

SERMON XXVI.

RAILING OR ABUSIVE LANGUAGE.

1 COR. vi. 10.

Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor REVILERS, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.

THE guilt of *evil-speaking* is generally felt, and there are few who do not acknowledge the necessity of guarding against it. There are however, I apprehend, many persons, who, though they think it wrong and cowardly—as it most certainly is—to speak evil of a man in his absence, make no scruple of speaking evil of him in his presence;—who will not traduce a man behind his back, but freely allow themselves to abuse him to his face. Nothing is more common than to hear those who are irritated, or provoked, or out of humour with any one, giving vent to their angry passion by abusive language, by calling him reproachful names, and laying to his charge a variety of crimes. This is the sin which in Scripture is called *railing* or *reviling*, and a very heavy sin it is. Nothing can be more opposite to the meek, and gentle, and forbearing spirit of Christianity; nothing more plainly proceeds from the corruption of our nature. Accordingly you will observe, that in the passage which I have chosen for my text, *revilers*, that is, persons who are in the habit of using abusive language, are classed

with idolaters, adulterers, and thieves; and, together with them, declared to be incapable of inheriting the kingdom of God.

A sin of the tongue, which is so repugnant to the spirit of Christianity, and so dreadful in its consequences, appears to require to be considered by itself. I must, however, before I proceed farther, observe, that there are cases, in which it is not only lawful, but a *duty*, to tell a man to his face of his faults, and plainly to “set before him the things “which he has done.” It is lawful to do this, whenever we are satisfied in our own consciences that we do it from a real concern either for the glory of God, or for the good of man—of him particularly to whom we thus address ourselves—and when we do it without indecent vehemence, but with calmness and temper. For instance, it is oftentimes expedient for a magistrate to speak in terms of reproof to an evil-doer; both for the purpose of making him feel something of remorse or shame for his evil deeds; and also for the sake of public example, and of inducing others to avoid the crime which they hear thus publicly reproved. So, again, the ministers of religion are oftentimes required by their office to tell men of their sins to their face, for the sake of humbling them, for the sake of repressing their proud self-conceit, and of bringing them to repentance. And they may, for these good purposes, and for the public correction of sin, find it expedient sometimes to do this with a degree of publicity, and before many witnesses. Thus St. Paul directs Timothy to *reprove and to rebuke*, as well as to exhort;^a and he bids Titus to *rebuke certain men sharply*, “that they may be “sound in the faith.”^b Again, the former of these apostolical men he charges, in another place, “to

^a 2 Tim. iv. 2.

^b Titus i. 13.

"rebuke them that sin"—that sin, that is, notoriously and scandalously—openly "before all, that others also may fear."^c In a similar manner, in the Old Testament, the Almighty bids his servants, the Prophets, to "cry aloud," and "spare not;" to show his "people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins."^d And, accordingly, we often find the messengers of the Most High using the strongest language of reproof. Thus Isaiah calls the Jews "a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evil-doers, children that are corrupt-ers."^e Thus John the Baptist termed the scribes and Pharisees a "generation of vipers;"^f and our blessed Lord himself addresses the Jewish teachers in various terms of reproach; he calls them "an evil and adulterous generation;"^g fools and blind guides, hypocrites, and children of the devil.^h And the ministers of religion now may sometimes feel themselves obliged, by the sacred commission which they bear, to reprove and to rebuke, perhaps to use the language of reproach; though it must still be done "with all long-suffering and gentleness." Even private persons may, and sometimes ought to address themselves in this manner to those whom they observe doing wrong, in order that they may bring them to amendment and reformation—"Thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour," said the Jewish law, "and not suffer sin upon him."ⁱ

In these, and the like cases, to tell a man openly of his faults, though it is in a degree to speak evil of him to his face, is certainly lawful, and is not to be called *reviling*. It is right in itself, and proceeds from a right principle, from a concern for the

^c 1 Tim. v. 20.
^f Matt. iii. 7.
ⁱ Lev. xix. 17.

^d Isaiah lviii. 1.
^g Matt. xii. 39.

^e Isaiah i. 4.
^h John viii. 44.

honour of religion, and the welfare of our neighbour's soul.

