

## SERMON XXVIII.

BY THE REV. JOHN OWEN, D.D.,

FORMERLY DEAN OF CHRIST CHURCH, AND VICE-CHANCELLOR OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD.

HOW WE MAY BRING OUR HEARTS TO BEAR REPROOFS.

*Let the righteous smite me; it shall be a kindness: and let him reprove me; it shall be an excellent oil, which shall not break my head: for yet my prayer also shall be in their calamities.—Psalm cxli. 5.*

It is generally agreed by expositors, that this psalm, as that foregoing, with two of those that follow, were composed by David in the time of his banishment or flight from the court of Saul. The state wherein he describeth himself to have been, the matter of his pleas and prayers contained in them, with sundry express circumstances regarding that season and his condition therein, do manifest *that* to have been the time of their composure. That the Psalmist was now in some distress, whereof he was deeply sensible, is evident from that vehemency of his spirit, which he expresseth in the re-iteration of his request or supplication; (verse 1;) and by his desire, that his prayer might come before the Lord “as incense, and the lifting-up of his hands as the evening sacrifice.” (Verse 2.) The Jewish expositors guess, not improbably, that in that allusion he had regard unto his present exclusion from the holy services of the tabernacle, which in other places he deeply complains of.

For the matter of his prayer in this beginning of the psalm, (for I shall not look beyond the text,) it respecteth himself, and his deportment under his present condition; which he desireth may be harmless and holy, becoming himself and useful unto others. And whereas he was two ways liable to miscarry,—First, by too high an exasperation of spirit against his oppressors and persecutors; and, Secondly, by a fraudulent and pusillanimous compliance with them in their wicked courses; which are the two extremes that men are apt sinfully to run into in such conditions,—he prays earnestly to be delivered from them both. The first he hath respect unto, verse 3: “Set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips;” namely, that he might not, under those great provocations which were given him, break forth into an unseemly intemperance of speech against his unjust oppressors, which sometimes fierce and unreasonable cruelties will wrest from very sedate and moderate spirits. But it was the desire of this holy Psalmist, as in like cases it should be ours, that his heart might be always preserved in such a frame, under the conduct of the Spirit of God, as not to be surprised into an expression of distempered passion in any of his words or sayings. The other he regards in his earnest supplication to be delivered from it, verse 4: “Incline not my heart to any evil thing, to practise wicked works with men that work iniquity: and let me not eat of their dainties.”

There are two parts of his request unto the purpose intended : 1. That, by the power of God's grace influencing his mind and soul, his heart might not be inclined unto any communion or society with his wicked adversaries in their wickedness. 2. That he might be preserved from a liking of, or a longing after, those things which are the baits and allurements whereby men are apt to be drawn into societies and conspiracies with the workers of iniquity : "And let me not eat of their dainties." (See Prov. i. 10—14.) For he here describeth the condition of men prospering for a season in a course of wickedness : they *first* jointly give-up themselves unto the practice of iniquity ; and *then* together solace themselves in those satisfactions of their lusts which their power and interest in the world do furnish them withal. These are "the dainties" of which an impotent longing and desire do betray the minds of unstable persons unto a compliance with ways of sin and folly ; for I look on these "dainties" to comprise whatever "the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, or the pride of life," can afford. All these David prays to be delivered from any inclination unto ; especially when they are made the allurements of a course of sin. In the enjoyment of these "dainties," it is the common practice of wicked men to soothe-up, approve of, and mutually encourage, one another in the way and course wherein they are engaged ; and this completes that goodly felicity which in this world so many aspire unto, and whereof alone they are capable. The whole of it is but a society in perishing, sensual enjoyments, without control, and with mutual applauses from one another.

This the Psalmist had a special regard unto ; who casting his eye toward another communion and society which he longed after, (verse 5,) that in the first place presents itself unto him which is most opposite unto those mutual applauses and rejoicings in one another which are the salt and cement of all evil societies ; namely, rebukes and reproofs for the least miscarriages that shall be observed. Now whereas the dainties which some enjoy in a course of prosperous wickedness, are that alone which seems to have any thing in it amongst them that is desirable, and on the other side rebukes and reproofs are those alone which seem to have any sharpness, or matter of uneasiness and dislike in the society of the godly ; David balanceth that which seemeth to be sharpest in the one society, against that which seems to be sweetest in the other, and, without respect unto other advantages, prefers the one above the other. Hence some read the beginning of the words, "Let the righteous *rather* smite me," with respect unto this comparison and balance.

"Let the righteous smite me ; *it shall be* a kindness : and let him reprove me ; *it shall be* an excellent oil, *which* shall not break my head : for yet my prayer also *shall be* in their calamities." The view of our translation will evidence the words to be elliptical in the original, by the various supplements which we make to fill up the sense of them, and render them coherent ; and this hath put some difficulty on the interpretation of the text, and caused some variety of apprehensions in sober and learned expositors. It is not unto my present purpose to engage into a discussion of all the difficulties of the text, seeing I design to found no other doctrine thereon than what all will acknowledge to be contained in the words and their coherence. I shall

only, therefore, briefly open them, with respect unto our present purpose and its concernment in them.

