

3. *Our most common speeches, that might otherwise seem culpable, are not only allowable, but commendable, as they may be referred unto some good purpose.*—As, First, for the remission of a mind over-bent and burdened with serious matter, that one may return with more vigour to it. Secondly: for the prevention of worse discourse, where better will not be entertained. Thirdly: for insinuation into bad men, that we may gain an opportunity of doing good upon them; and for introduction into better discourse, which abruptly cannot be brought-in.

So much, then, depending upon the scope of our discourse, let me give two cautions hereon.

CAUTION I. *That none pride themselves in the material goodness of their discourse.*—If the design be bad, it is like a fair apple rotten at the core.

CAUTION II. *That we judge none rashly for the seeming commonness of their discourse.*—If it be not their common dialect, and especially if they are among common-spirited people, there may be a pious guile in it, a reason for it, and it is charity to suppose it; but let every one judge himself, who only hath a capacity to know himself; and let us all be cautious, however, that we lay not a stumbling-block before a weak brother.

SERMON XXI.

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HOW MAY DETRACTION BE BEST PREVENTED OR CURED?

He that backbiteth not with his tongue, nor doeth evil to his neighbour, nor taketh up a reproach against his neighbour.—Psalm xv. 3.

AMONG the many sins for which God is contending with England, and especially with the professors of religion in it, I doubt not but one, and that none of the least, is, the gross misgovernment of their tongues. The abuses of the tongue are many, one whereof is the malignity of it. And whereas in David's time a malignant and virulent tongue was the badge and cognizance of an atheist: "Behold, they belch-out with their mouth: swords are in their lips: for who, say they, doth hear?" (Psalm lix. 7;) now, alas! this spot is become the spot of God's children, and high professors of religion. A man can scarce come into any company, but his ears shall be filled with censures, detractions, reproaches; party against party, person against person. Instead of that old Christian love and charity for which the ancient Christians were noted and applauded even by their adversaries, ("Behold," said they, "how the Christians love one another!") men's hearts are generally full of rancour, and their tongues of sharp reflections, contemptuous and reproachful expressions, censures, and slanders, against their absent, and oft-times innocent and more worthy, brethren. This is the disease

which I would endeavour to administer some physic to from these words.

The coherence is plain. David proposeth a question: "Lord, who shall abide in thy tabernacle? who shall dwell in thy holy hill?" (Psalm xv. 1.) By which you may understand either Sion, where the ark then was, or Moriah, where the temple was to be built; and by either of them, the church of God here, and especially the heavenly temple hereafter.

So that it is as if David had said, and asked, "What is the qualification of the true members of God's church, of the citizens of the New Jerusalem? By what properties are they known and distinguished from other men?" To this, David doth not answer, that they are so differenced by their high talks, by their crying-out upon the sins of other men, or the wickedness of the times, by their frequent attendance at God's tabernacle; but by the uprightness of their hearts, by the good government of their tongues, by the holiness of their lives: "He that walketh uprightly, and worketh righteousness, and speaketh the truth in his heart." (Verse 2.) And in this third verse that I have now read: "He that backbiteth not with his tongue, nor doeth evil to his neighbour, nor taketh up a reproach against his neighbour." It is the last clause which I intend to speak to, because it will comprehend the former: "Nor taketh up a reproach against his neighbour." The words I shall explain in the handling of the doctrine, which is this:—

DOCTRINE.

It is the duty, and must be the care, of every true Christian, not to take up a reproach against his neighbour.

I shall first explain the point, then prove it, and lastly apply it.

I. For EXPLANATION, three things are to be inquired into:—

QUESTION 1. "Who is my neighbour?"—There are some men of name in the world that will tell you, that, "in the language of the Old Testament, by 'neighbour' is to be understood 'one of the same country and religion,' *popularis Israelita*;" and it is the peculiarity of the gospel, that every man is made my neighbour. But if we examine scripture, we shall find this to be a gross mistake. I need not go farther for the confutation of it than to the Decalogue itself: "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour." (Exod. xx. 16.) I suppose it will seem a very hard saying to affirm, that it is lawful to bear false witness against a stranger. So when God commands, "Thou shalt not lie carnally with thy neighbour's wife," (Lev. xviii. 20,) I presume these gentlemen would not allow themselves that liberty with the wife of a stranger. If God may be his own interpreter, this controversy will quickly be ended from Lev. xix., where, if you compare two verses,—verse 18, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself," with verse 34, "But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself;"—you will not need the help of an artist to form this conclusion, that "the stranger is, in God's account, and ought to be in mine account, my neighbour." To the same purpose you may please to compare two other places of scripture together: Deut. xxii. 4, "Thou shalt not see thy brother's ass nor his ox fall down by the way, and hide thyself from them: thou shalt surely

help him to lift them up again ;” with Exod. xxiii. 4, 5 : “ If thou meet thine enemy’s ox or his ass going astray, thou shalt surely bring it back to him again. If thou see the ass of him that hateth thee lying under his burden, thou shalt help with him.” He who is my “ brother,” which is nearer than a neighbour, in the one place, is mine “ enemy,” and he that “ hateth me” in another place. And it is further observable to this end, that the Hebrew word *גַּר* and the Greek *πλησιον*, a “ neighbour,” is usually rendered in scripture by *ετερος*, “ another ;” as : “ He that loveth another hath fulfilled the law, for the law saith, “ Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” (Rom. xiii. 8, 9.) Most true therefore is that of St. Augustine, *Proximus est omnis homo homini*, “ Every man is a neighbour to any other man.” Nay, the more intelligent part of the Jews were of this opinion ; and Kimchi upon these words saith, “ He is called my neighbour with whom I have any business.” And the scribe, of whom we read, Luke x., knowing the mistakes of many of his brethren, asks our Saviour this question, “ Who is my neighbour ?” (Verse 29.) And our Saviour gives him an answer, the sum of which is this, that even the Samaritan was to be looked upon as his “ neighbour.”

