

Ettrick, Fast before the Sacrament, June, 1712.

THE UNEQUALITY OF MAN'S WAYS.

SERMON XXII.

EZEKIEL xviii. 29,

Are not your ways unequal?

MEN may be under the deepest affliction, and yet far from true humiliation. A stone broken in a thousand pieces, each piece is a stone. A hard heart, untouched by the grace of God, will be an unhumiliated heart, under the severest affliction. Here is a people, some of them captives in Babylon, some of them in hard circumstances in their own land; both groaning under affliction, but not to God, but against God. Let not people wish the evil day, upon the assurance that it will humble the generation. If hell were opened to flash out on the faces of a graceless generation; if the fire of the Spirit do not withal melt their hearts, "the bellows are burnt, the lead is consumed of the fire; the founder melteth in vain; for the wicked are not plucked away." They will quarrel God's ways as unequal, as if they deserved not the punishments inflicted upon them; while in the meantime it may be justly retorted on them, as in the text, "Are not your ways unequal?"

The words are a solemn appeal made by God himself to this people themselves, touching their way and manner of life. Consider here,

1. The antagonists, even God, and his own people, on whom he had heaped benefits and privileges, and who had made to him repeated professions of duty; and here God being the complainer, and they defenders, there is no doubt they must lose the cause.

2. The crime libelled against them; the inequality of their ways. They had the impudence to charge God with unequalness in his ways; as if he had punished them for that of which they were not guilty. The Lord clears himself, vers. 26—28; then he retorts the charge upon themselves, that their ways were unequal. The word signifies such an inequality as there is betwixt two things that are weighed; but the one cannot balance the other, there is no proportion or equality betwixt them; so their ways in which they walked with God, their carriage and behaviour to him, was most unequal and unevenly. Unequal among themselves, unequal in respect of his ways towards them; so that bring the balance from heaven or from

earth by which their actions should be weighed, they would be found light, unequal, disagreeable and disproportionable. Well then might he say, "talk no more so exceeding proudly; let not arrogancy come out of your mouth; for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed." And this charge is made on all and every one of their ways, as is the import of the singular number joined with the plural, in the Hebrew text; as if he had said, take every one of them, weigh them one by one, with my dealings with you, or with one another, you shall find them a confused disorderly mass; the whole thread of your life nothing but outs and ins, the whole of your conversation a rabble of inequalities.

3. The bar to which God brings this plea: it is that of their own consciences, whose tribunal was within their own breasts. Here God condescends to plead his cause against the criminals, where they themselves should be both judge and parties; being assured that though their corruptions did pass sentence in their favours, yet their consciences would reverse that sentence, and oblige them, out of their own mouths, to pronounce themselves guilty. In such a matter, where conscience is made judge, the sinner must lose the cause.

This is a day in which conscience should be set on a tribunal, and each of us should sist ourselves before it, to have our cause there judged. There are two things call for this, this day.

I. God seems to be mounting his throne for judgment this day; and the dispensations of the day towards us, and our Protestant churches, seem to sound that alarm of the judge's coming. "For, behold, the Lord cometh out of his place, to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity: the earth also shall discover her blood, and shall no more cover her slain." Providence appears to be whetting the glittering sword, and his arm to take hold on vengeance. It is time for us now to be going inward into our own breasts, as Isa. vi. 1—5. We have three sad tokens of God's mounting his throne:

1. The posts of the temple door with us are moved, as Isa. vi. 4. By this was signified the pulling down of the door, and exposing the temple to the profane, Amos ix. 1. And is not that this day fulfilled before our eyes, by that most unbounded toleration now set on foot in this Church, under the shadow of which the vilest errors and blasphemies may set up their heads; and men on whom the door of our temple was most justly shut, may now come in with their profane lives, erroneous preaching, and superstitious worship; and others must come in by the door of a patron's presentation, a door of which there was no pattern shewn in the mount; while that which Christ himself appointed, the call of the Church, is broken

down; and it is just with God that it should be so, seeing, in the best times of this Church, it was never freely opened.

2. Our house is also filled with smoke, which is a token of anger, Psal. xviii. 8. Some have been long looking for the mountain of the ministry to fall a burning, though former experience has shewn that to be a forerunner of all being cast into the sea. And some have been, like Samson's foxes, going through this Church with their firebrands, to set all in a flame; but now, alas! that spark is cast in which has already filled the house with such smoke of contention as will break forth at length into a flame of division, to the rending of this poor Church, if God in mercy prevent not.

