

A song in the house of their pilgrimage, verse 54. When the water of God's wrath is coming down, he is a wise man that climbs to such a branch of the tree of life growing on the banks, and holds by it till the flood be over. Amen.



December 22, 1705.

ON THE GOVERNMENT OF THE TONGUE.

SERMON XXXVII.

JAMES iii. 6,

*The tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity.*

THE keeping of the tongue is one of those duties, that entitles a man to safety from evil times, and therefore must now be urged as a seasonable duty. "What man is he that desireth life, and loveth many days, that he may see good? Keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile." The difficulty of this duty is such, that James saith, "If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body." The wisest monarch could hardly govern a great part of the world; how difficult then must it be to govern a world, and that a world of iniquity. The tongue is a world of iniquity, a heap of evils; as in the world many things are contained, so in the tongue.

I shall endeavour to make some discovery of this world of iniquity. As it is beyond my power, so it is not my design to make a full discovery of it. We must leave a void for the unknown parts of it. But behold a few of them: This world of iniquity is divided into two parts, undue silence, and sinful speaking. These are the higher and lower parts of this world, yet quickly may men travel from the one to the other. I shall speak of these in their order.

I. Undue silence, when the tongue rests idle, when God calls it to work. Our tongues are our glory, and should not be involved in a dark cloud of silence, when God calls them to shine forth.

1. Silence is unseasonable, when sin rageth and roareth. When men are dishonouring God, it is sad that our tongues should be nailed. When men declare their sin, as Sodom, it is sad that in our mouths there should be no reproofs. "Thou shalt in any wise

rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him." Our tongues testify that we are men, and they should shew we are Christians and in a covenant with God, offensive and defensive. "For the zeal of thine house," saith David, "hath eaten me up: and the reproaches of them that reproached thee, are fallen upon me." By this undue silence, we are injurious to God, in that we do not vindicate his glory, bespattered with the sins of others. His glory, I say, who hath given us a tongue as a banner, to be displayed because of truth. To run away here with flying colours, doubles the dishonour of God; while he is once dishonoured by the sinner, and again, by the silent professor, Mark viii. 38.

This undue silence is also injurious to our neighbour. We see him pulling down the house about his ears, and yet we will not help him; selling his soul for a trifle, and yet we do not bid him rue his bargain. O horrid cruelty! to stand with our tongues in silence, when the devil often casteth our neighbour into the fire.

It is injurious likewise, to ourselves, for thereby we adopt the devil's children brought forth by others, and set down their debts to our own account, Eph. v. 7—11. Other men's sins that we have occasioned, become ours, by silence, which gives consent; and the flame that burns up their house, will consume our own, if it be not quenched with a testimony against it. This silence also leaves a sting in our conscience, which remains inactive in the hearts of some for a while; but when the opportunity of bearing testimony against sin is gone, it bites dreadfully the hearts of those, whose consciences are not seared.

2. When an opportunity of edifying others inviteth us to speak, "let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth; but that which is good, to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers." O what iniquity is contracted, by the neglect of heavenly discourse among professors. A dumb Christian is a very unprofitable servant. A philosopher seeing a man with a fair face and a silent tongue, bade him speak, that he might see him. When scholars or merchants meet, we know what they are by their discourse; and why should not Christians also discover themselves. When men of the same nation, meet in foreign countries, they speak the language of their own country. I will say but three things of this neglect:

1. Dumb Christians are very unlike Christ, whose ordinary way it was to spiritualize all things, and turn the current of the discourse toward heaven. This we see exemplified in every part of his history.

2. Either there is no religion at all, or but very little, in that

heart. Nearest the heart, nearest the mouth. If fire be upon the hearth, the smoke will come out at the chimney. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another, in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; singing with grace in your hearts, to the Lord."

3. They are very useless sort of people; like the vine that is fruitless. "Shall wood be taken thereof, to do any work? or will men take a pin of it, to hang any vessel thereon?"