QUESTION II. “ What is a reproach ?”

I answer, in general,

1. *It is nothing else but an evil report, or an evil speech, unduly uttered concerning another.* Now a report is evil two ways :—

(1.) *When it is evil in itself, a false report.*—When a man belies his neighbour, and bears false witness against him, either in judicial proceedings, or in common conversation. These kinds of evil reports David was exercised with : “ False witnesses did rise up ; they laid to my charge things that I knew not.” (Psalm xxxv. 11.)

(2.) *When it is evil to a man’s neighbour, when your speech tends to your neighbour’s disparagement and defamation.*—And here I must inform you, that a man may be guilty of reproaching men by commendations, as David speaks of his enemy : “ His words were softer than oil, yet were they drawn swords.” (Psalm lv. 21.) It is the usual practice of some men to smooth the way to a reproach by a commendation, and to raise a man’s reputation, that he may tumble it down with more advantage.

2. *When a man publisheth a neighbour’s secret infirmities or sins.*—This all casuists allow to be a kind of detraction : and good reason ; for though the matter may be true and good, yet the principle from whence this proceeds is evil. It proceeds from want of love to my neighbour, and of the just care that I ought to have of his credit ; and the ends, either of speaker, or of the speech in its own nature, or of both, are evil,—even to bring his neighbour into contempt or disgrace.

3. *When a man aggravates the real or supposed faults of his neighbour either in opinion or in practice.*—Certainly the professors of this age, and this city, are deeply guilty in both these respects.

(1.) *In aggravating other men’s real or supposed errors and mistakes.*—Often-times men call that an error through their own ignorance or prejudicate opinion, which, in the judgment of far wiser and better men than themselves, and in reality, is a precious truth of God ; and the par-

donable mistakes of their neighbour they decry as fundamental and damnable errors, or at least as errors dangerous to salvation. I am far from pleading for errors that are really damnable, or highly dangerous, such as those of the Papists, Socinians, Quakers, and the like; but there are other and lesser differences among Protestants, who, "holding the Head," as the apostle speaks, differ in doctrines of less moment, or in the methods and modes of worship, in rites and ceremonies, which possibly one man thinks to be necessary, another to be lawful and indifferent, another sinful; and by these differing opinions it is lamentable to consider, and, I confess, I cannot think of it without horror and loathing, how Protestants traduce and defame one another. The one is "superstitious, idolatrous, a formalist, a profane person, and one that hath no sense of religion." The other is an "heretic, a schismatic, a fanatic, a licentious, lawless person, that follows his own sensuality, and hath not the fear of God before his eyes." Thus they mutually rail at one another, as if they had neither sense nor conscience. Nay, the disease is grown to that height, that, not content to censure men's opinions, they will also judge of their consciences and secret intentions, as if they maintained such doctrines against the light of their own consciences; a censure which proceeds from deep ignorance of the merits of the cause. It were, I confess, a very desirable thing that all men were of one mind; and Christians indeed are to labour for it, and to pray for it: "I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment." (1 Cor. i. 10.) But if a man consider the great weakness of most men's understandings, the infinite variety of their parts and apprehensions, educations, inclinations, interests, or what the scripture hath foretold, "There must be heresies, that they which are approved may be made manifest," (1 Cor. xi. 19,) I think he will conclude, that he who shall expect this absolute harmony and uniformity in this world must either dream or dote. And therefore the Holy Ghost hath directed us what to do in case of such differences of judgment; to wit, to talk charitably toward those that differ from us: "If thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably;" (Rom. xiv. 15;) and to agree with others as far as we can: "Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded: and if in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you. Notwithstanding whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing." (Phil. iii. 15, 16.) But for those mutual reproaches and censures one against another, I must take the boldness to charge you all, as you tender your salvation, to have a care of them; for though these points wherein you differ be disputable, yet this is out of all dispute, that you ought to "love your neighbour as yourself," and that you ought not "to take up a reproach against your neighbour." And therefore take heed, lest while you condemn another man for disputable and lesser errors, you do not run into an indisputable crime and fundamental miscarriage.

(2.) *Men are guilty of reproaching their neighbours by aggravating their errors in practice and conversation.*—When men censure and reproach others for things indifferent and of small moment: as, for

example, in their habits and garbs. I am not ignorant that there are great miscarriages in men's habits, and that the bush that hangs at the door doth frequently discover what is within, and tell the pride of men's hearts; and there are certain bounds and limits to be observed, that men's habits be agreeable to their quality, estate, calling, and condition in the world: but yet there is a just latitude in these things; the lawfulness of them doth not consist in a mathematical point; these are to be regulated by the custom of times and places. Now if a man see another that doth a little vary from his fancy or practice, whose garb is a little more ornamental than his, though not much extravagant; if now he judgeth the state of this man, and concludes him to be a profane or carnal person, this is a "reproach." So, again, when a man commits some miscarriage towards his neighbour through carelessness, or forgetfulness, or mistake, it is a common thing for men to charge it as a malicious design, intended for their hurt: this is a "reproach." And you may easily multiply instances in your own thoughts.

QUESTION III. "What is it to take-up a reproach against a man's neighbour?"

