

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.

that of lying united together. And when you consider that lying of itself is a dreadful sin; that it proceeds from the devil, who is the father of lies; that "lying lips are an abomination to the Lord;" and that "all liars will have their part in the lake of fire, which is the second death;" you must be sensible how exceeding sinful, and consequently how dangerous it becomes, when united with a sin which implies such cruelty and injustice to our neighbour as the sin of evil-speaking.

Of wilful and deliberate *slander*, however—of the sin of saying any thing against a neighbour's character, which you know to be false—I would hope that none of you would be guilty. No one *can* deliberately be guilty of it, until he has thrown off the fear of God, until he has brought himself to forget or despise his baptismal engagements, and virtually to renounce all the sanctions and obligations of religion.

But though I would in charity hope that none of you could be guilty of deliberate *slander*, I cannot, I fear, say the same of the sin of *evil-speaking*, the sin of injuring our neighbour's character, of speaking evil of him behind his back, when we think that what we say is founded in truth. This is a sin which is every where most deplorably prevalent; and a sin, which is the disgrace, and which occasions the disquiet, of every town and village in the kingdom; and from which few of us, it is to be feared, are entirely free. Many, even of those who profess, and to a degree really feel, a reverence for God and his laws, and are carefully observant of many of the duties of religion, are yet too apt to be guilty in this instance. The tongue, according to the expression of the Apostle, from whom my text is taken, is so *unruly*, so *untameable* an evil, that those who have made some good progress in religion in other respects, and through

God's help have got the better of many other corruptions, have hitherto not succeeded in conquering this;—perhaps, from the power of self-deceit, have hardly in good earnest attempted to do it. Let me beg of you, therefore, your serious attention to the observations which I wish to offer upon a vice so widely prevalent, and at the same time so utterly inconsistent with every part of the Christian character.

To prevent misapprehension, however, I must remark, that there *are cases*, in which it is lawful to speak what we know to another's prejudice. We may be called on fairly to do so, either by zeal for the glory of God, or by a love of justice, or by a sincere desire to promote the reformation and amendment of him of whom we speak. When we are honestly satisfied in our consciences, that we have such reasons as these for speaking of any fault or error committed by another, we are at liberty to do it. If, for instance, we know that any one has so far violated the laws of his country, that the general welfare of society requires that he should be punished; or if, when he has been charged with an offence by some other person, we are called upon to declare what we know before the civil magistrate, we not only may, but ought, to declare it. So again, a sincere desire for a neighbour's reformation may very properly induce us to mention to him, in the spirit of gentleness and friendship, what we have seen or heard to his discredit; or, for the same good purpose, to speak of it, in the same spirit, to some one who is likely to have influence with him;—perhaps to the minister under whose spiritual care he lives, who is especially appointed to watch for his soul, and to warn him against such practices as would lead him to destruction. Again, we may lawfully disclose what we know to another's prejudice, when it is abso-

lutely necessary for the clearing of our own character, or that of some innocent person unjustly traduced. Or if we see the young and inexperienced in danger of being led astray by the artifices of some bad man, of whose real character they are ignorant, we certainly do well to put them on their guard, and to warn them of the danger to which they are exposed. Excepting, however, in these and the like cases,—except either *justice* or *charity* clearly require us to speak,—we can hardly be too tender of our neighbour's reputation, or too careful that we say nothing that may in the slightest degree injure it. "Whether it be to friend or foe," says the son of Sirach, "talk not of other men's lives; and if thou canst without offence, reveal them not."^b Reveal them *not*; do not divulge what you know against any man, unless you are satisfied that you really do wrong to conceal it.

If we repeat whatever we have heard by common report, we shall probably in very many instances be chargeable with the guilt not only of evil-speaking or backbiting, but in some measure even of *slander* itself. For every one knows, that of the many ill-natured reports that are spread abroad, the greater part are not true—at least not true to their full extent. Consequently you are in danger of being, to a certain degree, guilty of *slander*, whenever you say any thing to another man's discredit, which you have not very good reason to believe to be true. To plead, that you only say what you have heard, and what multitudes report as well as you, is no excuse whatever. The guilt of slander attaches not only to its first author, but in some degree to every one that gives it circulation.

