

SERMONS
ON
IMPORTANT SUBJECTS,

BY THE LATE REVEREND AND PIOUS

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

THE FIFTH EDITION.

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MEMOIRS AND CHARACTER OF THE AUTHOR;

AND

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SERMON XXX.

THE RULE OF EQUITY.

MATTHEW vii. 12. *Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them; for this is the law and the prophets.*

CHRISTIANITY is not a fragment, but a complete system of religion; and it is intended and adapted to make us good entirely and throughout: it teaches us a proper conduct and temper towards every being with whom we have any connection, particularly towards God and our fellow men. A Christian is a complete, uniform, finished character; a character in which there is the most amiable symmetry and proportion; it is all of a piece, without chasms and inconsistencies. A Christian is a penitent, a believer, a lover of God, conscientious in devotion, and diligent in attendance upon every ordinance of religious worship. He begins his religion with a supreme regard to God, the Supreme of beings, sensible that unless he begins here, he inverts the order of things, and that all his religion and virtue must be preposterous and vain. To love the Lord his God with all his heart, and to serve him from that exalted principle, is the first and great commandment with him; and he observes it as such. Religion, virtue, morality, and everything that bears a specious name among mankind, is a poor, maimed thing, monstrously defective, if a proper regard to God be left out of the system. It is shocking and unnatural for the creatures of God to be punctual in observing the duties they owe to one another, and yet entirely negligent of those radical fundamental duties they owe to him, their common Parent, the highest excellence, and the original of all authority and obligation.

But though Christianity begins with, and chiefly consists in our duty to God, yet it extends farther; it also includes a proper conduct and temper towards men. A good Christian is not only devout, but moral and virtuous: he is not only a dutiful servant of God in matters purely religious, but he is a useful member of every society to which he belongs, and makes conscience of justice, charity, and all the good offices due to his fellow-creatures. He is a good ruler or a good subject, a good neighbour, a good father or child, a good master or servant; in short, he endeavours to have a “conscience void of offence towards God and towards men.” I have made it the great object of my ministry among you to bring you to pay a proper regard to God, as he has revealed himself in the gospel of his Son; and for this purpose have inculcated the important doctrines of faith, repentance, love, and those other graces which are essential to every good man. But I must not forget another

part of my office, which is, to teach you the second great command, or summary of the divine law, namely, “That you should love your neighbour as yourselves,” and inculcate upon you those important duties which you owe to mankind; and it is very extravagant for persons to disgust these, through a pretended relish for the gospel and the doctrines of grace, since these are no inconsiderable parts of the gospel, and the lessons of morality run through the whole New Testament.

When I would discourse upon the duties of social life, I cannot choose a text more pertinent or copious than that I have read to you, which is a fundamental and most comprehensive rule of morality; “all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them; for this is the law and the prophets.”

In the illustration and improvement of this subject, I shall,

I. Offer a few things for the right understanding of this divine rule of social duty.

II. Consider the reason of it.

III. Open its excellency.

IV. Mention some important instances of particular cases to which it should be applied. And,

Lastly, show the necessity and advantage of observing it.

I. I am to offer a few things for the right understanding of this divine rule.

It is proper then to observe, that as there is a great diversity in the stations and characters of men, there is a proportionable diversity in the duties which they owe one to another; and self-love may make a man very extravagant in his expectations and desires about the conduct of another towards him. On these accounts it is necessary that we should understand this precept with these two cautions or limitations.

1. That we should do that to others which we would expect and wish from them upon a change of condition, or if they were in our circumstances and we in theirs. Every man should be treated according to his character and station; and therefore that conduct which may be proper towards me in my station, may not be proper towards another in a different station: but let me suppose myself in his place and he in mine, and then that behaviour which I would expect from him, the same I should observe towards him. Thus, for example, a magistrate is bound to protect his subjects, and to behave towards them as he would desire a ruler to behave towards him if he were a subject; but he is not bound to yield that submission to his subjects, while a ruler, which he may justly demand of them. The rule in such cases is, let every man act in character; let him perform to others those duties which he would desire from others if they were in his circumstances, and he in theirs; and where there is a sameness of circumstances, there, and there only, his duty to others must be the same that he expects from them.