Answer: It is a defective manner of expression, and therefore is diversely supplied; but especially and most reasonably two ways: and, accordingly, a man may be guilty of taking-up a reproach against his neighbour two ways:—

1. *When he takes it up into his mouth.*—The Hebrew word is often so used; as Exod. xx. 7: "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain." *Not take it*; that is, not lift it up upon thy tongue, or not take it into thy mouth. So, Isai. xiv. 4: "Thou shalt take-up this proverb against the king of Babylon;" that is, Thou shalt take it up into thy lips, thou shalt utter and publish it. Thus, Ezek. xxvi. 17: "They shall take-up a lamentation for thee;" which is explained in the following words: "And say to thee, How art thou destroyed!" And therefore, elsewhere, the word "lips" or "mouth" is added; as Psalm xvi. 4: "Their drink-offerings of blood will I not offer, nor take up their names into my lips." Psalm l. 16: "What hast thou to do to declare my statutes, or that thou shouldest take my covenant in thy mouth?" And this phrase of *taking-up* may possibly respect the situation of the mouth above the heart; which, according to the opinion of the Hebrews, is the seat of the understanding. As if he had said: "If there should rise in thy heart an evil thought or device against thy brother, let it die there; let it never come up into thy mouth." Now, in this respect, a man may be guilty of this sin of taking-up a reproach against his neighbour two ways:—

(1.) *When he is the author and first raiser of a reproach.*—Such as Sanballat was: "There are no such things as thou sayest, but thou feignest them out of thy own heart." (Neh. vi. 8.)

(2.) *When a man is the spreader or promoter of it.*—Suppose it comes from another fountain, if thou art the conduit-pipe by whom it is conveyed to others, thou art guilty of it. "Thou shalt not go up and down as a tale-bearer among thy people." (Lev. xix. 16.)

2. *When a man takes it into his ear.*—So some expound these words: "Thou shalt not receive, not admit, not endure, a reproach against thy

neighbour." You know, the receiver of stolen goods is as obnoxious to the law as he that takes them away : so then a man may be guilty of this sin, not only by speaking, but also by the hearing of a reproach against his neighbour ; and so he may be three ways :—

(1.) *When a man quietly permits it, and gives no check to it.*—This is certain, the great law of charity commands me not only to do no hurt to my neighbour, but also to suffer no hurt to be done to him which it lies in my power to prevent or remove. If another set his house on fire, I must lend my help to quench it ; I must pull my neighbour's ox out of the pit, though another man hath cast him in ; and, consequently, when the good name of my neighbour is invaded by another, if I patiently bear the reproach, I make myself guilty.

(2.) *When a man hears a reproach against his neighbour greedily, and with delight.*—It is a sin, and that of no small size, for a man to take pleasure in the sins of others ; and therefore the apostle makes it an aggravation of sin : " Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them." (Rom. i. 32.) " Charity rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth." (1 Cor. xiii. 4, 6.) Consider, I beseech you, the commonness of this sin. If a reproach be fastened upon one who is a man's enemy, or of another party, men commonly hear such reproaches with delight ; not considering that this is not only a blemish to his own party, but also a blot to Christianity, a reproach to the Protestant religion, a sin against God and against the gospel, a scandal to men ; and these things should rather call for tears, than laughter and approbation. And therefore, when a man seems to approve another man's reproach, and encourage the reproacher, he involves himself in the guilt of it. It is the saying of a very learned man upon the Proverbs, that " it is not easy to know whether is a greater sinner, or whether is the greater plague to a commonwealth,—he that spreads a reproach, or he that willingly receives it."

(3.) *When a man easily believes a reproach.*—It is said indeed, " Charity believeth all things ;" (1 Cor. xiii. 4, 7 ;) but the object of this belief is the good of my neighbour, and not his evil. Charity readily believes well concerning its neighbour, where there is the least colour or foundation for it ; but it is slow to believe evil concerning him ; and when a man is prone to believe evil concerning another man, it is a great sign of an uncharitable disposition : the reason is, because men do most readily believe those things which comply with their own desires and inclinations ; as, in wars and differing factions, every man is apt to believe good tidings concerning his own party. Good men are the least suspicious, and slowest to believe evil of others ; of which you have a remarkable instance in Gedaliah : when Johanan told him of Ishmael's design to murder him, it is said, he " believed him not." (Jer. xl. 14.) And when it was pressed upon him a second time, and Johanan offered to punish the conspirator, and to prevent the execution of the treason, he said, " Thou shalt not do this thing : for thou speakest falsely concerning Ishmael." (Verse 16.)

You may observe how backward fond parents are to believe any ill report concerning their children : and whence doth this proceed ? Even

from an inordinate love and kindness to them; and therefore, on the contrary, men's credulity unto evil reports concerning their neighbours doth proceed from want of love and affection to them. So much for the explication.

II. The **PROOF** of the doctrine shall consist in the representation of the sinfulness and injury of this practice of censuring, back-biting, and reproaching of others. And that I may more effectually dissuade and affright myself and you from it, I shall discover to you how pregnant a sin this is: there is a complication of injuries in it. It is injurious, First, *to God*; Secondly, *to yourselves*; Thirdly, *to the party censured or reproached*; Fourthly, *to other men*.

(1.) *To God and Christ* in divers particulars.

1. *It is an invasion of God's prerogative.*—You know how dangerous a crime this is, when it is committed against an earthly prince; nor can you in reason think it less criminal and hazardous, when it is committed against Him who “accepteth not the persons of princes,” and who is “greater than the kings of the earth.” And therefore observe how severely God rebukes this sin in Rom. xiv.; when men did censure and reproach one another, either for the observation of days and meats, as guilty of superstition, or for the neglect of them, as proceeding from licentiousness; what saith the apostle? “Who art thou that judgest another man's servant?” (Verse 4.) And, “But why dost thou judge or set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment-seat of Christ.” (Verse 10.) As if he had said, “Thou dost set thyself in the throne of God, and thou dost take God's work out of his hands.”

