SERMONS,

PREACHED

IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF

HIGH WYCOMBE.

BY

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SERMON IX.

THE PATIENCE OF GOD.

Romans ii. 4.

*Despisest thou the riches of his goodness, and for­bearance, and long-suffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?*

This question was first addressed to the Jews, and was designed to remind them of the long continued forbearance of the Almighty towards their nation, and their sinful contempt of it. But it is a question which cannot be too solemnly nor too closely applied to ourselves. The subject to which it directs our attention, is the patience of God; and it leads us to consider, first, its nature; secondly, its greatness; thirdly, the effect it is designed to produce; and, lastly, the manner in which it is often abused. May the Spirit of God bless our meditations on it, and cause them to excite a spirit of enquiry, prayer, and gratitude, in every heart!

I. The patience of God is one of those attri­butes which the sins of his creatures first called into exercise, and which they are forced by his overruling hand to display. It evidently implies guilt and provocation on our part, and a readiness in God to spare us and keep back his vengeance. We are not therefore to suppose that it proceeds from any ignorance or carelessness in the Al­mighty. It is not because he does not see our iniquities that he does not punish them, for he tells us that “he has set all our misdeeds before him, and our secret sins in the light of his coun­tenance.”

Nor is it the fruit of indifference. On the contrary, it implies that “God is angry with the wicked every day that he is exceedingly dis­pleased with our sins, and with us on account of them. They are opposed to his pure and holy nature, to his just and good law, to the safety and happiness of his creatures; so that while we are contemplating them with cold unconcern, he rewards them with an abhorrence which no mind but his own can comprehend.

Neither must we ascribe the patience of God to weakness, to a want of power to punish. We sometimes bear with provocations because we are unable to avenge them; but the Lord God om­nipotent has at all times in his own hands the means of executing vengeance. The angels re­belled against him; and, though they excelled in strength, he bound them in everlasting chains under darkness; and as for offending man, he could in a moment consume him as a moth, level his body with the dust, and send his soul into a world of anguish; yea, the stroke of his arm would cause the foundations of the earth to trem­ble, and dash it in pieces like a potter’s vessel. Hence the prophet Nahum connects the forbear­ance of God with his power, his slowness to anger with his ability to destroy. “The Lord,” he says, “revengeth, and is furious; the Lord will take vengeance on his adversaries; and he reserveth wrath for his enemies. The Lord is slow to anger, and great in power, and will not at all acquit the wicked. The Lord hath his way in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet.” While he asserts the determination and ability of God to punish his enemies, he seems to intimate that he delays to punish, because he has power over his own wrath, and, though incensed to the utmost, can bridle and restrain it.

To what then must we ascribe the riches of Jehovah’s patience? Solely to his goodness. We find these attributes mentioned together in the text, and the one must be regarded as the spring and origin of the other. Goodness, when exer­cised in withholding the vengeance denounced against transgressors, is forbearance; and when continued under repeated provocations, it is termed long-suffering. There is however a dis­tinction to be made between the goodness and the patience of God. Man, as needy, is the par­taker of the one; while man, as guilty, is the object of the other. Goodness supplies our wants, patience bears with our sins. The one will en­dure for ever, and is inseparable from the divine nature; the other is adapted only to the present scene of things, and may end tomorrow. The sacrifice and intercession of Christ first caused it to be manifested, and when his mediatorial work of mercy is accomplished, patience will probably be seen no more, but remain hidden for ever in the bosom of Jehovah.

II. Such is the nature of the divine patience; the apostle reminds us, secondly, of its *greatness,* or what he terms its “riches.” Indeed every blessing which Christ has purchased for sinners, he has purchased in rich abundance. The mercy he has obtained for them is “great” and “ten­der,” the grace “manifold and exceeding,” the redemption “plenteous,” the joy “unspeakable,” the glory “an exceeding great and eternal weight.”

But before we can discover all the riches of the Father’s patience, we must be acquainted, on the one hand, with all the sins of all the transgressors who have experienced it, and, on the other hand, with the incomprehensible purity of God, and the degree of hatred which sin excites in his infinitely holy mind. Enough of it however has been dis­played and is still displayed in the world, to fill the enquiring mind with the deepest wonder.

1. Consider *how long it has been exercised.* It was first exhibited to the universe in the garden of Eden. In that scene of blessedness, man first spurned the authority of his Creator; and what followed his daring transgression? Did the earth immediately open its mouth to swallow him up, or did vengeful lightnings descend from heaven to blast him? No; he remained for nine hundred years a living monument of the forbearance and goodness of his insulted God.

