

1 "Evangelical Sanctity the Completion of Natural Virtue"  
2 Oxford University Sermons sermon 3  
3 St. John Henry Newman  
4 March 6, 1831

5 "Ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light:  
6 for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness and righteousness and truth." Eph. v. 8, 9.

7 [Note 1] WHILE Christianity reveals the pardon of sin and the promise of eternal life  
8 through the mediation of Christ, it also professes to point out means for the present  
9 improvement of our moral nature itself. This improvement, we know, is referred in  
10 Scripture to the Holy Spirit, as a first cause; and, as coming from Him, both the  
11 influence itself upon the mind and the moral character formed under that influence are  
12 each in turn called "the spirit." Thus, St. Paul speaks of the law of "the spirit of life in  
13 Christ Jesus," [Rom. viii. 2.] and contrasts it with that character and conduct which are  
14 sin and death. He speaks too of receiving "the spirit of faith," [2 Cor. iv. 13.] or the  
15 temper of which faith is the essence; and in the text, which is found in the Epistle for this  
16 Sunday, he refers to the outward manifestation or fruit of the same spirit, "goodness,  
17 righteousness, and truth." "Light" is another word, used as in the text—to express the  
18 same moral change which the Gospel offers us; but this title is proper to our Lord, who  
19 is the true Light of men. Christians are said to be "called into His marvellous light," to  
20 "walk as children of light," to "abide in the light," to "put on the armour of light." [1 Pet. ii.  
21 9. 1 John i. 7; ii. 10. Rom. xiii. 12.] Another similar term is newness or renewal of mind.  
22 Indeed, it is quite obvious that the phraseology of the New Testament is grounded in  
23 such views of the immediate inward benefits to be conferred upon the Church on the  
24 coming of Christ.

25 2. What, then, is meant by this language? language, which, if great words stand for  
26 great ideas, and an Apostle does not aim at eloquent speech rather than at the simple  
27 truth, must raise our expectations concerning the fulness of the present benefits  
28 resulting to us in the present state of things from Christianity. That it is not mere  
29 ordinary religious obedience, such as the Holy Spirit may foster among the heathen;  
30 nor, on the other hand, miraculous endowment of which St. Paul speaks, when he prays  
31 that "the Father of glory" might give to the Ephesians "the spirit of wisdom and  
32 revelation," "enlightened understanding," "knowledge of the riches of the glory of the  
33 Saints' inheritance," [Eph. i. 17, 18.] this surely is evident without formal proof, and least  
34 of all need be insisted on in this place.

35 3. Nor, again, does the question find its answer in the view of certain men of deeper  
36 piety than the mass of mankind,—of those, I mean, who, clearly perceiving that  
37 Christian morality and devotion are something extraordinarily excellent and divine, have  
38 sought to embody them in a strict outward separation from the world, a ceremonial  
39 worship, severe austerities, and a fixed adjustment of the claims of duty in all the  
40 varying *minutiæ* of daily conduct; and who, in consequence, have at length substituted  
41 dead forms for the "spirit" which they desired to honour.

42 4. Nor further may we seek an explanation of the difficulty from such men as consult  
43 their feelings and imaginations rather than the sure Word of God, and place that  
44 spiritual obedience, which all confess to be the very test of a Christian, in the indulgence  
45 of excited affections, in an impetuous, unrefined zeal, or in the language of an artificial  
46 devotion. For this view of spirituality, also, except in the case of minds peculiarly  
47 constituted, ends in a formal religion.

48 5. Moreover, the aspect of the Christian world affords us no elucidation of St. Paul's  
49 language concerning the great gift of grace. Far from concurring with Scripture and  
50 interpreting it for us, doubtless the manners and habits even of the most refined society  
51 are rather calculated to prejudice the mind against any high views of religious and moral  
52 duty. And this has been the case even from the Apostle's age, as may be inferred from  
53 his Epistle to the Corinthians, who could hardly have understood their own titles, as  
54 "sanctified in Christ," "called to be saints," [1 Cor. i. 2.] at the time that they have among  
55 them, "debates, envyings, whisperings, swellings, tumults, uncleanness,  
56 lasciviousness," [2 Cor. xii. 20, 21.] unrepented of.