2. *This is a manifest breach of the laws of God and of Christ.*—The things, as I said before, which thou dost censure and reproach another for, are oftentimes doubtful and liable to dispute; but the command of God against this sinful practice is evident, and without controversy. He whom thou censurest possibly may sin; but thou that dost reproach him certainly dost sin, and that against clear light; and so thou dost put thyself into the number of those that “rebel against the light,” which is mentioned as a great aggravation of sin. (Job xxiv. 13.) The law of God hath so evidently forbidden this sin, that if thy conscience doth not smite thee for it, if thou canst go on quietly in this sin, it is a sign thou art in a deep sleep, if not “dead in trespasses and sins.” That this practice is so great a breach of the laws of God and of Christ, will appear by these particulars:—

(1.) *It is against particular and express scriptures, forbidding this practice.*—The text is evident: it is not like some places of scripture, which are “hard to be understood,” and soon “wrested;” but it is so plain, that “he that runs may read it:” none shall dwell in God's holy hill that allow themselves in this practice. Again: “Thou shalt not raise a false report” against thy brother. (Exod. xxiii. 1.) *A false report*: either that which thou knowest to be false, then thou art guilty of forgery; or that which in the issue shall be found to be false, in which case thou art guilty of rashness and uncharitableness. In the Hebrew it is “a vain report,” a report that wants the solidity of a thorough information, and of real use to thy neighbour. “Speak not evil one of another. He that speaketh evil of his brother, and judgeth his brother,

speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law ;” (James iv. 11 ;) and so, in the grossest sense, is an Antinomian. Ministers must put people in mind “to speak evil of no man.” (Titus iii. 2.)

(2.) *This is against the fundamental law of love and charity, which is the chief of the laws of God.*—So great a law, that the rest of the laws of God must give place to it. Sacrifice, sabbaths, the worship and service of God, must frequently give place unto this duty of mercy and charity to men ; by which you may see, as how great a duty this is, so how great a sin the violation of this command is. God accepts no man’s person, he regards no service, where this is wanting. Though men pretend, or express, never so much love to God, though they do or suffer never so much for him, yet if they “have not charity, it profiteth nothing.” (1 Cor. xiii. 3.) And, “in this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil : whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother. If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar : for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen ?” (1 John iii. 10 ; iv. 20.)

But possibly some may ask, “Who, then, is my brother, to the love of whom I am thus obliged ? Possibly he is one of my own party and religion ; and such I do love.” No, every man is thy brother in this sense, and the object of thy love. It is true, good men are the principal objects of thy love ; but not the only objects of it. The commands of the gospel in this matter are general : “Honour all men. Love the brotherhood ;” (1 Peter ii. 17 ;) that is, Love them in a more eminent degree. “As we have opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.” (Gal. vi. 10.) But now, all persons, yea, even those that censure and reproach others, will pretend they love them : but, be not deceived : if thou dost sincerely love thy neighbour, thou wilt be ready to do all good offices for him, to seek his good, to maintain his credit, to interpret all things in the best sense, to cover his failings. “Charity shall cover the multitude of sins.” (1 Peter iv. 8.) Didst thou love thy neighbour, thou wouldest not be so apt to censure him, so greedy to hear, nor so ready to believe, evil reports concerning him. When God shall come at the last day to try men’s love to their brethren by the rules and characters of it which he did prescribe in 1 Cor. xiii., I doubt multitudes of persons will be found deeply guilty, that thought themselves in a manner wholly innocent. You should do well to study that chapter, and to labour thoroughly to understand it ; and that I commend to you as an excellent antidote against this wicked practice.

(3.) *This is a sin against that great and royal law of Christ, which even the Heathens have admired, and the emperor Severus did so highly applaud : “Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them : for this is the law and the prophets.”* (Matt. vii. 12.)—Now, let your own consciences answer the question : Would you be thus dealt with by others ? Would you have all your infirmities sharply censured ? your secret miscarriages published to the world ? the whole course of your lives ripped up, and all your actions severely examined ? No, no ; they that are so forward to censure the real or supposed miscarriages of others, would have their own more tenderly dealt with ; and, generally,

those that are most severe judges of others are most partial to themselves. They that will most freely defame other men, will not endure to be reproved and admonished themselves. They that will turn the edge of the sword to others, would have the back only turned to themselves.

(4.) *It is a sin against the great law of maintaining peace amongst men.*—This is prescribed as a remedy against this very sin: "Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another." (Rom. xiv. 19.) "Follow peace with all men." (Heb. xii. 14.) "If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men." (Rom. xii. 18.) He saith indeed, *If it be possible*, because in some cases it is impossible to have peace with wicked men without the neglect of our duty, and without the loss of truth and holiness; but as far as it is possible, we are obliged to promote it. But what peace can there be in the midst of censures and reproaches? The natural offspring of such parents are contentions, divisions, animosities; while peace lies bleeding and languishing.

(5.) *It is against that great command laid upon all Christians, of excelling other men.*—Christ requires more from Christians than he doth from other men: "What do ye more than others?" (Matt. v. 47.) Christians must be free from the vices of other men: "This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye walk not as other Gentiles walk." (Eph. iv. 17.) So, Luke xxii. 25, 26: "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship;" they are proud, ambitious, imperious. "But it shall not be so among you;" Christians must be in the world like "lights shining in a dark place." They must have all the virtues that others have, and they must be clean from all the vices and lusts in which others live. Now, the very Heathens have condemned this practice of reproaching and traducing others: detractors were infamous amongst them; and therefore it is a shame this should be practised by Christians.

(6.) *This is a sin against the whole design and scope of the scriptures.*—These are, as I may say, the two poles, upon which the heavenly globe of the scripture turns; the love of God, and the love of our neighbour. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." (Matt. xxii. 37, &c.) "Love is the fulfilling of the law;" (Rom. xiii. 10;) and the law is enforced by Christ, John xiii. 34: "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another." So, then, all the scripture hath but one neck; and this the detractor cuts off, and so makes himself the greatest anti-scripturist in the world.

