

Sermon II

"Self-Ignorance"

by
John Caird

*"Who can understand his errors? Cleanse thou me from secret faults."
Psalm 19:12*

Of all kinds of ignorance, that which is the most strange and, insofar as it is voluntary the most culpable, is our ignorance of Self. For not only is the subject, in this case, that which might be expected to possess for us the greatest interest, but it is the one concerning which we have amplest facilities and opportunities of information.

Who of us would not think it a strange and unaccountable story, could it be told of any man now present, that for years he had harbored under his roof a guest whose face he had never seen--a constant inmate of his home who was yet to him altogether unknown? It is no supposition, however, but an unquestionable fact that to not a few of us, from the first moment of existence, there has been present, not beneath the roof but within the breast, a mysterious resident--an inseparable companion nearer to us than friend or brother, yet of whom, after all, we know little or nothing.

What man of intelligence among us would not be ashamed to have had in his possession for years some rare or universally admired volume with its leaves uncut, or to be the proprietor of a repository filled with the most exquisite productions of genius and the rarest specimens in science and art, which yet he himself never thought of entering? Yet surely [there is] no book so worthy of perusal, no chamber containing objects of study so curious, so replete with interest for us, as that which seldom or never attracts our observation--the book, the chamber of our own hearts.

We sometimes reproach with folly those persons who have traveled far and seen much of distant countries and yet have been content to remain comparatively unacquainted with their own. But how venial such folly compared with that of ranging over all other departments of knowledge, going abroad with perpetual inquisitiveness over earth and sea and sky in search of information while there is a little world within the breast which is still to us an unexplored region. Other scenes and objects we can study only at intervals. They are not always accessible, or can be reached only by long and laborious journeys. But the bridge of consciousness is soon crossed. We have but to close the eye and withdraw the thoughts from the world without, in order at any moment to wander through the scenes and explore the phenomena of the still more wondrous world within. To examine other objects, delicate and elaborate instruments are often necessary. The researches of the astronomer, the botanist, the chemist, can be prosecuted only by means of rare and costly apparatus.

But the power of reflection, that faculty more wondrous than any mechanism which art has ever fashioned, is an instrument possessed by all. The poorest and most illiterate, alike with the most cultured and refined, have at their command an apparatus by which to sweep the inner firmament of the soul and bring into view its manifold phenomena of thought and feeling and motive. And yet, with all the unequalled facilities for acquiring this sort of knowledge, can it be

questioned that it is the one sort of knowledge that is most commonly neglected? And that, even among those who would disdain the imputation of ignorance in history or science or literature, there are multitudes who have never acquired the merest rudiments of the knowledge of Self?

What has now been stated as to the too common neglect of self-knowledge in general is emphatically true with respect to that branch of it to which the text relates. It is the moral part of our nature with reference to which defective knowledge is at once the most common and the most dangerous. As a matter of curiosity, an object of interesting study, every intelligent man should know something of the structure, organization, laws, and processes of his physical and of his intellectual nature. But as a matter not of curious interest merely, but of the last and highest necessity, we ought to be acquainted with our moral nature--with the condition of our hearts in the sight of God. The care of our bodily health we may depute to another, and the skill of the physician may render our ignorance of physiology of little or no practical moment. To be unacquainted even with our intellectual nature, unobservant of its operations and mistaken as to its character, may lead to no consequences more serious than vanity, self-conceit, an undue reliance on our own opinions. But when our ignorance relates not to the body but to the soul, not to the head but to the heart, no language can exaggerate its danger. For the care of our spiritual health--the moral culture and discipline of the soul--we can never depute to another. No friend on earth can be the soul's physician or free us from the burden of our solitary responsibility with regard to it. And unnoticed errors in the heart, unlike intellectual deficiencies, not merely affect our temporal condition or our social reputation, but may issue in our eternal ruin.