3. Silence is unseasonable when our wants are crying. These should make us cry to God, like that woman, who cried to the king of Israel, saying, "Help, my Lord, O King." O! what a dreadful thing is it, to think that a dumb devil should so possess the hearts of many, who will not call upon God. That tongue shall be tormented in hell flames, that will not now cry to God by prayer. "God will pour out his fury upon the heathen, and upon the families that call not upon his name." They have tongue enough for the world, that have none for God and their poor souls. The wicked, through the pride of his countenance, will not seek after God: God is not in all his thoughts.

II. Sinful speaking; when the tongue is exercised, but ill exercised; and this is a throng piece of this world of iniquity. I may divide it again into two parts, one against our duty to God, the the other against our duty to man, where *mind ourself* is our nearest neighbour. Only there is one part of this world of iniquity, that scorns to be bounded by either of these, and that is talkativeness, or much speaking; of which we may say they set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue walketh through the earth. Some are ever talking, and are never in their element, but when they are prattling; and when once they begin, it as difficult to stop them, or get word about, as to stop a flood of water, and turn the stream another way. Though they speak little, yet long. Their words clatter like a loose window in wind; whereby, though they give vent to their own pride, yet they grate the ears of others, and make them sit on thorns. I will say but two things of it.

1. It is a sign of a loose and frothy heart, where there is little of the fear of God. "Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth; therefore let thy words be few." God hath given us two ears, and but one tongue, and that with a twofold guard upon it. "Wherefore, my beloved brethren," says James, "let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath." "Wise men lay up knowledge, but the mouth of the foolish is near to destruction."

2. It is the fool's badge. "A fool's voice is known by multitude of words." It is the empty barrel that makes most noise. Such persons from want of acquaintance with themselves, present a fool to others, while they think him a wise man. They that are given to much speaking, seldom speak well. This made an orator ask a double fine of a talkative scholar; one to learn him to speak well, another to teach him to hold his peace. We should be like the virtuous woman. She openeth her mouth with wisdom. Her mouth is not always open, but duly shut, and discreetly opened. Her words are few, true, and useful. Now come we to the

I. Which is against our duty to God. Here I shall pitch on,

1. Rash swearing by the name of God. "Swear not at all," says our Saviour. O how is the name of God rent by black mouthed atheists in our day, whose discourse bewrayeth them to be hellileans. There is swearing also by the creatures, as by our conscience, faith, truth, and the like. These, men will rather minch and keep, than fairly give up; hence a brood of minched oaths, as Mary, good faith, and the like. And the little faith that is in the world, makes men hang by a hair of an oath, after they have been beaten from the more gross expressing of it; so by faith, is turned to faith, and by is cut off; then it is turned to faicks, then haith; and they will rather eat in letters, and keep three, than lose that hellish ornament of discourse, hence, fai, do ye; hai, do ye. And persons using these, we will see at our own communion table. But, sinners, what pleasure or profit accompanies this sin. Other sins have something of this nature; this has nothing. You must then love it for itself; a pure devilish love indeed.

Again, know ye what a terrible one God is, that you dare abuse his name; even that dreadful name, at which the devils tremble; that name, to which ye shall bow at length, whether you will or not. Are you not afraid he banish you to hell, while the oath is in your mouth; where you will get a long eternity to blaspheme his name. And you that dare not swear by God, but by your faith and the like, how dare you swear by them that are no gods, Jer. v. 7. This is a piece of idolatry, and I fear your God (I mean your faith), will not save you at length. They have little or nothing of faith in their hearts, that have it so often in their mouths.

Once more, God will be avenged on you for these things, if you repent not, Jer. v. 7—9. Thy swearing will damn thy soul. "Above all things, my brethren," says the apostle James, "swear not, lest ye fall into condemnation." O! then swear no more, lest God swear in his wrath, that you shall not enter into his rest. "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.”

OBJECTION 1. God forbid that be true, that God will be so severe for words.

ANSWER. Words are a wind that will blow you to hell: For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned. Mind also the roll's dimensions, Zech. v. 2, 3. There it is contained, every one that sweareth, shall be cut off as on that side, according to it. The roll exactly answers the dimensions of their houses, and of the porch of the temple where the law was taught, 1 Kings vi. 3. It will make you completely miserable, the execution exactly answering the threatening.