צַדִּיקִים יִחַלְמֵנִי וְצַדִּיק הָקָד: — צַדִּיקִים “The righteous,” is any one opposed to the workers of iniquity, (verse 4,) any righteous person whatever, any one who is of the society and communion of the righteous ones; for all the world falls under this distribution, as it will one day appear. “Let him smite me:” the word הִלֵּם is seldom used in the scripture but to signify a severe stroke which shakes the subject smitten, and causeth it to tremble; see Prov. xxiii. 35; 1 Sam. xiv. 16; Psalm lxxiv. 6; and it is used for the stroke of the hammer on the anvil in fashioning of the iron, Isai. xli. 7. Wherefore the word הָקָד following may be taken adverbially, as a lenitive of that severity which this word importeth: “Let him smite me, but” *leniter, benignè, misericorditer*, “gently, kindly, friendly, mercifully:” and so some translations read the words: “Let the righteous smite me friendly, or kindly.”

But there is no need to wrest the word to such an unusual sense; for the Psalmist intends to show, that, so he may be delivered from the society of ungodly men, and enjoy the communion of the righteous, he would not deprecate the greatest severities, which according to rule might be exercised in rebuking or reproving of him. And this he doth with so full a satisfaction of mind, with such a high valuation of the advantage he should have thereby, that he says not he would bear it patiently and quietly, but הָקָד “It will be unto me a benignity, a mercy, a kindness,” as the word imports. And as it seems that some reproofs, at least some regular dealings of righteous persons with us, may come as a stroke that makes us shake and tremble; so it is a good advance in spiritual wisdom, to find out kindness and mercy in those that are so grievous unto our natural spirits, unto flesh and blood.

וַיִּוְכַחֲנֵי “And let him reprove me.” This manifests what he intends by “smiting” in the foregoing words: it is reproofs that he intends; and these he calls “smiting,” in opposition unto the flattering compliance of wicked men with one another in the enjoyment of their “dainties,” and with respect unto that smart unto the mind and affections wherewith some of them are sometimes accompanied. But this word, directly expressing that subject-matter whereof I intend to treat, must be again spoken unto.

שֶׁמֶן רֹאשׁ אֶל־יָגִי רֹאשִׁי These words have a double interpretation; for they may be either deprecatory of an evil implied, or declaratory of the Psalmist’s sense of the good he desired. Kimchi on the place observes, that his father Joseph divided the words of the text, and began here a new sense, wherein the Psalmist returns unto the close of the fourth verse: “Let me not eat of their dainties; and let not their precious oil,” that is, their flatteries and soothings in sin, “break my head: but let the reproofs of the righteous preserve me.” And this sense is followed by the Vulgar Latin: *Oleum autem peccatorum non impingat caput meum*. But the other construction and sense of the words is more natural: שֶׁמֶן רֹאשׁ *oleum capitis*, “the oil of the head,” we render “an excellent oil;” and countenance may be given unto that interpretation from Exod. xxx. 23, where בְּשִׂמְיֵם רֹאשׁ “spices of the head,” is well rendered “principal spices.” But I rather think that שֶׁמֶן עַל רֹאשׁ “oil poured on the

head," which was the manner of all solemn unctions, is intended. This being a great privilege, and the token of the communication of great mercy, the Psalmist compares the rebukes of the righteous thereunto; and therefore he adds אֶל-יְיָ רִאשׁוֹ "It shall not break my head." Considering reproofs in their own nature, he calls them "amittings;" some of them being very sharp, as it is needful they should be, where we are obliged to rebuke *αποτομως*, "in a piercing and cutting manner." (2 Cor. xiii. 10; Titus i. 13.) But with respect unto their use, benefit, and advantage, they are like unto that anointing oil which, being poured on the head, was both gentle and pleasant, and a pledge of the communication of spiritual privileges, whence no inconveniences would ensue.

The last clause of the words belonging not unto our present design, I shall not insist on their explication. Some few things must be further premised unto our principal intention, concerning the nature of those reproofs which are proposed as a matter of such advantage in the text. And,

1. The word יָכַח here used, signifieth "to argue, to dispute, to contend in judgment," as well as "to reprove, rebuke, or reprehend." Its first signification is "to argue, or to plead a cause with arguments." Hence it is used as a common term between God and man, denoting the reasons real or pretended only on the one side and the other. So God himself speaks unto his people לְכוּ-נָא וְיִבְרַחְדָּה "Go to now, and let us plead, reason, or argue together;" (Isai. i. 18;) and Job calls his "pleas or argument" in prayer unto God הוֹדָחוֹת "I would fill my mouth with arguments." (Job xxiii. 4.) Wherefore that only hath the true nature of a reproof which is accompanied with reasons and arguments for the evincing of what it tends unto. Rash, groundless, wrathful, precipitate censures and rebukes are evil in themselves, and, in our present case, of no consideration; nor indeed ought any one to engage in the management of reproofs, who is not furnished with rule and argument to evince their necessity, and render them effectual. Sometimes things may be so circumstanced as that a reproof shall so carry its own reason and efficacious conviction along with it as that there will be no need of arguing or pleas to make it useful. So the look of our blessed Saviour on Peter, under the circumstances of his case, was a sufficient reproof, though he spake not one word in its confirmation. But, ordinarily, cogent reasons are the best conveyances of reproofs to the minds of men, be they of what sort they will.

