

SERMON XXVIII.

DUTY OF MARRIED PERSONS.

EPHES. v. 33.

Let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband.

THE Scriptures represent the state of marriage as the most intimate and sacred of the relations of social life—"For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and they twain shall be one flesh."^a Consequently, those who have entered upon this holy state will find the observance of its peculiar duties to be of the utmost consequence to their peace and comfort in this world, and to their eternal happiness in the world to come. I am anxious, therefore, to induce such persons to fix their serious attention upon these duties, as they are suggested in the solemn and impressive office for the celebration of matrimony.

Where both husband and wife are influenced by real religious principles, and the union has been contracted, as it ought to have been contracted, "reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God," there is good ground for trusting that it will meet with the divine blessing, and

^a Matt. xix. 5; Gen. ii. 24.

that all its duties, in every important instance, will be carefully observed. Where, however, this holy state has been entered into, as I fear is sometimes the case, "unadvisedly, lightly, and wantonly," either from the impulse of blind passion and appetite, or from the fear of the expense, or punishment, which the laws of the land sometimes bring upon those who sinfully give way to the desires of the flesh in their single state, there is the greatest cause for endeavouring to impress upon such persons the peculiar duties of the sacred relation which they have contracted.

Of all the duties of the marriage state, the great foundation is *love*; by which word I mean, not the short-lived offspring of fancy or desire, but a strong, fervent, deep-rooted attachment to each other. Throughout the whole compass of moral obligation, it may be truly said, in the language of inspiration, that *love is the fulfilling of the law*. The love of God is the best groundwork and source of all the duties of the first table; the love of our neighbour, according to the saying of St. Paul, comprises all those of the second; and the various relative duties, which are so many branches of the second table, are all best grounded and contained in *love*. Love consequently stands foremost in the solemn expression of consent in the marriage service, and in the still more solemn vow entered into at God's altar.

One of the chief causes for which matrimony was ordained, was "the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity." Even if love is unhappily wanting, married persons have still engaged, and are bound in point of absolute duty, to do all that they can for each other's happiness and advantage; to do all that they can to render their partner's life easy and comfortable. But

where these endeavours proceed solely from a sense of obligation, and not from affection, they will be cold and heartless, and comparatively ineffectual. Where they are the offspring of real attachment, they will be easy and natural, and of tenfold efficacy in advancing the happiness of the married state. Every instance of prosperity will, from being thus shared, become doubly gratifying, and the sufferings of adversity, affliction, and pain, will be lightened by the society and mutual support, *by the health and comfort* derived from each other.

Love, therefore, being both a duty in itself solemnly promised and vowed, and also the best means of rendering the performance of the other duties of this state easy and delightful, married persons can hardly be too careful in avoiding whatever may lessen or destroy it, and in attending to the means of its preservation and increase. Be on your guard against all those little instances of ill humour, or of violence, or impatience of temper, which too often undermine, and at length totally overthrow all conjugal affection. Be always ready to comply with each other's wishes and inclinations; and do not thwart or cross them, unless when compelled by a sense of duty. It is possible that your partner's natural temper may be faulty; it may perhaps be hasty and impatient, or may have a tendency to peevishness and sullenness. By prudence and good management, guided by love, you may be able, in great measure, to check and cure these imperfections. And, on the other hand, by ill judged opposition, by meeting them with ill temper and anger, you may increase and inflame them to the utter ruin of all domestic happiness. Little differences or disagreements may perhaps occasionally happen; do not aggravate them by impatience or undue warmth, either in words, or in look and manner. The advice of Solomon admits of uni-

versal application, but is particularly applicable to any thing like dissension between husband and wife—"The beginning of strife is as when one letteth out water: therefore leave off contention, before it be meddled with."^b And again—"A soft answer turneth away wrath; but grievous words stir up anger."^c By a soft answer, or, in some cases, by no answer at all, endeavour gently to soothe and turn away those angry feelings which are so destructive of domestic harmony. Never engage in dispute; and, above all, never dispute about trifles. Indeed, almost every thing is a trifle, when put in competition with the risk of endangering conjugal affection.

Do not pretend to say that you never discovered these faults of temper before marriage; but consider, that the engagement which you have contracted is indissoluble; that you have taken your partner *for better or worse*; and, that no imperfection of temper, of which you were not previously aware, any more than an alteration in your outward circumstances, by which you become richer or poorer, can in any degree alter the solemn obligation which you have voluntarily contracted, and of which both your interest and your duty require you to make the best.^d

^b Prov. xvii. 14.

^c Prov. xv. 1.

