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The Sermons of John Wesley - Sermon 65

The Duty of Reproving Our Neighbour

"Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him." Lev. 19:17.

A great part of the book of Exodus, and almost the whole of the book of Leviticus, relate to the ritual or ceremonial law of Moses; which was peculiarly given to the children of Israel, but was such "a yoke," says the apostle Peter, "as neither our fathers nor we were able to bear." We are, therefore, delivered from it: And this is one branch of "the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free." Yet it is easy to observe, that many excellent moral precepts are interspersed among these ceremonial laws. Several of them we find in this very chapter: Such as, "Thou shalt not gather every grape of thy vineyard: Thou shalt leave them for the poor and stranger. I am the Lord your God." (Lev. 19:10.) Ye shall not steal, neither lie one to another. (Lev. 19:11.) "Thou shalt not defraud thy neighbour, neither rob him: The wages of him that is hired shall not abide with thee till the morning." (Lev. 19:13.) "Thou shalt not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling-block before the blind; but shalt fear thy God: I am the Lord." (Lev. 19:14.) As if he had said, I am he whose eyes are over all the earth, and whose ears are open to their cry. "Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment: Thou shalt not respect the person of the poor," which compassionate men may be tempted to do; "nor honour the person of the mighty," to which there are a thousand temptations. (Lev. 19:15.) "Thou shalt not go up and down as a tale-bearer among thy people:" (Lev. 19:16:) Although this is a sin which human laws have never yet been able to prevent. Then follows, "Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart: Thou shalt in anywise rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him." [Lev. 19:17]

In order to understand this important direction aright, and to apply it profitably to our own souls, let us consider,

I. What it is that we are to rebuke or reprove What is the thing that is here enjoined

II. Who are they whom we are commanded to reprove And,

III. How are we to reprove them

I. 1. Let us consider, First, What is the duty that is here enjoined What is it we are to rebuke or reprove And what is it to reprove What is it to reprove To tell anyone of his faults; as clearly appears from the following words: "Thou shalt not suffer sin upon him." Sin is therefore the thing we are called to reprove, or rather him that commits sin. We are to do all that in us lies to convince him of his fault, and lead him into the right way.

2. Love indeed requires us to warn him, not only of sin, (although of this chiefly,) but likewise of any error which, if it were persisted in, would naturally lead to sin. If we do not "hate him in our heart," if we love our neighbour as ourselves, this will be our constant endeavour; to warn him of every evil way, and of every mistake which tends to evil.

3. But if we desire not to lose our labour, we should rarely reprove anyone for anything that is of a disputable nature, that will bear much to be said on both sides. A thing may possibly appear evil to me; therefore I scruple the doing of it; and if I were to do it while that scruple remains, I should be a sinner before God. But another is not to be judged by my conscience: To his own master he standeth or

falleth. Therefore I would not reprove him, but for what is clearly and undeniably evil. Such, for instance, is profane cursing and swearing; which even those who practise it most will not often venture to defend, if one mildly expostulates with them. Such is drunkenness, which even a habitual drunkard will condemn when he is sober. And such, in the account of the generality of people, is the profaning of the Lord's day. And if any which are guilty of these sins for a while attempt to defend them, very few will persist to do it, if you look them steadily in the face, and appeal to their own conscience in the sight of God.

II. 1. Let us, in the Second place, consider, Who are those that we are called to reprove It is the more needful to consider this, because it is affirmed by many serious persons, that there are some sinners whom the Scripture itself forbids us to reprove. This sense has been put on that solemn caution of our Lord, in his Sermon on the Mount: "Cast not your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under foot, and turn again and rend you." But the plain meaning of these words is, Do not offer the pearls, the sublime doctrines or mysteries of the Gospel, to those whom you know to be brutish men, immersed in sins, and having no fear of God before their eyes. This would expose those precious jewels to contempt, and yourselves to injurious treatment. But even those whom we know to be, in our Lord's sense, dogs and swine, if we saw them do, or heard them speak, what they themselves know to be evil, we ought in any wise to reprove them; else we "hate our brother in our heart."

2. The persons intended by "our neighbour" are, every child of man, everyone that breathes the vital air, all that have souls to be saved. And if we refrain from performing this office of love to any, because they are sinners above other men, they may persist in their iniquity, but their blood will God require at our hands.

3. How striking is Mr. Baxter's reflection on this head, in his "Saints' Everlasting Rest! "Suppose thou wert to meet one in the lower world, to whom thou hadst denied this of fice of love, when ye were both together under the sun; what answer couldst thou make to his upbraiding `At such a time and place, while we were under the sun, God delivered me into thy hands. I then did not know the way of salvation, but was seeking death in the error of my life; and therein thou sufferedst me to remain, without once endeavouring to awake me out of sleep! Hadst thou imparted to me thy knowledge, and warned me to flee from the wrath to come, neither I nor thou need ever have come into this place of torment."

