

SERMON XXII.

FORGIVENESS OF INJURIES.

EPHES. iv. 32.

Be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.

There are few instances in which the spirit of the world and the Spirit of Christ—in other words, the *old* and the *new man*—are more opposed to each other, than they are in the manner in which they severally behave under *injuries*, whether real or imaginary.

That we should feel, and, in the first instance, resent every wrong intentionally offered to us, appears indeed to have formed a part of the *original* constitution of our nature. This bare momentary resentment, therefore, considered in itself, is hardly to be looked upon as sinful. It becomes sinful, however, when it obtains fixed possession of the mind; when it drives from it that good will which we are bound to feel towards all men, even towards those who least deserve it at our hands; still more, when it leads us to wish their hurt; and more, above all, when it prompts us to seek to harm them ourselves, and thus assumes the character of the fierce and malignant passion of *revenge*. To this passion, however, hateful and pernicious as it is, we are all of us, by the dictates of our *corrupted* nature, by

the spirit of the *old man*, but too prone. When any wrong is offered us, the first impulse of that nature is to exclaim, I will be avenged on my enemy; "I will do so to him, as he hath done to me: "I will render to the man according to his work."^a So prevalent, indeed, is this feeling, and so commanding the power which it too generally acquires, that it is often able to exalt itself, in the opinion of the unthinking, almost into a virtue. It is then looked upon as a mark of a high and manly spirit, and the disposition recommended in the text, the disposition to forgive injuries, and to maintain a readiness to do good offices to those who have been guilty of them, is not unfrequently reproached with meanness, and considered as the mark of a soul deficient in energy and resolution. There are men who can even boast of cherishing this feeling; who, when they have suffered, or imagine that they have suffered any wrong, declare their determination never to forgive it, never to rest till they have repaid the injury, till they have gratified that revenge. They may perhaps pretend to acknowledge that they know such conduct to be morally wrong; but make the acknowledgment in such manner, as if they were secretly proud of acting contrary to it, and as if they were satisfied that the strength of natural feeling was sufficient excuse or justification.

Such a disposition, however, and the conduct which naturally results from it, is totally at variance with the express injunctions, and with the whole spirit of our holy religion; utterly inconsistent with the Christian character. Both the divine Author of that religion, and those to whom he intrusted the care of teaching and extending it among men, insist on nothing more earnestly and repeatedly, than on the duty of forgiving those who injure us, the duty

^a Prov. xxiv. 29.

of abstaining from every feeling and indulgence of revenge. "Ye have heard that it hath been said," says our Saviour, near the very beginning of the public exercise of his ministry, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you and persecute you."^b His Apostles, in like manner, exhort us not to render "evil for evil, or railing for railing;"^c to "recompense to no man evil for evil;"^d to conduct ourselves with all lowliness, and "meekness, and long-suffering; forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any."^e

Nothing can be plainer than these injunctions—nothing more easy to understand. And it is equally plain, that the writers of the New Testament invariably represent a readiness to forgive, as the distinguishing mark of a real Christian, as indispensably required of those who wish to walk worthy of the vocation wherewith they are called.^f Consequently, to allow ourselves to cherish any emotions of hatred, to indulge in any feelings of revenge against those who have injured us, is in some sort to renounce our claim to the name of Christian.

But perhaps we are ready to acknowledge the truth of this *in general*, to confess that *generally speaking* revenge is unlawful—but that in such and such instances we have been so grievously injured, that it is not only allowable, but even a duty. The precepts of our Lord and his Apostles, however, admit not of such exceptions. They are *universal*, and extend to all imaginable cases; and in no instance whatever do they permit us to hate any one;

^b Matt. v. 43, 44.

^c Col. iii. 12, 13.

^e 1 Peter iii. 9.

^f Ephes. iv. 1.

^d Rom. xii. 17.

in no instance do they allow us to revenge ourselves, however great the wrong done unto us may be, or however it may be heightened by aggravating circumstances.

The right to revenge belongs not to any creature. "It is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay," saith the Lord."^g To seek to avenge ourselves with our own hand, is invading the prerogative of him, to whom alone "belongeth vengeance and recompence."^h

Where the will of our heavenly Master is so clearly and decidedly made known to us, nothing more, certainly, ought to be necessary to induce us to comply with the exhortation in the text. The passion of revenge, however, is apt to take such strong hold on the mind, that any additional argument for such compliance can hardly be looked upon as superfluous. One or two such arguments I will now proceed to lay before you. Let me hope that they will not be without their weight; that they will not be found devoid of practical influence, where such influence is requisite.

And, first—we ought to check every emotion of revenge from mere worldly prudence, and from considerations of our own comfort and interest in this world. There is, I know, a saying, that *revenge is sweet*. That at the moment of its gratification it may produce a sensation of pleasure, of exultation and triumph, I by no means deny; but without stopping to enlarge on the hateful—the *diabolical*—nature of such exultation, I must observe, (and I believe the experience of every one who has felt it will testify the truth of the observation,) that the pain and uneasiness it occasioned while it was rankling in the bosom, far more than counterbalanced the pleasure produced by its gratification.

