

SERMON XXXIV.*

THE EVIL AND DANGER OF OFFENCES.

Woe unto the world because of offences: for it must needs be that offences come: but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh.—Matt. xviii. 7.

It is very evident that our Lord Jesus Christ lays very great weight upon this matter of offences. He represents them like a two-edged sword, that cuts both ways: 'Woe unto the world because of offences: woe to them by whom offences come:' he knits these two things together. It must needs be that there must be offences; God hath appointed it, and it must be so. He doth not merely tell us, it will be; but, it 'must be;' God hath ordered that so it shall be.

I will speak a few things in reference to offences that may be of use unto us; without looking into the depth of this great matter of offence and scandal; than which, I must needs say, I never yet saw any thing less inquired into, though there is no subject more written upon, and spoken to. We should consider for ourselves the time wherein we may be sure offences will abound. It is necessary from this wonderful caution of Christ here given, 'Woe, woe, it must be,' that we should consider the times wherein it is likely offences will abound. And if all those times should prove to be upon us, certainly it is our duty to be wary.

First, The first is a time of persecution. Offences will abound in a time of persecution to the ruin of many professors. So our Saviour tells us, Matt. xiii. 'One received the seed of the word, and it sprang up; but when persecution for the word arose, immediately he was offended.' Woe unto him, he is gone.

Secondly, A time of the abounding of great sins is a time of giving and taking great offence. This the Holy Spirit speaks expressly, that 'in the latter days there shall be perilous times.' All perils arise from offences. And why?

* This sermon was preached Sept. 30, 1681.

Men's lusts shall abound. When there is an abounding of lusts, there will be an abounding of offences, that make the times perilous.

Thirdly, When there is a decay of churches, when they grow cold, and are under decays, it is a time of the abounding of offences: 'Iniquity shall abound, and the love of many shall wax cold.' That is a time when offences will abound; such as all the churches of Christ seem to be under at this day. All the virgins, wise and foolish, are asleep. It is what I have told you often, and I wish I could say I have told you without weeping, that we are under woful decays, falling from our first faith, love, and works.

Now if all these times should be upon us: a time of persecution, as it is now throughout the world; saith the apostle, 'Think it not strange concerning the fiery trial, for all that befalls you, brethren, in the world:' a time of the abounding of great sin in men; I need not enlarge upon this: and a time of great decays in all churches: if it be thus with us, certainly it is very proper for us to look upon this warning of our Saviour: 'Take heed of offences.'

Offences are of two sorts.

I. Such as are taken only, and not given.

II. Such as are given, and taken also.

I. Such as are taken only, and not given. The great offence taken was at Jesus Christ himself. God appointed Christ to be the greatest offence in the world; Isa. viii. He had designed him to be a stumbling-block, and a rock of offence, an insuperable offence. The poverty of Christ in the world, and his cross were the rock of offence, whereat both Jews and Gentiles stumbled and fell, and ruined themselves unto eternity. Now the apostle disputes, 1 Cor. i. that this was an offence taken, and not given. How does he prove it? Why that wherein God puts forth his wisdom and his power is no offence given, but merely taken. But in Christ crucified God put forth his power. Let him be as poor in the world as he will, let him be crucified, there is the wisdom and the power of God in it, and therefore there can be no just offence.

This offence taken, and not given, is increased by the poverty of the church. You see your calling, brethren; 'not many great, not many wise, not many noble.' In plain

English, you are a company of poor, weak, persecuted people. But saith the apostle, this is no offence given; God chooses the things that are not, to bring to nought things that are. These things are an offence taken, and not given.

II. There are offences given and taken.

1. Offences given: and they are men's public sins, and the miscarriages of professors that are under vows and obligations to honourable obedience. Men may give offence by errors, and miscarriages in churches, and by immoralities in their lives. This was in the sin of David; God would pass by every thing but offence given: 'Because thou hast made my name to be blasphemed,' therefore I will deal so and so. What a talk did it occasion throughout the world? There is your holy man, your godly man, your David, a praying man; do you hear what a noise there is concerning him? 'Thou hast made my name to be blasphemed,' saith God, and this is a great provocation. So God speaks of the people of Israel: these were my people, by reason of you my name is profaned among the Gentiles. These are the people of the Lord; see now they are come into captivity, what a vile people they are. Such things are an offence given.

2. Offences taken: now offences are taken two ways.

(1.) As they occasion grief; and, (2.) Sin. A given offence may be taken either of these ways.

(1.) As they occasion grief. Rom. xiv. See that by thy miscarriage thou 'grieve not thy brother.' Men's offences who are professors, are a grief, trouble, and burden to those who are concerned in the same course of profession. But herein appears the wisdom of God, when he doth in his sovereignty sometimes suffer persons to give offence that may be sanctified unto the great advantage of the church. I am persuaded the church of Corinth was in so much disorder, that it had gone near to have been lost, if God had not suffered one among them to fall into a scandalous sin. But see what the end was. You find in the First Epistle the disorder they were in, and what a scandalous sin fell out among them: and in the Second Epistle, the sorrow upon it; when they knew it, they took offence, and were grieved at it: 'For behold that ye sorrowed after a godly sort; what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea what vehement desire,

yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge! In all things,' saith the apostle, 'ye have approved yourselves to be clear in this matter.' I look upon it to have been the greatest sanctified means that God appointed for the humiliation, recovery, and saving of that church, that he suffered in his sovereign wisdom, such an offence to fall out among them. That is the first thing; and let us lay it up in our minds, that we may not be moved and shaken; for I speak with a prospect of what is to come, and not of what is come: 'Offences will come;' and therefore let us remember, that God can sanctify the greatest offences to our humiliation and recovery, and to the saving of our church. Such is his infinite wisdom.

