

SERMON XXI.

ANGER.

EPHES. iv. 26.

Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath.

THERE is perhaps no passion of the human mind which more requires to be carefully watched, and kept within strict bounds, than the passion of *anger*. None of you will dispute the truth of this assertion, when you consider the many and the great evils, which this passion occasions in the world,—when you think how it breaks the peace of society, destroys good neighbourhood, and ruins the harmony of families. At the same time, there is hardly any fault, which seems to occasion less shame and remorse in those who are subject to it. Nothing is more common than to hear persons who are in the habit of giving way to excessive violence of temper, treating it as a light and excusable failing. They acknowledge, with a readiness which shows how little they are ashamed of it, that certainly they are apt to be *passionate*; that they are disposed to it by their constitution;—but that it is soon over, as they never *bear malice*. This idea, that they do not bear malice, seems to set them at ease, and they apparently feel no scruple in giving way to a passion, which, *in its excess*, is at variance

with the express precepts, and with the whole spirit and genius, of the Christian religion.

The opposite quality to wrath, or excessive anger, is *meekness*; and meekness is laid down, both by Christ and by his Apostles, as one of the leading graces of the Christian character. The former, near the beginning of his sermon on the mount, says—“Blessed are the meek.”^a And soon after, in the same divine discourse, he warns us against the danger of causeless anger: “Whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause, shall be in danger of the judgment.”^b In another place he proposes his own meekness as a pattern for us to follow—“Learn of me; for I am meek—*meek* and lowly in heart.”^c St. Paul, when exhorting the Colossians to acquire the character of real Christians, enjoins them to “put off anger, wrath,” and “malice,” and to “put on meekness, long-suffering,” and forbearance.^d And in the similar passage to the Ephesians, he cautions them in the words of the text—“Be ye angry, and sin not; let not the sun go down upon your wrath:” and again in the concluding verses of the chapter—“Let all bitterness, and *wrath*, and *anger*, and clamour, and evil-speaking, be put away from you, with all malice; and be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.”

It is my wish to enforce these precepts of Christ and of St. Paul. In order to which, I shall,

First, mention a few reasons for considering anger as not being absolutely sinful in itself:

I shall, secondly, point out some of the *very many* instances in which it is sinful:

And shall conclude, by laying before you a few

^a Matt. v. 5.

^c Matt. xi. 29.

^b Matt. v. 22.

^d Col. iii. 8, 12.

hints of advice, on the means of restraining this headstrong passion.

I. And, first, that anger is not in itself absolutely sinful, may be inferred both from the words of the text, and from the passage in the sermon on the mount already alluded to. When the Apostle says, "Be ye angry, and sin not;" we may at once conclude, that it is very possible to be angry without being guilty of sin; and the judgment denounced by our Saviour, is not against all anger in whatever circumstances, but against *anger without cause*.^e

We infer, too, that anger is not in itself sinful, from the circumstance, that God himself is repeatedly represented in Scripture as being angry. For though the Supreme Being is not really subject to any *passion*, and all such representations are made merely in condescension to the weakness of our capacities, for the purpose of setting forth in a more lively manner the evil consequences of sin to those who are guilty of it; yet certainly such representations would not have been made, had anger been *in itself* absolutely sinful. Our blessed Lord, during his ministry, "though in all points tempted as we are," was yet perfectly "without sin;" but *he* appears to have been repeatedly influenced by a holy anger. At one time we are told that he looked upon those about him "with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts."^f He appears to have been influenced by a zeal near a-kin to anger, when he drove the money-changers from the temple; and repeatedly, on other occasions, he was moved with indignation, or anger, at the hypocrisy and worldliness of the Jewish teachers. Many also of the most distinguished servants

^e He is angry without sin, who is angry only on such occasions—with such persons—in such manner—at such time—and for such continuance—as he ought. *Abp. Secker.*

^f Mark iii. 5.

of God, both in the Old and in the New Testament, appear to have been influenced by this passion, not only without blame, but, humanly speaking, to their honour. Such was the anger of Moses, when he witnessed the low idolatry of the Israelites;^g such was the anger of David, against the murderers of Ishbosheth,^h and the lawless pride of the sons of Zeruiah; such was the indignation of Nehemiah, against the transgressors of the divine law;ⁱ and such was the just anger of St. Paul on many occasions, recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, or alluded to in his Epistles.

Anger (within due limits) is not only lawful, but right and praiseworthy, when it is occasioned by sincere zeal for the glory of God, and for the interests of religion; or by a real regard for truth, justice, or mercy. As it is good to be "zealously affected always in a good thing,"^k so it is good to be angry when we see God dishonoured, his laws broken, the innocent wronged, or the poor oppressed. Though, even on such occasions, we should endeavour to be angry with the sin rather than the sinner, for whom, as an erring *brother*, we should feel pity and compassion. And where we ourselves are wilfully wronged, it is not only natural, but right, that we should feel some emotions of resentment. This passion, indeed, appears to have been implanted in the original constitution of our nature, before it was corrupted by the fall, as the ready instrument of preventing or of repelling injury, and for the restraint of evil-doers.