3. *This is a great injury to God, because it is a confederacy with God's greatest enemy, the devil.*—God judgeth of men's relations by their works, and not by their talks. "If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham." (John viii. 39.) And, verse 44: "Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do." Now this among others is the devil's great work and office, who is hence called "the accuser of the brethren," (Rev. xii. 10,) and from whence he hath his name *diabolus*, which is "a calumniator, a slanderer, a reproacher." And these men, as they do the devil's work, so they are called by the devil's name: "Not slanderers;" in the Greek, *μη διαβολους*, "not devils." (1 Tim. iii. 11.) And as they do the devil's work, so they

serve the devil's great design. "God is love," and therefore his design is to promote love in the world. The devil is a malignant and hateful spirit, and his work is to promote hatred, contention, and strife among men : and that is effectually done by this way.

(II.) *This is an injury to thyself* in these particulars :—

1. *Hereby thou dost contract guilt, the worst of all evils.*—A man's sin may injure another man ; but the greatest and the worst part of it falls upon his own head. "Wickedness," saith Seneca, "drinketh up the greatest part of its own poison." "He that sinneth against me wrongeth his own soul." (Prov. viii. 36.) Thou woundest another man's fame ; but thou woundest thy own conscience : which of these is the worst ? He whom thou reproachest gets a blot before men ; and thou dost procure to thyself a blot before God. Thou accusest him before other men ; and thy conscience will accuse thee for it before God.

2. *Hereby thou dost expel or weaken that excellent grace of love, that necessary and fundamental grace, that sweet and amiable grace.*—As all virtue is a reward to itself, so is this in a more special manner. Infinite is the pleasure of the holy soul, in loving God, and loving all men, and loving enemies. O, this is a most delightful work ! And, on the contrary, hatred, and malice, and envy, as they are most sinful, so are they very miserable, works, and a great torment to him that hath them. While the mind of a wicked, malicious man is like "the raging sea," continually "casting up mire and dirt," and is its own tormentor ; the mind of a good man, exercising itself in love, is, as it were, "a sea of glass like unto crystal," calm and serene ; it enjoys God, and itself, and other men, yea, even a man's enemies : by this holy art a man may get comfort out of his enemies, whether they will or no.

3. *Hereby thou dost lay a foundation for thy own reproach.*—"Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged : and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again." (Matt. vii. 1, 2.) Methinks this text should strike a terror into all persons who are guilty of this sin. The law of retaliation prescribed by God is frequently inflicted by him also : "He shall have judgment without mercy, that hath showed no mercy." (James ii. 13.) So that thou dost engage the great God against thee, to pour contempt upon thy name, and to make thee a reproach in the world.

(III.) *It is a great injury to the person whom thou dost censure and reproach ;* and that in these particulars :—

1. *Thou dost rob him of the best treasure which he hath in the world.*—"A good name is rather to be chosen than riches ;" (Prov. xxii. 1 ;) and, consequently, thou art more criminal than he that dieth by the hands of justice for taking away another man's goods : thou robbest him of that which thou art not able to give him ; thou robbest him of the most lasting good which he hath, and that which alone will abide after death. So that thy cruelty extends beyond the grave, and tends to this, —to make his name rot above ground, while his body rots in it. And this injury is the greater, because it cannot be prevented : there is no fence against this vice ; it is the arrow that flies by night, which no man can either observe or avoid, and it is an injury which can hardly be repaired. Breaches in men's estates may be made up, liberty lost may be recovered, a conscience wounded may be healed ; but a reputation can

hardly ever be restored. *Calumniare fortiter, aliquid adhærebit*, "Slander a man resolutely, and something, to be sure, will stick."

2. *Hereby thou dost disenable him from getting good, both as to his outward and as to his inward man.*

As to his *outward man* : who knows not the necessity of a good fame for the successful management of a man's worldly concerns? By one act of this sin thou mayest possibly undo a man and all his family.

It hinders him also from receiving *inward good* as to the state of his soul : at least he is not likely to get any good from thee. Whereas it is thy duty to "rebuke thy neighbour, and not to suffer sin to rest upon him;" (Lev. xix. 17;) this is the way to make that work altogether unsuccessful : it stops his ear against thy counsels, it hardens his heart against thy admonitions ; and many times such reproaches make men careless, and by degrees impudent ; and when once they have lost their reputation by thy calumnies, they are not careful to regain it, and, it may be, judge it impossible.

3. *Hereby thou dost hinder him from doing of good in the world.*—It is certain, a good name is of absolute necessity to make a man considerably serviceable in the world : when a man hath once lost this, the very good which he doeth is despised and disregarded. And this reason especially concerns you in the reproaching of three sorts of persons, which I do therefore in a special manner caution you against.

(1.) *In reproaching of magistrates, of kings, and persons in authority.*—Magistrates, though bad in themselves, yet are to be looked upon as great blessings ; and if we had the Persian experiment of absolute anarchy but for a few days, that every man might do that which seemed right in his own eyes, we should all be sensible of this truth. Now, the magistrate's reputation is the great supporter of that majesty and authority which he bears, and the magistrate's authority is the people's benefit. And therefore all persons should be tender in this particular ; they should not expose kings and magistrates to contempt and scorn, nor beget irreverence in people toward them. And therefore they ought to take heed, not only of divulging false reports concerning them, but even such as possibly may be true ; they must take heed of publishing the secret miscarriages of princes ; for this, as I told you, is a sin against any man, but much more against persons in authority.

(2.) *Against ministers.*—Their fame is most necessary for their usefulness in the word. And therefore, when a man defames a minister, beside that injury which is common to other men, he doth this peculiar mischief,—he endeavours to rob the world of all the good which such a person may do in it. I cannot but take this occasion to vent my great grief, and the scandal I justly take, at those ministers and Christians, who, if a man differ from them in some doctrines or rites of less moment, (though otherwise never so eminent,) make it their business to disparage and bespatter him, and think they do God good service, in blasting his reputation, representing him as a Papist, Socinian, time-server, &c. In the fear of God, consider the sinfulness of this practice. Whatsoever good such a person might do in convincing, converting, and building-up of souls, so far as this is hindered by thy means, the blood of such souls will fall upon thy head : nay, which

is more, although good should not be hindered by it, yet thou shalt answer for all that might have been hindered by it. And for this reason Constantine the Great did profess, that if he should know any secret miscarriage of a minister, he would cover it with a mantle.