Age after age has since passed, during every hour of which the multiplied millions of the sons of Adam have been in a state of open rebellion against their Sovereign; but the riches of his pa­tience are not exhausted, nor the treasures of his mercy diminished. The number and greatness of the provocations which he is still bearing with, prove that he is as abundant in long-suffering now as in the days of old.

2. Consider too, brethren, *how many sins every man commits;* what a multitude of transgressions we all crowd into every period of our existence. We can number vast sums; we can stretch the powers of our mind to take in the idea even of millions; but our sins pass all numbering, and our errors all understanding. Sooner may the hairs of our head be numbered, or the stars of heaven be counted, than we count the iniquities of our short lives, or number the transgressions of even one hurrying year.

3. Consider also *how aggravated and daring many of our provocations have been.* Sinning against conscience and convictions, against the warnings of friends and the rebukes of Provi­dence, we have seemed determined at seasons to fly in the very face of Jehovah, and to brave his vengeance.

4. But we are not the only transgressors who are provoking the Lord to anger. The earth is full of the habitations of wickedness. Consider *how many sinners there are in it.* Go from pro­vince to province, from island to island, from country to country, and behold a thousand mil­lions of creatures with hearts as desperately wicked as our own, lips as unclean, and lives as ungodly. And yet the earth is still suffered to keep its place in the creation. The sun still shines on it, and the dews of heaven water it. Goodness and mercy still linger among its. rebellious inhabitants, and testify to a wondering universe the infinite patience of its God.

III. But for what end are these amazing riches of mercy displayed? *What effect is this patience designed to produce* in the sinners towards whom it is exercised? The apostle informs us that it is intended to “lead them to repentance.” It springs from goodness, and it makes mercy the end at which it aims.

1. The forbearance of the Almighty *gives us time for repentance.* It affords us an opportunity of learning our need of it, and of seeking it. It allows the disappointments of life to try what effect they can produce on our hearts, and afflic­tions to exert on us their awakening and soften­ing power. It suffers the bitterness of sin to be tasted. It gives the criminal space to sue for a pardon, and the ruined prodigal time to come to himself, and return to his Father’s home.

2. *It shows us also that the penitent may obtain forgiveness;* that the God who spares, is anxious to be reconciled to us; that he is “not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.” The criminal who is respited day after day and year after year, has no reason indeed to consider himself pardoned, but he is warranted to hope that his prince is inclined to pardon him, and willing to receive applications on his behalf. And when we behold the great Sovereign of heaven deferring to execute on us the sentence of his violated law, sending us a re­prieve and many mercies along with it every hour of our life, we are encouraged to conclude that “there is mercy with him,” and that “with him is plenteous redemption.” His patience bids us regard him as a relenting Father, as well as an offended Judge. It seals the gracious promises of his word, and assures us that his anger may be averted and his wrath escaped; that however nu­merous our provocations may have been, how­ever long persisted in and highly aggravated, we may still obtain everlasting salvation, if we will seek it at his throne and take it on his terms.

3. Nay more; his forbearance *has a tendency to produce repentance in our hearts.* This is the meaning of the apostle’s language in the text, and the meaning also of the still stronger language of Saint Peter, when, alluding to this passage, he tells us to “account that the long-suffering of the Lord is salvation.”

Experience proves that man’s stubborn heart is much less likely to be subdued by the con­templation of vengeance, than by the influence of mercy. The one, when accompanied with the power of the Spirit, excites a painful, though sometimes a salutary fear in the mind; while the other beats down the sinner in the dust; fills his mind with a sorrow, deep, softening, and abiding; and lodges within his breast that broken and con­trite spirit which God will not despise; not that remorse of conscience which is the offspring of terror and the parent of misery and death, but that penitence which is the earnest of salvation; which causes the angels, as they behold it, to mag­nify with renewed ardour the abounding mercy of Jehovah, and the enthroned Redeemer to see of the travail of his soul and rejoice. Taking him, as it were, by the hand, and leading him aside, Patience pleads with the sinner, and says to him, “Come, and let us reason together. Remember how long and how grievously thou hast sinned against thy God; how thou hast wearied him and tried his patience to the very utmost by thine iniquities. And yet he is still waiting to be gra­cious unto thee, and is willing to pour into thy vile heart the joys of his salvation. How often, when in want, has he helped thee; when afflicted, sent thee consolation; when sick, restored thee! How many dangers has he warded off from thee, how many evils withheld, how many blessings given! And when for thy profit he has visited thee with chastisements, how tenderly has he corrected thee, mitigating thy troubles by many comforts, and mingling with thy trials innumer­able benefits! That very power which he might have employed to punish, he has exercised all thy life long to preserve and bless thee. No man has ever borne with his friend, no husband with his wife, no parent with his child, even for one hour, as God has borne for days, and months, and years, with thee. O admire his patience and adore his love! Return to thine injured, but pitying Father. Lie low at his footstool. Mourn over thy transgressions. Plead for his mercy.”