57 6. It is indeed by no means clear that Christianity has at any time been of any great  
58 spiritual advantage to the world at large. The general temper of mankind, taking man  
59 individually, is what it ever was, restless and discontented, or sensual, or unbelieving. In  
60 barbarous times, indeed, the influence of the Church was successful in effecting far  
61 greater social order and external decency of conduct than are known in heathen  
62 countries; and at all times it will abash and check excesses which conscience itself  
63 condemns. But it has ever been a restraint on the world rather than a guide to personal  
64 virtue and perfection on a large scale; its fruits are negative.

65 7. True it is, that in the more advanced periods of society a greater innocence and  
66 probity of conduct and courtesy of manners will prevail; but these, though they have  
67 sometimes been accounted illustrations of the peculiar Christian character, have in fact  
68 no necessary connexion with it. For why should they not be referred to that mere  
69 advancement of civilisation and education of the intellect, which is surely competent to  
70 produce them? Morals may be cultivated as a science; it furnishes a subject-matter on  
71 which reason may exercise itself to any extent whatever, with little more than the mere  
72 external assistance of conscience and Scripture. And, when drawn out into system,  
73 such a moral teaching will attract general admiration from its beauty and refinement;  
74 and from its evident expediency will be adopted as a directory (so to say) of conduct,  
75 whenever it does not occasion any great inconvenience, or interfere with any strong  
76 passion or urgent interest. National love of virtue is no test of a sensitive and well-  
77 instructed conscience,—of nothing beyond intellectual culture. History establishes this:  
78 the Roman moralists write as admirably, as if they were moral men.

79 8. And, if this be the case, as I think it is, do we not compromise the dignity of  
80 Christianity by anxiously referring unbelievers to the effects of the Gospel of Jesus in  
81 the world at large, as if a sufficient proof of its divine origin, when the same effects to all  
82 appearance are the result of principles which do not "spring from the grace of Christ and  
83 the inspiration of His Spirit"? For it is not too much to say, that, constituted as human

84 nature is, any very wide influence and hearty reception of given principles among men  
85 argues in fact their earthly character,—“they are of the world, therefore speak they of  
86 the world, and the world heareth them.” [1 John iv. 5.] The true light of the world offends  
87 more men than it attracts; and its divine origin is shown, not in its marked effects on the  
88 mass of mankind, but in its surprising power of elevating the moral character where it is  
89 received in spirit and in truth. Its scattered saints, in all ranks of life, speak of it to the  
90 thoughtful inquirer: but to the world at large, its remarkable continuance on the earth is  
91 its witness,—its pertinacity of existence, confronting, as it has in turn, every variety of  
92 opinion, and triumphing over them all. To the multitude it does not manifest itself [Note  
93 2];—not that it willingly is hid from them, but that the perverse freedom of their will keeps  
94 them at a distance from it.

95 9. Besides, it must not be forgotten, that Christianity professes to prepare us for the next  
96 life. It is nothing strange then, if principles, which avowedly direct the science of morals  
97 to present beneficial results in the community, should show to the greater advantage in  
98 their own selected field of action. Exalted virtue cannot be fully appreciated, nay, is  
99 seldom recognized on the public stage of life, because it addresses itself to an unseen  
100 tribune. Its actual manifestations on this confused and shifting scene are but partial; just  
101 as the most perfect form loses its outline and its proportions, when cast in shadow on  
102 some irregular surface.

103 10. Let it be assumed, then, as not needing proof, that the freedom of thought,  
104 enlightened equitableness, and amiableness, which are the offspring of civilization,  
105 differ far more even than the piety of form or of emotion from the Christian spirit, as  
106 being “not pleasant to God, forasmuch as they spring not of faith in Jesus Christ, yea,  
107 rather, ‘doubtless,’ having the nature of sin.”