Yet the text suggests what all experience corroborates, that it is a man's *moral* defects that are most likely to elude his own scrutiny. There is a peculiar secrecy, an inherent inscrutability about our sins. Bodily disease or injury, in the great majority of cases, manifests its presence by pain. [It] so obtrudes itself on our consciousness that it is impossible for the sick man to be long unaware of his danger or indifferent to its removal. But it is the peculiar characteristic of moral disease that it does its deadly work in secret. Sin is a malady which affects the very organ by which itself can be detected. It creates the darkness amid which it injures us, and blinds the eyes of its victim in the very act of destroying him. If there be any bodily disease to which it is analogous, it is to that fatal malady which often cheats the sick man into a delusive tranquility, the deeper and more deceitful in proportion to his danger. And if the unconscious cheerfulness of the dying be sometimes both strange and sad, if it has ever happened to us as we looked on the wan and wasted countenance on which consumption had set its ghastly seal to listen with mingled wonder and pity to the words of unabated hopefulness from the sick man's lips, surely more deserving of our pity is he who, all unaware of his spiritual disease, is hastening on in undisturbed tranquility and self-satisfaction to everlasting despair and death!

Now it is this self-concealing tendency of sin and the consequent difficulty of forming a right estimate of ourselves to which the Psalmist refers in the prayer of the text, "Who can understand his errors? Cleanse thou me from secret faults!" And what I now purpose in following out the train of thought here suggested, is to point out to you a few of the causes or considerations which serve to explain the self-ignorance of the erring and sinful mind.

1. One reason why the sinful man does not "understand his errors" is--***That sin can be truly measured only when it is resisted.*** It is impossible to estimate the strength of the principle of evil in the soul till we begin to struggle with it. And the careless or sinful man--the man who by supposition is not striving with but succumbing to sin--cannot know its force. So long as evil reigns unopposed within the soul, it will reign in a great degree unobserved. So long as a man

passively and thoughtlessly yields up his will to the sway of worldly principles or unholy desires and habits, he is in no condition to measure their intensity, scarcely to discover their existence. For in this, as in many other cases, resistance is the best measure of force.

The most powerful agents in nature, when unopposed, do their work silently and without attracting observation. It is only when some counteracting power arises to dispute their sway that attention is drawn to their presence and their potency. The rapid stream flows smooth and silent when there are no obstacles to stay its progress. But hurl a rock into its bed, and the roar and surge of the arrested current will instantly reveal its force. You cannot estimate the wind's strength when it rushes over the open plain. But when it reaches and wrestles with the trees of the forest or lashes the sea into fury, then, resisted, you perceive its power. Or if amid the ice-bound regions of the North an altogether unbroken, continuous winter prevailed, comparatively unnoticed would be its stern dominion. But it is the coming round of a more genial season, when the counteracting agency of the sun begins to prevail, that reveals by the rending of the solid masses of ice and by the universal stir and crash and commotion over the face of nature the intensity of the bygone winter's cold.

Now so too is it in the spiritual world. Sin's power is revealed only in the act of resistance. [There is] no agent more potent, and none, if undisputed, more imperceptible in its operation. In many a worldly and godless heart it reigns viewless as the wind, silent as the smooth and rapid stream. Rule in whatever form it may--in selfishness, or worldliness, or pride, or ambition, or covetousness, or sensuality--sin often breathes over that inner world an influence not only as stern and withering but also as still and unobtrusive as an unbroken winter's cold.

On the other hand, resistance discloses it. When the aspiration after a purer, nobler life begins to rise within the breast, and the long passive spirit rouses its energies to check the pride of evil (to force back and stay the current of unholy desire and passion), when the softening principle of divine love and grace begins to thaw the icy coldness of a godless heart, then it is that the soul becomes aware of the deadly strength of sin. Often the sense of guilt breaks upon the awakened spirit with all the strangeness of a discovery. With the rise of its new and higher consciousness there comes upon the soul the feeling of a hitherto unrealized burden--a heavy and intolerable weight of evil restraining and crushing back its new-born energies. Hitherto at ease in the embrace of sin, when the vision of God dawns upon the spirit there is a yearning to get near Him, and an impatience and galling sense of bondage in that which keeps it away from Him, as when a child contentedly reposing in a stranger's arms no sooner catches a glimpse of the parent than it struggles and stretches out towards the loved form, ill at ease in that embrace in which it had till now unconsciously rested.