IV. 1. Such is the effect which the divine for­bearance is intended and calculated to produce, but it does not always nor even generally pro­duce it. The question in the text intimates that we are in danger of despising the riches of the divine goodness, and we are undoubtedly guilty of this sin, when *we are unmindful of the pa­tience which bears with us,* when we either think nothing at all about it, or think of it lightly.

Many of us live day after day and year after year, and regard the continuance of our lives as a mere matter of course. If some extraordinary deliverance is vouchsafed to us, we express per­haps a momentary feeling of gratitude for it; but as for thanking God for keeping us alive and out of hell, it hardly enters our thoughts. And when we are reminded by others of the long-suffering of the Lord, it makes no impres­sion on our minds; it does not interest our feel­ings. While we acknowledge that it ought to excite our thankfulness, we think of it and talk of it, as though we had no personal concern, no interest, in it. And yet, brethren, were the exer­cise of this long-suffering to be for one moment suspended, we should be the very next moment in a world of unmixed wretchedness. And it is a miracle of mercy that we are not already there. Though we think so lightly of it, there is not a greater cause for wonder in the universe, than the patience of God towards man, except it be man’s unmindfulness of it.

2. But if the thoughtless and unthankful are guilty of despising the forbearance of the Lord, much more are they included in this charge, *who draw encouragement from it to continue in sin.*

It is one of the sad consequences of our de­pravity, as well as one of the strongest proofs of it, that we are prone to turn every blessing into a curse, and to make every remedy a poison. Not content with mere ingratitude for mercies, we abuse them. Thus the Jews treated the long-suffering of God, and thus are many of us treat­ing it. We hear of its riches and we experience its greatness, but instead of employing the hours it gives us in seeking reconciliation with heaven, we go on adding sin to sin, and increasing the terrors of our future condemnation. Because God is slow to punish, we conclude that he never will punish; that he either does not notice our sins, or that, if he notices them, he is too merci­ful, and too mindful of our frailty and infirmities, to call us to a strict account for them. The con­sequence is, that we become more fearless and hardened. Instead of forsaking our old sins, we plunge into new transgressions, and make that very patience which was designed to lead us to repentance, the means of inspiring us with confi­dence and presumption in our rebellion. “Be­cause sentence against an evil work is not execu­ted speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.”

No conduct, brethren, can be more base than this, none more dangerous; and yet there is none more common. There is an awful propensity to it in our very nature. We naturally reason from the past to the future, and we are prone to infer that the dispensations of the Almighty towards us will for ever continue the same as they have hitherto been, that mercy will ever be mingled with judgment, and patience never have an end. It becomes us then to look closely to ourselves; to regard the question in the text as addressed to us in particular;to consider the Holy Spirit as singling us out this very hour, and saying to each of us, “Despisest thou the riches of the Lord’s goodness, and forbearance, and long-suffering?”

Some of us need not hesitate a moment in answering this question. Our consciences testify that so far from having been led to repentance by the forbearance we have experienced, we have seldom thought of it, yea, that we have never in our whole lives seriously asked for what end we have been spared, nor spent one hour in en­quiring whether that end has been attained. As long as we remain in a state thus careless, we must take no consolation from the apostle’s words. He designed them to alarm, rather than to cheer us; and in order to alarm us, he points out in the following verse the consequences of our des­perate folly. To every one who is a stranger to heart-felt repentance, he says, “After thy hard­ness and impenitent heart, thou treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath, and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.”

The time of patience then will have an end. Notwithstanding all present appearances to the contrary, there is a day coming in which it will give place to wrath. And this wrath will be aggravated by the mercy which has preceded it. The fact is, that God exercises his long-suffering for his own glory, as well as for our salvation; and though we may lose the advantage, he will not lose the honour, of it. When patience has performed her appointed work, she will retire from our sight, and justice will ascend the throne, and have a solemn triumph in the final destruc­tion of those who have spurned at mercy. Now the justice of Jehovah magnifies his patience, but then patience abused will magnify his justice, make it more apparent, and invest it with a more fearful splendour. His backwardness to punish is now causing thousands of his enemies to suspect his purity and greatness; but then the out-pouring of his treasured wrath will wipe off the reproach, and force an assembled world to acknowledge the awfulness of his holiness and the terrors of his majesty. “O consider this, ye that forget God, lest he tear you in pieces, and there be none to deliver.” Be thoughtful. Be prayerful. Force your careless souls to reflect, and your stubborn knees to bend. At least, be determined to live no longer utterly regardless of the patience which spares you. Bring it before your mind in the morning, and in the evening meditate on it again, and strive to impress on your souls a sense of its greatness and its design. O let not its inesti­mable riches be all wasted. Perish not while mercy so great and so free is waiting to deliver you. Harden not the heart which the eternal Spirit is so ready to soften; and destroy not the soul which the everlasting Jesus died to save.