108 11. How then, after all, must the gift be described, which Christianity professes to  
109 bestow? I proceed, in answer to this question, to consider what is said on the subject by  
110 Scripture itself, where alone we ought to look for the answer. Not as if any new light  
111 could be thrown upon the subject, or any statements made, which have not the assent  
112 of sober Christians generally, but in order to illustrate and enforce an all-important truth;  
113 and, while at every season of the year practical views of Christianity are befitting, they  
114 are especially suggested and justified by the services of humiliation in which we are at  
115 present [Note 3] engaged.

116 12. The difference, then, between the extraordinary Christian “spirit,” and human faith  
117 and virtue, viewed apart from Christianity, is simply this:—that, while the two are the  
118 same in nature, the former is immeasurably higher than the other, more deeply rooted in  
119 the mind it inhabits, more consistent, more vigorous, of more intense purity, of more  
120 sovereign authority, with greater promise of victory—the choicest elements of our moral  
121 nature being collected, fostered, matured into a determinate character by the gracious  
122 influences of the Holy Ghost, differing from the virtue of heathens somewhat in the way  
123 that the principle of life in a diseased and wasted frame differs from that health, beauty,  
124 and strength of body, which is nevertheless subject to disorder and decay.

125 13. That the spiritual and the virtuous mind are essentially the same, is plain from the  
126 text as from other Scriptures: "The fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness and righteousness  
127 and truth." Let us rather confine our attention to the point of difference between them;  
128 viz. that the Christian graces are far superior in rank and dignity to the moral virtues.  
129 The following may serve as illustrations of this difference:—

130 14. (1.) Take at once our Lord's words, when enjoining the duty of love, "If ye love them  
131 who love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same?" Or St.  
132 Peter's, on the duty of patience! "What glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults,  
133 ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this  
134 is acceptable with God." [Matt. v. 46. 1 Pet. ii. 20.]

135 15. This contrast between ordinary and transcendent virtue, the virtues of nature and  
136 the virtues of Christianity, may be formally drawn out in various branches of our duty.  
137 For instance; duties are often divided into religious, relative, personal; the characteristic  
138 excellence in each of those departments of virtue being respectively faith, benevolence  
139 and justice, and temperance. Now in Christianity these three are respectively perfected  
140 in hope, charity, and self-denial, which are the peculiar fruits of the "spirit" as  
141 distinguished from ordinary virtue. This need not be proved in detail; it is sufficient to  
142 refer to St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, and his first to the Corinthians. These three  
143 cardinal graces of the Christian character are enforced by our Saviour, when He bids us  
144 take no thought for the morrow; do as we would be done by; and deny ourselves, take  
145 up our cross, and follow Him [Matt. vi. 34; vii. 12; x. 38.].

146 16. Other virtues admit of a similar growth and contrast. Christian patience is contrasted  
147 with what is ordinary patience in the passage from St. Peter just cited. St. John speaks  
148 of the "love of God casting out fear;" and whatever difficulty may lie in the interpretation  
149 of these words, they are at least clear in marking the transcendent quality of the  
150 Christian grace, compared with the ordinary virtue, as seen under former dispensations  
151 of religion. And in the Epistle to the Hebrews, the inspired writer contrasts the  
152 elementary objects of faith with those which are the enjoyment of a perfect and true  
153 Christian; the doctrines which spring from the Atonement being the latter, and the  
154 former such as the Being of a God, His Providence, the Resurrection and eternal  
155 judgment.

156 17. (2.) In the next place, we may learn what is the peculiar gift of the Spirit even without  
157 seeking in Scripture for any express contrast between graces and virtues, by  
158 considering the Christian moral code as a whole, and the general impression which it  
159 would make on minds which had been instructed in nothing beyond the ordinary  
160 morality which nature teaches. Such are the following passages—we are bid not to  
161 resist evil, but to turn the cheek to the smiter; to forgive from our hearts our brother,  
162 though he sin against us unto seventy times seven; to love and bless our enemies; to  
163 love without dissimulation; to esteem others better than ourselves; to bear one another's  
164 burdens; to condescend to men of low estate; to minister to our brethren the more  
165 humbly, the higher our station is; to be like little children in simplicity and humility. We  
166 are to guard against every idle word, and to aim at great plainness of speech; to make

167 prayer our solace, and hymns and psalms our mirth; to be careless about the honours  
168 and emoluments of the world; to maintain almost a voluntary poverty (at least so far as  
169 renouncing all superfluous wealth may be called such); to observe a purity severe as an  
170 utter abhorrence of uncleanness can make it to be; willingly to part with hand or eye in  
171 the desire to be made like to the pattern of the Son of God; and to think little of friends  
172 or country, or the prospects of ordinary domestic happiness, for the kingdom of  
173 heaven's sake [Note 4].