(3.) *Against good men, or eminent professors of religion.*—Who, I confess, when they are bad, are the vilest of men; and when their sins are known and public, they ought to be used with most severity; and such shall have the hottest place in hell who use religion as a cloak for their villainies: yet, when the sins of such persons are secret and scarce known, we should take heed of spreading of them. “Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Askelon,” not for their sakes, but for the sake of religion, which infinitely suffers by their misdemeanours, and the reproaches which arise from them.

(IV.) *This is a great injury to other men, in these particulars:—*

1. *Thou corruptest others by thy example.*—Especially ministers and eminent professors of religion,—they should, above all others, avoid this sin, because their actions are precedential. They that will not follow your counsel, will imitate your example; and though our Saviour hath cautioned us concerning the Pharisees, “What they bid or teach you, observe and do; but do not after their works;” (Matt. xxiii. 3;) yet, in spite of all that Christ hath said, men will take a contrary course: they will not hear your sermons, but will diligently attend to your conversations. O consider this: every time another hears thee censuring and reproaching thy neighbour, thou dost in effect preach and persuade him to this practice; thou settest a copy which other men may write after, when thou art gone into another world; and no man knows how far the contagion of such an evil example may spread, nor how great a fire a little spark may kindle.

2. *Thou art a disturber of human society, an incendiary in the place where thou dwellest.*—The peace and tranquillity of cities and kingdoms are often disturbed by this means. “Whence come wars and fightings among you? Come they not hence, even from your lusts that war in your members?” (James iv. 1.) They do not come from men’s lusts as they remain in their own hearts, for so they are secret and unknown to the world; but as they break out, first in their lips, and then in their hands.

3. *Thou art a great enemy to the church of God, however thou mayest seem to thyself or others a zealous friend of it.*—It is not easy for any man to conceive the great mischief which these censures and reproaches produce in the church: they break the peace of it, and fill it with sharp contentions and divisions; yea, they strike at the being of it. You know, “a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand:” they do their part to pull-down the glorious building of the church, so as one stone should not be left upon another. They eclipse the glory of the church, which doth not consist in external splendour, in riches and ornaments, but in love, peace, and unity among themselves. This was Jerusalem’s beauty, that it was “built as a city that is compact together.” (Psalm cxxii. 3.) This hinders the growth and progress of the church and of religion. When persons professing religion allow themselves in such sins which are not only offensive to God, but also odious in the world,

it fills the minds of men with powerful and invincible prejudices against religious men, and against religion itself for their sakes. I must tell you, if the professors of religion would learn the government of their tongues, and the right ordering of their conversations, it would be the likeliest means to propagate religion in the world. And, Christians, if ever you would do this, do it now; never was it more necessary or seasonable to wipe-off those stains and blemishes which at this day lie upon religion for the neglect of this duty by the professors of it. And thrice blessed are all you that contribute to so glorious a work as the restoration of that beauty and glory which religion once had in some of our remembrance. But when the tongues of Christians are exercised in this sinful practice, beside the particular injury to the person reproached, it hinders the conversion and salvation of others. Consider, I beseech you, a little, the greatness of this sin. You think it a great crime (and so it was) in Elymas the sorcerer, who, when Sergius Paulus called for Barnabas and Saul, and desired them to preach to him the word of God, "withstood them, seeking to turn away the deputy from the faith." (Acts xiii. 8.) He did this by his words, and thou doest it by thy actions. Thou doest the devil's work in stealing the seed of the word of God out of men's hearts, and making it unfruitful. These practices beget in men a mean esteem and contempt of God's word, when they see how little good it doeth to others, and how little power it hath with you that profess it.

Before I come to the application, two questions are to be answered:—

QUESTION I. "May I not speak evil of another person when it is true?"

1. *A man may be faulty in so doing.*—The real secret faults of your neighbour, as I told you, you ought not unnecessarily to publish. And suppose there be no untruth nor injustice in it; yet there is uncharitableness and unkindness in it; and that is a sin. Thou wouldst not have all truth said concerning thyself, nor all thy real faults publicly traduced. "Out of thy own mouth will God judge thee, O thou wicked servant!" Yea, thy own tongue and conscience shall another day condemn thee.

2. *You may speak evil of another person when necessity requires it.*—It may be necessary sometimes for his good; and so you may speak evil of him unto those that can help it; as a man may acquaint parents with the miscarriages of their children, in order to their amendment. Thus Joseph brought to his father the evil report of his brethren. (Gen. xxvii. 2.) Sometimes this may be necessary for the caution of others; as, if I see a man ready to enter into intimate friendship and acquaintance with a person whom I know to be highly vicious and dangerous, I may in such a case caution him against it; for, certainly, if charity commands me, when my neighbour's ox is ready to fall into a pit, to do my endeavour to prevent it, much more am I obliged to prevent the ruin of my brother's soul, when I see him so near destruction. But for a man to do this unnecessarily and unprofitably,—this is the sin I have been speaking of.

3. *If you will speak evil of other persons, do it in the right method.*—Christ hath given us an excellent rule: "If thy brother shall trespass

against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone : if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, take with thee one or two more. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church." (Matt. xviii. 15, 17.) But if men will be preposterous, and will not follow Christ's order, but, instead of private admonishing, will publish men's faults to others, herein they make themselves transgressors.

4. *In doubtful cases, silence is the safest way.*—It is rarely men's duty to speak evil of men ; and when it is not their duty to speak, it is not their sin to be silent. It is seldom that any [one] suffers by my silence, or concealment of his fault ; but great hazards are run, and many persons commonly are made sufferers, by my publication. Now, as charity commands me to pass the most favourable judgment, so wisdom obligeth me to choose the safest course.