2. *Reproofs do always respect a fault, an evil, a miscarriage, or a sin in them that are reprov'd.*—There may be mutual admonitions and exhortations among Christians with respect unto sundry things in the course of their faith and obedience, without a regard unto any evil or miscarriage. The general nature of a reproof is an admonition or exhortation; but it hath its special nature from its regard unto a fault in course, or particular fact. And hence the word signifies also "to chastise;" wherein is a correction for, and the means of a recovery from, a miscarriage: (2 Sam. vii. 14:) "I will reprove him with the rod of men," that is, "chastise him." This, therefore, is that reproof which we intend,—a warning, admonition, or exhortation given unto any, whereby they are rebuked for and with respect unto some moral evil or sin in their course, way, prac-

tice, or any particular miscarriage, such as may render them obnoxious unto divine displeasure or chastisement ; for it is essential unto a regular reproof, that, in him who gives it, it may be accompanied with, or do proceed from, an apprehension that the person reproved is by the matter of the reproof rendered obnoxious unto the displeasure of God.

3. *It may also be considered, that reproving is not left arbitrarily unto the wills of men.*—Whatever seems to be so, it loseth its nature, if it be not a duty in him who reproves, and will come short of its efficacy. No wise man will reprove, but when it is his duty so to do, unless he design the just reproach of a busy-body for his reward. The command is general with respect unto brother and neighbour, Lev. xix. 17 : “Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart : thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him.” But as to the particular discharge of this work as a duty, there must be either an especial office, or an especial relation, or a concurrence of circumstances, for its warranty. God hath in his wisdom and care given rules and bounds unto our engagement unto duties ; without a regulation whereby, we shall wander in them with endless dissatisfactions unto ourselves, and unnecessary provocations unto others. But the duty of reproving, with the love, wisdom, tenderness, and compassion required in the discharge of it, its motives, ends, and circumstances, its proper rules and limitations, fall not under my present consideration ; but these things in general were necessary to be premised unto what do so.

That which the text instructs us in may be comprised in this general observation : *Reproofs, though accompanied with some sharpness, if rightly received and duly improved, are a mercy and advantage incomparably above all the satisfactions which a joint consent with others in sin and pleasures can afford.*

The latter part of the proposition I have mentioned only to express the balance that is proposed by the Psalmist, between the best and most desirable advantages of wicked society on the one hand, and the sharpest or most displeasing severities that accompany the communion of the righteous or godly. But I shall not at all handle the comparison, as designing only some directions how men should behave themselves under reproofs, that they may be a kindness and an excellent oil unto them : or how they may by them obtain spiritual benefit and advantage unto their own souls. And this, however at present the matter may be managed, is of itself of great importance : for as, in the state of weakness and imperfection, of mistakes and miscarriages, wherein we are, there is no outward help or aid of more use and advantage unto us than seasonable reproofs ; so, in the right receiving and improving of them, as high a trial of the spirits of men, as to their interest in wisdom and folly, doth consist, as in any thing that doth befall them, or wherewith they may be exercised. For as “scorners of reproofs,” those that hear them unwillingly, that bear them haughtily and impatiently, with designs of revenge or disdainful retortions, have the characters of pride and folly indelibly fixed on them by the Holy Ghost ; so their due admission and improvement is in the same infallible truth represented as an evident pledge of wisdom, and an effectual means of its increase. This is so much and so frequently insisted on in that great treasure of all wisdom,

spiritual, natural, and political, namely, the Book of Proverbs, that it is altogether needless to call-over any particular testimonies unto that purpose.

Two things we are to inquire into, in compliance with our present design: I. *How reproofs may be duly received.* II. *How they may be duly improved*: whereunto the reasons shall be added *Why they ought so to be.*

I. *That we may receive reproofs in a due manner*, three things are to be considered: (I.) *The general qualification of the reprover*: (II.) *The nature of the reproof*: and, (III.) *The matter of it.*

(I.) *The Psalmist here desires that his reprover may be a righteous man.*—"Let the righteous smite me: let him reprove me." To give and take reproofs is a dictate of the law of nature, whereby every man is obliged to seek the good of others, and to promote it according to their ability and opportunity. The former is directed by that love which is due unto others, the latter by that which is due unto ourselves; which two are the great rules, and give measure to the duties of all societies, whether civil or spiritual. Wherefore it doth not evacuate a reproof, or discharge him who is reprov'd from the duty of attending unto it, that he by whom it is managed is not righteous, yea, is openly wicked; for, the duty itself being an effect of the law of nature, it is the same, for the substance of it, by whomsoever it is performed. Yea, oft-times such moral, or rather immoral, qualifications as render not only the reprover less considerable, but also the reproof itself, until thoroughly weighed and examined, obnoxious unto prejudicate conceptions, do occasion a greater and more signal exercise of grace and wisdom in him that is reprov'd, than would have been stirred up, had all things concurred unto the exact regularity of the reproof. However, it is desirable on many accounts that he who reprov's be himself a righteous person, and be of us esteemed so to be; for as such an one alone will or can have a due sense of the evil reprov'd, with a right principle and end in the discharge of his own duty, so the minds of them that are reprov'd are, by their sense of his integrity, excluded from those insinuations of evasions which prejudices and suggestions of just causes of reflections on their reprover will offer unto them. Especially, without the exercise of singular wisdom and humility, will all the advantages of a just reproof be lost, where the allowed practice of greater sins and evils than that reprov'd is daily chargeable on the reprover. Hence is that reflection of our Saviour on the useless, hypocritical diligence of men in pulling the mote out of their brother's eyes, whilst they have beams in their own. (Matt. vii. 3—5.) The rule in this case is: If the reprover be a righteous person, consider the reprover first, and then the reproof; if he be otherwise, consider the reproof, and the reprover not at all.

(II.) *The nature of a reproof* is also to be considered.—And this is threefold; for every reproof is either *authoritative*, or *fraternal*, or *merely friendly and occasional*.

