

### SERMON III.

YOUNG MEN CAUTIONED AGAINST BAD COMPANY.

I COR. XV. 33.

Evil communications corrupt good manners.

AMONG the many dangers against which we all have to guard, those especially who are just setting out on the journey of life, and beginning to think themselves their own masters, one of the most destructive is that which arises from keeping bad company. *Evil communications*, says the apostle, *corrupt good manners*. Even those whose characters appear to be in some degree formed, who have made some progress in the ways of holiness, and whose *manners* as yet are comparatively *good*, cannot keep bad company without danger of being corrupted. Where, however, the character is still unsettled, and the *manners*, instead of being good, are rather disposed to follow the guidance of appetite, or passion, or fancy, without regard to religion, such danger becomes still greater.

The pernicious effects of keeping bad company proceed from several causes. One of the principal of these is the *power and force of example*.

Of the power of example no one is ignorant. We know how almost all men, especially those

whose characters have the pliancy and easiness of youth, are apt to imitate, almost involuntarily, the example of those with whom they associate. If the companions with whom young men principally live, are in their conduct governed by the laws of sound reason and genuine religion—by a regard to the will of God—such conduct will have a satisfactory influence upon all who associate with them. They will become more and more confirmed in good principles, and right habits and dispositions; and while they promote their own happiness and well-being, will grow in favour with God and man. *He, says the Scripture, he that walketh with wise men shall be wise*;\*—and he that, like David, resolves to be *the companion of those that fear God and keep his commandments*, will catch from them something of the spirit by which they are actuated, and will probably become good from the force of good example. If, on the other hand, any one, one especially who as yet is young and inexperienced, is unhappily thrown much into the society of men who make light of all the precepts and sanctions of religion, great indeed is the danger of his being corrupted by them. It is probable that from his parents and his teachers—indeed from the suggestions of his own conscience—he has received some notions of right and wrong, some good impressions, which, at first, will be greatly shocked by what he sees and hears upon coming among such evil associates. But soon his right principles and right feelings will be weakened, perhaps entirely effaced, by communication with such men; and his own passions, and appetites, and lusts will prompt him to throw off, like his companions,

\* Prov. xiii. 20.

the restraints laid on them by religion and conscience.

The dread and the hatred of sin is, of course, greatly lessened by seeing it commonly practised, especially when practised by those with whom the young man intimately associates. When he sees them without fear indulging all their corrupt desires, and giving free scope to debauchery and sensuality, he will too soon be encouraged to run with them to *the same excess of riot*. His natural appetites are as strong as theirs, and their example emboldens him to give way to his appetites, without trying to control them.

But he will be corrupted, not only by the actual *example* of his bad companions, but by the *language* which they are in the habit of using—not only by what they *do*, but by what they *say*. They are in the habit of constantly indulging in that foolish talking and jesting which St. Paul speaks of as inconsistent with the Christian character. In their corrupt communications they freely and without shame speak of sensual indulgences, and of sins which ought not to be named among Christians, with careless levity, and as a matter of jest and merriment. Nothing tends more than such conversation to break down all the safeguards of virtue, and to grieve and drive from us the good Spirit of God. A thoughtless young man is apt to be taken by the appearance, which his loose associates put on, of caring for nothing, and of making a jest of things which are held in respect by sober-minded and sensible men. *In the latter days*, says the apostle, *shall be scoffers, walking after their own lusts.\** Men who are bent upon walking after

\* 2 Pet. iii. 3.

their own lusts are in great danger of becoming *scoffers*, of getting a habit of laughing and joking about things most awfully serious. Their ignorance and their folly possibly may even be carried so far as to induce them to treat religion itself with contempt, and to say, *The Lord shall not see, neither shall the God of Jacob regard it.—What is the Almighty, that we should serve him; or what profit shall we have if we pray unto him?*

The living much with *one* man of this character is likely to be attended with most hurtful consequences; and the danger is dreadfully increased when such companions are *many*. The influence of bad example of course becomes more powerful and more contagious from numbers. Men in general are easily swayed by the example of those in whose company they are. In spite it may be of the suggestions of reason and common sense, and of the checks of conscience, they weakly suffer themselves to be led away by their associates. They weakly think and say that they *must do as others do*, that they cannot stand out from the rest, without reflecting on the real nature and certain consequence of such foolish and unmanly conduct. They should rather remember the solemn injunctions of Scripture, *Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil.\** The example of numbers furnishes no excuse for bad conduct, nor will it lessen the punishment of guilt hereafter. When numbers join together for any sinful purpose, the injury is so much the greater to the peace and well-being of society, and may, even in this world, require to be visited with a punishment proportionably heavy. And in the great day of retribution, the number of the guilty will

\* Exod. xxiii. 2.

be no screen, no safeguard from the awful sentence of condemnation. *Though hand join in hand, the wicked shall not go unpunished.* Multitudes that have walked together *after the way of their own hearts*, in the paths of sin and folly, in the broad and easy way that leads to destruction, will together be condemned to that place of torment which is appointed for the wicked, and for those people that forget God.

