

say they had diminished; but they evidently had not become deeper. He used to say me, “I am trying, and I hope I shall yet be a Christian.” I cautioned him against delay, and against trusting in any of his efforts of “trying,” while he did not flee to Christ.

In this manner several months passed on. He appeared solemn, often spoke of his conviction of his lost condition as a sinner, acknowledged his need of a Saviour, and lamented the wickedness and hardness of his heart. But finding him very much the same, I feared that his perceptions of divine truth were not correct and clear, or that his impressions were only superficial or occasional; and therefore I aimed to deal the more plainly with him, and tried, in every way I could, to bring the gospel truths more clearly before his mind, and impress them more deeply upon his conscience and heart.

It was in one of these conversations, which I was accustomed to have with him, that he surprised me by expressing a thought, which I had never heard from him before. I had just asked him, “*What hinders you* from being a Christian indeed, since all the grace of the gospel is so free, and since you are so sensible that you need it?” His answer was —

“I think a great many more of us would be Christians, *if those who profess faith in Christ were different from what they are.*”

“That may be,” I said; “but you know, each one ‘shall give account *of himself* to God.’ You’re not accountable for professing Christians; and they’re not accountable for you.”

“I know that,” he said. “But how can we believe in the reality of salvation, when members of the church, and the elders too, are dishonest, will lie and cheat, and make hard bargains, a great deal worse than other people?”

“Have you any doubt of the reality of salvation?” I asked.

“Oh on, I believe in the reality of it. I believe in a change of heart as much as you do.”

“Good,” I said. “Now, as to the accusation, that our elders and church-members are such dishonest and hard men, I deny it: the accusation is not true. There may be some bad men in the church. There was a Judas among Christ’s disciples. One of the chosen twelve was a thief. But that was not a good reason why other people should reject Christ. The general character of our church-members is not

such as you have mentioned. You ought not to condemn Matthew and the other disciples because Judas was a villain.”

“Well,” he said, with some hesitation, “I know some church-members who are no better than other people, not a bit better than a great many of us who make no profession.”

“Perhaps you do. But what of that? Will their imperfections do you any good?”

“They ought to set us a better example,” he said.

“No doubt of that. And allow me to say, *you* ought to set me a good example, as *I* am to set you a good example. You and I are under the same law. God commands you to be holy as He commands me. It is quite likely that those church-members of whom you complain would be better men, if it were not for such persons as you, persons who set them no holy example.”

“Well, I believe many members of the church are great stumbling-blocks; I know they are.”

I said, “I believe many, who are *not* members of the church, are great stumbling-blocks; I know they are. You are one of them. You are a stumbling-block and a hindrance to many unrepentant sinners, to your partner in business, to your neighbours, to your sisters, and other acquaintances. If you would become a truly godly man, these persons would feel your influence constraining them to seek the Lord, and your example would be a stumbling-block to them no longer.”

“I do not profess to be saved,” he said.

“That is the very thing,” I replied. “You remain an unbeliever; and your example just encourages others to do the same. You once told me yourself how greatly you were affected when you saw your wife publicly baptized. If you would set such an example, it would probably affect others.”

“My wife is a good woman; she lives as a Christian ought to live.”

“Then you have at least *one* good example.”

“If all who profess faith were like her,” he said, “I should not find fault with them.”

“And if you were like her, other people would not find fault with you. Your example would commend Christianity.”

“Well,” he said, “the example of a great many professing Christians does not commend it to me.”

“Why look at the *bad* examples? Look nearer home. Look at your wife’s example. You are very

unwise to let your thoughts dwell upon the faults of Christians at all; and when you do so, you hunt up a few professing Christians, who are not by any means a fair specimen of our church-members, and you take them as samples of all the rest. That is unfair. I’m sorry you think that way. It will only lead you into error, and call off your attention from the eternal interests of your own soul. The faults of others cannot save you. I beg you to think less about other people’s sins, and more about your own.”

“Well, I will. I know I have had my mind turned away from Christ many a time, by thinking of the conduct of others.”

A few days after this I met my friend in the street, and asked him if he thought he had gained the “one thing needful.” He replied —

“No, I don’t think I have. But I believe I am as good a man as a great many who were at the Lord’s table yesterday in your church.”

“I am sorry to hear you talk of others again,” I said. “You promised me that you would think of your own sins, and let the sins of others alone; and now the very first sentence you utter is about some who were in church yesterday. I am surprised. Your hard thoughts about others will lead you, I am afraid, further and further from Christ.”

“Very likely,” he said, “but I can’t help it. The members of the church set such examples, that my mind is turned away from Christ by them often.”