1. *Authoritative reproofs* are either, (1.) *Ministerial*, or, (2.) *Parental*, or, (3.) *Despotical*.

(1.) There is an especial authority accompanying *ministerial reproofs*, which we ought especially to consider and improve.—Now I understand

not hereby those doctrinal reproofs, when, in the dispensation of that word of grace and truth which is "profitable for correction and reproof," (2 Tim. iii. 16,) they "speak, and exhort, and rebuke" the sins of men "with all authority;" (Titus ii. 15;) but the occasional application of the word unto individual persons, upon their unanswerableness in any thing unto the truth wherein they have been instructed. For every right reproof is but the orderly application of a rule of truth unto any person under his miscarriage, for his healing and recovery. Where, therefore, a minister of the gospel in the preaching of the word doth declare and teach the rule of holy obedience with ministerial authority, if any of the flock committed to his charge shall appear in any thing to walk contrary thereunto, or to have transgressed it in any offensive instance; as it is his duty, the discharge whereof will be required of him at the great day, particularly to apply the truth unto them in the way of private, personal reproof; so he is still therein accompanied with his ministerial authority, which makes his reproof to be of a peculiar nature, and as such to be accounted for. For as he is thus commanded as a minister to exhort, rebuke, admonish, and reprove every one of his charge as occasion shall require, so in the doing of it he doth discharge and exercise his ministerial office and power. And he that is wise will forego no considerations that may give efficacy unto a just and due reproof; especially not such an one as, if it be neglected, will not only be an aggravation of the evil for which he is reprov'd, but will also accumulate his guilt with a contempt of the authority of Jesus Christ. Wherefore the rule here is: The more clear and evident the representation of the authority of Christ is in the reproof, the more diligent ought we to be in our attendance unto it and compliance with it. He is the great Reprover of his church; (Rev. iii. 19;) all the use, power, authority, and efficacy of ecclesiastical reproofs flow originally and are derived from him. In ministerial reproofs there is the most express and immediate application of his authority made unto the minds of men; which if it be carelessly slighted, or proudly despised, or evacuated by perverse cavillings, as is the manner of some in such cases, it is an open evidence of a heart that never yet sincerely took upon it his law and yoke.

These things are spoken of the *personal* reproofs that are given by ministers, principally unto those of their respective flocks, as occasion doth require; wherein I shall pray, that our Lord Jesus Christ, the great Shepherd of the sheep, would yet make us all more faithful and diligent, as the season wherein we live doth abundantly require it. But, moreover, church-censures, in admonition and excommunication, have the nature and ends of ministerial reproofs. But the handling of their nature and use, with the duties of those persons who justly fall under them, and the benefit which they may reap thereby, is too long and large a subject to be here diverted unto.

(2.) Authoritative reproof is *parental*.—Reproof is indeed one of the greatest and most principal duties of parents toward children, and without which all others for the most part do but pamper them unto slaughter and ruin. Neglect hereof is that which hath filled us with so many Hophnis, Phineases, and Absaloms, whose outrageous wickednesses are directly charged on the sinful lenity and neglect in this matter even of

godly parents. And indeed, whereas some parents are openly vicious and debauched even in the sight of their children, in a sensual neglect and contempt of the light of nature, whereby they lose all their authority in reproof, as well as all care about it; and whereas the most have so little regard unto sin as sin, whilst things are tolerably well in outward concerns, that they neglect the reproof of it as such; and many, through a foolish, contemptible prevalency of fond affection, will take no notice of the sinful follies, extravagancies, and miscarriages of their children, until all things grow desperate with them; but soothe-up and applaud them in such effects of pride, vanity, and wantonness, as ought to be most severely reprov'd in them: the woful and dreadful degeneracy of the age wherein we live owes itself much unto the horrible neglect of parents in this duty. That parental reproof is a duty taught by the law of nature, confirmed in the scripture, enjoined under severe threatenings and penalties, exemplified in instances of blessings and vengeance on its performance or neglect, rendered indispensably necessary by that deprivation of our natures which works in children from the womb, and grows up in strength and efficacy together with them,—I should not need to prove, if it lay directly before me, it being a matter of universal acknowledgment. I shall only say, that whereas there is on many accounts an immediate impress of divine authority on parental reproofs, that which children ought to consider and know for themselves is, that a continuance in the neglect or contempt of them is a token that seldom fails of approaching temporal and eternal destruction. (Prov. xxx. 17.)

(3.) Authoritative reproof is *despotic*.—Namely, that of governors, rulers, and masters of families. This also partakes of the nature of those foregoing; and being a duty founded in the law of nature, as well as enforced by positive divine commands, casts a peculiar obligation to obedience on them that are so reprov'd. And where servants regard not sober and Christian reproofs as the ordinance of God for their good, they lose the advantages of their condition, and may be looked upon as unsanctified sufferers in a state of bondage, which hath an especial character of the first curse upon it.

2. *Reproof is fraternal*.—Or such as is mutual between the members of the same church, by virtue of that especial relation wherein they stand, and the obligation thence arising unto mutual watchfulness over each other, with admonitions, exhortations, and reproofs. As this is peculiarly appointed by our Saviour, (Matt. xviii. 15,) in confirmation of the ordinance in the church of the Jews to that purpose, (Lev. xix. 17,) and confirmed by many precepts and directions in the New Testament; (Rom. xv. 14; 1 Thess. v. 14; Heb. iii. 12, 13; xii. 15, 16;) so the neglect of it is that which hath lost us, not only the benefit, but also the very nature, of church-societies. Wherefore, our improvement of rebukes in this kind depends much on a due consideration of that duty and love from whence they do proceed; for this we are by the royal law of charity obliged unto the belief of, where there is not open evidence unto the contrary. And whereas, it may be, those things for which we may be thus reprov'd, are not of the greatest importance in themselves; who that is wise will, by the neglect of the reproof itself, contract the



open guilt of contemning the wisdom, love, and care of Christ in the institution of this ordinance?

