

SERMON XXX.

DUTY OF CHILDREN.

EPHES. vi. 1, 2.

Children, obey your parents in the Lord : for this is right.
Honour thy father and mother, (which is the first commandment with promise.)

ONE of the earliest duties which man is called upon to perform, after he comes into the world, is the duty which he owes to his *parents*—to those who, under Providence, have been the authors of his being, the occasion of his coming into life. And as this is one of the first duties in point of time, so is it also one of the first in point of dignity and importance. In the Ten Commandments it stands at the head of the laws of the second table, and is spoken of by St. Paul in the text as being the first commandment with promise.

It will, I think, generally be found, that in proportion as the duty to parents is attended to, most other duties also will be diligently observed ; and that where this is neglected, the neglect is accompanied by a disregard of most other parts of moral obligation. In other words, those who have grown up in habits of *love, respect, and obedience* to their parents, generally turn out good neighbours, good subjects, and, humanly speaking, good men. On the other hand, those who have been *disobedient to*

parents, and without the proper natural affection towards them, are too often to be ranked with the worst of characters, with those who are haters of God, and are filled with all unrighteousness and wickedness.

The word, by which the duty to parents is expressed, both in the Ten Commandments, and in the text, is *honour* ; “Honour thy father and thy mother.” Under this general term we are required to *love, honour, and succour* them ; to fulfil, in short, all those instances of duty which, from the word of God, and from the nature of the relation which subsists between them, we find to be due from children to their parents.

In the first place, children are to *love* their parents. This we are taught by the very frame and constitution of our being, which naturally disposes, not only men, but, for a time, most of the dumb animals also, to love those who have given them birth. And there is great reason why it should be so. For, not to dwell upon the consideration, that it is to your parents that, under Providence, you are indebted for your being, if you reflect upon the numberless benefits which each of you has received from them, and the many anxieties which they have undergone for your sakes ; if you consider how they watched over you with unwearied attention during the helplessness of infancy ; how they supplied you with food and raiment, and ministered to all your wants ; how they denied themselves many innocent gratifications, perhaps deprived themselves occasionally even of food, that their children might have enough—if you lay these things to heart, you surely must acknowledge, that every feeling and expression of love which you can possibly show, is little enough in return for such unceasing kindness.

Where this love really exists, it will go a great

way towards ensuring the fulfilment of all the other duties which children owe to their parents. It will, for instance, tend to render them *obedient*, and to make their obedience willing and cheerful, instead of being constrained and sullen. *Obedience* to parents is strongly inculcated in the holy Scriptures. Not only does the fifth commandment enjoin you to honour your father and mother, of which honour obedience is a principal part—but St. Paul says expressly in the text, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord; for this is right;” and again, to the Colossians, “Children, obey your parents in all things; for this is well-pleasing unto the Lord.” Every one must immediately see that this duty is founded upon the strongest and clearest reason. Children for many years are altogether incapable of governing themselves in the slightest degree; even when they grow older, and their reason begins to unfold itself, they still, if left to themselves, would be led almost entirely by their own appetites, and passions, and fancies; and it is absolutely necessary that they should be guided and controlled by wiser heads than their own. Their parents not only have more experience in the world, but must be supposed to have their children’s welfare at heart, and to be guided by a view to their best interest, when they check and control them by that authority with which God has invested them. Happy would it be for the children, happy for the parents, and happy for the world at large, if this authority were more frequently and steadily exercised. Children naturally like to have their own way; and many parents, either from a mistaken fondness, or in order to save themselves trouble, suffer them to do as they like, to walk after the desires of their hearts and the sight of their own eyes. The consequence too often is, that the children grow up to be the grief and re-

proach of their parents, a misery to themselves, and the pests of society.