OBJECTION 2. I never swear but when angry.

ANSWER. Nor does God ever damn a man for swearing, or any other sin, but when he is angry. Is it God that offends you? Why do you set your tongues against the heavens, when your fellow worms displease you?

OBJECTION 3. I have got a custom of it.

ANSWER. Custom is no defence. Is not thy sin then the more heinous? If a man has a custom of reproaching you, will that justify his conduct? Whence is this custom, but from your casting off God's fear.

OBJECTION 4. It is a common thing.

ANSWER. So much the worse. The men of the world conspire against God and dishonour him, and therefore you do so too; then, you shall perish with the world. Sooth not yourselves with that, that if it be ill with you, it will be ill with many one; for although most men should perish eternally, surely it will be no comfort to go to hell with company.

2. A light, irreverent, and profane using of the name of God, in common talk. We are not worthy to take his name in our mouths, much less ought we to abuse it in common talk. Would we speak of God with reverence, we should speak as in his sight and hearing, and this would cut off the irreverent use of God's name in any little matter that fools wonder at, or pretend to wonder at, and fear, as “God bless us, save us, Christ have a care of us, Lord have mercy on us.” My brethren, the blessing of God is a matter of great moment, and you should either seek it on the bended knees of your body, or, at least, of your heart. But it is not they that are serious with God for these things, that use to seek them in this way.

It would cut off also, the irreverent use of God's name in obsecrations; “as for God's sake, love of God, Christ's sake,” &c. These things may be used in weighty matters, but in trifles they are horrid. Let them be great things, that concern your own or your

neighbour's life or salvation, that you will seek for God's sake. When you do it, do it with reverence, as in his sight.

It would likewise cut off irreverence, in appeals to God in mere trifles, as, "God knows, where he is I know not." The omniscience of God is no matter of moonshine. The serious thoughts of it may make the best of us to tremble, and the worst of us not to make light of it.

It would do this also in prayers for the dead. Some cannot speak of the dead without a prayer, that perhaps never prayed for them while living. The dead are in an unchangeable state; and by these things you may bring down wrath on the living, but no help to the dead.

Many such ways is God's name abused. Yea, it is common with many to be very liberal of God's name, as "let him do it in God's name." Nay, many will have God or Lord in their discourse, when neither others nor themselves know what they would be at by it, as, "Lord man!" But I fear we are not at the bottom yet of the dunghill. Know ye God, that he is the Lord, and holy is his name.

3. Cursing; whereby we wish some horrid ill to ourselves or neighbours; but, because it is a kind of profane prayer, I speak of it under this head. This is done, either, 1. By expressing the name of God, as in these, "God damn, confound," &c. Oh! what if God should take these poor wretches at their wish, they would find that damnation is no matter of sport. 2. The name of God sometimes is supposed, but the profane prayer is belched out, as, "I would ye may break your neck," &c, in which men call on God to be an executioner of their wicked and passionate sentences on themselves or others. 3. Hitherto I refer to the invoking of the devil. O! what homage does the devil get from many Christians, who are found oftener praying to him than to God, as, "Devil take me." Sometimes they change, and mince his name, as, "foul fiend, sorrow one, for devil one," &c. These are the Goliahs, that boast and curse themselves or others by their God.

O! beware of cursing, James iii. 9—11. It is very provoking to God, and pleasing to the devil, who is also ready to take you by your word, when he can get leave. It is the character of a wicked man. "His mouth is full of cursing, and deceit, and fraud; under his tongue is mischief and vanity." Cursing will bring a curse upon you, if repentance prevent not. "As he loved cursing, so let it come to him; as he delighted not in blessing, so let it be far from him. As he clothed himself with cursing, like as with his garment, so let it come into his bowels like water, and like oil into his bones."

