

SERMON XXIV.

RASH JUDGING AND CENSORIOUSNESS.

MATT. vii. 1.

Judge not, that ye be not judged.

THERE are few of us, probably, who, at some period of our lives, have not suffered from *censoriousness*; and perhaps still fewer who have not been guilty of it themselves. The disposition to find fault, to form an unfavourable opinion upon the conduct and characters of other men, and to judge hastily and hardly of their principles and motives, is, in all classes of society, but too prevalent. It is, however, directly contrary to the kind and charitable spirit of our religion, as well as to the express injunction of our Lord and his Apostles—"Judge not, that ye be not judged," is a maxim we should never forget, and which should have a constant influence upon our conduct.

In discoursing on this precept, I mean, First, to mention a few of the cases to which it cannot be considered as applying;

Secondly, to point out some of the instances of rash and uncharitable judging which are most frequent; and,

Thirdly, to add a few words upon the sinfulness and danger of giving way to this habit.

I. And, first, this precept does not apply to men invested with authority in church or state, who are required by their office to pass judgment upon persons and things to the best of their ability. Even if the opinions which they form should turn out to be unfounded, yet if formed honestly, and to the best of their ability, they are not to be considered as offending against the injunction in the text.

Neither, in the next place, does this precept require us to think equally well of all men, or to be ready to confide in all alike. It is doubtless allowable to be willing to trust some men rather than others, and to be wary and on our guard where we have any reason for suspicion. Such caution does not necessarily imply that we judge *ill* of them, but merely that we have not sufficient grounds for judging *well*. And if we are careful not to suffer such suspicion to weigh more with us than it ought, and do not communicate it to others, except in the way of charitable caution and advice, such conduct cannot be considered as forbidden by the text.

Thus, again, we are not obliged by this prohibition to resist the evidence of our senses, and to shut our eyes to open and notorious transgressions. If we see a man drunk, we cannot avoid judging him to be guilty of drunkenness; and if we hear him swear, we must judge him guilty of profaneness, and of breaking the express commandment of God. Still less does this precept require us to excuse men who are openly guilty, to justify their crimes, or to represent them as trifling or harmless. Christian charity, and the recollection of our own weakness, may induce us to make what excuse, what allowances we can for the *sinner*, but we must be careful how we venture to lessen the *sin*. There are men, indeed, who, partly from a mistaken liberality, and partly to extenuate their own evil deeds, are in the habit of making light of

the most serious offences. Such conduct, instead of being kind and charitable, is in reality cruel and destructive; for it encourages men in practices which may occasion the ruin of their souls. At the same time, it tends to confound the distinction between right and wrong, it tends to sacrifice the interests of virtue, and the holiness and truth of God, to the weakness and corruption of man; and is consequently in danger of the woe denounced against those "who call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter."

II. In order to obviate mistake and misapprehension, I have thought it right to say thus much, as to what is *not* forbidden by the precept in the text. We will proceed, in the second place, to consider what *is* forbidden by it, what our Lord intended when he said—"Judge not, that ye be not judged."

It is, perhaps, hardly necessary to remark, that by *judging*, in this passage, is meant judging *unfavourably*, or *condemning* the motives or conduct of other men. If, without sufficient grounds, we form such harsh opinions in our own minds, we are guilty of a violation of charity; and are still more blameable if we suffer such opinion of the *head* to influence the *heart*, if *ill will* is the consequence of our unfavourable judgment. This, I say, is the case, even if the harsh judgment is confined to our own bosoms. But it seldom will be confined to them—"out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh"—and we are all too ready to give utterance to the judgments we have passed within ourselves, either that we may take credit for our sagacity and acuteness, or from the mere love of talking. When we thus express our uncharitable opinion, we are guilty of the sin which is termed *ensoriousness*; and our guilt is greater, in proportion as the mischief is more widely spread.

Indeed, it is impossible to say how far the evil may extend. The harsh judgment which we have formed will seldom be softened by those to whom it is communicated. Often, as it spreads, it will become more unfavourable to the injured person; and what was first given only as a strong opinion, will, by others, be considered as a certain truth. The character which we have censured may thus be utterly ruined, and the mischief which we do become irreparable.