My object now, however, is to enforce the duty of obedience upon children. You are to “obey,” says St. Paul, “in all things”—in all things, that is, which are allowed by the laws of God, or the laws of the land. If, indeed, a parent should unhappily bid a child do any thing plainly and decidedly contrary to the divine law, here God must be obeyed rather than man. And if, when the reason of a young person is considerably matured, a parent should enjoin any thing which would, in the opinion of judicious persons, be likely to render life unhappy, a respectful refusal may be lawful. Generally speaking, however, obedience to parents is the clear and positive duty of their offspring, not only until the age of twenty-one years, when the laws of the country allow them to act for themselves, but, to a certain degree, as long as they live. The punishment of disobedient children, under the Mosaic law—which, you will remember, proceeded from God himself—was most dreadful. “If a man have a stubborn and rebellious son, which will not obey the voice of his father, or the voice of his mother, and that, when they have chastened him, will not hearken unto them; then shall his father and his mother lay hold on him, and bring him out unto the elders of his city, and unto the gate of his place; and they shall say unto the elders of his city, This our son is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard. And all the men of his city shall stone him with stones, that he die.”^a In the same book it is said, “Cursed be he that setteth light by his father or his mother. And all the people shall say, Amen.”^b

^a Deut. xxi. 18.

^b Deut. xxvii. 16.

Whatever alteration maturity of years and understanding may make in some cases with regard to *obedience*, it makes none in the *respect* and *reverence* which are due to parents as long as they live. Indeed, it seems not impossible that some feelings of this nature may find place even after this life is over. In a future state, indeed, all human distinctions will have ceased, and the spirits of the just made perfect "neither marry nor are given in marriage;" but it seems to me that a filial feeling of respect may even then continue, and add to the happiness of both children and parents who meet in the realms of bliss.

Most earnestly do I exhort all who have parents to treat them always with the utmost deference and respect, and to nourish in their bosoms an habitual feeling of filial reverence. Never allow yourselves to behave towards them, or to speak to them in a slighting or disrespectful manner. Parents should, for their children's sake, if not for their own, immediately check any approach to behaviour of this nature; but even if they weakly permit it, let not children so take advantage of their indulgence as to lose the feeling of honour and respect. This feeling will induce you to listen to their admonitions and advice with attention, and to receive their reproofs with meekness. If they should be led into any hastiness of speech, any warmth or intemperance of language, you must bear with them, not answering again, or not answering but with submission and respect. If your parents have their failings and imperfections, whether arising from the infirmities of age, or from natural character, you should be very backward to observe them; and if you cannot help seeing them, must conceal them carefully from the eyes of the world. Bad, indeed, must be the heart, and most depraved both the feelings and the understanding of that man, who can be

guilty of exposing to others the weaknesses of a parent, or of treating them as a matter of jest or ridicule. "Glory not in the dishonour of thy father; for thy father's dishonour is no glory unto thee."^c Most men who are governed by the common feelings of nature, agree in looking upon such behaviour with abhorrence and disgust; and it appears to fall under the awful censure expressed in the book of Proverbs—"The eye that mocketh his father, and despiseth to obey his mother, the ravens of the valley shall pick it out, and the young eagles shall eat it."^d

Another important part of the duty to parents, is that of affording them *relief* and *support*, if they are reduced to want it. This is comprehended in the term *honour*; for thus our Saviour explains the word in his reproof of the Pharisees for making this commandment of none effect through their tradition—"God commanded," says he, "Honour thy father and mother—but ye say, Whosoever shall say to his father or his mother, it is a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me"—that is, what should have relieved you, I have devoted to religious purposes—whosoever shall say thus—"and honour not his father or his mother, he shall be free."^e Or, as it is in St. Mark, "Ye suffer him no more to do aught for his father or his mother."^f In several other passages of Scripture the term *honour* appears to bear the same meaning.

The laws of this country require those who are able, to provide subsistence for their parents when reduced to poverty, and the voice of nature and of God speaks the same language. As parents supplied the wants of their children during the helplessness of infancy, so their children, in return,

^c Ecclus. iii. 10.

^e Matt. xv. 4, 5, 6.

^d Prov. xxx. 17.

^f Mark vii. 12.

should minister to their necessities during the feebleness and infirmities of old age. Their feelings of love, and gratitude, and respect, forbid them to leave a father or a mother exposed to distress, if they can remove it. They should exert themselves to procure comforts for their parents, and never allow them to become a burden to others if they are able to prevent it. St. Paul directs that both "children and nephews"—(which word should here be rendered grandchildren)—should "learn first to show pity at home, and to requite their parents"^g—to requite them, to repay them that care, and attention, and maintenance, which they received in their childhood.