A man is guilty of the sin of *railing or reviling*, when not from any right principle, but from the instigation of his own corrupt passions, from pride, from anger, or from revenge, he assails another with reproachful language, calls him abusive names, and taunts and insults him, by laying to his charge either the faults of which he has actually been guilty, or sins of which he is innocent. For, you will observe, we have no right to reproach a man even with the sins with which he really is chargeable, in a taunting, insulting manner, or from a feeling of anger or contempt. And if we reproach him with crimes of which he is innocent, if we bestow on him injurious names, which he in no way deserves, and "lay to his charge things which he knows not," we are guilty of the worst sort of reviling; are guilty of something like *slander* or *calumny*, as well as of *railing*. And as we are thus chargeable with double guilt, we expose ourselves to double punishment.

I would here remark, by the way, that the offensive and dreadful practice of *swearing at any one*, of cursing, and *damning* him, falls directly under the prohibition of the text. Not only is it a flagrant violation of the third commandment, a breach of our duty towards God, but it is also a very bad species of *railing*. It is an expression of unchristian insolence and ill will, which, if properly considered, could hardly proceed from any one who had not utterly thrown off all regard for religion.

The sin of *reviling*, as I just now hinted, sometimes proceeds principally from *pride*. Those of an overbearing temper, of a haughty and arrogant spirit, assume that right of treating with contempt those whom they think beneath them,—their servants, perhaps, or labourers,—and of expressing

this contempt on the most trifling occasions in injurious language. Now, injurious language, when it proceeds from any vicious principle whatever, is a grievous sin; but surely, it becomes peculiarly unmanly and disgraceful, when addressed to those who, from their circumstances and situation in life, are to a certain degree precluded from answering. It is very ungenerous to take advantage of any little difference in rank or station for such a purpose.

Parents also I should earnestly exhort, not to make use of any description of rough language to their children, for the purpose of enforcing their authority. It is distressing to hear a father or mother angrily upbraiding a child with stupidity or ignorance,—which probably is not in any degree its own fault;—or addressing it in taunting or insulting words. It is in itself a very pernicious habit, and the effects which it may have upon the temper and character of the child are most painful. It tends to lessen its love and filial respect for its parents, to sour its temper, to render it needlessly unhappy, and to give it the habit of using the same bad language to its play-fellows, perhaps even to the parents themselves.

The most general occasion of railing or abusive language, is *anger*. When a person is provoked, or put out of temper by any one, he is apt to express his anger in reproachful words; sometimes in curses and imprecations. He would perhaps vent his wrath by actual violence and striking, but being withheld from this by the strong arm of the law, or by the fear of bodily hurt, he has recourse to the violence of the tongue. It is possible, we know, to be angry without being guilty of sin: but when anger expresses itself in this manner, it is both sinful in itself, and the occasion of sin. It is to no purpose therefore for a man, when he is

guilty of *reviling*, of using reproachful language, to say that he was *provoked* to it, that he was in a *passion*, and could not help it. It is the duty of a Christian not to be “easily provoked,”^k but to keep his passions—the passion of anger among the rest—within proper bounds. To assist him in doing this he has the precepts and the sanctions of religion, and, above all, the offer of the help of the Holy Spirit. If he does not seek or make use of this help, and disregards these precepts and sanctions, he disregards them at his peril.

Men and women are particularly ready to advance this excuse, when they have themselves been assailed with abusive language; when accosted with reproachful words, they think that they must have a right to answer in the same strain. Their adversary is consequently more irritated; and they thus go on vying with each other in abuse, and uttering words and reproaches most disgraceful to those who use them; and not only repugnant to every feeling and principle of religion, but shocking to common decency. If, after the ferment of anger has passed away, any expostulation is offered on the sinfulness and scandal of such conduct, the reply will probably be, “He or she called me names first, and surely I had a *right* to answer in the same manner: was *I* to be abused and *reviled*, and yet was I bound to bear it without *retorting*?” Believe me, you had no *right* to answer abuse with abuse; you *were bound* to bear it without retorting. This would have been your wisest course in common prudence. While “grievous words,” such as those which you were provoked to use, “stir up anger,” a “soft answer turneth away wrath.”^l If you had answered *mildly*, or made no answer at all, your adversary

^k 1 Cor. xiii. 5.^l Prov. xv. 1.