But even supposing that you are well assured

^b Ecclus. xix. 8.

that what you say is true; still, you have no right to say it; you still are chargeable with the unmanly, unchristian vice of *backbiting* and *evil-speaking*. Reflect now for a moment on the greatness of this sin. You all are sensible of the value of character. You all know, that there are few things which every man holds more dear than his good name. It is in itself of great worth—and upon it many depend, almost entirely, for the means of subsistence—so that if you rob them of their character, you rob them of their means of getting their bread. Many of those who are in the habit of allowing themselves to talk freely of their neighbour's faults, would be highly offended to be themselves suspected of *thieving*; they look upon a *thief* with contempt, and think that nothing should tempt them to stoop so low as to be guilty of so base a sin. But are they less guilty, when they deprive a man of his character? They would be shocked to be supposed capable of robbing him of his money, but think little of robbing him of that which is dearer to him than money; for "a good name," says Solomon, "is rather to be chosen than great riches."^c A common thief steals perhaps to relieve his necessities: that is no excuse for him certainly, but still he seems to get something by his crime. The *evil-speaker* or *backbiter* robs a man of his most valuable possession, without having even an appearance of advantage to himself to plead. Again, the *thief*, if he should be brought to repentance, may testify the sincerity of his repentance by making restitution, by "giving again that that he has robbed." The *evil-speaker*, however, puts reparation out of his power. When brought to repentance, he may wish to *unsay* what he has said, and *undo* the evil that he has done;

^c Prov. xxii. 1.

but it is now too late. The evil report, through his means, has spread far and wide; it is uttered by a hundred tongues; and he has no means of stopping its mischievous progress. And shall we, my friends, pretend that we are Christians, and be guilty towards any fellow-mortal of such a cruel injury as this?

The foundation of the several branches of our duty towards our neighbour is, that we should love him as ourself; and we know, that "he that loveth not his brother abideth in death," in spiritual death, tending to death eternal. But how can we pretend that we thus love our neighbour, when we wrong him in so tender a part—when we despoil him of what he holds most dear? Again, the rule by which our conduct towards other men should be regulated, is that golden one of "doing as we would be done by;—of doing unto all men as we would they should do unto us." And are we willing to have our character torn to pieces, our good name stolen away from us, by the backbiting tongues of the malicious or of the thoughtless? If we are jealous of our own reputation, if we feel—painfully and deeply feel—when men "shoot out their arrows, even bitter words," against us, and strive to lower us in the opinion of those among whom we dwell,—let us not be guilty of inflicting on others a wound which we feel so acutely ourselves,—let us not do to others an injury, which, when offered to ourselves, we complain of as cowardly and cruel. A man who speaks evil of his friend, is justly looked upon as base and unworthy; but the Christian religion, which requires us to love all men as ourselves, requires us so far to treat all men as friends, as not to injure them in this manner. Attend particularly to the words of my text. "Speak not evil one of another, brethren," says the Apostle. We are all brethren,

brethren by creation, and still more brethren by redemption and adoption. For brethren in any way to injure each other, is most unreasonable and unnatural. "Sirs, ye are brethren," said Moses, "why do ye wrong one to another?" The affecting consideration of such a relationship ought to have withheld them; and it ought still to withhold us from speaking evil one of another.

And in order to be liable to this heavy guilt, it is not necessary that what you lay to your neighbour's charge should be some heavy and serious crime. If you unnecessarily say any thing to lower his character, though you impute to him only what are deemed trivial faults or follies, yet, if it tends really to lower his character, you offend against both the precepts and the spirit of religion.

Various are the ways in which men are guilty of the sin of evil-speaking. Some men attack their neighbour's character by a direct and specific charge;—some say that they repeat merely what they have heard from others; thus weakly thinking to remove the blame from their own shoulders;—others will profess to disbelieve some ill-natured story, which, however, they are careful to repeat, and, if they can, to get believed by those to whom they address it;—and others again, if they have no absolute faults to charge, will seek to lower their neighbour's reputation, by ascribing his fairest deeds to some unworthy motives.