In short, children are called upon to succour their parents, to comfort and assist them, in whatever manner they are able, and to do all that they can to contribute to the ease and happiness of their declining years. The common feelings of humanity enforce these lessons. Corrupted as our nature is, yet still, those who are regardless of the wants and distresses of their parents, are justly blamed and reproached by all around them. The voice of nature seems to speak the language of the son of Sirach—"My son, help thy father in his age, and grieve him not as long as he liveth. And if his understanding fail, have patience with him; and despise him not when thou art in thy full strength."^h "He that feareth the Lord will honour his father, and will do service unto his parents, as to his masters."ⁱ And a few verses after, "He that forsaketh his father is a blasphemer; and he that angereth his mother is cursed of God."^k

In the Scriptures we have several awful instances

^g 1 Tim. v. 4.

ⁱ Eccclus. iii. 7.

^h Eccclus. iii. 12, 13.

^k Eccclus. iii. 16.

of disobedient children; and, on the other hand, some beautiful examples of dutifulness and filial love. The affection which Joseph showed to his aged parent, when he wished to nourish him in his declining years, and the respect with which he treated him, are familiar, I trust, to most of you. Of Solomon we read, when his mother came to speak unto him, that "the king rose up to meet her, and bowed himself unto her, and sat down on his throne, and caused a seat to be set for the king's mother; and she sat on his right hand."^m Our blessed Lord, "who gave us an example that we should follow his steps," was dutifully subject unto his parents;ⁿ and almost the last words that he spoke, when expiring on the cross, were those in which he recommended his mother (whose soul, according to the prophecy of the aged Simeon, was now pierced through with the sword of anguish^o) to the care of his beloved disciple.

Let these examples, together with the express precepts of the Scripture and the voice of nature itself, induce you to be affectionate, and dutiful, and obedient to your parents. Remember the awful judgments denounced in the word of God against undutiful children. Remember that St. Paul, in the Epistle to the Romans, classes those who are without natural affection and disobedient to parents, together with men who are haters of God, and full of murder, deceit, and malignity.^p And in the second Epistle to Timothy, he speaks of disobedience to parents, as being one of the signs of the perilous times which should come in the last days, when men should be proud, blasphemous, without natural affection, and despisers of those that are good.^q God grant that we may not be called to see such unhappy signs of the times!

^l 1 Kings ii. 19.

^m Rom. i. 29, 30.

ⁿ Luke ii. 51.

^o 2 Tim. iii. 2, 3.

^p Luke ii. 35.

If in time past any of you have been unmindful of the duty which you owe to your parents, confess your sinfulness to God with shame and confusion of face. There are, perhaps, few kinds of sin, which, when the heart is rightly affected, will occasion deeper shame or more sincere contrition. Implore the forgiveness of God, through the merits and atonement of his Son; and if you still have opportunity, endeavour to make amends to your parents for your past transgressions, by redoubled attention and affection. Comply as far as you possibly can with all their wishes; receive their admonitions with respect; kindly minister to their wants; and bear patiently with their failings and infirmities. In earnest prayer seek the aid of the Holy Spirit to enable you to fulfil these duties as you ought to fulfil them; and ever bear in mind, that the best feelings of nature, the common judgment of mankind, and the express and solemn precepts of the word of God, all concur in requiring you to *love, honour, and succour your father and mother.*

The Child's Prayer for Parents.

(From Jenks.)

O Lord, my *heavenly* Father, I humbly beg thy blessing, grace, and mercy upon my parents. Cast them not away in the time of old age, forsake them not when their strength faileth them; but have compassion on their infirmities, and help them in all their weakness. O remember not against them any of their former iniquities; but according to thy mercy remember them for thy goodness sake in Christ Jesus. Grant that true wisdom may ever be with them; that their hoary heads may be found

in the way of righteousness, and their souls be ever precious in thy sight. Let goodness and mercy follow them all the days of their life; and the longer they live in this world, make them still the readier to die, and the fitter to live with thee in life eternal. Be thou their guide until death; in death their support and comfort; and when all on earth shall fail them, be thou the strength of their hearts and their portion for ever, through Jesus Christ.