3. Our prophets mostly seem to be sent out with a heavy message, as Isa. vi. 9, 10. The generation, in spite of gospel light, is still growing worse and worse; and the more our wounds are handled, the more they corrupt and stink. And, truly, the preaching of the word seems, for this long time, to have been followed with a judicial obduration; as if their meat had been laid before them, to fit them for the slaughter.

Therefore set conscience on the tribunal beforehand, and let it impartially judge your hearts and lives, that you may get wrongs righted before the decree bring forth.

II. God is ascending a throne of mercy among us. We are to see in this place, in a solemn manner, God in Christ reconciling the world to himself; and possibly it may be the last which we may have of that sort, till from the throne of judgment there come forth thunderings, lightnings and voices, which may rend the hearts of those whom the still small voice from the mercy-seat cannot make to relent. Therefore set conscience beforehand on the tribunal, and let it make an impartial judgment of your state and case; for,

1. It is a day of pardons, and sealed pardons. But the malefactor must come with a sense of his crimes in his heart, a confession in his mouth, and the rope about his neck of self-condemnation.

2. It is a solemn marriage-day. But the bride must be taking farewell of her father's house, and her own people. She must be casting off her filthy rags, and putting on the wedding-garment. She must be considering what will please, and what will displease her husband; whether her heart be gained from all others or not; and whether or not she is every way pleased with the match; content to take him for better and worse, and to follow him whithersoever he goes; otherwise her heart will leap back, and the marriage be marred.

3. It is to be an exaltation day to sinners, in which they are to

be exalted to sit at Christ's table, to eat his flesh and drink his blood, and to have the covenant sealed; and therefore this must be a humiliation day, for it is the humble that are exalted indeed, and the soul that is most humble bids fairest for the highest seat at the feast. The soul that hath most of gospel heaviness for sin, is likely to receive most of the oil of gladness. They that now lie most deep in the dust, and have the most profound sense of their follies and vileness, are the most likely to be admitted, as the beloved disciple, to lean on Christ's bosom. Now, as we are to be helpers of your joy, we would also be helpers of your shame and sorrow this day.

Sinners, what think you of your ways? "Are not your ways unequal?" Throw away the false balances of a corrupt judgment, and of your self-conceit. You have weighed too long with them. Let us weigh our ways in the balance of the sanctuary.

I. Weigh your ways in the balance of your Christian privileges. God has exalted this land to heaven that way. He hath made our poor corner of the world a lightsome corner, with Bibles, sermons, Sabbaths, sacraments, and other ordinances. But do we look like a people thus privileged? "Are not our ways unequal?"

1. How unsuitable to the gospel are our conversations. "Only," says the apostle, "let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel." Do we look like the citizens of the New Jerusalem? Nay, instead of adorning the doctrines of the gospel by holy and heavenly lives, our unholiness and carnality, our irregular and un-gospel-like walk, leaves a stain on the ways of God.

2. How little are our privileges valued and improved? It is seldom our case sends us to our Bibles. The treasure lies there by us, but we slight it, do not dig into it, but are poor, formal, lifeless creatures, in our reading, hearing, and other exercises. The preaching of the word is very little prized, Sabbaths by many are miserably misspent, and sacraments disregarded.

3. Where is the fruit of these things? There is no growth proportionable to our means of grace. The showers of gospel waterings have as little fruit following them in many, as the rain that falls on the rocks and sands, and at best, "the seed of an homer does but yield an ephah." And "are not our ways unequal?" No wonder the kingdom of God should be taken from us, and given to others, that would bring forth the fruits of it, and that that land should be left unploughed that doth so ill requit the pains of the husbandman.

II. Weigh our ways in the balance of our mercies, that should lead us to repentance. He is a good God to us. Good to our land, good to every one of us in particular. But how unequal are our re-

turns to our receipts? A shameful confounding disproportion may be found there.

1. How unequal are they to the sparing mercy God is giving us? He has spared our land, ourselves in particular, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him. But we have been to him as a snake hid in a man's bosom, that sets itself to gnaw out his bowels. "Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil." The more he spares, the more does sin grow, the higher do we run on in our accounts; which is like to bring it to that, that his eye will not pity, nor his hand spare us any more.

2. How unequal are our ways to the preventing mercies with which we have met. How often has the Lord prevented us, held us up by his hand when we were on the brink of ruin, falling into sin? But hath that made us more watchful? Have we not been ready to cast ourselves again into the same snare? Have we duly acknowledged our debt to God in that matter? He has prevented our danger by seasonable deliverances, general and particular: but though for the present it might have some impression on us, yet have we not, many of us, behaved as if we had been delivered to work iniquity?