174 18. Now, in enumerating these maxims of Christian morality, I do not attempt to  
175 delineate the character itself, which they are intended to form as their result. Without  
176 pretending to interpret rules, which the religious mind understands only in proportion to  
177 its progress in sanctification, I may assume, what is enough for the present purpose,  
178 that they evidently point out to some very exalted order of moral excellence as the  
179 characteristic of a genuine Christian. Thus they are adequate to the explanation of the  
180 Apostle's strong language about the Spirit of *glory* and God [Note 5] as the present gift  
181 gained for us by our Saviour's intercession, which in the text is evidently declared to be  
182 a moral gift, yet as evidently to be something more than what is meant by ordinary faith  
183 and obedience.

184 19. (3.) And next, let us see what may be gained on the subject by examining the lives  
185 of the Apostles, and of their genuine successors. Here their labours and sufferings  
186 attract our attention first. Not that pain and privation have any natural connexion with  
187 virtue; but because, when virtue is pre-supposed, these conditions exert a powerful  
188 influence in developing and elevating it. Considering St. Paul's ready and continued  
189 sacrifices of himself and all that was his in the cause of the Gospel, could the texture of  
190 his religion bear any resemblance to that weak and yielding principle which constitutes  
191 the virtue of what we now consider the more conscientious part of mankind? He and his  
192 brethren had a calm strength of mind, which marked them out, more than any other  
193 temper, to be God's elect who could not be misled, stern weapons of God, purged by  
194 affliction and toil to do His work on earth and to persevere to the end.

195 20. And let us view such men as these, whom we rightly call Saints, in the combination  
196 of graces which form their character, and we shall gain a fresh insight into the nature of  
197 that sublime morality which the Spirit enforces. St. Paul exhibits the union of zeal and  
198 gentleness; St. John, of overflowing love with uncompromising strictness of principle.  
199 Firmness and meekness is another combination of virtues, which is exemplified in  
200 Moses, even under the first Covenant. To these we may add such as self-respect and  
201 humility, the love and fear of God, and the use of the world without the abuse of it. This  
202 necessity of being "sanctified wholly," in the Apostle's language, is often forgotten. It is  
203 indeed comparatively easy to profess one side only of moral excellence, as if faith were  
204 to be all in all, or zeal, or amiableness; whereas in truth, religious obedience is a very  
205 intricate problem, and the more so the farther we proceed in it. The moral growth within  
206 us must be symmetrical, in order to be beautiful or lasting; hence mature sanctity is  
207 seldom recognized by others, where it really exists, never by the world at large.  
208 Ordinary spectators carry off one or other impression of a good man, according to the  
209 accidental circumstances under which they see him. Much more are the attributes and

210 manifestations of the Divine Mind beyond our understanding, and, appearing  
211 inconsistent, are rightly called mysterious.

212 21. (4.) A last illustration of the special elevation of Christian holiness is derived from the  
213 anxious exhortation made to us in Scripture to be diligent in aiming at it. There is no  
214 difficulty in realizing in our own persons the ordinary virtues of society; nay, it is the  
215 boast of some ethical systems that they secure virtue, on the admission of a few simple  
216 and intelligible principles, or that they make it depend on the knowledge of certain  
217 intellectual truths. This is a shallow philosophy; but Christian perfection is as high as the  
218 commands and warnings of Scripture are solemn: "Watch and pray;" "many are called,  
219 few chosen;" "strait is the gate, and narrow is the way;" "strive to enter in," "many shall  
220 seek," only; "a rich man shall hardly enter;" "he that is able to receive it, let him receive  
221 it;" [Matt. vii.; xix.; xxii.; xxvi. Luke xiii.] and others of a like character.