would have been ashamed of going on, or the fire of his anger would have gone out for want of fuel. And this ought to have been your course, from the well-known principles of Christianity. I cannot too often remind you, that our holy religion allows us in no case to revenge ourselves; and particularly cautions us not to answer abuse with abuse. St. Peter expressly bids us, not to render "evil for evil, or railing for railing, but contrariwise blessing."^m We are not to render *railing for railing*: nothing can be plainer. In the same spirit, our blessed Lord, in his divine sermon on the mount, had said, "Bless them that curse you."ⁿ This precept is to be understood of all those who in any way abuse or revile you, or treat you with contempt: "bless and curse not:" give good language for bad: answer them not in the spirit in which they assail you.

Our Lord himself gave us an example, that we should follow his steps: and his example we are bound to follow, if we would be partakers of his resurrection. But he especially bids us to imitate him in meekness and gentleness under injuries. We are by the Apostle, for our direction, particularly charged to bear in mind, that Christ, "when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not."^o Suffer me again, therefore, solemnly and earnestly to warn you, that no bad language addressed to you will justify your using the like in return. I am not speaking now of what privilege you may think you may claim, from the customs or the spirit of the world. With those customs and that spirit we have nothing to do—except in many cases to avoid and to shun them. But I am speaking of what is your duty as *Christians*, of what is required of you by your

^m 1 Peter iii. 9.ⁿ Matt. v. 44.^o 1 Peter ii. 23.

religion. Be assured, that that religion has no principle more clear, no precept more express, than that you are not to answer abuse with abuse, that you are not to render railing for railing.

Not only in the case of being ourselves assailed with reproachful words, but in every case, the use of such language—excepting, as I stated towards the outset of this discourse, where it is required by, and proceeds from, some right principle—is utterly inconsistent with the Christian character. It generally, if not always, implies a degree of *contempt*;—now utter contempt we are not permitted to feel for any fellow-creature, still less for any fellow-Christian. According to Solomon, it is "he that is void of wisdom," and he *only*, "that despiseth his neighbour."^p Remember the words of our Saviour, "Whosoever shall say to his brother, "Raca," (that is, worthless fellow,) "shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, "Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell-fire."^q Here the word *fool* is used as an expression of the lowest contempt. Reviling, or using abusive language, is so great a sin, that St. Paul advises us to avoid the society of those who are guilty of it. "I have written unto you," says he, "not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother," that is, that professes to be a Christian, "be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a *railer*, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat."^r A *railer*—a person who is in the habit of attacking his neighbour with rough language—is here, you see, ranked by St. Paul with idolaters, and fornicators, and extortioners, and declared unworthy of being admitted into the company of Christians. And as he is unfit for all good and Christian society on earth, so are we

^p Prov. xi. 12.^q Matt. v. 22.^r 1 Cor. v. 11.

assured that he will be shut out from the blessed society in heaven; for the text positively assures us, that "revilers" shall be excluded from the kingdom of heaven, no less than murderers and adulterers.

Let me, therefore, entreat you, my friends, to take heed unto your ways, that you offend not in your tongue in this or any other manner. If you desire *life* in this world, and in the world to come, and would fain "see good days,—refrain" your "tongue from evil." Let nothing—neither injurious actions nor abusive words—*nothing*, in short, *whatever*, induce you so far to forget your Christian character and your Christian hopes, as to be guilty of *reviling*, of using reproachful language. Pray to God for his grace, to keep you from being "provoked so far as to speak unadvisedly with your lips." Bear ever in your minds the recollection of the example which you have to follow, the example of the meek and lowly Jesus; and in compliance with that example, and with the genius and precepts of the religion which you profess, "let all bitterness, and wrath, and *clamour*, and "evil-speaking, be put away from you, with all "malice."

THE PRAYER.

Give me grace, O Lord, so to take heed to my ways, as that I may not offend by my tongue. Enable me to refrain my lips from uttering injurious, reproachful language, however I may be provoked. Make me careful never to render railing for railing; but grant that I may follow the example of thy meek and lowly Son, who when he was reviled,

* 1 Peter iii. 10.

reviled not again, and threatened not when he suffered reproach and contumely. Hear me, O Lord, for the sake of the same thy Son, our Lord and Saviour.