3. And, lastly : *Reproofs are friendly or occasional.*—Such as may be administered and managed by any persons, as reasons and opportunities require, from the common principle of universal love unto mankind, especially toward them that are of the household of faith. These also, having in them the entire nature of reproofs, will fall under all the ensuing directions, which have a general respect thereunto. If, then, we would duly make use of and improve unto our advantage the reproofs that may be given us, we are seriously to consider the nature of them, with respect unto those by whom they are managed ; for all the things we have mentioned are suited to influence our minds unto a regard of them and compliance with them.

(III.) *The matter of a reproof* is duly to be weighed by him who designs any benefit thereby. And the first consideration of it is, whether it be *true* or *false*. I shall not carry them unto more minute distribution, of the substance and circumstances of the matter intended, of the whole or part of it ; but do suppose that, from some principal consideration of it, every reproof, as to its matter, may be denominated and esteemed true or false. And here our own consciences, with due application unto the rule, are the proper judge and umpire. Conscience, if any way enlightened from the word, will give an impartial sentence concerning the guilt or innocence of the person, with respect unto the matter of a reproof ; and there can be no more infallible evidence of a miscarriage in such a condition, than when pride, or passion, or prejudice, or any corrupt affection, can either outbrave or stifle that compliance with a just reproof which conscience will assuredly tender. (Rom. ii. 14, 15.)

1. If a reproof, as to the matter of it, be *false* or unjust, and so judged in an unbiassed conscience, it may be considered *in matter of right*, and *of fact*. In the first case the matter may be true, and yet the reproof formally false and evil. In the latter the matter may be false, and yet the reproof an acceptable duty.

(1.) *A reproof is false in matter of right, or formally, when we are reproofed for that as evil which is indeed our duty to perform.*—So David was fiercely reproofed by his brother Eliab for coming unto the battle against the Philistines, ascribing it to his pride and the naughtiness of his heart : whereunto he only replied, “What have I now done? Is there not a cause?” (1 Sam. xvii. 28, 29.) And Peter rebuked our Lord Jesus Christ himself for declaring the doctrine of the cross. (Mark viii. 32.) And so we may be reproofed for the principal duties that God requireth of us ; and if men were as free in reproofing as they are in reproaching, we should not escape from daily rebukes for whatever we do in the worship of God. Now, though such reproofs generally may be looked on as temptations, and so to be immediately rejected, as they were in the cases instanced in ; yet may they sometimes, where they proceed from love and are managed with moderation, be considered as necessary cautions to look heedfully unto the grounds and reasons we proceed upon in the duties opposed, at which others do take offence.

(2.) *If the reproof be false in matter of fact*, wherein that is charged

on us and reprov'd in us whereof we are no wise guilty, three things are to be considered, that it may not be unuseful unto us :—

First. *The circumstances of the reprover* ; as, (1.) Whether he do proceed on *some probable mistake* ; or, (2.) *Credulity and easiness in taking up reports* ; or, (3.) On *evil, groundless surmises of his own* ; or, (4.) From a *real godly jealousy, which hath been imposed on, as easily it will be, by some appearances of truth*. Without a due consideration of these things, we shall never know how to carry it aright towards them by whom we are reprov'd for that whereof we are not guilty.

Secondly. Consider aright *the difference between a reproof and a reproach*.—For they may be both false alike, and that whereof we are reprov'd have no more truth in it than that wherewith we are reproach'd. Yea, we may be honestly reprov'd for that which is false, and wickedly reproach'd with that which is true ; so Augustine calls the language of the maid unto his mother about drinking of wine *durum convicium*, [“a hard and unjust reproach,”] though the matter of it were true enough. But a reproach is the acting of a mind designing of and rejoicing in evil : unto a reproof it is essential that it spring from love. “Whom I love, I rebuke,” is the absolute rule of these things. Let a man rebuke another, though for that which indeed is false, if it be in love, it is a reproof ; but let him rebuke another, though for that which is true, if it be from a mind delighting in evil, it is a reproach ; and if it be false, it is moreover a calumny.

Thirdly. When a man in such cases is fully justified by the testimony of his own conscience, bearing witness unto his integrity and innocency, yet may he greatly miscarry under the occasion, if he attend not diligently unto his own spirit, which most men judge to be set at the utmost liberty under such injurious provocations as they esteem them. Wherefore, *to keep our minds unto sedate, Christian moderation in such cases, and that we may not lose the advantage of what is befallen us, we ought immediately to apply them unto such other duties as the present occasion doth require* : as,

(i.) *To search our own hearts and ways, whether we have not indeed upon us the guilt of some greater evils than that which is falsely charged on us, or for which we are reprov'd on mistake*.—And if it appear so upon examination, we shall quickly see what little reason we have to tumultuate and rise up with indignation against the charge we suffer under. And may we not thence see much of the wisdom and goodness of God, who suffereth us to be exercised with what we can bear-off with the impenetrable shield of a good conscience, whilst he graciously hides and covers those greater evils of our hearts, with respect whereunto we cannot but condemn ourselves ?