^g Rom. xii. 19.

^h Deut. xxxii. 35.

But let us now consider what the consequences would be—what, sometimes, the consequences actually are—when those malignant feelings are indulged.

A man, we will suppose, has received, or thinks that he has received, some injury. The first emotion of his soul is a wish to retaliate, to repay the injury done unto him. Now, as every one is an unfair judge in his own case, and, where he is himself concerned, very apt to see things in a false light, which represents them as being very different from what they really are, it is probable, indeed almost certain, that the injury which he thinks he has received will appear much greater than it actually is. Perhaps the effect of mere ignorance, inadvertence, or mistake, will, in his eyes, be converted into an injury, though none was intended, or even thought of. This injury, whether real or only imagined, he determines to revenge; but, from the false estimate he has formed, his revenge will probably be *excessive*; far beyond the wrong which occasioned it. He is now, instead of suffering, become the aggressor, and his enemy will in his turn seek to retaliate. And thus they will be in danger of going on, in an interchange of wrongs and mutual ill offices, till a deadly spirit of hatred is formed, which the authority of human laws can hardly prevent from satisfying itself with blood, and which, where such laws do not exist, does in fact proceed to every evil word and work.ⁱ “The beginning of strife,” says the wise man, “is as when one letteth out water.”^k And again, “as coals are to burning coals, and wood to fire;” so are such contentious men to kindle strife.^l

We should act wisely if, instead of thus giving

ⁱ See Bishop Butler's Sermon on this subject.

^k Prov. xvii. 14.

^l Prov. xxvi. 21.

way to a sense of injury, we set ourselves quietly to consider what circumstances may be pleaded in mitigation of it. We should endeavour to make all fair allowances for the person who has offended us; and consider, in the first place, whether he really intended it; and if he did, whether it was not under some mistaken impression, whether indeed his conduct might not be attributed, even to some proper motive. We should reflect, how apt we are to be blinded by self-love in any case which affects ourselves, and how apt that principle is to magnify trifles. Let us reflect, too, how often we ourselves fail in what is due to other men; how inattentive we are to their interests, how forgetful sometimes of the sort of respect which we ought to pay to them. We should think it hard if all our inadvertencies and mistakes should be construed into intentional offences, and resented as serious wrongs. Let us give to others the same indulgence which we expect ourselves, and the occasions of deep resentment, revenge, and quarrelling, will be greatly lessened.

Such forbearance is dictated not by religion only, but by common sense, and a regard for our own peace and comfort. If at the same time we cultivate a deep feeling of humility, and are penetrated with the conviction of our own unworthiness, with the sense that we have but little real claim to respect or attention, this conviction will cut off the principal occasions of offence, and consequently will leave us comparatively little room for the exercise of the virtue of *forgiveness* of injuries; and will render it easy in the cases in which it is called for.

As, however, neither the forbearance, nor the degree of humility which I have alluded to, are very common, I must call your attention to the

powerful arguments for forgiveness which are proposed to us in the Scriptures.

One of the most forcible of these, is that which is furnished by the example of our Saviour—"Even as Christ forgave you," says St. Paul to the Colossians, "so also do ye."^m Christ, the Scriptures assure us, came into the world to purchase the pardon of our sins, by laying down his life for our sakes, by undergoing in our stead the punishment which our iniquities deserved. And this he did while we were in a state of enmity with him. While we were yet sinners, and enemies to him through wicked works,ⁿ "in due time Christ died for the ungodly."^o He gave, too, a striking and beautiful example of forgiveness, when, at the time of his crucifixion, he prayed for his murderers—"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."^p Surely, the least return which we can offer for such unmerited mercy, is to endeavour to comply with his repeated exhortations to us to follow his example; and in this instance of meekness and forgiveness of injuries above all others, for in this he particularly proposed himself to our imitation.

Our blessed Lord, when enforcing the necessity of our forgiving those who have wronged us, dwells much upon the forgiveness held forth to us by God, and upon the disproportion which any injuries which can be offered to us by our fellow-men, bear to our offences against him. Our sins against God are countless; "yea, they are more in number than the hairs of" our head.^q They are attended, too, with the aggravation of being committed against one, who is higher than the highest, and excellent in power; against one to whom we are in-

^m Col. iii. 13.

ⁿ Luke xxiii. 34.

^o Rom. v. and Col. i.

^q Psalm xl. 12.