To *the fearful and penitent* the subject before us is calculated to afford encouragement. You are conscious perhaps that you have long despised the patience of the Lord, and you need no argu­ments to convince you of the heinousness and danger of your conduct. The remembrance of your provocations is grievous unto you, and the burden of them is at seasons almost intolerable. Your preservation from day to day fills you with wonder. When you close your eyes in the even­ing, it is with an apprehension that you may open them in eternity; and when you awake in the morning, your first thoughts are thoughts of surprise and thankfulness that you are yet among the living. You hear of the mercy of a dying Jesus, but you fear that for you the time of mercy is past, and the day of grace ended. But these fears are groundless. The long-suffering you have experienced, tells you, almost as plainly as God can tell you, that he is willing to be reconciled to you; that he is anxious to behold you supplicat­ing pardon at his throne; that he keeps you alive for the very purpose of giving you time and en­couragement to return to him, and lay hold of his great salvation.

You may learn the same lesson also from his forbearance to others. If he extends his long-suffering year after year to the thousands of hardened sinners who defile the earth, to multi­tudes who openly despise his authority and glory in blaspheming his name, surely his mercy can reach to those who are mourning over their trans­gressions and trembling at his word. Shall the rebel setting him at defiance, be spared; and shall the returning penitent, prostrate at his feet, find no compassion, no grace?

You yourselves too, brethren, were once “fool­ish and disobedient,” full of enmity against God, and dead to his fear and love. Not one tear did you ever shed for sin. On the contrary, it was for years your joy and perhaps your glory. And yet the Lord bore with you; and not only bore with you, but gave you the means of grace, and has sent at length his Holy Spirit to warn you, to pierce your heart with a sense of your iniquities, and to fasten on your minds an apprehension of judgment. Now what conclusion are you war­ranted to draw from his goodness towards you? If you were spared when sin was your delight, you may surely conclude that you will not be destroyed when it is your burden. If wrath was withheld when you were rebellious and daring, and withheld for the very purpose of leading you to repentance, you can have no reason to think that mercy will be denied when you are become submissive and trembling. God himself assures you that it will not. He declares in his word that he casts out none that come to him; and in order to remove all unbelief and suspicion from your mind, he has singled out some of the vilest of his enemies, reconciled them to himself through the blood of his covenant, and owned and loved them as his children. He reminds you of Manasseh and of Paul, and tells you that for this cause they obtained mercy, to show forth the boundless riches of his grace, and to encourage you to come with humble boldness to his throne. Seize then the opportunity. Accept his offered salvation; believe the record he has given of his Son; and you who are now the monuments of his patience, shall soon be witnesses to others of his readiness to pardon, and everlasting monuments of his ability to save.

*The pardoned* also, the sinners whom the good­ness of God has already led to repentance and righteousness, may learn much from the contem­plation of the divine patience. It is to this that they are indebted for all their present privileges and future prospects.

Remember, brethren, the years that are past. Look back to the days of your childhood and youth. How many who were then your compa­nions in folly, have since been summoned away! And where are they now? We dare not answer the question. But where are you? Safe in Christ, cleansed by his blood, clothed in his righteousness, sanctified by his Spirit, living in the arms of mercy, and rejoicing in the hope of glory. And to what must you trace the difference between your condition and that of your lost companions? Not to your less daring wickedness, for you per­haps were as thoughtless as they; but to the forbearance of God, to that forbearance which kept you alive till grace softened and changed you. Nay, you are still indebted to the continued exercise of his patience. Though pardoned and accepted, it is this which keeps you hour by hour from de­struction. May a conviction of this truth affect and humble you! May it attach you more closely to your long-suffering God, and endear to you that Saviour whose blood purchased the mercy that spares, as well as the grace which enriches you! In the midst of the blessings and honours which are heaped on your head, regard yourselves as criminals offending every hour, and every hour receiving a pardon; and show that you regard yourselves in this light, by the readiness with which you bear with the offences of others. Who should exercise mercy more than they who have found it? None will exercise it more. The pardon they have obtained, disposes them to be willing to pardon; and the patience they are re­ceiving, makes them also patient. “Be ye there­fore followers of God as dear children,” and prove your relation to him by resembling him in that which he deems the chief glory of his nature— his slowness to wrath; his ability to bear provo­cations, and his readiness to forgive them.