

THE
DISTINGUISHING CHARACTERS
OF
TRUE BELIEVERS.

V. IN RELATION TO THEIR FORGIVING INJURIES, IN OPPOSITION TO
REVENGE.*

ROMANS xii. 19.

Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.

As in sinful anger there is a desire of revenge, so revenge is the hellish sacrifice to sinful anger, wherewith it is satisfied, and wherein it is fully accomplished. Therefore it is necessary to add a little concerning this. In the words there is,

1. A dehortation from revenge, which is proposed pathetically,

1st, With an endearing compellation, *Dearly beloved*. He knew how prone corrupt nature is to revenge, how hard it is to sinful men to be denied the satisfaction of it, when once their passion is up: therefore he interposes as it were with the angry man, and with softest words begs him to forbear.

2dly, Both negatively and positively, telling what is not to be done, and what is to be done.

(1.) Ye are not to avenge yourselves. All revenge is not sinful, nor here forbidden. For it is competent to God, as saith the text; and to the magistrate, chap. xiii. 4. "He is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doth evil." But it is private and personal revenge, namely, where one as a private man revenges himself on another, over whom he has no authority and power given him for that effect. *Avenge not yourselves.*

* This subject was discussed in two short discourses, preached at Ettrick, Nov. 7, and 8, 1724.

(2.) Ye are to *give place to wrath*; i. e. to the wrath of your adversary who does you the injury. Decline it as David did Saul's javelin thrown at him, rather than give him as good as he brings. Rather suffer injuries, than revenge yourselves at your own hand. It is just what our Saviour teaches, Matth. v. 39. "Resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also." As if he had said, Take a second blow, rather than revenge the first.

2. A reason of the dehortation, which is taken from Deut. xxxii. 35. *To me belongeth vengeance, and recompense.*

1st, Revenge belongs to God; he pleads it as his own right, and he has put in his claim to it, as his sole privilege before the world, in the word, that none who hear the Bible can pretend ignorance. Therefore it belongs not to us, and we must not invade his right.

2dly, He will certainly see to the execution of it. Say not, If we are not allowed to revenge injuries, then they will go unpunished, and many wrongs we get will never be righted. No; God will right all wrongs; none of them shall go unseen to. He has given his word for it.

The doctrine arising from the text is,

Doctr. One's revenging himself at his own hand on such as have wronged him, is deeply sinful and dishonouring to God, whose province alone vengeance is.

In treating this doctrine, I shall shew,

I. What this revenge is that is so deeply sinful and dishonouring to God.

II. What is the sinfulness and dishonour to God in it.

III. Make application.

I. I am to shew what this revenge is that is so deeply sinful and dishonouring to God, whose province alone vengeance is.

Revenge is twofold, public and authoritative, private and personal.

1. There is a public and authoritative revenge, which is taken on those that wrong others by such as are invested with a lawful power and authority for that purpose. This is so far from being sinful, that it is a necessary piece of justice and charity, and is done in the name and by the authority of God. Thus the magistrate has a power to revenge wrongs in the state, Rom. xiii. 4, forecited. So also have church-rulers power to revenge or censure scandals in the church, 2 Cor. x. 6, where the apostle speaks of a *readiness to revenge all disobedience*. And thus masters of families have a power to revenge wrongs in their families, as Abraham did in the case of Hagar,

Gen. xvi. 6. And it is of equal latitude with rightful government, in whatever lawful society. And persons wronged seeking redress from those to whom the public revenge belongs, is a lawful thing, and men are invested with authority that they may be so applied to, as the importunate widow did to the unjust judge, saying, *Avenge me of mine adversary*, Luke xviii. 3. And applying to them for it, they apply to God for it, since they act in his name.

2. There is a private and personal revenge, which is the requiting of a wrong with the like, or worse, for the satisfying of the passion of the injured, not supported by any authority from the God of vengeance. This is sinful revenge. The kinds of it are three.