“Yes,” I said, “the old prophet knew how that was: ‘They eat up the sin of my people, and set their heart upon iniquity; they have left off to take heed to the Lord.’ *You are one of those.* You seize upon the sin of God’s people, as if it were bread to you; and then you forget to pray — you have left off to take heed to the Lord. After you have eagerly fed yourself upon the sin of God’s people, then you have no inclination to take heed to anything God says to you. I advise you to eat some other sort of food. The sin of God’s people is a bad breakfast. It is very indigestible. The wicked seize upon it, as if it were bread to the hungry; and the worst thing is, that after they have eaten such a breakfast they have no family prayer; they do not take heed to the Lord. That is your case precisely. You complain of Christians instead of praying for yourself. You never seek the Lord in prayer after finding fault with members of the church.”

“How do you know I don’t pray?” he asked.

“I know by the text which I just quoted. ‘You eat up the sin of God’s people’; and for that reason, I know that the other part of the text belongs to you. You ‘have left off to take heed to the Lord.’ Is it not so? Have you not left off, ceased to pray, since you began to find fault with Christians?”

“Yes, I own it. I am not going to deny it.”

I said, “I am very sorry you take such a course. You yield to a temptation of the devil. The best Christians are imperfect, very imperfect. They do not profess to be sinless. You may see their faults, but you cannot see their repentance, and tears, and agony of spirit, when in secret they mourn over their many imperfections, and beg forgiveness of God, and grace to be more faithful. If *you* felt so, if you had done wrong in public through thoughtlessness, or through some temptation, and then in secret should mourn bitterly over your faults — would you think it generous, or kind, or just, if your neighbour should go around complaining of your faults, as if you were a bad man?”

“No, I would not think I deserved that.”

“Very well. These imperfect Christians have such secret mournings. And if you will go to them, and kindly tell them their faults, you will hear things from them which will alter your feelings about them; you will have a better opinion of their hearts than you have now, and a more just opinion too. Did you ever mention to these people the things you complain of?”

“No, I never did,” he answered.

“I think you ought to do it. Certainly you ought to do it, or cease to make complaints about them to others. Jesus Christ has taught us our duty in such a case. ‘If thy brother trespass against thee, go to him, and tell him his fault betwixt him and thee alone.’”

“That applies to Christians,” he said.

“It applies to *you*. You ought to be a Christian. And your neglect of one duty cannot excuse your neglect of another. You must not plead one sin as an excuse for another. If one of your neighbours had a bad opinion of you, surely you would much rather he should come and tell you what he had against you, and hear your explanation, than that he should tell it to other people.”

“Yes, I would. But I have given nobody’s name.”

“I know it; and I complain of that. Instead of pointing out the guilty individuals, you complain

of Christians in general; and thus you make the innocent suffer with the guilty. You make Christianity suffer (at least in your estimation) by the faults of a few, who profess to be Christians. How would *you* like it, if I should speak of the men of your trade as you speak of Christians, and say, 'Blacksmiths are villains, dishonest men'?"

"I would want you to name the men," he said.
"And I want *you* to name the men. Come, tell me who they are, and what they have done; and I promise you I will have their conduct investigated. They shall be tried before the proper tribunal. You shall be a witness against them. And if they are found guilty, they shall be turned out of the church; and then they will be complained of by you no longer, and the good name of Christianity will no more be dishonoured by them."

"Oh, I can't be a witness against anybody."
"Why not? Can't you tell the truth? Will you make the cause of Christ to suffer, rather than bring bad men to justice? Will you injure the good name of all of us by not helping to purify the church from unworthy members? Will you let this thing go on and hinder, as you say it does, a great many of you from becoming Christians?"

"It is not my business to speak against church-members," he replied.
"Why do you do it, then? You have been doing it every time I have met you, for the last three months. And though I have tried to persuade you to cease, you still keep on."

"Well, I don't mean to injure anybody."
"No, sir, I don't think you do. The only one you injure is *yourself*. The general accusations which you so often fling out against professing Christians are *slanders*. They are not true. You may *think* them true, but they are not true. I affirm them to be utterly unfounded and false. There may be, indeed, a few persons in the church who are as you declare them to be; but your general accusations are falsehoods. But suppose all you say, or even suspect, were true, suppose half of our church to be bad men; in the name of all that is common sense, I ask you, *what does that have to do with your salvation?* If half the money that is in circulation is counterfeit, does that make the good money in your pocket valueless? or will it lead you to refuse to take all money?"

"I don't want to have counterfeit money!"
"And I don't want you to have a counterfeit

faith. The very fact that you complain of counterfeit money, is full proof that you believe there is good money somewhere; and your complaint of counterfeit Christians is full proof that you believe there are true Christians somewhere."