*The companion of fools*, says the wise man, *shall be destroyed,\** and no men more deserve to be numbered among *fools*, than those who act in such manner, as if they said in their hearts, *There is no God*—those who, by the working of wickedness, give evident proof that they are without understanding.

One of the hurtful, the natural consequences of associating with bad men, which must not be entirely passed over, is the injury which it does, not only to a man's own moral and religious habits, but to his character and reputation in society.

Nobody is insensible to the value of *character*, to the importance of preserving a fair name and reputation among his neighbours. *A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches.†* A man often depends upon his character, not merely for his comfort and happiness in life, but even for actual subsistence. Consequently, it is generally considered, that wilfully to bring a slur upon a man's reputation, is to do him a cruel injury. Now every one sees that nothing is more hurtful to a man's character than his associating with bad men. He must expect to be judged of from his companions. And if, in defiance of all danger

\* Prov. xiii. 20.

† Prov. xxii. 1.

and of all warnings, he still clings to their society, it is too probable that, together with all other right feelings, he will lose even his regard for his own character, will become callous and insensible to shame, and be utterly given over to every evil word and work. *Were they ashamed, says the prophet, when they had committed iniquity? nay, they were not at all ashamed, neither could they blush.\** The being thus lost to shame, is a sad mark of hardened, incorrigible wickedness. Many a young man, who seemed to be setting out in life with every fair prospect of doing well both here and hereafter, has had all his fair prospects blasted, and been brought to utter ruin—ruin to his fortune, ruin to his health, ruin to his reputation, *ruin to his soul*—by unhappily falling into bad company, and then, by not having the resolution, the manliness, to extricate himself from it.

He has formed perhaps an intimacy with some young man of his own age, who has something pleasant and agreeable in his manners and general character, but has no regard for, no sense of, the obligations of religion. By him he is led into the society of other ignorant and thoughtless young men, equally devoid of religious principle. He is probably soon seduced by them into a neglect of all the duties of the Lord's day, and tempted to spend, in some idle amusement, the time that ought to be devoted to public worship. Under the same bad influence he accompanies them to the public-house, and joins them in drinking to excess, while he is more and more corrupted by the loose conversation, and by the swearing and profaneness which meet his ears. Perhaps his parents or some other friend, perhaps

\* Jer. vi. 15.

his *spiritual pastor*—the minister of the parish in which he lives—being aware of and lamenting his danger, may kindly warn and admonish him. But his unprincipled associates encourage him to laugh at all such admonition, and to treat them with contempt, and the evil pride and obstinacy which are natural to the heart of man are in unison with their suggestions. It is awful to think, that the Holy Spirit, being thus resisted and grieved, may at length altogether depart from him, and leave him to make utter shipwreck of his conscience, utter shipwreck of his soul.

Let me therefore earnestly exhort you—and I entreat parents, and all who take an interest in the good conduct and well-being of the young, to enforce and second the exhortation—let me, I say, earnestly exhort young men especially, who are most exposed to this temptation, to be ever on their guard against the many and great dangers which arise from keeping bad company. Avoid the first beginnings, the first inlets, of this danger. Never form an intimacy with men of bad character, men who have no regard for religion. In the various transactions, the multiplied business of life, you may occasionally be thrown into the company of such men, but do not willingly, and of choice, enter much into their society. When unavoidably engaged in their company, though you should certainly behave towards them with civility and courtesy, yet you should be on your guard, like a man who feels himself to be in an enemy's country, like a man who knows himself to be surrounded by danger. Remember the warning of St. Paul: *I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother—that is, a brother Christian—be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a*