QUESTION II. "But what, if that man I speak against be an enemy to God and his people ? May not I in that case speak evil of him ? Doth not that zeal I owe to God engage me to speak evil of such a man as far as I can with truth ?"

This, I believe, is that which induceth many well-meaning persons to this sinful practice of detracting from divers worthy persons, ministers, and others, as supposing them to be enemies to God and to his ways ; and so they think their reproaching and censuring of such persons is nothing but zeal for God.

For answer to this, consider,

1. *There is abundance of sinful zeal in the world and in the church.*—Therefore the apostle gives us a caution : "It is good to be zealously affected always in a good thing." (Gal. iv. 18.) Otherwise we know it was from zeal that Paul persecuted the church. (Phil. iii. 6.) Zeal, indeed, is an excellent grace in itself ; but nothing [is] more frequently both pretended where it is not, (and where envy, interest, or malice lie at the bottom,) and abused where it is.

2. *True zeal hath an equal respect to all God's commands, and especially to those that are most plain and most considerable.*—It is at least doubtful, whether the man thou traducest be an enemy to God and his ways ; sure I am, it is so with some ministers and Christians that are highly censured and reproached by those that differ from them ; and it were great impudence to deny it : but this is a certain truth and evident duty : "Thou shalt not take up an evil reproach against thy neighbour."

3. *Consider how easy a mistake is in this case, and how dangerous.*—Peradventure he whom thou callest an enemy to God, will, upon inquiry, be found a friend of God and his ways. But what dost thou mean by "the ways of God ?" Possibly thy own ways or party that thou art engaged in : take heed of that. If you would judge aright, you must distinguish between the circumstantials and the essentials of the ways of God. Suppose a man be an enemy to thy party, and thy way and manner of religious worship and government ; yea, let us suppose that thine is indeed the way of God, wherein yet thou mayest be mistaken ; if, now, this man be an able and zealous assertor of the substantial and fundamental truths of God and ways of holiness, and this be attended

with a holy and exemplary life, who dare say that this man is an enemy to God and his ways? O my soul, come not into the secrets of such persons!

4. *You must not go out of God's way to meet with God's enemies.*—If any man be really an enemy of God and of his truths and ways, I do not persuade you to comply with him, or by sinful silence to betray the cause of God; only let me entreat you to do God's work in God's way: you may apply yourselves to him, and endeavour to convince him; you may speak or write against his doctrine, provided you do it with modesty and moderation, and not with that virulence and venom wherewith too many books are now leavened. But, for this way of detraction and reproach, it is a dishonourable and disingenuous way, it is a sinful and disorderly way, it is an unprofitable and ineffectual way, and no way suitable either to the nature of God whom you serve, or to the rule and example of our blessed Saviour, or to the great principle of love and charity, or to that end which you are to aim-at in all things,—the honour of God, and the good of other men.

III. Now I come to the APPLICATION.

USES.

USE I. *Lamentation for the gross neglect of this duty, or the frequent commission of this sin.*—What tears are sufficient to bewail it? How thick do censures and reproaches fly in all places, at all tables, in all conventions! And this were the more tolerable, if it were only the fault of ungodly men, of strangers and enemies to religion; for so saith the proverb, "Wickedness proceedeth from the wicked." When a man's heart is full of hell, it is not unreasonable to expect that his tongue should be "set on fire of hell;" and it is no wonder to hear such persons reproach good men, yea, even for their goodness. But, alas! the disease doth not rest here: this plague is not only among the Egyptians, but [among the] Israelites too. It is very doleful to consider, how professors sharpen their tongues like swords against professors; and one good man censures and reproaches another, and one minister traduceth another; and who can say, "I am clean from this sin?" O that I could move your pity in this case! For the Lord's sake, pity yourselves, and do not pollute and wound your consciences with this crime. Pity your brethren: let it suffice that godly ministers and Christians are loaded with reproaches by wicked men; there is no need that you should combine with them in this diabolical work; you should support and strengthen their hands against the reproaches of the ungodly world, and not add affliction to the afflicted. O pity the world, and pity the church which Christ hath purchased with his own blood, which, methinks, bespeaks you in those words: "Have pity upon me, have pity upon me, O ye my friends; for the hand of God hath touched me." (Job xix. 21.) Pity the mad and miserable world, and help it against this sin; stop the bloody issue, restrain this wicked practice amongst men as much as possibly you can, and lament it before God; and for what you cannot do yourselves, give God no rest until he shall please to work a cure.

USE II. CAUTION. *Take heed you be not found guilty of this sin.*

—Wherein any of us have been guilty, let us be truly and thoroughly humbled for it; and for the future let us make conscience of abstaining from it. I will suppose what I have said may be sufficient for arguments to convince and for motives to persuade you; and therefore I shall only give you some directions in order to the practice of this duty: and, to assist you against this sin,

DIRECTION I. *Avoid the causes of this sin.*—This is the most natural and regular way to cure a disease, by taking away the cause of it. Particularly take heed of these things as the causes of this sin:—

1. *Take heed of uncharitableness in all its kinds and degrees, malice, envy, hatred.*—Where these diseases are in the heart, they will break-out at the lips. “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.” (Matt. xii. 34.)

2. *Take heed of loquacity and multitude of words.*—A man need not seek far for perpetual motion; he may find it in some persons’ restless and incessant tongues. Now, persons of this temper will not want matter of discourse, and therefore pick-up and spread-abroad all sorts of censures and reproaches against others, not so much out of malice against them, as for their own diversion and ease, that their tongues may not want exercise. Take heed of this: it is in itself a sin, an abuse of the tongue, a wasting of time, a reproach to thyself; it makes thee cheap and mean and contemptible in the eyes of others, and especially of wise and good men; and it is also the cause of many other sins.