Nor is it only in the first struggles of penitence that sin is revealed in its true character to the soul. With every increase of spirituality, whatever of evil remains in it becomes more repulsive to its keener sensibilities, more irksome to its aspiring energies. Faults and errors, unapparent or venial to its former consciousness, become in the higher stages of the spiritual life more and more odious. And in the purest and best actions more of evil is now discerned than formerly in the basest and worst. The quickened conscience feels the drag of sin at each successive step the more heavy; and as the believing spirit yearns with an intenser longing for the life of God, with a more indignant impatience does the cry break from the lip--"Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?"

2. Another reason for the self-ignorance of the sinner is--*That sin often makes a man afraid*

to know himself. The suspected existence of something wrong in the soul makes us shrink from self-inspection. Strange though it may seem, the state of mind is by no means an uncommon one in which a man has a latent misgiving that all is not right with his soul, yet from a disinclination to know the whole truth and to act up to it refrains from all further examination. There are few men who do not know a little of themselves, multitudes whom that little so disturbs that they refuse to know any more. Ever and anon, even in the most careless life, the veil of custom drops and the soul catches a glimpse of its own deep inward wretchedness. But the glimpse so terrifies that few will look again. The heart of a sinful man, laid bare in all its nakedness to its own inspection, is a sight on which it would be terrible to look long. And most men prefer the delusive tranquility of ignorance to the wholesome pain of a thorough self-revelation.

And yet this voluntary ignorance (where interests so momentous are at stake) strange in itself, becomes the more strange when contrasted with our conduct in other cases. In the affairs of this world, men will indeed often shun the sight of inevitable evils and refuse to disturb themselves by the contemplation of calamities which it is beyond their power to avert. But where the suspected evil is not beyond the reach of remedy, in most minds there is a disposition of quite an opposite character--a disposition that seeks, on the least appearance of any alarming symptom, to know the worst at once. Does the prudent man of business, for instance, light on something strange in his confidential servant's accounts? Or are his suspicions awakened as to the state of some debtor's affairs with whom he is deeply involved? What, in the great majority of cases, will be his immediate mode of action? To shut his eyes to the disagreeable information, and by refraining from all further investigation purchase present ease at the risk of future ruin? Not so, but rather instantly to set about a rigid scrutiny; and not to rest till he has sifted the matter to the bottom, though the unpleasant discovery should be that his servant has embezzled his property, or that his debtor is on the brink of bankruptcy.

Or does the anxious and affectionate relative note with alarm the symptoms of dangerous disease in the person of one he loves? Does he see, or persuade himself he sees, the hectic flush beginning to gather on the cheek? Does he hear, or think he hears, the short sharp cough that rouses all his fears for the future? And need I ask what, in general, will be the effect of such misgivings? What parent, husband, friend, at such a time could consult his own selfish tranquility by ignoring the danger, taking no means to discover its extent, and if possible to check its progress?

But however rare in the sphere of our worldly interests this voluntary blindness, this reckless evasion of disagreeable intelligence is in spiritual things--even among prudent, wise, sagacious men--not the exception but the rule. Inquisitive, restless, easily alarmed in other cases, most men become strangely incurious here. Our fears and suspicions diminish instead of increasing in proportion to the magnitude of the interests involved. And when it is not our health, or wealth, or worldly fortunes, but the character and happiness of the soul for time and eternity that are implicated, the almost universal endeavor is not to provide against threatened danger but to evade or forget the signs of it.

Few men indeed, however thoughtless and indifferent to religion, can pass through life without occasional misgivings as to their spiritual state. There are times when conscience speaks out even to the most careless ear, and passing visitations of anxiety as to the soul and its destiny trouble the most callous heart. Amid the superficial cares and pleasures of a worldly existence a man's deeper nature may slumber. The surface ripple of the stream of common life may fill the sense and lull the soul to sleep. But to almost every one there come occasions when the smooth

current of the life of sense is interrupted and his true self is roused to a temporary wakefulness. In the stillness of the lonely sickbed, amid worldly reverses, in declining health, or under bitter bereavement, when we stand by the bier or bend over the closing grave of old friends and coevals, in such passages of man's history the soul, eternity, God become for the moment real things; and the most thoughtless and worldly-minded is forced to pause and think.

