

## **Preface to Cooper's Treatise on "HEART DISCIPLINE"**

By John Angell James

The subject of this volume is the most important that can be found in the whole range of experimental and practical religion, and bears the same relation to the general character of the Christian, that the natural heart does to the human frame. If that organ be in a sound and healthy state there is at least, one indication, and one means of good health; but serious disease here, must be fatal not only to health, but to life. Nor does the comparison stop here. Perhaps there is no morbid condition of the body, certainly no mortal disease, which more effectually conceals its existence and progress, (so as to occasion little alarm or inconvenience to its subject up to the time of its fatal termination), than some diseases of the heart. And is it not equally true, that in the spiritual man "the heart is deceitful above all things?" And this is one of the operations of its deceitfulness, concealing its really unhealthy condition from its possessor.

Hence the beauty and force of the admonitions of Solomon—"Keep the heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life." "Be wise, and guide your heart in the way." And hence also the indispensable necessity of a Christian's paying great attention to the state of his heart; and of his calling in some spiritual physician who shall apply a spiritual stethoscope, to ascertain whether he is in a sound or morbid condition. If I may carry on the metaphor, there is one advantage of our spiritual economy over the natural one, for while disease on being detected admits in the latter only of palliatives, it admits in the former of cure. Is not this a reason why Christians should honestly seek to know their real condition, and desire not to be deceived, in order, if it be unhealthy, to have it removed? In diseases of the body that are inevitably mortal, it may be mercy in some cases where a person is spiritually prepared for death, to keep the patient in ignorance, he is thus saved many painful apprehensions and gloomy anticipations. But where a cure can be effected, it is desirable for the sufferer to know the

worst to quicken his concern to obtain the healing process.

The Author then has chosen a most momentous subject. He has gone to the seat of action, and desired to regulate the organization of the soul. It is the heart which is the constant object of divine notice and omniscient scrutiny. "I, the Lord, search the heart." Man looks at the conduct, and conjectures the motive from the action, God looks at the heart and determines the action by the motive. What this is, that are we in the judgment of the All-wise. The heart influences the conduct, from thence "are the issues of life." As in the physical body, the heart is the fountain of that vital fluid which according as it is healthy or impure, carries vigor or feebleness, pain or ease, activity or torpor to the whole body; so is it also in the spiritual frame. Let the Christian keep the heart, and the heart will keep the life.

How necessary this duty is may be learned from the declarations of Scripture, from the testimony of all godly men, and the history of ungodly ones, and from every man's personal experience. And yet necessary as it is, there is no duty which the greater part of mankind seem more indisposed to attempt than this. Many who are not altogether regardless of their external character, are lamentably inattentive to their inner man. They are like a person who garnishes the exterior of his house, but neglects the internal state of its apartments. Why are not even Christians more attentive to this duty? Many reasons may be assigned for this. In some cases it may arise from a lack of thought about the matter. In others there is too little real concern about spiritual things, too much lukewarmness of soul, too much absorption of mind in secular concerns. Many have no time, or will have none, to meditate, to examine, to judge. Then, also, there is, it must be confessed, real difficulty in the work; it requires painstaking, retirement, resistance of the encroachments of the world. Not a few are afraid to have dealings with the heart. A careful examination would discover much that is evil, and much that they would rather not know, and which they would not like to put away.

Yet, after all, for those who have the wisdom and the courage to enter upon this duty, it has its reward. Self-discipline, if it has its pains, has also its pleasures—for is

there nothing honorable, nothing pleasant in the thought of being masters at home; of being possessors of our own spirits?

The Author of the following Treatise very properly includes in the heart, the whole soul; and, treating the subject, not merely on philosophical or ethical principles, but on Christian grounds, comprehends in its discipline the following things, a spiritually enlightened understanding, an awakened conscience, a rectified will, and sanctified affections. It will be seen, therefore, that his design is not merely to regulate our passions and affections, but to teach us how to discipline our whole inner self according to the word of God. It is extremely probable that by a very large majority of professing Christians an undue attention is paid in religious matters to the emotional part of our nature, and far too little to the intellect, the will, and the conscience. By such people, therefore, the whole of self-discipline is resolved into what I cannot, in their case, call a training of the affections, but an excitement of them.

Eminent personal godliness, so far as the faculties of the soul are concerned, is compounded of clear intelligence, inflexible will, soft emotion, and tenderness of conscience. It is the tendency of various schools of theology, if not to separate these things, yet to blend them in undue proportions.

It has been often said that, as all truth is homogeneous, there is no one truth but is related to all truths. The same remark may be made of Christian graces, there is no one virtue which is not related to all other virtues. And the discipline of the heart must of necessity bear upon all the relations and duties of man—it is, in fact, the discipline of the whole soul by the power of true religion. And how true it is that the soul is the seat of all real religion. Were religion nothing more than a round of external ceremonies, confined to a certain place and to limited periods of time, it must have, and could have—no necessary connection with any other engagements, but would be a thing of and by itself. But true religion is a right state of the soul, not only towards God, but also towards man. It must follow us everywhere, and influence us in all things, and at all times. It must not

be like the clothes we wear, which may be of any fashion, and can be put on and off at certain times and in particular places, as mere forms and ceremonies may be; but must be like the heart in the body—which animates us and influences us always and everywhere. "Whether we eat or drink, or whatever we do, we are to do all to the glory of God." It invests the whole character with the beauties of holiness. Instead of lowering the Christian to the man, raises up the man to the Christian. It makes what is little, great; what is base, noble; what is low, elevated. And it does so equally by the rule which it observes, the motive which influences it, and the end which it seeks. The most menial servant of a palace who disciplines his heart by the rules of religion in the duties of his humble station, is as to moral character, intentions, and design, upon a level with the monarch who there holds his court and directs the affairs of empires. This gives an elevation and dignity to the whole character, and exalts even the commonest duties of life into acts of piety.

But this is not all, for self-discipline not only influences but helps everything in morals and religion. It is beautiful to trace the flow of the sap, the principle of vegetable vitality to the minutest channel of the remotest leaf of the loftiest tree; or the course of the blood to the smallest veins of the least limb and farthest from the heart, and see how the common fountain supplies and nourishes all. But this is not half so delightful as to follow the course and the effects of religious self-discipline to seeming circumstances and engagements that are most apparently remote from the source of all spiritual influence—in an enlightened mind and a renewed heart.

[HOME](#)[QUOTES](#)[SERMONS](#)[BOOKS](#)