^d "Argue not about trifles, which no two ever disputed for yet, but in order to the vanity of a victory, for in themselves they are not of moment enough to defray the charges of the breath expended on them. But then, consider, that in every victory of this sort, there are *two*, one triumphing, and the other triumphed over; and that a victory or triumph is the act of an adversary, not of a friend; nor at all possible where there is but one. In all cases, therefore, of none, or of little weight, the best way is to let the first speaker carry it, lest a spirit or habit of disputing, although begun about trifles, should proceed to matters of more consequence; like a spark among straw, which sometimes burns the house. Besides, people seldom dispute, be it about what it will, but little

The obligation of mutual and lasting *love* is equally incumbent upon, equally *vowed* by, both. Upon the husband it is most forcibly inculcated in a variety of passages of Scripture—"Husbands love your wives," says St. Paul, "even as Christ also loved the Church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word; that he might present it to himself a glorious Church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing, but that it should be holy, and without blemish. So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife, loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it even as the Lord the Church: for we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh."^e The Apostle here makes use of the most powerful arguments, and speaks of the marriage union as being represented

"sallies of wit, tart expressions, inuendoes, squinting at unpleasing topics, or the sly arts of seizing advantages in an argument, all of them irritating things, are wont to intrude, and too much enliven the conversation. This is not rubbing, as it is softly called, but really brushing a part with nettles, which is already sensible enough, and perhaps a little disposed to inflammation. But, if you should happen to differ about a matter of moment, consider first, whether it is of moment equal to the love and peace you wish to live in; and if, as I will venture to pronounce it beforehand, it is not, that is the wisest and best person of the two, who, after a sweet and soothing use of one or two reasons, first seizes the opportunity of sacrificing it to mutual love, by a free and cheerful surrender." See Skelton's Sermon on the Duties of the Married State; a sermon which I strongly recommend to all those married persons who have the means of seeing it. I take this opportunity of also recommending Mr. Bean's pious, sensible, and well written little book, "The Christian Minister's Affectionate Advice to a new-married Couple."
^e Ephes. v. 25-31.

by that most intimate connexion, which subsists between Christ and the Church; the Church deriving its spiritual life and nourishment, its very existence, from him its head, and having been purchased by the shedding of his blood. But, lest those to whom he speaks should not be able to understand the full meaning of this comparison, which St. Paul himself calls a great mystery, he sums up the duty he had been inculcating in one short sentence, level to the capacity of every one—"Nevertheless"—whether you fully comprehend this sublime mystery or not, still your duty is plain—"nevertheless, let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself."^f Every man knows how dearly he loves himself; how anxiously he avoids whatever may give him pain or uneasiness, how gladly he embraces whatever may contribute to his pleasure and satisfaction. Let this love which he bears to himself be the *lowest* measure of that which he bears to his wife, who is become in fact part of himself. Let him be *at least equally* anxious not to give her pain, and to promote her happiness.

It was, probably, in order the more forcibly to represent the closeness of the union which ought to subsist between man and wife, that God made choice of the mode which he adopted in the first formation of woman. Doubtless, he might have created her, as he created man, out of the dust of the ground; but instead of so creating her, he took her substance out of the man himself. "The Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; and the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and

^f Ephes. v. 33.

“flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh.”^g St. Paul, in the passage which I quoted from his Epistle to the Ephesians, plainly alludes to this first formation of woman: and nothing can place in a stronger point of view the close and intimate union which subsists between husband and wife, and the duty of the former to love the “latter as his own body.”

In the Epistle to the Colossians, St. Paul, after charging husbands to love their wives, adds, “and be not bitter against them;” never be harsh, and rough, and ill tempered towards them, but always behave with gentleness and kindness. Even if you think you have reason to be displeased with any thing in their conduct or manner, still do not express your displeasure with bitterness or violence; but with meekness and love; with the same tenderness and forbearance, in short, with which you would wish your own failings to be treated. Many little things had better be passed over entirely without notice; for if any one is extreme to mark every thing that is done amiss, no human being can abide it; so full are we all, even those who are most ready to see them in others, of manifold failings and imperfections. The illustration which St. Paul derives from the love of Christ to his Church may here again instruct us. Instead of being moved to bitterness and wrath by the imperfections and blemishes in his Church, he gave himself to die, in order to purify and pardon it; and a husband ought to suffer any thing, rather than behave towards “the wife of his bosom” with harshness. St. Peter, in his admonitions to husbands, adds, “giving

^g Gen. ii. 21—24.

“honour unto the wife as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life;” that your prayers be not hindered.^h This accordingly forms part of the marriage vow, in which the husband solemnly pledges himself to *honour* his wife, as well as to *love* and *keep* her. He is to *honour* her; to treat her always with attention and respect. She has a strong claim to this *honour*, as being the weaker. For a man to take advantage of her weakness, so as to refuse her the honour due to her, is *unmanly* and base. St. Peter gives, as a reason for this honour, the consideration, that husband and wife are “heirs together of the grace of life.” They are equally objects for whom Christ died, are equally admitted to the hope of immortality.