Or again, when the sinful man listens to some very earnest exhibition of divine truth or is brought into contact with one who is living a very holy, pure, unselfish life, [then] a painful impression of his own deficiencies--a transient glimpse of a nobler, purer ideal of life to which his own presents a miserable contrast--may visit his mind. But such thoughts are too distressing to be long dwelt upon. Very rarely have men the resolution voluntarily to arrest and detain them before the mind's eye. We do not like to have the easy tranquility of our life disturbed by spiritual anxieties. We do not care to have our self-complacency hurt by the repulsive spectacle of our proper selves. And [just] as the fair face on which disease has left its ugly seams turns with pain from the first sight of the reality which the mirror reveals, so the mind hastens to avert its view from the too faithful reflection of self which an awakened conscience presents. Instead of seeking true comfort by the steady, however painful, contemplation, and then through God's grace by the deliberate, persevering correction of its evil self, the mind too often seeks a speedier but most unreal satisfaction by forgetting its convictions and seeing itself only in the false glass of the world's opinions.

Thus, with many, life is but a continuous endeavor to forget and keep out of sight of their true selves--a vain eluding and outstripping of a reality which is still ever with them, and to the consciousness of which they must one day awake. Often, however, it is an endeavor attended only with partial success. Deep down, in the most worldly and careless mind, there is often a hidden restlessness, an uneasy disquieting consciousness as of an evil half realized, and which it would fain, but cannot, forget. Inadequate to produce any serious reformation, the convictions of conscience yet remain as a latent foreboding--a vague sense as of a debt undischarged and still hanging over us, a disease uncured and secretly working within us. Refusing to know himself, the man is often far from happy in his forgetfulness. His brightest hours are overshadowed as by the vague sense of a coming danger. There is a feverishness and unreality in all his joys. And the nearest approach to happiness he attains is but, after all, as the wretched enjoyment of the poor spendthrift, who revels on for a little hour in unreal splendor rather than be at the pains to examine into his embarrassed affairs, or of the hapless wretch in the sinking ship who drives away by intoxication the sense, but only thereby unfits himself the more to encounter the reality, of danger.

3. Again, the self-ignorance of the sinful may be accounted for by *the slow and gradual way in which, in most cases, sinful habits and dispositions are acquired.*

Apart from any other consideration, there is something in the mere fact of the gradual and insidious way in which changes of character generally take place that tends to blind men to their own defects. For everyone knows how unconscious we often are of changes that occur by minute and slow degrees. If, for instance, the transitions from one season of the year to another were more sudden and rapid, our attention would be much more forcibly arrested by their occurrence than it now is. But because we are not plunged from midsummer into winter; because in the declining year one day is so like the day that preceded it, the daylight hours contract so insensibly, the chilly feeling infuses itself by such slight increases into the air, the yellow tint creeps so gradually over the foliage; because autumn thus frequently softens and shades away

into winter by gradations so gentle, we scarcely perceive while it is going on the change which has passed over the face of nature. So, again, how imperceptibly do life's advancing stages steal upon us? If we leapt at once from boyhood into manhood, or if we lay down at night with the consciousness of manhood's bloom and vigor and waked in the morning to find ourselves grey-haired, worn and withered old men, we could not choose but be arrested by transitions so marked.

But now, because today you are very much the same man as yesterday--because with the silent growth of the stature the graver cares, and interests, and responsibilities of life gather so gradually around you; and then when you reach the turning point and begin to descend, because this year the blood circulates but a very little less freely, and but a few more and deeper lines are gathering on the face than in the last; because old associations are not suddenly broken up but only unwound thread by thread, and old forms and faces are not swept away all at once by some sudden catastrophe but only drop out of sight one by one--you are not struck [and] you are not forced to think of life's decline, and almost unawares you may not be far off from its close.

Now if we know that changes such as these in the natural world and in our own persons take place imperceptibly, may not this prepare us to admit that analogous changes--equally unnoted because equally slow and gradual--may be occurring in our moral character, in the state of our souls before God? And with many I maintain that it is actually so.