(ii.) *To consider that it is not of ourselves that we are not guilty of the evil suspected and charged*.—No man of sobriety can on any mistake reprove us for any thing, be it never so false, but that it is merely of sovereign grace that we have not indeed contracted the guilt of it ; and humble thankfulness unto God on this occasion for his real preserving grace will abate the edge and take off the fierceness of our indignation against men for their supposed injurious dealings with us.

(iii.) *Such reproofs, if there be not open malice and continued wicked-*

*ness manifest in them, are to be looked on as gracious providential warnings to take heed lest at any time we should be truly overtaken with that which at present we are falsely charged withal.*—We little know the dangers that continually attend us, the temptations wherewith we may be surprised at unawares, nor how near on their account we may be unto any sin or evil which we judge ourselves most remote from and least obnoxious unto. Neither on the other hand can we readily understand the ways and means whereby the holy, wise God issueth forth those hidden provisions of preventing grace which are continually administered for our preservation; and no wise man, who understands any thing of the deceitfulness of his own heart, with the numberless numbers of invisible occasions of sin wherewith he is encompassed continually, but will readily embrace such reproofs as providential warnings unto watchfulness in those things whereof before he was not aware.

Fourthly. When the mind by these considerations is rendered sedate, and weighed unto Christian moderation, *then ought a man in such cases patiently and peaceably to undertake the defence of his innocency, and his own vindication.*—And herein also there is need of much wisdom and circumspection; it being a matter of no small difficulty for a man duly to manage self and innocency, both which are apt to influence us unto some more than ordinary vehemency of spirit. But the directions which might, and indeed ought to, be given under all these particular heads, would by no means be confined unto the limits fixed to this discourse.

(3.) If the *matter of the reproof be true in fact*, then it is duly to be considered, whether the offence for which any one is reprovèd be *private* or *public*, attended with scandal.

(i.) If it be *private*, then it is to be weighed, whether it was known unto and observed in and by the person himself reprovèd, or no, before he was so reprovèd. If it were *not so known*, (as we may justly be reprovèd for many things, which, through ignorance, or inadvertency, or compliance with the customs of the world, we may have taken no notice of,) and if the reproof bring along light and conviction with it, the first especial improvement of such a peculiar reproof is thankfulness to God for it, as a means of deliverance from any way, or work, or path that was unacceptable in his sight. And hence a great prospect may be taken of the following deportment of the mind under other reproofs; for a readiness to take in light and conviction with respect unto any evil that we are ignorant of, is an evidence of a readiness to submit to the authority of God in any other rebukes that have their convictions going before them. So the heart that is prone to fortify itself by any pleas or pretences against convictions of sin, in what it doth not yet own so to be, will be as prone unto obstinacy under reproofs in what it cannot but acknowledge to be evil. If it were *known before* to the person reprovèd, but not supposed by him to be observed by others, under the covert of which imagination sin often countenanceth itself; that soul will never make a due improvement of a reproof, who is not first sensible of the care and kindness of God in driving him from that retreat and hold where the interest of sin had placèd its chiefest reserve.

(ii.) Sins, so far *public* as to give matter of offence or scandal, are the ordinary subject of all orderly reproofs, and therefore need not in particular to be spoken unto.

II. Having showed the nature of reproofs in general, with such considerations of the matter of them as have afforded occasion unto sundry particular directions relating unto the duty under discussion, it remains only that we farther explain and confirm the two generals comprised in the observation deduced from the text ; namely, (I.) *Why we ought to receive reproofs orderly or regularly given unto us, esteeming of them as a singular privilege* : and, (II.) *How we may duly improve them unto their proper end,—the glory of God, and the spiritual advantage of our own souls.*

(I.) As to the first of these we may observe,

1. *That mutual reproofs for the curing of evil and preventing of danger in one another, are prime dictates of the law of nature and that obligation, which our participation in the same being, offspring, original, and end, to seek the good of each other, doth lay upon us.*—This God designed in our creation, and this the rational constitution of our natures directs us unto. To seek and endeavour for each other all that good whereof we are capable in time or unto eternity, was indelibly implanted upon our natures, and indispensably necessary unto that society among ourselves, with the great end of our joint living unto God, for which we were made. All the mutual evils of mankind, whether of persons or of nations, designed or perpetrated against one another, are effects of our fatal prevarication from the law of our creation. Hence Cain, the first open violent transgressor of the rules and bounds of human society, thought to justify or excuse himself by a renunciation of that principle which God in nature had made the foundation of a political or sociable life with respect unto temporal and eternal ends : “Am I,” saith he, “my brother’s keeper?” (Gen. iv. 9.) Yea, God had made every man the keeper of his brother, so far as that they should in all things, in their opportunities and unto their power, seek their good and deliverance from evil. In those things which are good unto us, those which are spiritual and eternal have the pre-eminence. These nothing can prejudice but sin and mortal evils, whose prevention, therefore, in one another, so far as we are able, is a duty of the law of nature, and the prime effect of that love which we owe unto the whole offspring of that “one blood” whereof God hath made all nations. And one of the most effectual means for that end are the reproofs whereof we treat ; and the obligation is the same on those that give them, and those to whom they are given, with respect unto their several interests in this duty. Wherefore, to neglect, to despise, not thankfully to receive such reproofs as are justly and regularly given unto us at any time, is to contemn the law of our creation, and to trample on the prime effect of fraternal love. Yea, to despise reproofs, and to discountenance the discharge of that duty, is to open a door unto that mutual hatred and dislike which in the sight of God is murder. (See Lev. xix. 17 ; with 1 John iii. 15.) Let us therefore look to ourselves : for there is no greater sign of a degeneracy from the law and all the ends of our creation, than an unwillingness to receive reproofs justly deserved and regularly administered, or not to esteem of them as a blessed effect of the wisdom and goodness of God toward us.