222 22. Such, then, is the present benefit which Christianity offers us; not only a renewal of  
223 our moral nature after Adam's original likeness, but a blending of all its powers and  
224 affections into the one perfect man, "after the measure of the stature of the fulness of  
225 Christ." Not that heathens are absolutely precluded from this transformation from sin to  
226 righteousness; nor as if we dare limit the actual progress made by individuals among  
227 them; nor, further, as if it were not every one's duty to aim at perfection in all things  
228 under any Dispensation; but neither the question of duty nor that of God's dealings with  
229 heathen countries has come under consideration here; but what it is that Christians  
230 have pledged to them from above on their regeneration; what that great gift is of Christ's  
231 passion, of which the Apostles speak in language so solemn and so triumphant, as at  
232 first sight to raise a difficulty about its meaning.

233 28. Considering, then, the intense brightness and purity of that holiness to which we are  
234 called, and on the other hand our ignorant and sensual condition, as we are really  
235 found, our Church teaches us to put away from ourselves the title of "Saint," and to  
236 attribute it to such especially as "have laboured and not fainted;" [Rev. ii. 3.] those who,  
237 like the Apostles and primitive martyrs, have fought a good fight, and finished their  
238 course, and kept the faith.

239 24. Nor let it seem to any one, that, by so doing, the timid Christian is debarred of his  
240 rights and discouraged; or, on the other hand, that the indolent are countenanced in low  
241 views of duty by setting before them what they may consider a double standard of  
242 virtue. For indolent minds will content themselves with the performance of a meagre  
243 heartless obedience, whether or not a higher excellence is also proposed to them. And  
244 as to the sincere but anxious disciple of Christ, let it relieve his despondency to reflect  
245 that on him as much as on the matured saint, have been bestowed the titles of God's  
246 everlasting favour and the privileges of election. God's will and purpose are pledged in  
247 his behalf; and the first fruits of grace are vouchsafed to him, though his character be  
248 not yet brought into the abiding image of Christ. While the distance from him of the prize  
249 must excite in him an earnest desire of victory and a fear of failure, there is no  
250 impassable barrier between him and it, to lead him to despair of it. And there is a point  
251 in a Christian's progress at which his election may be considered as secured; whether

252 or not he can assure himself of this, at least there may be times when he will "feel within  
253 him the working of the spirit of Christ, mortifying the flesh, and drawing up his mind to  
254 high and heavenly things." Thus St. Paul on one occasion says, "Not as though I had  
255 attained;" yet, far from desponding, he adds, "I press towards the mark for the prize."  
256 Again, at the close of his life, he says, "Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of  
257 righteousness." [Phil. iii. 12-14. 2 Tim. iv. 8.]

258 25. The subject which has come before us naturally leads on to one or two reflections,  
259 with which I shall conclude.

260 On the one hand, it suggests the question, Are there in this age saints in the world, such  
261 as the Apostles were? And this at least brings us to a practical reflection. For, if there  
262 are such any where, they ought to exist in our own Church, or rather, since the Apostles  
263 were men of no higher nature than ourselves, if there are not among us such as they  
264 were, no reason can possibly be given for the deficiency, but the perverse love of sin in  
265 those who are not such. There are Christians who do not enjoy a knowledge of the pure  
266 truth; and others, who wander without the pale of the divinely privileged Church of  
267 Christ; but we are enabled justly to glory in our membership with the body which the  
268 Apostles founded, and in which the Holy Spirit has especially dwelt ever since, and we  
269 are blessed with the full light of Scripture, and possess the most formally correct creed  
270 of any of the Churches. Yet, on the other hand, when we look at the actual state of this  
271 Christian country, it does not seem as if men were anxiously escaping the woe, which,  
272 first pronounced on an apostate Apostle, assuredly hangs over them. They do not  
273 appear to recognize any distinction between natural and spiritual excellence; they do  
274 not aim at rising above the morality of unregenerate men, which, though commendable  
275 in heathen, is not available for Christian salvation. And they are apt to view Christian  
276 morality as a mere system, as one of the Evidences for Revealed Religion, and as a  
277 mark of their superior knowledge in comparison with Jews and Pagans, far more than  
278 as it enjoins on them a certain ethical character, which they are commanded to make  
279 their own.

