

CHRISTIAN MAGNANIMITY:

A

SERMON,

Preached at Princeton, September, 1775—the Sabbath preceeding the

Annual Commencement;

And again with Additions, September 23, 1787.

To which is added,

A N

A D D R E S S

T O T H E

S E N I O R C L A S S ;

Who were to receive the Degree of

BACHELOR OF ARTS;

B Y

JOHN WITHERSPOON,

D. D. L. L. D.

President of the College of New-Jersey:

PRINCETON:

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M.DCC.LXXXVII.

IT seems proper to acquaint the public with the reason and intention of this publication. It had been the custom in the college of New-Jersey from its first establishment, that the president should preach a sermon on the Lord's day preceeding commencement, for the benefit of young persons in general; and in the end, address a particular exhortation to the seniors of that year, who were to receive the first degree in the arts and leave college. This custom was very much approved by the author of the following sermon and address, on his taking charge of the college, and therefore regularly continued. For several years, the address was founded upon and had a particular relation to whatever had been the subject of the preceeding discourse. But in the year 1775, when the war with Britain was actually begun, and every thing seemed to breath the spirit of defence, he chose Christian Magnanimity, as the subject of the discourse; and not knowing what might be the event of the important contest, he thought it adviseable to make a collection or summary of all the advices that had been given to the young gentlemen for their conduct in life, in different years, under distinct heads. This produced the one now published, which, with some variations and additions, has been delivered to the class annually, sometimes the sabbath preceeding commencement, and sometimes on commencement day, when the exercises left room for it. The author having now introduced every thing that he thought of sufficient importance to find a place in it, and the length of the piece having become such as not easily to admit

mit of its being all pronounced in one day, especially the day of commencement, he has been induced to publish it, together with the sermon which accompanied it, when first prepared and reduced to a regular system. He the more willingly agreed to this, that several instances have happened of gentlemen educated at this college signifying, that they thought they had received advantage, in many situations, by recollecting the advices given them at their graduation for their conduct in life. He therefore now puts the whole into their hands, and into those of all who are willing to accept of it, as the fruit of long experience and considerable attention to the course of human affairs, earnestly wishing that they may be useful and eminent as citizens, scholars, patriots; and at the same time beseeching them, that in any or all of these characters, they may neither forget nor be ashamed to be Christians.

A
S E R M O N
O N
C H R I S T I A N M A G N A N I M I T Y .

I T H E S S A L O N I A N S , ii. 12.

“That you would walk worthy of God, who hath called you into his kingdom and glory.”

TH E present state was intended to be, and I think must, by every person of reflection, be admitted to be a continual trial of the faith and constancy of a Christian. It is therefore a duty we owe to others in general, but in a special manner, the elder to the younger, to give them faithful warning of the temptations and dangers, to which they must, of necessity, be exposed, if they mean to walk in the paths of piety and virtue. It hath often occurred to me, in meditating on this subject, that as false money is most dangerous, when it is likest to the true, so those principles and that character, which approach the nearest to true religion, if notwithstanding they are essentially different from it, will be most ready to impose on an uncautious and unsuspecting mind. Therefore, if there is such a thing as a *worldly virtue*, a system of principles and duty, dictated by the spirit of the world, and the standard of approbation or blame with the men of the world, and if this is at bottom, essentially different from and sometimes directly opposed

opposed to the spirit of the gospel, it must be of all others, the most dangerous temptation, to persons of a liberal education and an ingenuous turn of mind.

This, if I am not mistaken, is really the case. There are so many branches of true religion which are universally approved, and which, impiety itself, cannot speak against ; such as truth and integrity in speech, honesty in dealing, humanity and compassion to persons in distress. But there are other particulars, in which the worldly virtue and the Christian virtue seem to be different things. Of these I shall select one, as an example, viz. spirit, dignity, or greatness of mind. This seems to be entirely of the worldly cast : It holds a very high place in the esteem of all worldly men : The boldest pretensions are often made to it, by those who treat religion with neglect, and religious persons with disdain or defiance. It is also a virtue of a very dazzling appearance ; ready to captivate the mind, and particularly, to make a deep impression on young persons, when they first enter into life. At the same time, the gospel seems to stand directly opposed to it. The humility of the creature, the abasement and contrition of the sinner, the dependence and self-denial of the believer, and above all, the shame and reproach of the cross itself, seem to conspire in obliging us to renounce it.