There is a winter of the soul, a spiritual decrepitude and death to which many are advancing--at which many have already arrived--yet all unconsciously because [it is] by minute and inappreciable gradations. For character is a thing of slow formation. Seldom or never does the soul reach its mature and consolidated state by broadly marked and rapid transitions. The incidents of each passing day help by minute touches to mold it. The successive changes of our outward life leave each their little deposit behind, though it may be long before the formation becomes of noticeable dimensions. Every passing breath of moral influence shakes and sways the stem of our being. But it may be many a day ere [before], by the bent acquired in one particular direction, we can mark the prevailing wind.

Differing as we all do from each other, perhaps as much in our individual characters as in the form and expression of our outward features, we did not issue [come forth] each with his own separate stamp of character full formed from Nature's mintage. And in the case of the irreligious and sinful, it has been by the slow and plastic hand of time that the natural evil of man's being has been molded into the manifold forms and aspects which their characters now exhibit. A character of confirmed selfishness, or covetousness, or sensuality, or harshness and irascibility, or hardened worldliness and unspirituality--whatever may be the special type of character in any one here--it never was formed in a day or by a few strokes upon the raw material of mind.

On the contrary it has been by many a small sin, by innumerable minute tamperings with conscience, by a thousand insignificant sacrifices of principle to passion, of duty to inclination, by multiplicity of little fits of anger and unnoted acts of sensual indulgence--it has been by a long series and succession of such experiences as these that many a man's moral being has been fashioned into the shape it wears. The change for the worse, though on the whole and to other observers very marked, has been from day to day slight and inappreciable, so that not only the worldly, the careless, the unspiritual, but even the openly wicked and abandoned, have often a comparatively slight and imperfect sense of that evil in them which has grown, and deepened, and darkened shade by shade. The most hardened and shameless profligate, had he reached his

present maturity in sin by a single stride, would probably be as much horrified at the change as if the merry innocent face and clear bright eye of his childhood had been transformed in a single day into the bloated aspect and suspicious scowl of guilt. But just as men note not the lines of deformity settling day by day over the countenance, so neither do they discern the lineaments of moral repulsiveness daily deepening into the soul.

4. It tends greatly to increase this insensibility to the progress of sin in the soul, that, ***as character gradually deteriorates, there is a parallel deterioration of the standard by which we judge of it.*** As sin grows, conscience declines in vigor. The power that perceives sin partakes of the general injury which sin inflicts on the soul. It does not remain stationary while the other elements of our being--the desires, affections, moral energies--are in downward motion. It [the power that perceives sin] does not resemble a spectator standing on the shore who can discern the slightest motion of the vessel in the stream. But rather, [in its relationship] to the other powers [of discernment], conscience stands in the relation of a fellow-voyager who cannot perceive in his companions the motion of which [he] himself partakes. Or, as in fever and other diseases that affect the brain, the disease soon unhinges the power by which the patient is made conscious of its ravages. So sin is a malady which cannot proceed far without injuring the moral consciousness by which its presence can be known.

Even to the natural conscience, weak and unenlightened though it be, sin in many of its forms has an ugly look at first, but its repulsiveness rapidly wears off by familiarity. To the call of duty, the voice of religion, the first announcement of the solemn truths of death and judgment and retribution, the mind even in its natural and unrenewed state can never be altogether insensible. But if unregarded, the impression soon fades and the solemn sounds grow fainter and fainter to the ear. By every act of disobedience to its dictates, we sin away something of the sensitiveness of conscience. And it is quite possible for the process of disobedience to go on until, even from the grossest sins, all the first recoil of dislike is gone, and to the voice of warning and instruction there rises not the faintest echo of compunction in the soul.

Just as in winter the cold may become so intense as to freeze the thermometer--and thereby to leave you without the means of marking the subsequent increases of cold--so there is a point in the lowered temperature of the inward consciousness where the growing coldness, hardness, selfishness of a man's nature can no longer be noted--the mechanism by which moral variations are indicated becoming itself insensible and motionless. And then--*then* in an awful sense--does his sin become a hidden thing to the sinner. *Then* is attained a dreadful freedom, an ominous emancipation from all restraint. The soul has reached that condition in which it can sin on unchecked, contracting a daily accumulating debt of guilt--yet all unconsciously, inflicting deeper and more incurable wounds upon itself, yet without pain; heaping up, without remonstrance, wrath against the day of wrath. No matter how rapid its fatal descent, no warning voice can retard it now. No matter how terrible the ruin before it, no prognostic of danger can startle it now. "The light that was in it" has become "darkness, and how great is that darkness!"