280 26. When, moreover, to the imperative duty, which lies upon us, of being true  
281 Christians, and to the actual signs of carelessness and unbelief which the Christian  
282 world exhibits, we add the extreme difficulty of turning from sin to obedience, the  
283 prospect before us becomes still more threatening. It is difficult even to form a notion of  
284 the utter dissimilarity between the holiness to which we are called and the habits which  
285 we still imperceptibly form for ourselves, if we leave the tendencies of our nature to take  
286 their spontaneous course. What two things are more opposed to each other than a mind  
287 revelling in the keen indulgence of its passions, and the same mind, when oppressed  
288 with self-reproach and bodily suffering, and loathing the sins in which it before exulted?  
289 Yet, great as this contrast is, remorse does not more differ from profligate excess, than  
290 both of them differ from a true religious habit of mind. As the pleasure of sinning is  
291 contrary to remorse, so remorse is not repentance, and repentance is not reformation,  
292 and reformation is not habitual virtue, and virtue is not the full gift of the Spirit. How shall  
293 we limit the process of sanctification? But of these its higher stages deliberate sinners

294 are as ignorant, and as ignorant of their ignorance, as of those "heavenly things," to  
295 which our Saviour refers.

296 27. And lastly, when the shortness of our probation is added to the serious thoughts  
297 already dwelt upon, who shall estimate the importance of every day and hour of a  
298 Christian's life in its bearing on his eternal destiny? Not that life is not long enough to  
299 ascertain each man's use of his own gifts,—rather, our probation could not be materially  
300 longer, for our nature is such, that, though life were ten times its present length, yet our  
301 eternal prospects would, as it appears, still be decided by our first start on its course.  
302 We cannot keep from forming habits of one kind or another, each of our acts influences  
303 the rest, gives character to the mind, narrows its freewill in the direction of good or evil,  
304 till it soon converges in all its powers and principles to some fixed point in the  
305 unbounded horizon before it. This at least is the general law of our moral nature; and  
306 such fearful expression does it give to every event which befalls us, and to every  
307 corresponding action of our will, and especially with such appalling interest does it  
308 invest the probation of our early years, that nothing but the knowledge of the Gospel  
309 announcements, and above all of the gracious words and deeds of our Redeemer, is  
310 equal to the burden of it. And these are intended to sustain the threatenings of the  
311 visible system of things, which would overwhelm us except for the promise, as the  
312 hearing of the promise on the other hand might puff us up with an unseemingly  
313 presumption, had we no experience of the terrors of Natural Religion.

314 28. The day, we know, will come, when every Christian will be judged, not by what God  
315 has done for him, but by what he has done for himself: when, of all the varied blessings  
316 of Redemption, in which he was clad here, nothing will remain to him, but what he has  
317 incorporated in his own moral nature, and made part of himself. And, since we cannot  
318 know what measure of holiness will be then accepted in our own case, it is but left to us  
319 to cast ourselves individually on God's mercy in faith, and to look steadily, yet humbly,  
320 at the Atonement for sin which He has appointed; so that when He comes to judge the  
321 world, He may remember us in His kingdom.

322 (Preached on Sunday afternoon, March 6, 1831, by appointment of the Vice-  
323 Chancellor.)

324 Notes

325 1. [This discourse was not published in former editions, as having been written in haste  
326 on a sudden summons to preach.]

327 2. Vide John xiv. 21-23.

328 3. Lent.

329 4. Matt. v. 28, 37, 39, 44; vi. 25; xii. 36; xviii. 3, 8, 35; xix. 12, 29; xx. 27. Rom. xii. 9, 16.  
330 1 Cor. vi. 18-20. Gal. vi. 2. James v. 13.



331 5. 1 Pet. iv. 14.