1st, Revenge taken by those in authority, out of hatred and ill-will to the person of him who does the wrong. For they are *revengers to execute wrath*, Rom. xiii. 4. not their own wrath against the person, but God's, in whose name they act. And the executing of justice must still be an act of love to their neighbour, which is the sum of the second table, but never of hatred. No man has any authority from God to that purpose. So the public revenge in that case becomes so far private, deeply sinful and dishonouring to God.

2dly, Revenge sought from those in authority, in cases wherein it is neither necessary for the public good, nor the amendment of the offender, nor the safety of the party hurt. This also is private revenge, deeply sinful, and dishonourable to God. For in such cases there is nothing obliging the man's conscience to seek it, and therefore he is obliged to forgive it wholly, Col. iii. 13. All then that is aimed at in such cases, is the satisfying of the man's own revengeful passion, getting his heart's sight on the party that has wronged him: which is diametrically opposite to the royal law of love, and the spirit of Christianity, James ii. 8. Let such take heed to this, who fly to their law-pleasing on every trifling occasion, just to gratify their own passion. It is a horrid abuse of an ordinance of God; it is to make the law, the magistrate, and the authority of God which he is invested with, subservient to your revengeful passions, Matth. v. 40.

3dly, Revenge taken by those not in authority empowering them to take it, taken by persons not acting in a public capacity, but at the command of their passion fleeing to take revenge at their own hand; which is most directly forbidden in the text. It is a common sin in the perverse generation wherein we live. And this revenge is taken three ways.

1st, By words. I speak not here of revenge in the heart, for that belongs to anger, of which I have spoke already. But the tongue is as real an instrument of revenge, as the hands, swords, or spears.

Therefore say not, I will recompense evil, Prov. xx. 22. Say not, I will do so to him as he hath done to me: I will render to the man according to his work," chap. xxiv. 29. And what are the scoldings and floutings among people, but the acting of revenge on them for the wrong alleged to be said or done to them? One's passion is fired against another, and then they pursue them with bitter words, lying, railing, and reviling speeches; so that many can no more speak good of those by whom they conceive themselves wronged, but on all occasions boil out their revenge that way. And the passion of revenge is served by these speeches, as really as it would be by the blood of their offenders, though not to the same degree.

2dly, By deeds, Prov. xxvi. 29, above quoted. When men make one ill turn meet another, so that they come to be even with those that have wronged them, paying them home in their own coin or worse, which the Spirit of God directly forbids, Rom. xii. 17. *Recompense to no man evil for evil.* Thus many lay up their resentments till a convenient season that it falls in their way, to do their neighbour an ill turn, because he did one to them; which will have a fearful end, Isa. xxix. 20. Of this is beating, fighting, and murdering; to which the revengeful passion natively leads.

3dly, By omission of duty owing to the offending party, either in the way of justice, or charity, contrary to that, Rom. xii. 20. "If thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him to drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head." Many think that is enough if they do no ill to those who offend them. But as the revengeful passion natively leads to withholding the good that is due, contrary to Prov. iii. 27. it is evident, that the withholding of it is a sacrifice to revenge, as well as the positive doing of ill to them. Even as the besiegers may revenge themselves as effectually on the besieged, by starving them, as by storming their town.

II. I proceed to shew what is the sinfulness and dishonour to God in this revenge.

1. It is directly opposite to the love of our neighbour, the fundamental law of the second table, Lev. xix. 18. "Thou shalt not avenge nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself; I am the Lord." This law had in Christ's days a great deal of rubbish laid over it; but he cleared it from all that kind, both by this doctrine and example. But alas! how has the practice of Christians so called, laid it under much rubbish again! Will men pretend to love those as themselves, whom they must at their own hand, without law or right be revenged on? Nay, revenge is hatred carried to a height.

2. It is unjust violence, as assuming and exercising a power and

authority over men which God never gave us. Whatever difference there is betwixt private men, some more some less honourable, they are by right all equal so far, being together subject to those in authority, to whom God has given the execution of wrath. And as unjust violence ever was so it will ever be highly dishonourable to God the Judge and Protector of all, Gen. vi. 11. Men are not left like beasts, among whom the stronger command the weaker; but God has set laws for one and the other.