The wife, in like manner, is bound by every consideration to love and honour her husband; and, in addition to love and honour, owes him the duty of *obedience*. To this she solemnly pledges herself in the expression of consent, and in the marriage vow, in which she promises to *obey* him; and you will observe, that in the several passages from the New Testament, *obedience* is the duty principally insisted on. “Wives, *submit yourselves* unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the Church: and he is the Saviour of the body. Therefore, as the Church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing.” And again he saith, “Let the wife see that she reverence her husband.”^k And again, “Wives, *submit yourselves* unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord.”^l You will observe, that St. Paul lays down the duty of obedience in the

^h 1 Pet. iii. 7. ⁱ Ephes. v. 22—24. ^k Ephes. v. 33. ^l Col. iii. 18.
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wife in the strongest and most extensive manner. She is to be obedient in *every thing*—in every thing which is not contrary to the will of God; for, if the will of God and the will of the husband should unhappily interfere with each other, God in this, as in all other instances, must be obeyed rather than man. In all cases not contrary to the law of God, the duty of wives is clear; they *must obey in every thing*. You may think sometimes that your understanding, or your knowledge, or your skill in management, may be superior to your husband's; and this may often be really the case. Where it is, the husband will act wisely in leaving things in great measure to your management. But, wherever he thinks fit to assert his authority, there, even if he should be inferior to you in any of the particulars above mentioned, your duty, as plainly set forth in Scripture, is to *obey* and to *submit* yourselves. I should here, however, just suggest to husbands, that the less they insist upon this right, the more willingly it will be paid; and that they should, generally speaking, seem rather to lead their wives by gentleness and love, than to control them by authority.

St. Peter inculcates the duty of obedience in a similar manner: "Ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives; while they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear."^m Surely there hardly can be a stronger argument to lead wives to dutiful subjection to their husbands, than the hope, that by their gentleness and submission they may win them over to real religion, to which they perhaps could not be brought by any other motives.

^m 1 Pet. iii. 1, 2, &c.

St. Peter, after cautioning all Christian wives against vanity and costliness in their apparel, goes on to exhort them to put on "the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which," says he, "is in the sight of God of great price;" and he then enforces his exhortation, by giving as an example, the dutiful submission of Sarah to her husband. The value of a meek and quiet spirit is great in every relation of life, but in none is it greater than in the state of marriage. A woman cannot take a more effectual method of securing her husband's fidelity and love, than by putting on this ornament of a *meek and quiet spirit*; while, on the other hand, any violence or hastiness of temper, any angry or peevish behaviour, will go far towards estranging him, and inspiring him with a dislike of her society. Wives should remember, that the first woman was formed for the express purpose of being a *helpmate* to man. They should always bear this in mind, and endeavour, by all the means in their power, to *help* their husbands in all things; to sooth them in their difficulties and vexations, to comfort them in their sorrows, and, as far as they can, to set forward the salvation of their souls, by gently winning them to the love and practice of genuine religion.

There is one part of the marriage vow which I would gladly be excused from mentioning, but which I do not feel it right to pass over in silence; I mean that which provides for faithfulness to the marriage bed. Each party solemnly promises and vows to *keep only* unto its lawful partner, *so long as they both shall live*. The breach of this part of the vow—the crime of *adultery*—is one of the most deadly sins that can be committed. It is at once a criminal indulgence of carnal lust; a cruel injury to a person, who has a just right to expect nothing but what is kind and good; and at the same time a breach of a solemn vow, contracted in God's house,

at God's altar. Adultery consequently is one of those sins which are repeatedly spoken of in Scripture as shutting the guilty persons out of heaven, and assigning them to the dreadful portion of the devil and his angels, in the fire that never shall be quenched.

Finally, let me exhort you both to endeavour to advance yourselves and each other in the knowledge and practice of true religion. In proportion as your union is governed by religion, it is likely to be happy. You cannot show a stronger instance of love—you cannot do any thing more calculated to increase and strengthen that love—than the endeavour to assist your partner in the ways of holiness. Let this be the object of your cordial exertions, and of your fervent prayers.

In order to preserve the recollection of your duties always fresh and vivid in your minds, I should advise you often to read over the marriage service; it might be well if you made it a rule to do this every year on your wedding day; at the same time examining yourselves by it, and imploring God to forgive your failures. And never forget that you are bound to the observance of these duties by the sanction of a solemn and deliberate *vow*.

Every important alteration in a man's life should be regarded by him as a new call to godliness of living; and those who have made so important and great a change as takes place when they enter into the holy state of matrimony, should derive from it fresh arguments and motives for giving themselves up to the service of God. The solemn circumstances attending the celebration of marriage, should contribute to fix religious impressions upon you; and you should feel bound by strong additional ties to act up to those impressions. In the relation which you have contracted, you have at once great additional cause for thankfulness to God, and also addi-

tional occasion for his favour and protection. Seek, therefore, that favour and protection in earnest prayer, and by endeavouring, in reliance on divine aid, to live in all things according to the will of God.ⁿ Employ yourselves much in religious meditation, and in reading the holy Scriptures; and pray, that "whatever in God's word you shall profitably learn, you may indeed fulfil the same." I conclude with the impressive benediction of the marriage service: May "Almighty God, who at the beginning did create our first parents Adam and Eve, and did sanctify and join them together in marriage, pour upon you, who have entered that holy state, the riches of his grace; may he sanctify and bless you, that ye may please him both in body and soul, and live together in holy love, unto your lives' end."

ⁿ New married persons should, in compliance with the direction in the Prayer Book, take an early—indeed *the earliest*—opportunity of receiving the Lord's supper. And I should exhort them to continue to be regular communicants at the holy table, as a means of improving in religion, and of assisting them in observing the solemn engagement which they have contracted by the marriage vow.