What shall we say, then, my brethren ? shall we say that magnanimity is no virtue at all, and that no such excellence belongs to human nature ? or shall we admit that there is beauty and excellence in it—confessing at the same time, that it does not belong

belong to religion, and only say, that though we want this, we have many other and better qualities in its place? To this I can never agree; for every real excellence is consistent with every other; nay, every real excellence is adorned and illustrated by every other. Vices may be inconsistent with each other, but virtues never can. And, therefore, as magnanimity is an amiable and noble quality—one of the greatest ornaments of our nature, so I affirm, that it belongs only to true and undefiled religion, and that every appearance of the one, without the other, is not only defective, but false.

The holy scriptures, it is true, do chiefly insist upon what is proper to humble our pride, and to bring us to a just apprehension of our character and state. This was wise and just, because of that corruption and misery into which we are fallen, the contrary would have been unjust. It is evidently more necessary, in the present state of human nature, to restrain pride, than to kindle ambition. But as the scripture points out our original dignity, and the true glory of our nature, so every true penitent is there taught to aspire after the noblest character, and to entertain the most exalted hopes. In the passage which I have chosen as the subject of my discourse, you see the Apostle exhorts the Thessalonians to walk suitably to the dignity of their character, and the importance of their privileges, which is a short but just description of true and genuine greatness of mind.

My single purpose, from these words, at this time, is to explain and recommend magnanimity as a Christian virtue; and I wish to do it in such

a manner, as neither to weaken its lustre, nor admit any degree of that corrupt mixture, by which it is often counterfeited and greatly debased. Some infidels have in terms affirmed, that Christianity has banished magnanimity, and by its precepts of meekness, humility, and passive submission to injury, has destroyed that nobleness of sentiment, which rendered the ancients so illustrious, and gives so much majesty and dignity to the histories of Greece and Rome. In opposition to this, I hope to be able to shew that real greatness is inseparable from sincere piety, and that any defect in the one, must necessarily be a discernable blemish in the other. With this view, I will (first) give you the principles of magnanimity in general, as a natural quality; (secondly) I will shew what is necessary to give it real value, as a moral virtue, and (thirdly) shew that it shines with the most perfect brightness as a Christian grace; after, will improve the subject, by a practical application of what may be said for your instruction and direction.

First, then, let me state the principles of magnanimity, in general, as a natural quality. I think it must be admitted, that as there is a real difference between bodies as to size and bulk, as well as other sensible qualities, so there is a real character of greatness, or meanness, applicable to the mind, distinct from its other qualities or powers. It is, however, I apprehend, a simple impression, which cannot be explained or further analyzed, but may easily be felt, and is best illustrated by its effects. These may be summed up in the following particulars: To magnanimity it belongeth to attempt
great

1, great and difficult things; 2, to aspire after great and valuable possessions; 3, to encounter dangers with resolution; 4, to struggle against difficulties with perseverance, and 5, to bear sufferings with fortitude and patience.

1, It belongs to magnanimity to attempt great and difficult things. Those, who, from a love of sloth and ease, neglect the exercise or improvement of their powers, and those who apply them with ever so great assiduity and attention, to things mean or of small consequence, are plainly destitute of this quality. We perceive a meanness and want of spirit in this respect, when particular persons fall below their rank in life, or when, as is too frequently the case in any rank, they fall below human nature itself. When a prince, or other person of the first order and importance in human life, busies himself in nothing but the most trifling amusements, or arts of little value, we call it mean; and when any man, endowed with rational powers, loses them through neglect, or destroys them by the most grovelling sensuality, we say he is acting below himself. The contrary of this, therefore, or the vigorous exertion of all our powers, and particularly, the application of them to things of moment and difficulty, is real magnanimity.

2, It belongs to magnanimity, to aspire after great and valuable possessions. It is more difficult properly to illustrate this as a branch of magnanimity, because of its frequent perversion, which will be afterwards explained. It seems, however, to be necessarily included in the general character. A great mind has great capacities of enjoyment