3. How unequal to enriching mercies. "Blessed be the Lord, who daily loadeth us with his benefits, even the God of our salvation." Every day we rise, providence bids us stoop, and take on our day's load of benefits. But if conscience be allowed to speak, it will tell us, that every day the Spirit of the Lord gets on a new load of provocations from us. God is drawing us to him by cords of love, and we drive him from us by our daily follies.

III. In the balance of our afflictions, by which God has been at so much pains with us. These are the means made use of to cut off our luxuriant branches, that we may bring forth fruit; to wean us from the world, and to make us heavenly. They are the brisk gale that should cause us make speedy way towards Immanuel's land. But alas!

I. Are not many made worse and worse by their afflictions. Instead of the peaceable fruits of righteousness, showers of troubles and crosses, falling on the cursed ground of an ill heart, bring forth the briars and thorns of murmuring, fretting against God. Such trials often put men on ill courses. The poverty of many often roots up their honesty. Trade decays, the land is impoverished, and the effect of it on many is, their spirits are embittered, that they can get no good of the gospel. They are like the children of Israel, "who hearkened not unto Moses for anguish of spirit, and cruel bondage in Egypt." Are not your ways then unequal?

2. Do we not cleave to that from which God is trying to separate us by the wedge of affliction. God sees such a thing would ruin a person, if they should get their will, and therefore God drives the wedge to make a separation; but the more God pulls these from us, we draw the more violently. Gall and wormwood are laid on the world's breast, but the child sucks the more greedily. The cup of poison is put out of our reach, and yet we search for it the more diligently.

3. Where is the contempt of the world, the heavenly-mindedness, the soul's taking up its rest in God, delighting in him, taking him for all, and instead of all, rejoicing in him in all cases and conditions—the native fruits of sanctified afflictions? Nay, the bewitching world has invaded the professors of this day, taken us captive; so that when we are sought to a kingdom, we are lying hid among the stuff.

IV. In the balance of our engagements, purposes, and resolutions. The vows of God are upon us, the land is under covenants; each of us are under baptismal vows, many of us are under communion vows. Purposes and resolutions have been taken up under convictions and afflictions. Our vows have been very extensive, to the whole of the Christian life. They have been aimed at particulars in our way. But are our ways equal? Have not our engagements been like the green withs, our purposes as the corn on the housetop? Are we what we engaged and resolved to be? No, no.

1. Have we not returned to our vomit, and after vows made enquiry. These very particular lusts, of which we seemed once and again to have taken farewell, invite us to return, and we have been found again on the forbidden ground.

2. Does our unwatchful, careless walking, look like our engagements and purposes. Were we resolved to give all that scope to our hearts, lips and lives, that they have actually gotten? Did we purpose to be at so little pains to beware of temptation, as indeed we have been? No, but our ways are unequal. Our purposes high, our performances very far below them.

3. Does our omission of duties, prayer, reading the word, meditation, self-examination look like them? How easily are we put off these things?

V. In the balance of our profession. Alas! how wide are our practices from our principles. No man could gather from what we do, what we believe, there is such an inequality betwixt them.

1. How unequal are our ways to our profession of the great fundamental principles of religion, that we are all lost by nature, and must be renewed by grace. Are our ways equal? how is it, then,

that men live without dipping into the thoughts of that state, and inquiring whether they are converted or not. A heaven and hell. What means the profanity of many, the coldriveness and formality of others, in the duties of religion.

2. How unequal to our professions of love to God and Christ. How comes this love of the world, so little care to please him, so little being affected with the dishonour done to him.

3. Our concern for his interest. If it be so, how comes it that there is so little sympathy with this bleeding, groaning Church? How is it there is so little wrestling at the throne of grace at this time?

Lastly, In the balance of your attainments, which you have sometimes had, if ever you knew ought of seriousness. Let us look on ourselves as we have been in some golden spots of our time. O! how unlike ourselves will we appear, unstable as water.

To conclude. Take this night a view of your ways. Behold them, how unequal they are to what God has done for you, and what you yourselves have done. And sure I am, you will see your hearts and lives a mass of monstrous deformities, which will be the way to true humiliation, which will prepare you for a communion day. Amen.

Presbyterial Exercise and Addition, Selkirk, March, 2, 1731.

DUTIES OF HUSBAND AND WIFE.

SERMON XXIII.

EPHESIANS V. 33,

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

THE apostle having, in several preceding verses, laid out the duties of husbands and wives severally; and having enforced them with most powerful argument, fit at once to convince the judgment and influence the affections; an argument utterly unknown to the heathen moralists, being taken from the mysterious part of Christianity, namely, from the spiritual marriage and state of the mysteri-