But though, in such instances as those above mentioned, anger is without sin, yet I fear it is sinful in nineteen out of twenty of the cases in which we give way to it. Some of them I will shortly notice.

^g Exod. xxxii. 19. ^h 2 Sam. iv. ⁱ Neh. xiii. ^k Gal. iv. 18.

II. Anger, then, is sinful, whenever it is excited against those persons or things which are not the proper objects of it;—whenever it is excited entirely without cause, or to a greater degree than the cause of it will warrant;—whenever it leads on to violent words or actions;—and then, especially, is it sinful, when it takes lasting possession of the mind, and settles into a habit of malice or hatred.

And, first, anger is sinful, when it is excited against a being or person that is not the proper object of it. Of such sin are we guilty, when we are so destitute of religion and common sense as to allow ourselves to be angry with God, and with the dispensations of his providence. God is himself infinitely perfect; and all that he does is just and right. We cannot, therefore, be too much on our guard against giving way to any disposition to murmur and repine—either in great things or in small—against what is ordered by his will. If we are *angry* with the station and circumstances in which Providence has placed us; or if, instead of being resigned under the calamities which fall on us, we complain, as if we were hardly and injuriously dealt by, our anger is sinful. The same may be said, when we are fretful and impatient under the many little untoward accidents which frequently occur: when, for instance, we are out of humour with the weather, and murmur because the seasons are not such as our wishes would make them.

We offend, too, most decidedly against the precept of the text, when we are angry with those who gently admonish us of our faults, and advise us to correct them. Brotherly admonition is really an instance of the truest kindness. If, instead of being thankful for it, and endeavouring to amend, we so far listen to an evil pride as to be *offended*, we act both foolishly and sinfully.

Another instance of anger, which is very foolish and blameable, is the anger which is excited against objects unendowed with reason. Such is the anger which is sometimes felt against *very little* children; against dumb animals; and even against inanimate objects. Some persons are so *senseless*, as to allow themselves to be *in a passion* with the horse or cow which does not immediately do as they wish,—perhaps because it follows the mere impulse of its nature,—or with the tool, which does not readily perform its office,—or with the block or stone, against which they have heedlessly hurt themselves. “He that is soon angry dealeth foolishly;”¹ especially he who is angry on such occasions as these. Parents or nurses, who teach a child to beat the chair or table against which it has run, and to express its little resentment against every person and thing that happens to hurt or offend it, are thoughtlessly encouraging a habit of giving way to anger, which will make them a nuisance both to themselves and to others in this life, and perhaps ruin their souls in the life to come.

Again, anger is always unreasonable and sinful, when it is occasioned by comparative *trifles*. A heedless word, for instance, a casual look, or mere inadvertence, will stir up a degree of anger in some men, at which those whose passions are well regulated are justly astonished. The angry man himself must feel, and often does feel, no little degree of shame, when, in his cooler moments, he considers how trifling was the circumstance which he weakly permitted to make his blood boil, and to throw his mind into a sort of tempest.

Even when it has some cause, yet anger, on whatever occasion, is sinful, when it is so violent as to get the better of our reason, and deprive us

¹ Prov. xiv. 17.

of the proper government of ourselves. It then becomes what the Scriptures appear to express by the term *wrath*, and what in common language is called *rage*. The *greatest provocation* will not justify this excessive and ungovernable passion. Such anger is too apt to lead on to violent words, and perhaps to violent actions, even to striking and wounds. Too many men, when in a *passion*, immediately give vent to it in injurious, reproachful language—perhaps in curses and imprecations, in calling down the vengeance, the *damnation* of God upon the person or thing which has offended them. Their angry language, probably, raises a similar storm of passion in the bosom of him who is the object of their wrath; one angry word produces another; and they go on, mutually rising in bitterness and wrath, till their passion knows no bounds. Let not such persons, when again cool, speak peace to their consciences, by saying that they are sorry for what they said and did, but that they were *in a passion*, and could not help it. I say to them, as I say to drunkards—You are strictly answerable for all the sins of which you were guilty in that state, as well as for the great additional sin of throwing off the government of reason and religion. It is against such excesses that St. Paul cautions us a few verses after the text. “Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and *clamour*,” that is, loud and violent language, “and *evil-speaking*,” calling reproachful, abusive names, “be put away from you, with all malice.”^m Certainly nothing can be more unworthy of a Christian, more unbecoming in one who professes to be a disciple of the meek and lowly Jesus, of him “who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not.”ⁿ

^m Eph. iv. 31.ⁿ 1 Pet. ii. 23.

Sometimes, instead of expressing itself in violence of language and manner, anger takes the form of *sullenness* and *ill humour*, which is displeased with every thing, even with kind offices, and attempts at reconciliation. It then becomes a most irksome inmate of the breast, painful and distressing both to him who is influenced by it, and to all who come within reach of his unhappy temper.

The last instance of sinful anger which I shall now mention, is, when it settles into a spirit of *malice* and ill will. It is against this, especially, that the Apostle warns us in the text—“Be ye angry, and sin not.” You may *possibly* have reasonable cause for a well regulated anger—but, at all events, “let not the sun go down upon your wrath,” never retire to rest in an unforgiving temper, or with a spirit of ill will seated in your bosom. St. Paul adds, “neither give place to the devil.” By yielding to a spirit of *malice*, you give an advantage to your great enemy, which he will perhaps improve to your utter ruin.