4. Every one, therefore, that has a soul to be saved, is entitled to this good office from thee. Yet this does not imply, that it is to be done in the same degree to everyone. It cannot be denied, that there are some to whom it is particularly due. Such, in the first place, are our parents, if we have any that stand in need of it; unless we should place our consorts and our children on an equal footing with them. Next to these we may rank our brothers and sisters, and afterwards our relations, as they are allied to us in a nearer or more distant manner, either by blood or by marriage. Immediately after these are our servants, whether bound to us for a term of years or any shorter term. Lastly, such in their several degrees are our countrymen, our fellow-citizens, and the members of the same society, whether civil or religious: The latter have a particular claim to our service; seeing these societies are formed with that very design, to watch over each other for this very end, that we may not suffer sin upon our brother. If we neglect to reprove any of these, when a fair opportunity offers, we are undoubtedly to be ranked among those that "hate their brother in their heart." And how severe is the sentence of the Apostle against those who fall under this condemnation! "He that hateth his brother," though it does not break out into words or actions, "is a murderer:" And ye know," continues the Apostle, "that no

murderer hath eternal life abiding in him." He hath not that seed planted in his soul, which groweth up unto everlasting life: In other words, he is in such a state, that if he dies therein, he cannot see life. It plainly follows, that to neglect this is no small thing, but eminently endangers our final salvation.

III. We have seen what is meant by reprovng our brother, and who those are that we should reprove. But the principal thing remains to be considered. How, in what manner, are we to reprove them

1. It must be allowed, that there is a considerable difficulty in performing this in a right manner: Although, at the same time, it is far less difficult to some than it is to others. Some there are who are particularly qualified for it, whether by nature, or practice, or grace. They are not encumbered either with evil shame, or that sore burden, the fear of man: They are both ready to undertake this labour of love, and skilful in performing it. To these, therefore, it is little or no cross; nay, they have a kind of relish for it, and a satisfaction therein, over and above that which arises from a consciousness of having done their duty. But be it a cross to us, greater or less, we know that hereunto we are called. And be the difficulty ever so great to us, we know in whom we have trusted; and that he will surely fulfil his word, "As thy day, so shall thy strength be."

2. In what manner, then, shall we reprove our brother, in order that our reproof may be most effectual Let us first of all take care that whatever we do may be done in "the spirit of love;" in the spirit of tender good-will to our neighbour; as for one who is the son of our common Father, and one for whom Christ died, that he might be a partaker of salvation. Then, by the grace of God, love will beget love. The affection of the speaker will spread to the heart of the hearer; and you will find, in due time, that your labour hath not been in vain in the Lord.

3. Meantime the greatest care must be taken that you speak in the spirit of humility. Beware that you do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think. If you think too highly of yourself, you can scarce avoid despising your brother. And if you show, or even feel, the least contempt of those whom you reprove, it will blast your whole work, and occasion you to lose all you labour. In order to prevent the very appearance of pride, it will be often needful to be explicit on the head; to disclaim all preferring yourself before him; and at the very time you reprove that which is evil, to own and bless God for that which is good in him.

4. Great care must be taken, in the Third place, to speak in the spirit of meekness, as well as lowliness. The Apostle assures us that "the wrath of men worketh not the righteousness of God." Anger, though it be adorned with the name of zeal, begets anger; not love or holiness. We should therefore avoid, with all possible care, the very appearance of it. Let there be no trace of it, either in the eyes, the gesture, or the tone of voice; but let all of these concur in manifesting a loving, humble, and dispassionate spirit.

5. But all this time, see that you do not trust in yourself. Put no confidence in your own wisdom, or address, or abilities of any kind. For the success of all you speak or do, trust not in yourself, but in the great Author of every good and perfect gift. Therefore, while you are speaking, continually lift up your heart to him that worketh all in all. And whatsoever is spoken in the spirit of prayer, will not fall to the ground.

6. So much for the spirit wherewith you should speak when you reprove your neighbour. I now proceed to the outward manner. It has been frequently found that the prefacing a reproof with a frank profession of good-will has caused what was spoken to sink deep into the heart. This will generally have a far better effect, than that grand fashionable engine, -- flattery, by means of which the men of

the world have often done surprising things. But the very same things, yea, far greater, have much oftener been effected by a plain and artless declaration of disinterested love. When you feel God has kindled this flame in your heart, hide it not; give it full vent! It will pierce like lightning. The stout, the hard-hearted, will melt before you, and know that God is with you of a truth.

