are among the triumphs of the Christian precepts of gentleness and love; the effects of that *new* commandment given by our Lord, that men should love one another.

It is sufficient to have thus briefly mentioned these subjects, upon which it would be easy to enlarge, so as to form from them a body of testi-

* The siege and sack of Jerusalem will immediately occur to the reader. I cannot stain the page by transcribing from the historian of this memorable event the many instances of savage barbarity of which Titus was guilty in the impalings and crucifixions of many of the Jews who fell into his hands. It is no apology for him, that these people were become extremely degenerate, or that he was the instrument in the fulfilling of ancient prophecy. *Ex uno disce omnes;* but he was extolled as the most clement of conquerors.

mony to the superior mildness and humanity, and consequently to the superior happiness of the present age, as well as to the influence of Christianity in producing so beneficial a change; for I perceive in your assembling together this day, —meeting, not as is usual with us, only to offer up together our praises and petitions, and to be reminded of our duty by the word of God, but with purposes of the purest benevolence,—one most striking proof of the superior humanity of present times: By the readiness with which you have come this day, prepared to make your offerings of benevolence, each according to his ability willing to further the good work, you have borne witness to the efficacy of your religion in humanizing the manners and softening the heart. You are acting under the *new* commandment, that men should love each other; and shewing that you are the disciples of Him who first declared the right of all mankind to the character of our brethren, and said, that inasmuch as men did their favours to the least and poorest of his brethren, it should be accounted unto them as done unto himself.

For look into the history of the most renowned people of ancient times, and see if in the brightest periods of heathen greatness, there are any instances of such condescensions to the wants and infirmities of those who occupied the lowest sta-

tions in society, as you make this day; if they ever called upon their religious instructors to animate the higher orders to acts of beneficence to the inferior; if there is a single instance of the citizens of any state of antiquity being assembled for the avowed purpose of counteracting the combined and unhappy effects of extreme penury and sickness. Look among the venerable remains of their edifices. We have many which astonish us by their vastness, and delight by their extraordinary beauty and exquisite proportions. These were all raised by the toil of the lower orders of society; but we find not among them one which was devoted to the reception of the man by whose labour they were erected, when sickness had enervated his limbs, or age weighed down his head.

It was with Christianity that these blessed Asylums began to exist; and they increased as she flourished. We have not time to attend to their state or numbers during the ages of Christian barbarism, but the English antiquary looks with honest pride upon the long roll of Infirmaries and Lazar-houses surrendered at the period of the Reformation, the offspring of the humanity of our early Christian ancestors.* And when the

* The Protestant, lost in admiration of the heroic virtue displayed by the Reformers, forgets that too many of them were guilty of inflicting the same cruelties upon others who

poor man observes the numberless structures erected in every part of this happy island by the benevolence of the rich, out of the most disinterested wish to relieve him from a portion of his burthen, he has reason to bless his God that he became poor in a Christian country.

The friends of Christianity have not, it is apprehended, made as much advantage as they reasonably might, of the argument to be drawn

differed from them in religious opinions; so also, viewing only the blessings which he perceives to have immediately resulted on the freeing Christianity from that load of ceremonies with which its pure worship was burthened, and from many of those pernicious opinions with which its heavenly doctrines were polluted, he loses sight of some effects of the glorious Reformation which were unfavourable to the interests of society. Amongst these may be noticed the depriving the poor of many accustomed sources of relief. Hospitals and other establishments for their benefit, voluntarily erected, were almost if not entirely as numerous before the Reformation as at present; but most of them being connected with religious houses, when they lost that support, fell to decay. The poor felt severely the loss of these places of relief, till a parliament of Queen Elizabeth provided for them, by an Act which forms the foundation of the present system of laws relating to the poor. A few of these ancient hospitals yet exist, not however always for the benefit of the poor; a proof of the importance to the perpetuity of these establishments, and the constant appropriation of their funds according to the intentions of the donors, that a considerable portion of their income shall depend upon the voluntary contributions of a public which never dies, nor is ever found averse from supporting such Institutions while worthy of its patronage.