4. Profaning of scripture phrases, by jesting or scoffing on the scriptures; or using them to express the conceptions of men's wanton wits, alluding to them in common talk, and the like. Alas! this is much used by the profane generation, who hold forth their contempt of the word, by these means. It is knowing persons readily, that are guilty. This is an affronting of God, whose sacred oracles the scriptures are. The heathens paid a profound respect to the oracles of their gods. The Jews and primitive Christians, had a great respect for the scriptures; so have all the godly, in all ages. If men should treat our letters to them at this rate, how would we take it. Remember the Scriptures are the word by which you shall be judged. The man that would burn his rights to land, or like a child, tear them and dress babies with them, would soon be denuded of his estate; so they who thus treat the Bible, will soon be denuded of heaven, of which the scriptures are the rights.

5. Mocking of religion and seriousness. There are some, in whose consciences the piety of others leaves a sting, and therefore they endeavour to laugh it away, and mock at those who are serious, and reproach them for that which is their glory. "They that sit in the gate, speak against me," says David, "and I was the song of the drunkards." To mockers, I would say,

Your sport is not that of God's people. Let me see an instance in all the Bible, of a mocker that was a godly man. "The godly man sitteth not in the seat of the scorner." And as this practice of mocking leads the way to the sin against the Holy Ghost, so there is scarcely any thing except that sin, that is so sure a sign of a ruinous state.

Again, you do but make the cords with which you shall be bound under the wrath of God for ever. "Now, therefore, be not mockers, lest your bands be made strong." If ever you get repentance, and be saved, you must be saved in that way you mock now. Either you must be like them you mock, or perish for ever: "For without holiness no man shall see the Lord."

**OBJECTION.** It is but hypocrisy that we mock.

**ANSWER.** But that is a horrid untruth. If it be so, why do you not imitate those you mock, so far as they do well? Why do you not shew as much distaste of the ways of the openly wicked? But how come you to judge men's hearts, when their outward actions appear good? Nay, let us entreat you to try religion, and be not as these, who speak evil of the things they know not, but what they know naturally, as brute beasts, in those things they corrupt themselves. I would give you such advice as was given to the Athenians, that they should be sure that Philip was dead, before they expressed

joy for his death. Be sure that there is no reality in religion, before you mock at it.

6. Reasoning against religion, and defending sinful opinions and practices. This is very frequent with men who love carnal liberty, and so endeavour to shelter sinful practices, under the cloak of reason; yea, and the Scriptures too, by which they bring God himself to be a patron to their wickedness." But the curse is denounced against these. "Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter.

*Lastly*, Murmuring and complaining. Proud hearts make us fret at the dispensations of providence. This sets the tongue on fire, and hence some are ever complaining, as if their tongues had been given them for no other end, but to accuse God. Read Jude 14, 15, 16. It is a base tongue that will proclaim our crosses, and bury our mercies, though the last are far more numerous than the former.

II. Against our duty to man. I shall here specify these following things,

1. Idle speaking. That is, words spoken to no good purpose, tending neither to the glory of God, nor the good of ourselves or others, either in spiritual or temporal things. This is condemned. "But I say unto you," said Jesus, "that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof, in the day of judgment." It may be comprehended under that foolish talking which is not convenient; rash, roving, and impertinent discourse, which doth no good to the hearers, but bewrays the folly of the speaker. It will not be long ere our speech be laid, so that it is sad to waste our little breath so idly. We have enough besides, to fill our accounts, though we wanted that. A gracious soul will beware of idle words, as of vain thoughts.

2. A trade of jesting. Paul says, "Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient." It is not unlawful to pass an innocent jest, to produce a moderate recreation. But if a jest be allowed to be sauce to our conversation, yet it is impious to make it the meat. For a man to make every word a jest, is fitter for a stage than Christian gravity. And seldom, if ever, is it so managed, but it is offensive both to God and man; but some will rather lose their friend than their jest.