3. It cannot reach the true ends of revenge, which God hath settled. It may indeed reach the end proposed by the proud heart, viz. the satisfying of passion: but that end, and the means to it, are alike abhorred by God. But God has appointed public revenge for the amendment of the party offending, Rom. xiii. 14. the public good of the society, Deut. xix. 20. and for the safety of the wronged thereafter, 1 Tim. ii. 2. But what doth private revenge but irritate the party smarting by it, give a scandalous example to others, and involve the party revenging and others too in much trouble?

4. It is void of all equity: for in it a man is accuser, judge, and executioner, all in his own cause. Who would reckon that fair in another's case? He not only accuses his neighbour of wrong, which is often so ill grounded, that if another were to judge, it would not be sustained: but he judges of it too, and passes sentence on his neighbour, to be sure in favour of himself: and finally he executes his own sentence: and all this when he is under the power of passion. Men are partial in their own favours at all times, and passionate then. Where then can equity have place, in a matter so stated?

5. It is an invading of the authority of those who are in authority, a taking out of their hand what God has put in it. Therefore the apostle immediately to this subject subjoins the duty of subjects to magistrates, and theirs to their subjects, Rom. xiii. Members of families revenging themselves on one another, invade the master's authority; church-members in the case of scandals, the authority of the church-rulers; and the members of the politic body, in the case of civil injuries, the office of the magistrate. And usurpation in all cases is a sin of a deep dye.

6. *Lastly*, It is an invading of the authority of God. God himself claims vengeance as his peculiar prerogative; it is a flower of the crown of heaven, which, he will not part with, as in the text. It is owned to be so by his good subjects, Psal. xciv. 1. "O Lord God, to whom vengeance belongeth: O God, to whom vengeance belongeth.—Nah. i. 2. God is jealous, and the Lord revengeth, the Lord revengeth." Therefore none are to meddle with it, but those

who have authority from himself to act in his name therein. He only is fit to have it in his hand, not we: for he is omniscient, we know little, and are liable to mistakes: he is without passions, we are ready to be blinded by them: he is the common Father and Judge of all, most just and impartial, we are prejudiced in our own favours. A father of a family will not allow the children to punish one another, but bids them complain to him. So saith God to men, but private revenge regards not his orders.

I shall now make some practical improvement of this subject.

USE I. Of lamentation. We may hence take occasion to lament,

1. The state of human nature in general. How low are we brought who once stood in the image of God! We may see here man's nature sullied with two black lineaments of the picture of the devil. (1.) Wrong and injustice. Man was a righteous creature, but now he wrongs and is wronged, his fair righteousness that he was created in, is gone. Men are now thieves, robbers, and oppressors to one another: and every where the cry is heard of violence and wrong, and the nearest relation is not a fence against it, Micah vii. (2.) Revenge of wrong for satisfying of passion. Hence there is a cry of cruel suffering at the hands of men who were created harmless, and are born naked, as designed for the picture of peace. His meekness and patience is gone too.

2. The state of our nature of each of us in particular, that is so ready to revenge; so that no sooner an injury is received by us, but as powder is ready to fly up when a spark lights on it, our nature is no less ready to fly to revenge on the first appearance of an injury. It is humbling to think how early this piece of our nature appears, even in the babe in the mother's arms, who seeks and shews a satisfaction in the revenge of what is displeasing to it; though its giving the mother a stroke to give such a one &c. be ludicrous in itself, it is humbling to consider the rise of it.

3. The sinfulness of our lives. O what guilt lies on every soul of us in this point? What black accounts on the score of revenge? Though some perhaps have been kept from fighting, hurting, and wounding others; yet view the thoughts, words, lesser deeds, and omissions of duty, in the way of revenge, who can count his errors that way? O the need of the blood and Spirit of Christ for healing of our nature, for removing the guilt and stain of our lives that way?

USE II. Of reproof. It serves to reprove,

1. Those who allow themselves in scolding, railing on, and reviling those who they conceive have wronged them. Such tongue-vengeance did Shemei take on David, for which just ven-

geance fell afterwards upon him from the Lord, 2 Sam. xvi. 7, 8. It is an ill use of the tongue, to make it as a sword to pierce our neighbour, and as claws to tear him. This is that *clamour and evil-speaking*, which is the effect of passion, Matth. iv. 31. See the danger of it. Matth. v. 22.