3. *Take heed of pragmatism, which is, when men are inquisitive and busy about other men’s matters.*—A sin often reprov’d in scripture: “For we hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all.” (2 Thess. iii. 11.) “Let none of you suffer as an evil-doer, or as a busybody in other men’s matters.” (1 Peter iv. 15.) You may observe how Christ reproveth this in his own dear apostle: “Peter seeing him saith to Jesus, Lord, and what shall this man do? Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me.” (John xxi. 21, 22.) As if he had said, “Mind you your own business; do not busy your head about other men.”

4. *Take heed of man-pleasing.*—There are many whose great employment and business it is to spread evil reports concerning others, who are therefore called “tale-bearers;” and this they do to please the humours of persons with whom they converse, unto whom they know such discourse is most acceptable. And thus many persons make themselves guilty in hearing reproaches, and not checking them, because they will comply with the company, they will not displease nor offend their friends. Take heed of this, and remember that severe sentence of the apostle: “If I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ.” (Gal. i. 10.) He that pleaseth other men, so as to neglect any duty, or to commit any sin, whatsoever he pretends, he is not the servant of Christ.

DIRECT. II. *Learn the government of your tongues.*—Consider the necessity of it. The apostle James lays the stress of all religion upon it: “If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridled not his

tongue, this man's religion is vain." (James i. 26.) And if this be true, I am sure there are many high professors that must be blotted out of the saints' calendar. Consider also the easiness of this government of the tongue. Men have more command of their tongues, and of their outward members, than they have of their inward motions, concupiscences, and passions. If tongues be unruly, God and nature have given you a bridle to restrain them, the *ἔρκος ὀδόντων*, the "fence of the teeth," as the poet speaks.

DIRECT. III. Learn distrust of reports.—It is a good rule, *Μεμνησο ἀπιστεῖν*, "Learn to disbelieve." Fame hath lost its reputation long since; and I do not know any thing which it hath done in our age to regain it; and therefore it ought not be credited. How few reports are there in any kind, which, when they come to be examined, we do not find to be false! For my part, I reckon, if I believe one report in twenty, I make a very liberal allowance. And especially distrust reproaches and evil reports, because these spread fastest, as being grateful to most persons, who suppose their own reputation never so well grounded as when it is built upon the ruins of other men's.

DIRECT. IV. Reproach no man for that which you do not thoroughly understand.—This, I am sure, is highly reasonable; and he that doeth otherwise is altogether inexcusable, because he runs an infinite hazard, lest, while he opposeth a man, he be found to fight against God. And truly, if this rule were practised, some kinds of reproaches would be rare in the world: for persons of true and clear understanding are not apt to reproach others for different opinions in lesser matters; they consider the weakness of human nature, and the necessity of mutual forbearance. It is the weaker sort that are here, as in other things, most querulous; and generally where there is least light there is most heat. Those persons by whose censures and reproaches the church of God among us is most miserably torn and wasted, are generally the more ignorant part of Christians. How many are there that are full of rage one against another for being either for a form of prayer or against it, either for the ceremonies or against them, that never searched into the state of the controversy, and never took pains to examine the arguments on both sides, which in all reason they ought to have done, or else at least to have restrained their tongues from such unreasonable and sinful censures and reproaches! These, I say, are the persons that are most guilty, nay, upon the matter, the only guilty persons, except such whom base lust and interest doth corrupt and work to these animosities.

DIRECT. V. Converse much with yourselves.—It is want of business at home in men's own hearts, that makes them ramble so much abroad, and rake into the lives of others. Study yourselves more, and other men less. Did you search your own hearts and lives, you would find so much cause of self-judging and self-abhorring, that you would have little cause to despise others, and much cause of compassion toward others.

DIRECT. VI. Judge of others as you would do of yourselves and your own actions.—It is worth our consideration, what a great difference there is between the judgment men pass upon themselves, and [upon] other

men. As for themselves, all their errors are but small mistakes; and all their sins against God, however attended with ugly circumstances of light, of consent of the will, custom, and allowance, yet they are but sins of infirmity, if themselves may be judges in their own cause. Their injuries to men are but small and trivial offences; and they do indeed expect both from God and man a pardon, of course, which if they have not, they judge God to be harsh and severe, men to be cruel and implacable. But when they come to pass judgment upon other men, the tables are turned, some mistakes are damnable delusions, and all their sins against God, which they can observe, are evidences of a naughty heart, and inconsistent with grace; and the offences of others against them are inexcusable and intolerable, great affronts and indignities; whereas, on the contrary, thou shouldst, as it was said of a great man, "Be severe to thyself, and candid to others;" because thou knowest more wickedness by thyself, and more aggravation of thy own sins, than of all the sins that are in the world. But at least all the reason and justice in the world requires this, that thou shouldst weigh thyself and others in the same balance, that thou shouldst try thy own and their actions by the same touchstone; and more need not be done. Thou who art so prone to flatter thyself, wouldest certainly be more indulgent to other men, and pass a more favourable construction upon their actions.

SERMON XXII.

BY THE REV. RICHARD BAXTER.

WHAT LIGHT MUST SHINE IN OUR WORKS?

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.—Matthew v. 16.

THE work designed for this time is, to resolve this practical case: What is that light which must shine before men, in the works of Christ's disciples, for the glorifying of God? But the explication of the text is therein included.

The Sun of Righteousness, Jesus Christ, who "giveth light to every one that cometh into the world," (or, "coming into the world, giveth light to all,") from his fulness hath bespangled the inferior heavens,—his church, with many fulgent stars, appointed freely to communicate the heavenly light which they had freely received. In his corporal presence he prepared them; and his Spirit having moved on the darkened world, he irresistibly said, at the descent of the Holy Ghost, "Let there be light; and there was light;" beginning at Jerusalem, but not fixed to any determinate place. But what he gave them necessarily and antecedently, they were to exercise as free agents, by a command more resistible, which here he gives them. Having told them their office, and given them their names, verse 14: "Ye are the lights of the world;" he next