3. Lying; of which there are four sorts: 1. Pernicious. 2. Officious. 3. The sporting lie. 4. The rash lie; when men through inadvertency, and customary looseness, tell an untruth; as when tidings were brought to David, saying, Absalom hath slain all the king's sons, and there is not one of them left. This is so common,

that we may say truth hath fallen in the streets. Few so tender, as to avoid making a lie. Consider God is a God of truth, and therefore it is most contrary to his nature, and the devil is the father of lies. It is a badge of the old man. "Lie not one to another, seeing ye have put off the old man." The godly are children that will not lie. A lying tongue is an abomination to the Lord, and lies will lodge the soul with the devil for ever. All liars shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone. Say not it is only to do good to others, for we must not speak wickedly for God. Some lie to keep others from sin, but it is an excess of charity for a man to damn his own soul, to save another's. If it is to make sport, surely that grieves the Spirit of God, and is indeed sport to the devil. Or, if you say you know no better, remember God has given you a heart to think before you speak, and before you speak you should be sure.

4. Uncharitable speaking of truth, to the wounding of the reputation of others. It is not enough, that what ill we speak of others be true, but the speaking of it must bring a greater, than the disadvantage the party gets by it. This brought the curse on Ham and his posterity, Gen. ix. 22. And we should imitate Shem and Japheth, with respect to the faults of others. This uncharitable speaking is readily the effect of pride, while others are cast down, that we may rise on their ruins; or of envy which, like the flies, pass over the sound parts, and feed on the sores in the body. It is most contrary to charity, which covers the multitude of sins. Truth may come from a malicious heart, as in Doeg's case, 1 Sam. xxii. 8, 9 This does not stop at the real faults of others, but oftentimes breaks out to the natural defects of others, or to that which is really their affliction; in which that holds true, he that despiseth the poor, reproacheth his Maker.

5. Slandering or backbiting. Of this, three sorts of persons are guilty: 1. He that raiseth a false report of his neighbour, Exod. xxiii. 1. Here is a true son of the devil, with malice and lying in conjunction. 2. He who readily reports it, though he knows it to be false, as readily receives, though he is not sure it is true. 3. He that spreads it. This is a very common sin. Tale bearers and whisperers are found every where, whose tongues are swords to stab the reputation of others.

Ye do the devil's work, who is the accuser of the brethren. Ye are his special errand-bearers, and no doubt, will get such wages as he has to give. Consider that sad passage, Psal. l. 20, 22. "Therefore, speak not evil one of another, brethren. He that speaketh evil of his brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law."

6. Censoriousness, which construes the words and actions of others, always to the worse. Many are of such a waspish nature, that they can suck poison out of the sweetest flowers, and have an evil tale of every person, Matth, vii. 1, 2.

7. Flattery; a base kind of sin, by which men strive to humour others, at the loss of truth, to the great hurt of the party flattered. Of such a person it may be said, "The words of his mouth were smoother than butter, but war was in his heart; his words were softer than oil, yet were they drawn swords." But this is remarkable, that these that will speak fair before a man's face, will not stand to wound him behind his back. The Lord shall cut off all flattering lips, and the tongue that speaketh proud things.

8. Boasting; by which men talk big of themselves, or others concerned in them; trumpeting out their own praise, a sin which is odious in the sight of every man. Some boast themselves of what they have not. "Whoso boasteth himself of a false gift, is like clouds and wind without rain." Others, of what they have, setting it in a magnifying glass. These are the black roll, 2 Tim. iii. 2.

*Lastly*, Obscenity. "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth." This argues a rotten heart, and is ready to infect others. "Evil communications corrupt good manners." O! how like the devil, that unclean Spirit, do they look, who cannot hold within the bounds of common modesty. These are some of the most common parts of the world of iniquity.

INFERENCE 1. If the tongue be a world of iniquity, what must the heart be; for out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaketh. You may know the lion by his paw.

2. See wherein true greatness consists: to govern a world of iniquity. Here is work for you. To help you.

1. Labour to get the heart purified from these sins and lusts that it vents by the tongue. Quench the fire on the hearth, and the smoke will cease.

2. Get the fear of God impressed on your hearts, and walk as under the eye of an all-seeing God. This will be a bridle and a spur to the tongue, for it needs both. Amen.