This is one of the usual consequences of offending against the precept in the text. We *do* offend against it whenever we unnecessarily form a decided opinion to the disadvantage of another, without very sufficient ground for it. And if we take into our consideration how very seldom it is that we have such certain and sufficient grounds, how very rarely we are fully acquainted with all the circumstances of any case, and how utterly unable to penetrate the many and various reasons and motives from which any action or line of conduct proceeded, we shall find that our safest and wisest course is to abstain, where we can, from judging at all.

It may be useful, perhaps, to point out some of the instances of *rash judging* which are most frequent.

We are guilty, then, of this offence, whenever we condemn any one merely from *hearsay* and *common report*. No one is ignorant how hastily, and lightly, unfavourable reports are often taken up, how eagerly they are propagated by the thoughtless and unfeeling, and how apt they are to be exaggerated almost by every one through whom they pass. No one is ignorant how often, when they are sifted to the bottom, they are found either to be totally without foundation, or to have arisen from circumstances which ought to have furnished

matter of praise rather than of censure. Mere report, therefore, can never be looked upon as a sufficient foundation on which to form a judgment to a neighbour's disadvantage. Before we can safely form, still more before we can *express* such an opinion, we ought to go through a process something like that which, in a particular instance of judging, was prescribed to the Jews—If it be told “thee, “and thou hast heard of it, and inquired diligently, “and, behold, it be true, and the thing certain.”^a That you have been merely *told* a thing, is, generally speaking, no sufficient reason for passing a harsh judgment, unless you have also inquired diligently, and found it to be true.

Thus we offend against the precept in the text when we condemn any man, merely upon hearing what is said against him, without knowing what he has to urge in his own defence. This maxim of common prudence and justice we might learn even from the heathen Festus—“It is not the manner of the Romans,” says he, “to deliver any man to die, before that he which is accused have the accusers face to face, and have licence to answer for himself concerning the crime laid against him.”^b If we venture to judge *at all*, at least let us not be less circumspect, less considerate in our judgment than this unenlightened heathen. *Appearances*, perhaps, as well as common report, may be against a man, but mere appearances do not form sufficient ground to go upon. “Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment.”^c

Another very common instance of *rash judging* is, when the words or actions of our neighbour being capable of being viewed either in a bad or a good light, we put the worst interpretation upon

^a Deut. xvii. 4.^b Acts xxv. 16.^c John vii. 24.

them; thus, perhaps, condemning him for a fault of which neither God nor his own conscience in any degree accuse him. The disposition to this, frequent as it is, is a mark of the sinful pride and corruption of our nature, and is directly contrary to the spirit of Christianity. Charity “thinketh no evil.” Charity “believeth all things; hopeth all things;”^d and he who has that most excellent gift of charity shed abroad in his heart, will be ready to put upon any doubtful action the best construction of which it is susceptible; will be glad to believe it to have proceeded from a good intention, unless the contrary be evident and undeniable.

Sometimes, from a single action, we assume the right to condemn at once a man's whole character and conduct. From a single act of drunkenness, for instance, or a single act of dishonesty, we perhaps pronounce him who has been guilty of it, to be a habitual drunkard, or habitually dishonest. Such a single act of sin, no doubt, constitutes a man a sinner in the sight of God; and, if unrepented of, exposes him to the severity of his wrath; but still it does not form sufficient foundation for any one of his fellow-mortals to pass a censure upon his whole character, as if it took its colour from that one act. Those who, humanly speaking, are good men, may, through the suddenness or the violence of temptation, fall into sin; and their sin is the more grievous, since it gives occasion to the enemies of the Lord and of goodness to blaspheme. But if, from one sin, we immediately conclude, that all their previous good conduct was mere pretence, and that they are in reality destitute of religion, our judgment is rash and uncharitable.

An instance of *rash judging*, which is by no

^d 1 Cor. xiii.

means unfrequent, is, when we form a *general* unfavourable opinion of a man, merely because either we or our friends have received some injury from him, or have had with him some misunderstanding. The soreness which we feel in consequence disposes us, too often, to see his whole conduct in an unfavourable point of view. But surely, the circumstance of his having wronged, or had some difference with either ourselves or our friends, does not affect all the rest of his character; and if we permit such a circumstance to lower his character in the judgment which we form in our own bosoms—still more if we express that opinion to others—we are guilty of a weak selfishness. He who takes upon him the office of a judge or censor, must, at least, divest himself of all prejudice and partiality.