from the ameliorated condition of the lower orders of society, when speaking of the benefit derived to the world by the new-discovered grace of our Lord Jesus Christ: nor has sufficient attention been paid to the state of the lower orders in civilized heathen countries, by those who have professed to write on the history and manners of Greece and Rome. A reader of the original writers from whom we derive most of our knowledge of these illustrious nations might suppose, that what we call indigence was scarcely known among them: and to a considerable extent it is presumed, that amongst those persons of whom we speak when we use the terms Greeks or Romans, that is, those persons who enjoyed the privileges of citizenship in the free states of antiquity, there were but few who depended upon disinterested bounty for their daily support. In the better ages of those commonwealths, industry and frugality, the habits of self-denial which their political institutions encouraged and enforced; and in the more corrupt, the value of the votes which each possessed in the elections to the honours and offices of the state, most of which were popular; secured the citizens from the extremes of poverty and distress. But they were not all Grecians who were of Greece; nor were all Romans who lived in that celebrated city, or in the provinces where the inhabitants enjoyed many of

the privileges of Roman citizenship. While these people talked and fought for liberty, while they declared that life was not worth the living for in slavery, they were keeping in a state of the most deplorable bondage a race of beings outnumbering themselves, denying them the exercise of the commonest rights of man. These persons held the places in society which are occupied by the poor of the present day; and the rich made no efforts to render their burthens more easy; but esteeming them born only to minister to their luxury, they treated them as if they belonged to some inferior order of animated existences.

It would too much shock the ears of a Christian audience to be told of all the oppressions to which these persons, the poor of former days, were subject. The most abject of those who fill the subordinate stations, and perform the menial offices in a Christian country, may look down in pity upon the lower orders of people in the several states of Greece, and in the city and adjoining territory of Rome. They were people with few, if any, political rights; they were even incapable of changing the master for whom they laboured; they had no opportunity of railing themselves by any extraordinary diligence or fidelity from this state of humiliating degradation. This hope, which in our times comes to all, came not unto them. Confined to the lowest rank of life, there

many of them were born, and there they died.* They married, but at the command of their masters: their offspring were his property. The parent and the child were often separated, to meet no more. Their servitude was of the hardest kind, their labour immense. When not employed in the menial offices of a family, or in the works of agriculture and masonry, they were confined to unhealthy employments in subterranean apartments; they were generally to be seen in chains; they were obliged to submit to every degrading purpose of their tyrant master: and it is a fact well known, that it was the common practice of the Spartan masters to make their slaves drunk, in order to exhibit to their children the odiousness of that vice. The lash resounded in the halls of these boasted sons of liberty; and this not as necessary and occasional discipline, but professedly to keep in subjection the minds of these unhappy people, who sometimes might presume to think that they had been men. To crown their wrongs, their lives were sported with in the most open

* The Spartans were absolutely forbidden by an ancient law to manumit any of their slaves. Among the Romans, we find that some of the slaves did procure their liberty. A person who had once been a slave, could however never partake of the privileges of even the lowest class of citizens; nor was emancipation ever made a necessary consequence of good conduct; but in the few instances in which it was granted, it was solely an act of free grace in the proprietor.

and shameless manner. A law of Lycurgus appointed as a necessary precaution the murdering them in cold blood, whenever they were becoming so numerous as to give cause of apprehension to their oppressors. And the historian Tacitus relates, that a Roman of high birth, who had four hundred slaves under his roof, having been assassinated in his house by the furious revenge of one of them, the whole number without exception were put to death.*

These were the people, who in the days of heathenism occupied the lower stations in society; and this the manner in which the image of God impressed upon them was defaced and dishonoured.

But surely you will say, when these hands which had laboured for the ease and emolument of the rich, became enervated by disease or incessant toil; when their bodies were nearly worn out by unremitted labour; these boasted sons of genius, liberty, and virtue provided for their faithful servants some secure and happy retreat from the hurry and the cares of life: their sun at least set in peace. Yes; the Christian naturally hopes and looks that this should have been the case: he mistakes for the native dictates of the human heart the suggestions of a mind with its moral

* This was according to a law of long standing in the Roman commonwealth. See Tac, Ann. lib. xiv. cap. 42, et 43.

sensibilities formed by the precepts and genius of a heaven-descended religion. But turn to the faithful page of history, and see if the passage to that state where the rich and the poor meet together, was smoothed by any indulgence to these poor outcasts of the world. She blushes while she records the cruelties which attended the hour of sickness and nature's decay; such they were as must have made them long for the place where alone the wicked ceased from troubling, and where the weary might be at rest.