^p Rom. v. 6.

debted for every blessing that we enjoy. And yet he continues to bear with us; he continues to be kind even "to the unthankful and to the evil;"^r "and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust."^s To forgive the offences committed against ourselves, therefore, is to follow the example, to imitate one of the most glorious perfections or attributes of God, the attribute of mercy; it is, to adopt the language of our Saviour, to become in some sort "the children of the Highest." And, on the other hand, we are assured, that if we refuse to forgive those who have wronged us, neither can we hope for forgiveness of our offences at God's hand. We might almost infer thus much from the natural suggestions of our own minds. Of ourselves we must think it probable that we shall be dealt with hereafter as we deal with others now. It is just and reasonable that it should be so. This natural feeling is strongly expressed by that sagacious observer of mankind, the author of the book of Ecclesiasticus, "He that revengeth shall find vengeance from the Lord, and he will surely keep his sins in remembrance. Forgive thy neighbour the hurt that he hath done unto thee, so shall thy sins also be forgiven when thou prayest. One man beareth hatred against another; and doth he seek pardon from the Lord? He showeth no mercy to a man, which is like himself; and doth he ask forgiveness of his own sins?"^t

We are assured by the highest authority, that this argument for the forgiveness of injuries is founded in truth. Our Lord himself repeatedly warns us, that if we forgive not, we shall not be forgiven by God. It was to illustrate this truth, and to bring it home to the consciences of his hear-

^r Luke vi. 35.

^s Matt. v. 45.

^t Eccus. xxviii. 1-4.

ers, that he introduced the striking parable of the unforgiving servant,^u who, though he owed his lord ten thousand talents, yet refused to bear with his fellow-servant who owed him only an hundred pence. The consequences of his refusal you well know. He was delivered "to the tormentors, till he should pay" to his lord "all that was due to him." You know also our Saviour's application of the parable—"So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses." We must forgive *from our hearts*. It is not enough to abstain from ill offices, and outward expressions of ill will. If we still bear hatred in our hearts; if we wish harm to them, though we harm them not ourselves; if we rejoice when we hear of any harm happening to them, our forgiveness is not complete. This consideration is of so powerful a nature, that it ought always to be present with us; and that it might be thus present with us, our Lord has made it a part of our daily prayers, in which we beg God to forgive us our trespasses, only so far as we forgive them that trespass against us:—in other words, we tell him *not* to forgive us, if we ourselves are unforgiving. Reflect for a moment upon the dreadful consequences of having our sins unforgiven by God; and surely nothing more can be necessary to induce you to comply with the exhortation of the text. Upon the first rising of any emotions of malice or revenge, recollect that, if you give way to those dark feelings, you give way to them at your peril. You may indeed, by gratifying them, hurt your enemy, but the evil which you inflict upon yourself is, beyond all comparison, greater than any you can do to him; for you will thus deprive yourself of the

^u Matt. xviii. 23—35.

forgiveness of God, and will bring the dreadful penalty of your sins down upon your head.

Let us, then, my friends, continually strive, and watch, and pray, against every approach to an unforgiving disposition—against every desire for, or attempt at, revenge. Let us not keep the remembrance of either real or fancied wrongs rankling in our bosoms, under the pretence that *we can forgive, but not forget*. It may be true, that we cannot always literally forget; but let us take heed that this be not made a cloak to cover a secret feeling of ill will, or lurking enmity of heart. The wrongs that are done unto us cannot greatly hurt us, if we will not let them. To pass them over is a mark of real greatness and manliness of soul; it is the glory of a man "to pass over a transgression."^x And, what is of more consequence, forgiveness is a necessary part of the character of a real Christian, of him who has put on the new man.

Let us, therefore, earnestly beseech the Spirit of grace, to pour into our hearts his distinguishing fruits of love, peace, long-suffering, and gentleness.^y Let us beseech him, to enable us to "put on, as the elect of God,—meekness" and "long-suffering; forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any;"^z "to be kind one to another, tender-hearted, *forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven*" us.^a

THE PRAYER.

(From the Whole Duty of Man.)

O blessed Jesu, who wast led as a sheep to the slaughter, let, I beseech thee, that admirable ex-

^x Prov. xix. 11. ^y Gal. v. 22. ^z Col. iii. 12, 13. ^a Eph. iv. 32.

ample of *meekness* quench in me all sparks of *anger* and *revenge*, and work in me such a gentleness and calmness of spirit, as no provocations may ever be able to disturb. Lord, grant I may be so far from offering the least injury, that I may never return the greatest any otherwise than with prayers and kindness; that I, who have so many *talents* to be forgiven by thee, may never exact *pence* of my brethren; but that, putting on mercy, meekness, and long-suffering, thy peace may rule in my heart, and make it an acceptable habitation to thee, who art the Prince of peace; to whom, with the Father and Holy Spirit, be all honour and glory for ever.

SERMON XXIII.

ENVY.

1 Cor. xiii. 4.

Charity envieth not.

ALL the passions *originally* implanted in human nature are innocent in themselves; and when directed to their proper objects, and kept within due bounds, become instruments of good to man, and of glory to God. This is the case with hope and fear, with love and hatred, with joy and sorrow, and with anger. *Envy*, however, appears to be altogether evil—to be made up of malignity and baseness; and, as such, could never have existed in a state of innocence.

Envy is a secret displeasure of mind, at seeing another person possess some advantage which we ourselves have not, or, at least, have not in the same degree. It inclines those who are under its influence, to wish that the prosperity which has excited it, may be in some way lessened; and too often shows itself in attempts to lower the character, or in some way to injure the prospects of those whose success has given birth to it.

In this there is something so base, something so unworthy not only of a Christian, but of a *man*, that hardly any one will acknowledge, even to himself, that he is actuated by so hateful a passion. I fear,