Nearly the same may be said when we judge hardly of a man, because he belongs to a party of which we disapprove. We may have reason to think, that in that instance he is mistaken and wrong; but if, on that account, we assume a right to find fault with his general character, and to represent it altogether in an unfavourable point of view, we offend decidedly against the injunction in the text. And so, on the other hand, if we lay to the charge of any particular class or body of men, the faults of some few of the individuals of which it consists; if, for instance, we tax a whole trade or profession with dishonesty, because we have suffered from the dishonesty of one or two of its members; if we charge a whole sect in religion with hypocrisy, or a whole party in the state with want of public principle, because we think that in some particular instances we have ground for such a charge, we are guilty of a very blameable kind of *rash judging*.

Some unthinking and ignorant people are in the

habit of forming their opinion of men from the outward circumstances in which they are placed; and if they see them visited by losses, or other calamities, consider such calamities as divine judgments upon them, conclude that they must have been grievous sinners, and set themselves to find out, or, perhaps, to *invent* the particular sins for which such judgments are inflicted by God. We can hardly be too much on our guard against this instance of uncharitableness. Such judgment is always *rash*. Of this fault those men appear to have been guilty, who told our Lord “of the Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answering said unto them, Suppose ye that these Galileans were sinners above all the Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, Nay: but except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish. Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.”^e We should always remember, that, as outward prosperity, though it calls for the gratitude of those who enjoy it, is no proof of God’s peculiar favour, so afflictions and suffering are by no means to be regarded as tokens of his displeasure. They are rather to be looked upon as proofs of his fatherly care, and must never be made the ground or occasion of any unfavourable opinion of him who is visited with them.

To pretend to judge even of the thoughts and intentions of men, and of the *motives* from which their actions proceed, is almost always *rash*, and, consequently, strictly forbidden in the text. It belongs to him alone who is the great Searcher of hearts to judge of these. He often knows, that ac-

^e Luke xiii. 1—5.

tions of very questionable appearance proceed from pure and upright motives; and that others of the fairest outside are deficient in principle. *He* knows this; but it must almost always remain unknown to man, till that day when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed. "Therefore," says the Apostle, "judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts."^f

In short, the prohibition in the text forbids all disposition to condemn or censure the actions or motives of other men, unless when we are called upon to do so by a sense of duty. It forbids all proneness to take pleasure in finding fault; all inquisitiveness into the lives and conduct of others, for the purpose of finding materials for blaming them. And when, as it sometimes happens, we are compelled in our own minds to pronounce them guilty, it forbids us needlessly to disclose their guilt, to delight in speaking of it, or to find our amusement in blackening or lowering their characters. *Charity rejoiceth not in iniquity.*

III. There can, I think, be but little necessity for stating at any length the reasons on which this prohibition is founded, or for pointing out the sinfulness and danger of *rash judging*. A few words, however, upon this head, may assist what has been said in making the deeper and more lasting impression.

And, first, let us direct our attention to the evil source from which this disposition to judge and censure others appears to proceed. It springs from the pride and naughtiness of our hearts; it springs from the vain imagination, that by thus judging, we give proof of our superior sagacity and discern-

^f 1 Cor. iv. 5.

ment; and from the idea, that by lowering the character of those around us, we raise our own, and make it appear the brighter. We receive an empty satisfaction from thus exalting ourselves above them; from the sort of superiority which is implied in becoming their censor and their judge.

And as a censorious disposition shows great want of humility, so it is a mark of ignorance of our own character, of an alarming insensibility to our own failings, infirmities, and sins. Did we in any degree see our sins in the light in which we *ought* to see them, and in which, if our eyes were not blinded by partiality and self-conceit, we *should* see them, our attention would be so occupied in lamenting and endeavouring to correct our own faults, that we should have little leisure and less inclination to attend to those of other men; of whom, generally speaking, we know much less evil than we know of ourselves. We should then feel the force of that passage of St. Paul, "wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself."^g We should feel the force of our Lord's address to the accusers of the woman taken in adultery—"He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her;"^h or that of his indignant expostulation which follows the verse which I have chosen for my text—"Why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye."ⁱ

If we loved our neighbour as ourselves, as we

^g Rom. ii. 1.

^h John viii. 7.

ⁱ Matt. vii. 3-5.

ought to love him, we should feel as little satisfaction in contemplating his failings, as in dwelling upon our own. Are we willing that other men should judge, and blame, and condemn us? If we are not, we should call to mind the golden rule, of doing as we would be done by, and let that restrain our disposition to censoriousness.