There is, I think, nothing against which our Saviour more earnestly cautions us, than against an unforgiving disposition. He enforces the necessity of forgiveness by precept, by striking parables, and, most powerfully, by his own example. He expressly assures us, that “if we forgive not men their trespasses, neither will our heavenly Father forgive us;” and his Apostles, in a variety of passages, enforce the same doctrine. We can hardly, therefore, be too much upon our guard against any thing approaching to malice, or a desire of revenge; and the danger that there always is, if we give way to anger, that it will lead us to a settled spirit of ill will, should induce us to restrain it within the strictest bounds. Anger “resteth”—remains settled—“in the bosom of fools,” and of fools only.

In short, anger is evil and dangerous in so many ways, and upon so many accounts, that if we reflect at all, we must feel the force of the representations against it in holy Scripture. We are told, that while, on the one hand, "he that is slow to wrath is of great understanding;"^o so, on the other, "he that is soon angry, dealeth foolishly;"^p and he that is hasty of spirit exalteth folly."^q

III. Let us, therefore, my friends, do all that we can to get the better of this headstrong and turbulent passion. If any of us are by nature particularly inclined to it—are of a *passionate disposition*—that is a reason for taking the greater pains, and being the *more watchful*, and praying the *more earnestly*, in order to get the better of it—but no excuse at all for giving way to it without resistance. Whatever sin most easily besets us, we should strive against that sin with especial care. If we are by nature inclined to wrath, there is the greater reason why we should try to acquire—to put on—the spirit of meekness. Consider, that a proneness to anger is generally a mark of a weak mind. We see it most in madmen, who are deprived of reason; in children, whose reason is not yet matured; and in those whose reason is weakened by infirmity or sickness. On the other hand, the getting the mastery of a tendency to anger is a proof of strength of mind, and of religious principle, aided by divine grace. The wise man tells us, that "he that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit, than he that taketh a city."⁴

Give me your attention while I suggest one or two hints, which may assist you in getting the better of anger. In the first place, endeavour to conquer pride. "Only by pride cometh contention;"^r and

^o Prov. xiv. 29.
^q Prov. xvi. 32.

^p Prov. xiv. 17, 29.
^r Prov. xiii. 10.

pride is the chief source of anger. Men who are puffed up with a conceit of their own worth and importance, are apt to take offence at every trifling circumstance. They are *angry* if their persons and every thing belonging to them are not treated with the respect which they think their due. They are *angry* if their advice is not followed, if their opinion is neglected. If there was no such thing as pride in the world, there would hardly be any sinful anger. This, doubtless, is the reason why humility and meekness are so constantly united in the precepts of holy writ, in the passages especially which I have already referred to. In short, if we are humble, we shall not be *passionate*; and if we are in the habit of being soon and violently angry, we may be pretty sure that we have much evil pride at work within us.

Another important piece of advice, is, to check the *first beginning of anger*. Endeavour to suppress the first emotions of it in your bosom; and, at all events, do not give vent or expression to them, till you have taken time to consider whether you have just cause for resentment, whether you *do well to be angry*. "The beginning of strife," and so also the beginning of anger, "is as when one letteth out water: therefore, leave off contention, before it be meddled with."^s If we give utterance to angry words, the storm of passion will go on increasing till it knows no bounds. The like conduct we should observe when any one is angry with us; remembering, that "a soft answer turneth away wrath;" and "yielding pacifieth great offences;"^t "but grievous words stir up anger;"^u It will be wise, too, as far as we can, to avoid being much in the company of men who are in the habit

^s Prov. xvii. 14.

^t Prov. xv. 1, and Eccles. x. 4.

of giving way to violent anger, and who will be likely to lead us into the same fault. "Make no friendship with an angry man; and with a furious man thou shalt not go: lest thou learn his ways, and get a snare to thy soul."^a

We must also endeavour to moderate our attachment to the trifling and perishable things of this present world. If we are eager in the pursuit of the honours, the riches, or the pleasures of life, we shall be apt to be angry and out of humour when that pursuit is unsuccessful. If we set our hearts on worldly vanities and enjoyments, we shall be vexed and irritated when disappointed of them. The more we can succeed in setting our affections on things above, and not on things on the earth, the less shall we be exposed to be carried away by sinful anger.

Finally, let us earnestly beseech that Being, among the distinguishing fruits of whose influence are love and peace, that he would pour into our hearts a spirit of gentleness; that he would enable us to check, to put away from us, all violent anger, and wrath, and clamour; and to walk continually in all lowliness and meekness, forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any.

THE PRAYER.

O Almighty God, who alone canst order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men, suppress in me that pride from whence cometh anger and contention; grant me grace to put away all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and all malice. However I

^a Prov. xxii. 24, 25.

am tempted and provoked, make me still to possess my soul in *patience*, and not be overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good. Enable me to follow the example of meekness and forbearance given by thy Son, in whose name I beseech thee to hear my prayers.