*drunkard, or an extortioner: with such a one no not to eat.\** Remember too the blessedness which in the first psalm is spoken of as belonging to him *who hath not walked in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stood in the way of sinners, and hath not sat in the seat of the scornful.†* The sitting in the seat of the scornful, the sitting in company with men who scoff at, who make a jest of serious things, is likely to be attended with most hurtful consequences. The men against whose society I am warning you, may have many pleasant and engaging qualities, in addition to the temptations which they hold forth to your sensual appetites; but let not any of these temptations seduce or entice you to become their associate. *My son, if sinners entice thee, consent thou not. My son, walk not thou in the way with them; refrain thy foot from their path—for their feet run to evil—their feet go down to death—their steps take hold on hell.‡*

If unhappily you have already fallen much into the society of immoral and irreligious men, the sooner you can extricate yourselves, the sooner you can break off the connexion, the better. I do not ask you to behave towards them with harshness, with any degree of unkindness, but firmly resolve quietly to avoid their society—society in which you cannot continue without endangering your dearest interests, without peril to your soul. *Come out from among them, saith the Scripture, and be ye separate, and touch not the unclean thing,§* that ye be not partakers of their evil deeds. If you continue in their society, you will hardly help being partakers of their evil deeds—hardly help being corrupted by their evil

\* 1 Cor. v. 11.

† Prov. i. 10, 15, 16; v. 5.

‡ Psa. i. 1.

§ 2 Cor. vi. 17.

communications, their bad example, and consequently will be in danger of being partakers of their punishment. If you wilfully keep company, while on earth, with the enemies of God and goodness, you will be in danger of being condemned hereafter to live for ever in the wretched society of wicked spirits in hell. It is a most awful consideration, that in the world to come every one of us must be *either* the companion of devils or the companion of angels.

Endeavour then, I entreat you, more and more to cultivate the acquaintance, to seek the society of those who love God, and humbly try to keep his commandments, those who sincerely believe in the Gospel of his Son Jesus Christ, and show the reality of their faith in the unblameableness and holiness of their life. So, by the help of the Divine Spirit, may you become more and more prepared to become hereafter a member of the society of the blessed, the society of *an innumerable company of angels, the general assembly and church of the first-born, which are written in heaven, of the spirits of just men made perfect, and of Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant.\**

\* Heb. xii. 22, 23, 24.

*The Prayer.*

O God, by thy providence and thy grace preserve me, I beseech thee, from the way of sinners, from the society of evil men, and from the contagion of bad example. O hold thou up my going in thy paths, that my footsteps slip not. Make me the companion of those that fear thee, and keep thy commandments. And after walking before thee and with thy servants while on earth, bring me at last into the glorious assembly of just men made perfect, through the merits of the Mediator of the new covenant, Jesus Christ our Lord.

*Texts to be committed to memory.*

Evil communications corrupt good manners.  
*1 Cor. xv. 33.*

Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil.  
*Exod. xxiii. 2.*

The companion of fools shall be destroyed.  
*Prov. xiii. 20.*

Were they ashamed when they had committed iniquity? nay, they were not at all ashamed, neither could they blush. *Jer. vi. 15.*

I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner: with such a one no not to eat. *1 Cor. v. 11.*

Blessed is the man that hath not walked in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stood in the way of

sinner, and hath not sat in the seat of the scornful. *Psa. i. 1.*

My son, if sinners entice thee, consent thou not. My son, walk not thou in the way with them; refrain thy foot from their path—for their feet run to evil—their feet go down to death—their steps take hold on hell. *Prov. i. 10, 15, 16; v. 5.*

Come out from among them, and be ye separate, and touch not the unclean thing. *2 Cor. vi. 17.*

I have not dwelt with vain persons; neither will I have fellowship with the deceitful. I have hated the congregation of the wicked; and will not sit among the ungodly. *Psa. xxvi. 4, 5.*

A froward heart shall depart from me; I will not know a wicked person. *Psa. ci. 4.*

## SERMON IV.

---

SWEARING.

---

JAMES V. 12.

Above all things, my brethren, swear not.

OF the many sins into which young men are apt to fall, from the bad example of others, and their own thoughtlessness, one of the most prevalent is the senseless habit of profane swearing.

There is hardly any sinful habit which admits of so little excuse, or which more plainly indicates a want of proper reverence for God's name, an absence of serious religious principles.

The name of God is pronounced in Scripture to be *holy and reverend*,\* and you well know the respect for that holy name which is enjoined in the third commandment: *Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain: for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.*† God will not hold guiltless—will surely punish—those who make use of his great name to confirm a falsehood; those, in other words, who knowingly take a false oath, who are guilty of perjury. Neither will he hold guiltless those thoughtless persons who profane his holy name by using it as a light by-word. The words of

\* *Psa. cxi. 9.*

† *Exod. xx. 7.*