This last description of evil-speaking is what is expressed by the word *detraction*. *Detraction* consists in endeavouring to lower a good character, by pointing out blemishes, or picking holes in it—by misrepresenting its virtues, and exaggerating its defects. If, for instance, a man is liberal in giving, the detractor will call him profuse and ostentatious; if he is frugal, he calls him pitiful and sordid. In the representations of a man addicted to *detraction*,

a reasonable prudence becomes worldly cunning; bravery is termed rashness; humility meanness; and religion hypocrisy.

It would be endless to mention all the various manners of hurting a man's character. They all fall under the general name of *evil-speaking* or *backbiting*, are all chargeable with the heavy degree of guilt which I have endeavoured to point out to you. And perhaps those are little less to blame, who encourage evil-speaking by listening to it with readiness and attention. It is an old maxim, that if there were no receivers of stolen goods, there would be no thieves; and it may be said with equal truth, that if there were no listeners, there would be no tale-bearers, no evil-speakers.

Nor will the guilt of evil-speaking appear the less, when we inquire into the causes from which it proceeds;—in which inquiry we shall be led to consider some of the *pleas* which men sometimes advance in *excuse* for it. One great cause of it is *pride* and *self-conceit*. Elated with the imagination of their own virtue, with the conceit that they are not as other men are, men are tempted to endeavour to blacken the character of their neighbour, that their own may appear the brighter by contrast, and that they may be permitted to assume a sort of superiority over them. "Pride," we know, "was not made for man;" and we are told in Scripture, that "the proud in heart are an abomination to the Lord:" when this, therefore, is the source of evil-speaking, a man is guilty of a complicated, of a double sin.

An opposite description of men fall into evil-speaking from a cause the reverse of this. Having, by their follies and their vices, destroyed and ruined their own characters, they are anxious to bring every one else down to the same level with themselves, that thus their reputation may no longer be

darkened by comparison with those that are unblemished. Perhaps, too, they know so much ill of themselves, that they are really disposed to think that there is nothing but evil in man, and that every appearance of goodness and religion is merely a pretext and a cheat. This, I suspect, is no unusual cause of backbiting; but it is a cause which most men will be ashamed to own.

A third source of this sin of evil-speaking, is the spirit of *revenge*. A man has received, or thinks that he has received, some injury, which the corrupted feelings of his nature prompt him to revenge. The dread of the correction of the laws of the land, or perhaps the fear of an encounter with him whom he deems his enemy, prevents him from avenging himself with his *hand*. He therefore seeks to do it with the *tongue*. Under the influence of this dark passion he attacks his enemy's character, and by injuring his good name, inflicts wounds of the worst and sorest nature. Now you all know, that every feeling and gratification of revenge is forbidden by the religion of Christ. "Dearly beloved," says the Apostle, "avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord."^d And if we are absolutely forbidden to avenge ourselves in any other way, least of all should we seek revenge in so base and dastardly a manner as by *backbiting* or *evil-speaking*.

Some men, again, will run down a neighbour's character without any ill feeling toward him, but for the sake of *paying court*, of making themselves acceptable, to him to whom they are speaking—who, as they imagine, has conceived some dislike to the person whose character is assailed. Those who are guilty of evil-speaking from such consi-

^d Rom. xii. 19.

derations, are, if possible, more inexcusable, and chargeable with greater meanness, even than those whom I last mentioned.

But perhaps, after all, the most usual cause of evil-speaking is a mere love of talking, coupled with the vanity of seeming to know more than the rest of the world, and attended by a general spirit of levity and thoughtlessness. But surely a man's good name and reputation is far too serious and valuable a thing to be trifled away in this light and foolish manner. Inconsideration in matters of religion, is a fault utterly unworthy of an immortal and responsible being, where ourselves alone are concerned; but, it becomes doubly blameable, where it occasions so serious a wrong to a neighbour as injuring his reputation. Remember that striking passage in the Proverbs of Solomon—"As a mad man, who casteth firebrands, arrows, and death; so is the man that deceiveth" (or, as it is in another version, that *backbiteth*) "his neighbour, and saith, Am not I in sport?"^e