7. Although it is certain that the main point in reproof is, to do it with a right spirit, yet it must also be allowed, there are several little circumstances with regard to the outward manner, which are by no means without their use, and therefore are not to be despised. One of these is, whenever you reprove, do it with great seriousness; so that as you really are in earnest, you may likewise appear so to be. A ludicrous reproof makes little impression, and is soon forgot; besides, that many times is taken ill, as if you ridiculed the person you reprove. And indeed those who are not accustomed to make jests, do not take it well to be jested upon. One means of giving a serious air to what you speak, is, as often as may be, to use the very words of Scripture. Frequently we find the word of God, even in a private conversation, has a peculiar energy; and the sinner, when he expects it least, feels it "sharper than a two-edged sword."

8. Yet there are some exceptions to this general rule of reproof seriously. There are some exempt cases, wherein, as a good judge of human nature observes,

Ridiculum acri fortius --

a little well-placed raillery will pierce deeper than solid argument. But this has place chiefly, when we have to do with those who are strangers to religion. And when we condescend to give a ludicrous reproof to a person of this character, it seems we are authorized so to do, by that advice of Solomon, "Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes."

9. The manner of the reproof may, in other respects too, be varied according to the occasion. Sometimes you may find it proper to use many words, to express your sense at large. At other times you may judge it more expedient to use few words, perhaps a single sentence; and at others, it may be advisable to use no words at all, but a gesture, a sigh, or a look, particularly when the person you would reprove is greatly your superior. And frequently, this silent kind of reproof will be attended by the power of God, and consequently, have a far better effect than a long and laboured discourse.

10. Once more: Remember the remark of Solomon, "A word spoken in season, how good is it!" It is true, if you are providentially called to reprove anyone whom you are not likely to see any more, you are to snatch the present opportunity, and to speak "in season" or "out of season;" but with them whom you have frequent opportunities of seeing, you may wait for a fair occasion. Here the advice of the poet has place. You may speak

Si validus, si laetus erit, si denique poscet:

When he is in a good humour, or when he asks it you. Here you may catch the

Mollia tempora fandi, --

time when his mind is in a soft, mild frame: And then God will both teach you how to speak, and give a blessing to what is spoken.

11. But here let me guard you against one mistake. It passes for an indisputable maxim, "Never attempt to reprove a man when he is intoxicated with drink." Reproof, it is said, is then thrown away, and can have no good effect. I dare not say so. I have seen not a few clear instances of the contrary. Take one: Many years ago, passing by a man in Moorfields, who was so drunk he could hardly stand, I put a paper into his hand. He looked at it, and said, "A Word -- A Word to a Drunkard, -- that is me, -- Sir, Sir! I am wrong, -- I know I am wrong, -- pray let me talk a little with you." He held me by the hand a full half-hour: And I believe he got drunk no more.

12. I beseech you, brethren, by the mercies of God, do not despise poor drunkards! Have compassion on them! Be instant with them in season and out of season! Let not shame, or fear of men prevent your pulling these brands out of the burning: Many of them are self-condemned:

Nor do they not discern the evil plight That they are in;

but they despair; they have no hope of escaping out of it; and they sink into it still deeper, because none else has any hope for them! "Sinners of every other sort," said a venerable old Clergyman, "have I frequently known converted to God. But an habitual drunkard I have never known converted." But I have known five hundred, perhaps five thousand. Ho! Art thou one who readest these words Then hear thou the words of the Lord! I have a message from God unto thee, O sinner! Thus saith the Lord, Cast not away thy hope. I have not forgotten thee. He that tells thee there is no help is a liar from the beginning. Look up! Behold the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world! This day is salvation come to thy soul: Only see that thou despise not him that speaketh! Just now he saith unto thee: "Son, be of good cheer! Thy sins are forgiven thee!"

13. Lastly: You that are diligent in this labour of love, see that you be not discouraged, although after you have used your best endeavours, you should see no present fruit. You have need of patience, and then, "after ye have done the will of God" herein, the harvest will come. Never be "weary of well-doing; in due time ye shall reap, if ye faint not." Copy after Abraham, who "against hope, still believed in hope." "Cast thy bread upon the waters; for thou shalt find it after many days."

14. I have now only a few words to add unto you, my brethren, who are vulgarly called "Methodists." I never heard or read of any considerable revival of religion which was not attended with a spirit of reproof. I believe it cannot be otherwise; for what is faith, unless it worketh by love Thus it was in every part of England when the present revival of religion began about fifty years ago: All the subjects of that revival, -- all the Methodists, so called, in every place, were reprovers of outward sin. And, indeed, so are all that "being justified by faith, have peace with God through Jesus Christ." Such they are at first; and if they use that precious gift, it will never be taken away. Come, brethren, in the name of God, let us begin again! Rich or poor, let us all arise as one man; and in any wise let every man "rebuke his neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him!" Then shall all Great Britain and Ireland know that we do not "go a warfare at our own cost:" Yea, "God shall bless us, and all the ends of the world shall fear him." Manchester, July 28, 1787

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