(2.) Given offences occasion sin. There comes the woe, as to the world; for there is no woe from offences to them who are truly humbled for them, grieved at them, and made thereby watchful over themselves and their own ways. But now, when offences are made an occasion of sin, as in the world, the world takes no offence at all by their own sins, nor by the sins of one another. Let them be what they will, let their teachers be as scandalous in their lives as possible, they are not grieved nor concerned: and the reason is in that saying of David, 1 Sam. xxiv. 13. 'As saith the proverb of the ancients,' (it was a saying from the flood, if not from the beginning of the world), 'Wickedness proceedeth from the wicked.' Look for nothing but wickedness from wicked men. So that it is no offence at all to see wicked men do wicked things. They do not take offence at one another; nor doth the church of God take offence; for, as saith the proverb, they can do no otherwise. To shew you how men are hardened in their prejudices against the truth, and confirmed in all their course by offences, would be too long a work for me to declare. But offences given are an occasion of sin, even among professors and believers themselves.

The worst way whereby a given offence is thus taken, is, when men countenance themselves in private sins by others' public sins; and go on in vices because they see such and such commit greater. Woe unto us if we so take offence. Again, a given offence is taken, when our minds are provoked, exasperated, and carried off from a spirit of love and

tenderness towards those that offend, and all others, and when we are discouraged and despond, as though the ways of God would not carry us out. This is to take offence to our disadvantage.

Thus I have shewed you the great weight and import that is to be laid upon this matter of offence, as being the greatest aggravation of sin.

I have shewed you the times wherein offences will abound: a time of persecution; a time of the increase of abominable sins; and a time of the decay of churches; such as are upon us.

I have likewise shewed you, there are offences taken only, and not given: Christ and his cross, the poverty of the church, its persecution and distress in all places, and the hopes and fears of all mankind at present, that it will be ruined. These are offences taken only, and not given, being all suited to the wisdom, goodness, and righteousness of God. There are offences also that are given by outward, known, public sins of persons, who are under evangelical obligations to more honourable obedience. And under this head we might bring in every thing we see or hear, but some more gross than others. And these offences occasion either grief and sorrow; and then they prove a sanctified means in the hand of God for the church's good, making them more watchful and careful for the future: or they occasion sin, both by the world, and by professors; and there comes the woe.

I shall give you a few rules from hence, and so conclude.

Rule 1. The giving offence being a great aggravation of sin, let this rule lie continually in your hearts, That the more public persons are, the more careful they ought to be, that they give no offence either to Jew or Gentile, or to 'the church of Christ.' Why doth the apostle put Jew and Gentile before 'the church of Christ?' Because more evil will ensue upon it, and more disadvantage unto the souls of men. Let this be our rule in walking, especially those of us whose occasions do call us unto more converse in the world, let us always endeavour to give no offence to Jew or Gentile, or to 'the church of God.'

2. If what I have laid down be your first and your main rule, I doubt, where this is neglected, there is want of sincerity; but where it is your principal rule, there is nothing but hypocrisy. Men may walk by this rule, and have corrupt minds, and cherish wickedness in their hearts. If this be the principal rule that guides you, that you will carry it so complyingly, that you will give no offence, this is worse than neglecting the rule in the first case; that argues want of sincerity, this is a certain predominancy of hypocrisy. The principal rule commands conscience to God in all sincerity, and the second, to give no offence; and if we make this our first rule, we are not upright with God. And therefore, let none please themselves that they walk according to rule, if the internal power of God be not found in their souls.

3. Be not afraid of the great multiplication of offences at this day in the world. The truths of the gospel and holiness have broke through a thousand times more offences. They have broke through heresies, and blasphemies, and poverty, and persecution. God hath still preserved his people, who have broke through, and got the conquest over the greatest offences: over offences taken, in the cross of Christ, in the poverty of Christ, in persons that have preached the gospel, and in those who have professed it: over offences given, in innumerable swarms of blasphemous heretics who have professed the name of Christ from the beginning; in false reports that have been cast upon Christians, being reported generally throughout the world, to be a vile generation of wicked persons. The truth and grace of God hath conquered all these offences, and prevailed over them all, and will do so again, if we keep close unto truth, and the power of religion.

4. Beg of God wisdom to manage yourselves under offences: and of all things take heed of that great evil which professors have been very apt to run into; I mean, to receive and promote reports of offence among themselves, taking hold of the least colour or pretence to report such things as are matter of offence, and give advantage to the world. Take heed of this, it is the design of the devil to load professors with false reports. And if so, he is not a wise man,

nor she a wise woman, that stand not upon their guard, when they see an engine the devil often makes use of, who, when he hath raised false reports, and wounded divers, is greatly pleased, and careth not if afterward they be discovered to be false, as knowing that he hath done his work; for hereby he hath drawn out and imbittered the spirits of men one against another. And therefore stand upon your guard, and know it is the devil's engine, though you see not his hand in the managing of it.