2. *Whereas the light of nature is variously obscured and its directive power debilitated in us, God hath renewed on us an obligation unto this*

*duty by particular institutions, both under the Old Testament and the New.*—The truth is, the efficacy of the law of creation as unto moral duties being exceedingly impaired by the entrance of sin, and the exercise of original, native love toward mankind being impeded and obstructed by that confusion and disorder whereinto the whole state of mankind was cast by sin; every one thereby being made the enemy of another, (as the apostle declares, Titus iii. 3,) not being cured by that coalescency into civil societies which respects only political and temporal ends; the discharge of this duty was utterly lost, at least beyond that which was merely parental. Wherefore God, in the institution of his church, both under the Old Testament and the New, did mould men into such peculiar societies and relations, as wherein way might be made meet again for the exercise thereof. He hath so disposed of us, that every one may know every one whom he is obliged to reprove, and every one may know every one whom he is obliged to hear. And as he hath hereby cured that confusion we were cast into, which was obstructive of the exercise of this duty; so by the renovation of positive commands, attended with instructions, directions, promises, and threatenings, enforcing the giving and receiving of reproofs with respect unto moral and spiritual ends, he hath relieved us against that obscurity of natural light which we before laboured under. Should I go to express the commands, directions, exhortations, promises, and threatenings, which are given in the scripture to this purpose, it would be a work as endless as I suppose it needless to all that are conversant in the holy writings. It may suffice unto our present purpose, that, there being an express institution of God for the giving and taking of reproofs, and *that* an effect of infinite goodness, benignity, and love toward us; not thankfully to receive reproofs, when it is our lot to deserve them and to have them, is to despise the authority of God over us and his gracious care for us. When, therefore, it befalleth any to be justly and orderly reproved, let him call to mind the authority and love of God therein, which will quickly give him that sense of their worth and excellency as will make him thankful for them, which is the first step unto their due improvement.

3. *A due consideration of the use, benefit, and advantage of them, will give them a ready admission into our minds and affections.*—Who knows how many souls, that are now at rest with God, have been prevented by reproofs, as the outward means, from going down into the pit? Unto how many have they been an occasion of conversion and sincere turning unto God! How many have been recovered by them from a state of backsliding, and awakened from a secure sleep in sin! How many great and bloody sins hath the perpetration of been obviated by them! How many snares of temptations have they been the means to break and cancel! What revivings have they been to grace, what disappointments unto the snares of Satan, who can declare? The advantage which the souls of men do or might receive every day by them, is more to be valued than all earthly treasures whatever; and shall any of us, when it comes to be our concern, through a predominancy of pride, passion, and prejudice, or through cursed sloth and security, the usual means of the defeatment of these advantages, manifest ourselves to have no interest in or valuation of these things, by an unreadiness or unwillingness to receive reproofs,

when tendered unto us in the way and according to the mind of God?

(II.) But now, suppose we are willing to receive them, it will be inquired in the last place, *What considerations may further us in their due improvement? and what directions may be given thereunto?* An answer to this inquiry shall shut up this discourse: and I shall say hereunto,

1. *If there be not open evidence unto the contrary, it is our duty to judge that every reproof is given us in a way of duty.*—This will take off offence with respect unto the reprove, which, unjustly taken, is an assured entrance into a way of losing all benefit and advantage by the reproof. The reason why any man doth regularly reprove another, is because God requireth him so to do, and by his command hath made it his duty toward him that is reprovèd. And do we judge it reasonable that one should neglect their duty toward God and us, and in some degree or other make himself guilty of our sins, for no other cause but lest we should be displeasèd that we are not sufferèd to sin securely, and, it may be, to perish eternally? And if we are convincèd that it is the duty of another to reprove us, we cannot but be convincèd that it is our duty to hearken and attend thereunto; and this will fix the mind unto a due consideration of the present duty that lies before us, and what is our just concernment in the reproof. Besides, if it be done in a way of duty, it is done in love; for all orderly rebukes are effects of love. And if we are convincèd of any one, that he doth reprove in a way of duty, we must be satisfièd that what he doth proceedeth from love, without by-ends or dissimulation; for what doth not so, be it what it will, belongs not to rebuking in a way of duty. And this will remove all obstructing prejudices in all who have the least gracious ingenuity. Ahab despisèd the warning of Micaiah, because he thought they mutually hated one another: he knew how it was with himself, and falsely so judgèd of the prophet by his necessary sharpness toward him. But where there are such surmises, all advantages of reproofs will be assuredly lost. Where, therefore, our minds are satisfièd that any reproof is an effect of love, and given in a way of duty, *dimidium facti*, “we are half-way in the discharge of the duty directed unto.”