There was a small island in the Tiber, on which it was the frequent practice of the Romans to expose their old, useless, or sick slaves, there to perish by hunger and cold, or to be washed off by the rising flood. The existence of this custom we learn from an edict of the Emperor Claudius forbidding the practice. In the same law it was also prescribed that no one should kill a slave merely for old age and sickness. But supposing that this edict had been strictly obeyed, it is very doubtful whether their condition would have been much more comfortable: we may imagine what others would have done, when it was the professed maxim of the elder Cato to sell his superannuated slaves for any price, rather than maintain what he esteemed a useless burthen.* What a

* Suetonius in Vita Claudii, and Plut. in Vita Catonis, as quoted by Hume in his Discourse "on the Populousness of ancient Nations." Essays, vol. iv. p. 142.

noble contrast is this day exhibited, throughout this opulent and Christian city, to the barbarous conduct of the falsely-called liberal and enlightened Romans!

This then was the state to which those persons were reduced who occupied the lower stations in life, in times preceding Christianity. That they should be thus degraded and oppressed, was indeed a natural consequence of the sentiments concerning them which prevailed among the higher orders. Where there was no love, no fellow-feeling, no sense of a common origin, no prospect of being hereafter brought to the same level, it could not be expected that there should be any consideration respecting them, but how they might be made to minister most effectually to the emolument or pleasure of their masters; we could not expect to find any disinterested endeavour to mitigate the rigours of their lot, and still less their masters indulging any thought of abridging themselves of one earthly comfort or luxury to render more tolerable the lives of men so mean as they were. Matters had continued in this state through at least ten centuries, in different climates of the world, in the successive stages of intellectual improvement, under various forms and modes of government. No man had lifted up his voice with any effect in

their cause, even to declare of them that in the eye of Him who is over all, the rich and the poor are equal, for that men are brethren. In this distressed and unhappy state were the poor among the self-denying and illiterate Spartans, the refined, luxurious, and generous Athenians, during the better ages of the Roman commonwealth, the days of their Cato and their Scipios: and when that once noble people became subject to the despotic rule of some of the most enormous tyrants that ever disgraced and afflicted human nature. Variety of national character, change of political situation, to them was nothing. The poor were slaves, and slaves they were destined to remain. The modes of oppression were acquiring new horrors; the line which separated those who commanded from those who obeyed was becoming daily more wide: in all human probability the institutions which had existed ten centuries were to continue ten centuries longer in augmented horrors, when the Gospel of Christ was promulgated, and like the Angel who visited the two Apostles in their prison, struck off the fetters of the poor, and restored to them their long-lost liberty, and the enjoyment of the common rights of man.

It is not the authority of any single precept in the Gospel, but the spirit and genius of the Christian religion, more powerful than any par-

particular command, which hath abolished the practice of depressing the lower orders to a state of slavery, and treating them as if they were beings of a different species from those who can afford to avail themselves of their services and labour. The temper which Christianity inspired was considerate, mild, and gentle; abhorring to inflict one unnecessary pain, disposed as far as possible to banish misery, and delighting in nothing so much as in seeing all men happy. The doctrines it taught added such dignity and lustre to human nature, as made its professors ashamed so to treat those on whom as well as on themselves was stamped the image of divinity, for whom the common Saviour had lived, and taught, and died, in the blessings of whose kingdom they were to participate, as they all partook together in the cup of his communion, and whom they were taught to believe that they should meet again beyond the tomb, and it might be, see them exalted to a state of far superior dignity and glory than should be allotted to those who were their masters upon earth. Wherever such opinions prevailed, men would hesitate to degrade their servants into slaves, and to strip them of some of the most honourable distinctions of rational beings.

But you are this day a witness, that to redeem them from a state of slavery was not all which

Christianity did for the poor. There are many evils the natural and necessary attendants of extreme poverty, which only the more wealthy can remove; and these evils we all know are much increased, when old age or sickness have debilitated the frame. You have heard with what inhumanity the ancients too often treated their poor, when the pains of habitual servitude were aggravated by bodily weaknesses: they were committed to unfeeling masters to exhaust in them the power of labour to the utmost, or exposed to perish unpitied and unknown.