"Yes, that's true," he said.
"And you're not one, are you?"
"No, I'm not," he answered.
"And are you striving to be one? Are you as prayerful about it as you were sometime ago?"
"No, I don't think I am."

"Will you answer me one more question? Has not your seriousness diminished, and your prayerfulness ceased, very much in proportion as you have had hard thoughts, and made hard speeches about the faults of Christians?"

"I can't say *no* to that question."
"Then I wish you very seriously to consider whether your faultfinding has not provoked God to withdraw from you the influences of His Holy Spirit! You do know, that your desire after salvation has never been promoted by your complaining about Christian people. Thinking of their sins, you forget your own, as I have told you before. You foster in your own heart a spirit of self-righteousness by your miserable and foolish way. I have warned you against it before, and I will now warn you again, if you will permit me. If you go on in this way, God will leave you to your deceptions and your impenitence; you will live without Christ, and you will die without Him! I beseech you, therefore, as a friend, as a neighbour, as a minister, dismiss your thoughts about the faults of a few, for they are only a few professors of religion, and seek from God the forgiveness of your own sins, and the salvation you so much need."

I left him. But he never sought me again. Fifteen years have since passed, and he is still as far from God as ever. Often when I have met him, I have endeavoured to draw him into some conversation about Christ; but he avoids the subject and commonly shuns me.

The Holy Spirit would lead us to think much about *our own sins* and *our own need* of forgiveness and salvation. It's a dangerous thing for us to dwell upon the imperfections of others. Our eyes should be fixed upon Christ — "*looking unto Jesus.*" □

Ichabod Smith Spencer was born in 1797 in Rupert, Vermont. He was educated at schools in the upstate New York region, and converted at the age of 18. He became a school teacher, and his fame as a teacher and administrator grew to the place that he was soon in great demand. In fact in 1830 he was called to be President of the University of Alabama, and in 1832 the President of Hamilton College of New York. He refused both because by this time the Lord had called him to preach. He was called to serve as colleague-pastor of the Congregational Church in Northampton, Massachusetts in 1828. This was the very church made famous by Jonathan Edwards.

Spencer's ministry at Northampton from 1828-1832 was remarkably blessed with conversions. More than 250 in those few years came to Christ under his ministry, and he wore himself out in the work. For health reasons alone he resigned that demanding and large ministry in 1832.

He refused a call to the Park Street Church in Boston at this time, the largest in New England, because of his tender health. Later in 1832 he accepted the call to the Second Presbyterian Church of Brooklyn, New York. This was a church planting effort with no building and about 40 people. He remained at this post the rest of his life, thus spending 22 years at this church. By the time of his death in 1854, the church had grown to be one of the largest and most influential churches in all of New York State.

Spencer was a true shepherd. He placed upon himself the demand that he would make a home visit for every member of his church every year, which he did all 22 years. These visits were not for social but spiritual purposes, and were rarely spent in vain. It is said that he averaged more than 800 appointments with souls every year.

Fully committed to the doctrines of grace, he was a gifted preacher, and his sermons were effective in awakening many sinners; yet it was his personal ministry that was most mightily blessed by God as he dealt individually with inquiring souls. □

HISTORICAL NARRATIVE #5
by Ichabod Spencer

THE FAULTS OF CHRISTIANS

Among my parishioners, at one time, there was a very industrious and respectable man, a mechanic, for whom I entertained a high esteem. I thought him a man of talent, and of much good feeling. He was about thirty years of age, was married, and his wife had recently become a child of God, as she believed, and had made a public profession of her faith in Christ. I had now the more hope of being useful to him, on account of his wife's experience of grace, and the happy state of her mind. He had also some other relatives who were members of my church, and were exemplary Christians.

He was himself a constant and attentive hearer of the gospel every Sunday, and whenever I met him (which was very often), he spoke freely of Christianity, and confessed his obligation and his anxiety to be a Christian. I had no small hope in his case. I had noticed the increasing depth of his seriousness. Besides, I knew him to be a personal friend to myself, very much attached to me; and on that account I had the more expectation of being able to influence his mind upon the subject, which now occupied, as he said, "all his thoughts."

After his wife became a Christian, he appeared to be more deeply impressed than ever. The day on which she was baptized, and came for the first time to the Lord's table, was a most solemn day to him. He afterwards said to me, "When I saw my wife go forward before all the congregation to be baptized, I could not hold up my head, I was forced into tears, and I solemnly resolved to put off my salvation no longer. And I mean to keep that resolution."

After this I was careful to see him several times, for the purpose of personal conversation. He was thoughtful, serious, prayerful; and as I thought, was not far from the kingdom of heaven. But as the weeks passed on, I was surprised and sorry to find that his religious impressions appeared to have come to a stand. They did not vanish. I could not