2. *Take heed of cherishing habitually such disorders, vices, and distempers of mind, as are contrary unto this duty, and will frustrate the design of it.* Such are, (1.) *Hastiness of spirit.*—Some men’s minds do with such fury apply themselves unto their first apprehension of things, that they cast the whole soul into disorder, and render it incapable of further rational considerations. There may be, it is possible, some failures and mistakes in useful and necessary reproofs, in matter, manner, circumstance, some way or other. This immediately is seizèd on by men of hasty spirits, (a vice and folly sufficiently condemnèd in scripture,) turned unto a provocation, made a matter of strife and dispute, until the whole advantage of the reproof is utterly lost and vanisheth. A quiet, gentle, considerative, sedate frame of spirit is requirèd unto this duty. (2.) *Pride and haughtiness of mind.*—Self-conceit, elation of spirit, which will be inseparably accompanied with the contempt of others, and a scorn that any should think themselves either so much wiser or so much better

than ourselves as to reprove us in any kind, are a fenced wall against any benefit or advantage by reproofs, yea, things that will turn judgment into hemlock, and the most sovereign antidote into poison. No wild beast in a toil doth more rave and tear and rend, than a proud man when he is reprov'd; and therefore he who manifests himself so to be, hath secured himself from being any more troubled by serious reproofs from any wise man whatever. See Prov. ix. 7, 8. (3.) *Prejudices*.—Which are so variously occasioned as it were endless to recount. If now we make it not our constant business to purge our minds from these depraved affections, they will never fail effectually to exert themselves on all occasions to the utter defeatment of all use in or benefit by the most necessary and regular reproofs.

3, *Reckon assuredly, that a fault, a miscarriage, which any one is duly reprov'd for, if the reproof be not received and improv'd as it ought, is not only aggravated, but accumulated with a new crime, and marked with a dangerous token of an incurable evil.*—See Prov. xxix. 1. Let men do what they can, bear themselves high in their expressions, grow angry, passionate, excuse or palliate, unless they are seared and profligately obstinate, their own consciences will take part with a just and regular reproof. If hereupon they come not up to amendment, their guilt is increased by the occasional excitation of the light of conscience to give it an especial charge, and there is an additional sin in the contempt of the reproof itself. But that which principally should make men careful and even tremble in this case is, that they are put on a trial whether ever they will forsake the evil of their ways and doings, or no: for he who is orderly reprov'd for any fault, and neglects or despiseth the rebuke, can have no assurance that he shall ever be delivered from the evil rebuked, but hath just cause to fear that he is entering into a course of hardness and impenitency.

4. *It is useful unto the same end immediately to compare the reproof with the word of truth.*—This is the measure, standard, and directory of all duties, whereunto in all dubious cases we should immediately retreat for advice and counsel. And whereas there are two things considerable in a reproof: First, the matter of it; that it be true, and a just cause or reason of a rebuke; and, Secondly, the right which the reprov'd hath unto this duty, with the rule which he walk'd by therein; if both these, for the substance of them, prove to be justified by the scripture, then have we in such a case no more to do with the reprov'd nor any of his circumstances, but immediately and directly with God himself; for where he gives express warranty and direction for a duty in his word, his own authority is as directly exerted thereby as if he spoke unto us from heaven. Hereby will the mind be prevented from many wanderings and vain reliefs which foolish imagination will suggest, and be bound up unto its present duty. Let our unwillingness to be reprov'd be what it will, as also our prejudices against our reprov'd, if we are not at least free to bring the consideration and examination of the one and the other unto the word of truth, it is because our deeds are evil, and therefore we love darkness more than light. No milder nor more gentle censure can be pass'd on any, who is not free to bring any reproof that may be given him unto an impartial trial by the word, whether it be according to the

mind of God, or no. If this be done, and conviction of its truth and necessity do then appear, then let the soul know it hath to do with God himself, and wisely consider what answer he will return, what account he will give unto Him. Wherefore,

5. *The best way to keep our souls in a readiness rightly to receive and duly to improve such reproofs as may regularly be given us by any, is to keep and preserve our souls and spirits in a constant awe and reverence of the reproofs of God which are recorded in his word.*—The neglect or contempt of these reproofs is that which the generality of mankind do split themselves upon, and perish eternally. This is so fully and graphically expressed, Prov. i., that nothing can be added thereunto. And the great means whereby much hardness comes upon others through the deceitfulness of sin, is want of keeping up a due sense or reverence of divine reproofs and threatenings on their souls. When this is done, when our hearts are kept up unto an awful regard of them, exercised with a continual meditation on them, made tender, careful, watchful, by them, any just reproof from any, that falls in compliance with them, will be conscientiously observed and carefully improved.

6. *We shall fail in this duty, unless we are always accompanied with a deep sense of our frailty, weakness, readiness to halt or miscarry, and thereon a necessity of all the ordinances and visitations of God, which are designed to preserve our souls.*—Unless we have due apprehensions of our own state and condition here, we shall never kindly receive warnings beforehand to avoid approaching dangers, nor duly improve rebukes for being overtaken with them. It is the humble soul—that feareth always, and that from a sense of its own weakness, yea, the treacheries and deceitfulness of its heart, with the power of those temptations whereunto it is continually exposed—that is ever likely to make work of the duty here directed unto.

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## SERMON XXIX.

BY THE REV. THOMAS VINCENT, A. M.,  
OF CHRIST CHURCH, OXFORD.

WHEREIN DOTH APPEAR THE BLESSEDNESS OF FORGIVENESS? AND  
HOW IT MAY BE OBTAINED.

*Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.—*  
Psalm xxxii. 1.

OF all the pains or torments that any of the children of men do or can feel in this life, none are comparable to those which proceed from the lashes and wounds of a guilty conscience, under the apprehensions of the anger of a sin-revenging God, and the impression of some scalding drops of his wrath upon the soul. “The spirit of a man will sustain his infirmity; but a wounded spirit who can bear?” (Prov. xviii. 14.) David had ventured to transgress, and that very heinously; and in his breaking