The *judging* forbidden in the text, is an instance not only of want of humility and of charity, but of want of justice. When we are guilty of it, we assume an authority over our neighbour to which we have *no right*. He is our equal and our *brother*; we are subject to the same Master, and must equally submit to the same judgment hereafter. And thus to judge and condemn him, we have no more right or title than a culprit before a court of human judicature has to judge and condemn those who are about to be tried in the same manner as himself. "Why dost thou judge thy *brother*?" says the Apostle, "or why dost thou set at nought thy *brother*? for we shall all stand before the judgment-seat of Christ. Let us not therefore," continues St. Paul, "judge one another any more."^k

And as rash judging is an act of injustice towards men, so is it also to be looked upon as an act of injustice towards God. It is an usurpation of his right; an invasion of his prerogative. He is the God of *judgment*; to him alone judgment and vengeance belong. "Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? To his own master he standeth or falleth;"^l and you have no right to censure him.

And if the sinfulness of rash uncharitable judging be so great, the punishment which awaits it will doubtless be severe. It is to this that our attention is directed by the latter part of the text—"Judge

^k Rom. xiv. 10, 13.

^l Rom. xiv. 4.

"not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again." These words may be applied to the consequences of sinful judging even in this world. With what judgment we judge, we may expect to be judged *even here*. If we have allowed ourselves to be harsh, and censorious, and uncharitable in judging others, they, in their turn, will assume, and feel that they may justly assume, a right to treat us in the same manner. They will feel that they have a right to watch our conduct with an observant eye, to publish abroad whatever faults they can discover in it, and to hold them up to the reproach of a censorious world. In their most awful meaning, however, these words refer to the judgment of the last day,—that day when we shall all stand before the judgment-seat of Christ. At that dreadful day, as, on the one hand, a meek, and gentle, and charitable disposition will, through the merits of Christ, be graciously accepted; so will that which has delighted in uncharitable judging, be treated with terrible severity; for with what judgment we judge, we shall be judged; and "he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath showed no mercy."^m This consideration of the last judgment, joined with the contemplation of our own weaknesses and sins, and of the need in which we stand of mercy, the consideration of *the beam in our own eye*, ought certainly to repress effectually a disposition to uncharitable judging.

Let us, my friends, beseech God to pardon our past transgressions of this precept, and for the time to come, to assist us in striving against this dangerous, but too prevalent, fault. Let us check, both in ourselves and in others, all censoriousness, eager-

^m James ii. 13.

ness to blame and condemn ; and let us, on the contrary, be ready to make all fair allowances for other persons, to be candid and kind in the interpretation which we put upon their conduct. Let us abstain from judging *at all*, unless when called to it by a sense of duty, and strong conviction. Let us,—to adopt the words of the Apostle, which I before quoted,—“ judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts.”

THE PRAYER.

O Lord, the God of judgment, by whom alone our actions, and words, and thoughts are justly weighed, keep far from us all disposition to judge and censure our brethren. We stand ourselves in constant need of thy mercy and forgiveness. Let us not deprive ourselves of the hope of it, by uncharitable judging ; but in our conduct to each other, let mercy still rejoice against judgment, as we pray that it may do in our own cases, through the merits and atonement of Jesus Christ.

SERMON XXV.

EVIL-SPEAKING.

JAMES iv. 11.

Speak not evil one of another, brethren.

As the greater part of the comforts and enjoyments of society proceeds from the proper use of *speech*, so a very large portion of the discomforts of society springs from its abuse. It is with a view to the evils which arise from the abuse of this faculty, that St. James calls the “ tongue a world of iniquity ;—an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.”^a Of the many sins of the tongue, *slander* and *evil-speaking* are two of the most frequent, and at the same time two of the most dangerous. The distinction between slander and evil-speaking appears to be this :—*Slander*, which is also called *calumny*, consists in inventing ourselves, or propagating from others, any report against our neighbour’s character which is *not true*. *Evil-speaking*, or *backbiting*, extends to saying any thing to his prejudice, even when what we say *is true* ;—unless we are called upon to speak, by some weighty consideration of justice or charity.

From this statement you perceive that *slander* consists of two sins—of the sin of evil-speaking and

^a James iii. 6, 8.