And as evil-speaking is thus evil in itself, and in the causes from which it proceeds, so is it evil in the consequences which it produces. Besides the deep—the often irreparable—injury which it does to him whose character is assailed by it, it naturally tends to occasion lasting divisions and animosities; it leads on to hatred, and malice, and all uncharitableness. As, "where there is no tale-bearer the strife ceaseth," so, on the other hand, a tale-bearer separateth very friends, and his words are as wounds.^f

From all these considerations, you may well suppose that the sin of evil-speaking is every where strongly spoken against in the Scripture. Holy David, in his zeal for true religion, exclaims—"Whoso

^e Prov. xxvi. 18, 19.

^f Prov. xxvi. 20; xviii. 8.

"privily slandereth his neighbour, him will I destroy."^g And, in the fifteenth Psalm, gives it as one of the characteristics of him who should ascend the holy hill of the Lord, that he "hath not slandered his neighbour;" or, as it is in the Bible version of the Psalms, "he that backbiteth not with his tongue—nor taketh up a reproach against his neighbour."^h Our blessed Lord classes *false witness* with murder and adultery; and St. Paul ranks *backbiters*ⁱ with fornicators, and murderers, and haters of God; with those of whom he expressly says, that they "shall not inherit the kingdom of God." Again, in the second Epistle to Timothy, he mentions false accusation as one of the sins of those who have "a form of godliness, but deny the power thereof;" who are Christians in profession and outward appearance, not in reality. And to the like purport the Apostle, from whom my text is taken, assures us, that "if any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, this man's religion is vain."^k He may seem, and may pretend to be religious; but if he *bridleth not his tongue*, if he gives way to evil-speaking and backbiting, or slandering, "he deceiveth his own heart," and *his religion is vain*; it is *vain* and ineffectual as to regulating his conduct in this life, and will be found to have been *vain* in the life to come. "By thy words," says our Saviour, "thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned."^l

Let us, therefore, my friends, strive to correct both in ourselves, and in those with whom we converse, the pernicious and dangerous sin of *evil-speaking*. With holy David let us resolve to take heed unto our ways, that we offend not with our

^g Psa. ci. 6.

^h James i. 26.

ⁱ Psa. xv. 3.

^k Matt. xii. 37.

^l Rom. i. 30.

tongue.^m Let us carefully guard against evil-speaking ourselves; and give no encouragement to it in others, by appearing to listen to it with approbation and pleasure. Let us ever remember, that if guilty of backbiting, we offend against the fundamental precepts of our holy religion—against the love of our neighbour—and against the rule of doing as we would be done by. Let us remember, that by this vice we are guilty of a mean sort of stealing, of robbing our neighbour of that which is dearer to him than his money or his goods.

To guard against this sin will require unremitting care and watchfulness, for the habits of society and our own corruption render us continually liable to fall into it. We shall, however, think such care and watchfulness well bestowed, if we seriously reflect upon the hateful nature and dangerous consequences of the sin of evil-speaking. And because our care and vigilance will be ineffectual without God's assistance—since “the tongue is an unruly evil, which no man,” of his own strength alone, “hath tamed or can tame”ⁿ—let us seek from heaven strength equal to the task—let us beseech God to “set a watch over our lips, and to keep the door of our mouth,” to restrain us by his grace from slander and evil-speaking, and to render our tongues, as well as all our other members, instruments of righteousness and of his glory.

THE PRAYER.

O God, forasmuch as without thee we are not able to please thee in any thing, particularly in the proper government of the tongue, do thou by thy grace assist us in controlling that unruly member.

^m Psa. xxxix. 1.

ⁿ James iii.

Set a watch, O Lord, over our lips, and keep the door of our mouth, that we may so take heed unto our ways, as that we may not offend in tongue. Keep us from the base and unchristian sins of slandering and backbiting, and grant that our speech, instead of injuring our neighbour, may be made the instrument of his edification and of thy glory, through Jesus Christ our Lord.