2. Those who end their quarrels in blows and fightings. It is much to be lamented that this is so frequent amongst us. It is contrary to the letter of the text, and being so contrary to the laws of God, it is strange that those who own a God, and the Bible to be his word, that they make no bones of it. It is contrary to the laws of the land also. So that fighters do thereby shew, that they neither fear God nor regard men. In time of war, we were all men of peace, not a man among us to lend a hand to the defence of the public cause, for our King and country, religion and liberty, though called thereto publicly by public authority. Is it not sinful and shameful to be men of war then in time of peace? But from it we may see that the lusts of most men have a greater power to set their hands to action, than their consciences, James iv. 1. Ye have reason to decide your quarrels; if that will not do, ye have superiours to do it: why should men then, like unreasonable creatures, fall a pushing one another? But let such remember, that if they repent not and reform, the day will come wherein they shall read their sin in their punishment, Matth. xxvi. 52. *For all they that take the sword, shall perish by the sword; and God will fight against them for ever.* See Gal. v. 19—21.

3. Those who are sure to do an ill turn to those who have wronged them, if it lie in their power. They will confidently promise it, and perform it too, and boast themselves of it when they have done. It is a sign religion is at a low pass, and that the laws of Christ are little regarded among Christians, Prov. xxiv. 29. Matth. v. 44, 45. Alas! how shall we prove ourselves Christians indeed living at that rate? How would we suffer loss of liberty, goods, and life for Christ, with a spirit of meekness, when every private wrong can provoke our vengeance? What would they do more who never heard of Christ? It is worthless religion that puts not men to be followers of the meek and lowly Jesus.

4. *Lastly*, Those who make no conscience of doing their duty to those who have wronged them, but they carry towards them as if their offence loosed them from all bonds of duty to them, and so satisfy their revenge, Matth. v. 44—46. One's being out of their duty to us, is not enough for us to neglect our duty to them. Alas! what would become of us if God treated us at this rate, withdrawing his mercies from us upon every provocation? *Be followers of God.*

Use *ult.* Revenge not yourselves but rather give place to wrath, the wrath of your adversary. To press this, I offer the following motives.

1. This is true excellency and bravery of spirit. Men are much mistaken in their measures, who count otherwise. For,

(1.) In this ye will resemble the spirit Jesus Christ was actuated by, 1 Pet. ii. 23. "Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously." Luke xxiii. 34. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." *Ye shall be as gods*, was the height of ambition that men aspired to very soon. Behold an allowable way how we may be like our Lord! in meekness and patience, suffering wrong rather than avenging at our own hand. This was the way how Christ, being true God as man, did walk. And therefore it is true excellency of spirit. When James and John would have revenged an affront offered to Christ by the inhospitable Samaritans, by commanding fire to come down from heaven and consume them, "He turned, and rebuked them, and said, Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of. For the Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them," Luke ix. 55, 56. He had legions of angels at his command, yet he says, *Father, forgive them*, Luke xxiii. 34.

(2.) Ye will shew a generous contempt of the impotent malice of an evil world, possessing yourselves in the midst of all the sallies of it upon you, Luke xxi. 19. *In patience possess ye your souls*. The moon retains her brightness though the cur barks at her: and an excellent spirit retains its composure, notwithstanding the little rubs one meets with in an evil world.

(3.) Ye will shew yourselves masters of your own spirit; and many who have won cities by storm, have been trod under foot by their own spirits; which shews victory over the latter to be a more glorious thing than over the former, Prov. xvi. 32. "He that is slow to anger, is better than the mighty: and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city."

(4.) Ye will overcome him that wrongs you. Either you will gain him to return to his duty, Rom. xii. 20. or ye will at least keep your ground while his corruption carries him out of the road, and tends to drive you off your road too. So he is the true over-comer, not who does the wrong, but who bears it with patience, Rom. viii. 37. "In all these things we are more than conquerors, through him that loved us."