Such then are some of the ways in which sin effects its own concealment. And surely if it is possible that anyone who now hears me is in the condition I have attempted to describe, it will need few words to set before him its guilt and danger. [First,] its guilt; for let no man flatter himself that unconsciousness of sin divests any act of its culpability, or even of necessity extenuates the fault of the transgressor. Voluntary ignorance, so far from being a palliation [reprieve], is only an aggravation of the offense. He who willingly extinguishes the light escapes not the consequences of the errors to which darkness leads. The drunkard who prepares for

crime by first heating his brain to madness is not therefore treated as if he were naturally irresponsible. And to have evaded the light of conscience or persisted in sin till the light of conscience dies out, instead of palliating ulterior acts of guilt, is itself one of the greatest which can be committed. No! He who never knew and could not know God's will may honestly offer the plea of ignorance. But the willful ignorance of hardened insensibility is at once a grievous aggravation of the offense and its most awful punishment.

And [second,] the danger of self-ignorance is not less than its guilt. For of all evils a secret evil is most to be deprecated. Of all enemies a concealed enemy is the worst. Better the precipice than the pitfall. Better the tortures of curable disease than the painlessness of mortification. And so whatever your soul's guilt and danger, better to be aware of it. However alarming, however distressing self-knowledge may be, better that than the tremendous evils of self-ignorance. If indeed there were any possibility of your state being beyond hope or help, if your sin were irremediable and your doom inevitable, then might you be excused for refraining from all inquiry; then might further remonstrance be cruelty, not kindness. The dying man need not be tormented with useless remedies. The doomed felon may be let alone to pass quietly the interval till his execution.

But it is not so with you. No man here need, by himself or others, be given up for lost. No living soul is beyond the reach of remedy. You need not shrink from laying bare the sore, however hideous; from probing the wound of the soul to the quick, however painful the process, as if it were all in vain. Far less need you "heal your hurt slightly," or seek from false remedies a superficial peace, when, for each and all, the sovereign specific--the divine Healer--is at hand. "There is balm in Gilead; there is a Physician there." No case beyond His intervention; no soul so far gone in sin as to baffle His skill. Open your whole heart to Jesus. Tell Him all your case. Confess at His feet every hidden grief, every secret sorrow, every untold guilty fear. He is ready to hear and help. He is infinitely able to save unto the uttermost all that come unto Him. At the last extremity--spiritual life and death trembling in the balance--call Him in. Lay open your soul to His inspection. Cast yourself in confiding love on His all-sufficient aid and your recovery is sure.

But, on the other hand, if indolence or indifference prevail and you refuse to know your danger and to seek the Savior's proffered aid, reflect, I beseech you, that a time is approaching when self-knowledge shall be no longer a matter of choice. It is possible now to exclude the light. But a light is soon to dawn that, whether we will or no, shall pierce to the hidden depths of every heart and lay bare the soul at once to the eye of Omniscience and to its own. It is possible now to seek the peace of self-forgetfulness, to refuse to be disturbed, to sink for a little longer into our dream of self-satisfaction. But it is a peace as transient as it is unreal. Soon, at the latest--and all the more terrible for the delay--the awakening must come.

There are sometimes sad awakenings from sleep in this world. It is very sad to dream by night of vanished joys, to revisit old scenes and dwell once more among the unforgotten forms of our loved and lost, to see in the dreamland the old familiar look and hear the well remembered tones of a voice long hushed and still--and then to wake with the morning light to the aching sense of our loneliness again. It were very sad for the poor criminal to wake from sweet dreams of other and happier days, days of innocence and hope and peace when kind friends, and a happy home, and an honored or unstained name were his--[and then] to wake in his cell on the morning of his execution to the horrible recollection that all this is gone forever, and that today he must die a felon's death.

But inconceivably more awful than any awakening which earthly daybreak has ever brought shall be the awakening of the self-deluded soul when it is roused in horror and surprise from the dream of life to meet Almighty God in judgment!

This is Sermon II of *Sermons by the Rev. John Caird* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1858). The text has not been modified except that punctuation and spelling have been updated and long paragraphs have been divided.