You, my Christian friends, are met for the express purpose not only of supplying their wants, but of affording them the best possible opportunity for the healing of their infirmities. With no self-interested views, but out of the love you bear unto them, you seek to restore their limbs to soundness, their bodies to health. But why are you so employed? Not because there is a something universally operating which disposes the heart to compassion and humanity; for we have seen that the civilized and equally refined Roman was not affected by any such influence; but because your ideas of moral beauty and excellence, formed under the direction of your religion, include the being kind one to another without any exceptions, the bearing each other's burthens, the being ready to all good works, the

succouring the distressed, the feeding the hungry, the clothing the naked, the visiting the sick; the assisting especially those who, in the ordinary course of human events, cannot be expected to make you any return, under the expectation that though they cannot recompense you, yet that you shall be recompensed at the resurrection of the just. Here not only the genius and spirit of Christianity, but many of her particular and positive commands are directed to the ameliorating the condition of the suffering poor. Under her dominion men are enjoined to rejoice in that they have the poor always with them, to exercise and improve their benevolent dispositions by presenting them at all times with objects of their compassionate regard. Our Lord was indeed one anointed "to preach glad tidings to the poor, deliverance to the captive, to heal the broken-hearted, to set at liberty them that are bruised:" and Christianity thus shews itself to be a dispensation worthy to have come from that impartial Being who placed men at first in a state of equality, and who regards all mankind with an equal and benignant eye.

Christians in every age have felt the influence of the promises by which their great teacher enforced his commands of liberality; and, as if in attestation to the truth we have been maintaining, the ministering to the poor was an office

long connected with their religious services. From the weekly Agapæ, or Love-Feasts, while the sect was humble and inconsiderable, there was always a something reserved for the more necessitous of their brethren. When the sect became numerous, powerful, and wealthy, the ministers of religion were usually the mediators of benevolence between the rich and the poor. In the dark ages of Christianity there was no virtue in more repute; and when light began to dawn on the benighted world, the spirit of benevolence to the poor flourished amidst the decay of other Christian virtues and graces; and has at length prevailed so far that in most Christian countries, the rich have voluntarily made a legal surrender to the poor of a right to a certain portion of all their possessions: a liberality which would have excited the utmost astonishment, could it have been contemplated by any heathen sage: nor satisfied with this, they have provided other extraordinary means of relief for cases of distress which make larger claims upon the community than ordinary instances of poverty.

Of this nature is the noble Institution, to the support of which you are come this day disposed liberally to contribute. To you to whom it is so well known any enlarged display of its excellencies would be superfluous: nor need I remind you that it depends principally for its support

upon the voluntary contributions of its benevolent friends. It can scarcely be necessary to recall to your memories, that there is no method in which you can do as much good at the same expense to yourselves, as by maintaining such establishments as these. You call in to your aid the remains of the liberal contributions of its earlier friends: your bounty is defended from the encroachments of the bold and forward, who in many other modes of bestowing relief often seize upon that which ought to fall into the hands of the more necessitous, but more modest poor: the objects of your bounty are persons in the greatest possible distress, for they are those who are at once the victims of poverty, of sickness, and of pain. And permit me to mention, as peculiar to this establishment, that your benevolence avails itself of one of the richest presents from the great Giver of all good: the stream of health flows full and free, it is superfluously copious; the means of healing are given you; you are asked but to bring the cripple to its banks, who may bathe and be restored. Even this very stream affords an illustration of the argument which has been pursued in this discourse: while in heathen hands it was guarded with the strictest jealousy from the pollution of the humbler sons of men, it was reserved to gratify the luxury of those who sought not to prolong the lives, but

often expedited the deaths, of their once faithful attendants. No Christian ever approached this fountain of health, and felt its reviving and invigorating power, without conceiving the benevolent wish, and perhaps breathing the pious prayer, that all who wanted it, were present to feel as he did.

Let then the poor, let all be thankful that they live in Christian times; and let each of us, according to the measure of our ability, preserve this best distinguishing feature in the Christian dispensation, by being kind one to another, loving as brethren, communicating of our abundance to the necessities of our poorer brethren,—and much necessity and misery alas! are abroad in the world,—as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. So shall we be found at last amongst those who have proved themselves on earth genuine disciples of Christ, and be admitted by him with exceeding glory into his everlasting, heavenly kingdom.

FINIS.