2. Consider the wrong done to God by your revenging yourselves. Ye take out of his hand what he has reserved for himself on good

grounds; ye invade his sovereign authority, and pull a jewel out of the crown of heaven to adorn yourselves, Deut. xxxii. 35. forecited. Thus,

(1.) Ye impeach his justice, as if he like Gallio cared for none of these things, so that unless ye revenged yourselves, your wrongs would never be righted. This is the blasphemous language of that practice: for who believeth that a just God will revenge all wrongs, would take it out of his hand?

(2.) Ye impeach his wisdom, in committing vengeance into the hands of those in authority, saying, in effect, that it would be far better to leave that to private men, and that God's method of vengeance is not fitted to reach the end. And therefore ye will correct the ordinance of heaven.

(3.) Ye impeach his veracity, and refuse to believe his word, that he will repay. And therefore ye will repay injuries yourselves, as if God's word were not to be believed.

(4.) Ye dare his vengeance. If he is the God of vengeance, and will repay, sure he will take vengeance on those who contemn and invade his authority.

Now what wrong can any man possibly do to you, that will justify your doing such wrong to God?

3. Revenge is a most ensnaring thing, not to be harboured in the least. It is a sacrifice to passion, and involves the soul in guilt that way. It often carries men into such heights, as afterwards they would wish they had not gone to when it is past remedy. How many has revenge brought to an ill end? Yea, how many have been brought into compact with the devil by this means?

4. *Lastly*, It is inconsistent with peace with heaven and pardon. They who live in a course of revengeful passions, are living in a state of black nature, Tit. iii. 3. Our Saviour is express in that, Matth. vi. 15. "If ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." How can ye go to God, to pray for pardon, when ye will not forgive those that sin against you? So revenge puts a bar in the way of your pardon: and the guilt of sin unpardoned will bar you out of heaven.

Object. The scripture saith, *Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.*

Ans. That was the law, the execution of which was not committed but to the magistrate; and does not belong to private persons.

Object. 2. If we put up with one injury, we will get more.

Ans. The text saith not so, Rom. xii. 20. "If thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head." But better we get never so many wrongs, than that we wrong God by revenging ourselves.

Object. 3. It is not manly not to revenge affronts and wrongs.

Ans. As blackmoors paint the devil white, so do vain men their vices and corrupt passions. So proceeding from words to blows is manliness with them; whereas a little consideration would shew them, that it is childishness; for so do nurses still their babies, by revenging them on those that displease them. It is brutishness; anger a dog, and he will be ready to fly at your face. It is foolishness, Eccl. vii. 9. "Be not hasty in thy spirit to be angry: for anger resteth in the bosom of fools." Was David not manly that revenged not himself on Saul? Saul says otherwise, 1 Sam. xxiv. 18—21. "Thou hast shewed this day how that thou hast dealt well with me: forasmuch as when the Lord had delivered me into thine hand, thou killedst me not. For if a man find his enemy, will he let him go well away? wherefore the Lord reward thee good, for that thou hast done unto me this day," &c.

Quest. How then should we do in the case of affronts and wrongs?

Ans. 1. Arm yourselves with meekness and patience, while you go through an evil world, laying your accounts that ye will have use for them, wherever ye are, and that daily.

2. Learn to bear with and forbear one another, and to be always ready to forgive the injuries done to you, so far as they concern yourselves, Col. iii. 13. "Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye." And there is no measure to which this forgiving is to be stinted, Matth. xviii. 21, 22. "Lord, (says Peter) how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, until seventy times seven."

3. In matters of weight, where the good of the party offending, the public good, or your future safety, makes redress necessary, apply to those for it who are vested with authority for that end, Rom. xii. 4. Only do it not from a spirit of revenge.

4. In that case, and in other cases, wherein redress is not to be expected, lay the matter before the Lord, put it in his hand, and wait for him, Prov. xx. 22. "Say not thou, I will recompense evil: but wait on the Lord, and he shall save thee."

5. *Lastly,* Live by faith, keeping your eye on Christ the fountain of strength, the pattern of meekness, and on the judgment to come, when all wrongs shall be redressed, and justice shall be done to every one.