2. We should make only our reasonable and lawful expectations from others the rule of our conduct towards them. A man may expect and wish very extravagant and sinful things from others: he may desire another should give him all his estate, or gratify his wicked lusts and passions by some criminal compliance: such desires are by no means to be the rule of conduct; for we cannot indulge them, nor others comply with them, without acting wickedly and unreasonably. But those things which we may desire and expect from others, consistently with right reason, religion, and the laws of society, those things we ought to perform to them; those things which our consciences justify, and not those to which our inordinate self-love or some extravagant passion may prompt us.

If we understand this precept with such limitations as these, we may safely follow it as a general rule of conduct; and then it will not be liable to such objections as may be otherwise made against it. For example, a criminal may plead, "If I were in the place of my judge, and he in mine, I would acquit him, and grant him his life." Or a judge might think, "If I were in the place of that poor criminal, I should be glad if my judge would forgive me: and therefore, if I would do as I would be done by, I must forgive him." Such thoughts as these, arising from wrong principles, are not to be the rule and measure of our actions or expectations; for our own consciences cannot approve of them in our sedate and impartial moments. I proceed,

II. To consider the reason of this precept.

Now the reason or foundation of it is evidently this, namely, the natural equality of mankind. For notwithstanding the great difference in the capacities, improvements, characters, and stations of men, yet, considered as men, they share in the same common nature, and are so far equal; and therefore, in the same circumstances, they have a right to the same treatment. A superior, for example, should treat his inferior just in the manner in which he would reasonably expect to be treated himself if he was in a low condition and his inferior advanced to his station. If there be any reason why another should behave in such a manner to me, there is the very same reason that I should behave in the same manner towards him; because he is to himself what I am to myself, as near, as dear, as important. Is it reasonable my neighbour should make no encroachments upon my property? It is equally reasonable that I should not encroach upon his; for his property is as much his as my property is mine. Do I expect my neighbour should observe the rules of justice in his dealings with me? then certainly I should observe them in my dealings with him; for he has as good a right to be treated according to these rules, by me, as I have to be so treated by him. If it is reasonable that he should be tender of my good name, it is equally reasonable that I should be tender of his. If he should relieve me in my calamities, certainly I am equally bound to relieve him when in the same circumstances. And the

reason is plain; he is to himself what I am to myself, and he is to me what I am to him, and therefore I am obliged to treat him as I would justly expect he would treat me, We are equal, and consequently our obligations are equal, and our duties mutual or reciprocal. Hence you see that this precept is the most reasonable thing in the world. My next business is,

III. To open the excellency of it.

And this appears (1.) from its comprehensiveness; it includes all the social duties of life; it is a short summary of the whole divine law, as far as it refers to our conduct towards man. This excellency Christ himself points out: *This*, says he, *is the law and the prophets*; that is, it is the substance of both: do to others what you would have others do to you, and then you do to them all that the law and the prophets, and I may add, all that Christ and the apostles require you to do. Now it is a great advantage to have the whole of our duty collected into such narrow bounds, and presented to us at one view: we are not sent to pore over tedious' volumes of laws and statutes, or to gather up fragments of precepts here and there in order to learn our duty to one another: it is all summed up in this, *Do to others what you would have them do to you*. With this is connected another excellency of this precept; and that is,

2. Its conciseness: it is what I may call a portable directory, which you may always carry about with you and easily recollect; and therefore you need never be at a loss to know your duty. You may always know your own expectations and desires; do to others then what you would expect and desire from them, and you are right. You do all that the law and the prophets require you to do. Tedious precepts and long discourses are not so easily learned or remembered; but the shortest memory cannot fail to recollect this concise command.

3. Another excellency of this precept is, that it is universal, and extends to all mankind, in all circumstances; to superiors, inferiors, and equals. It is true there is a great diversity in the characters and stations of men, which it is not your business, nor is it in your power to alter; and there is a correspondent variety in the duties you owe them. But you can easily imagine them all in the same circumstances; or you can easily suppose yourselves in their place, and they in yours; and then you can with equal ease look into your own minds, and consider what treatment you would expect from them in such a change of circumstances; and that will immediately discover how you should treat them in their present circumstances. Thus the rule may be universally applied without impropriety.

4. Another excellency of this precept is, that it is plain and convictive. Common minds may be bewildered, instead of being guided, by an intricate, tedious system of laws; but a man of the weakest understanding may easily perceive this rule. It is an appeal to his own sensations. 'What would you

expect or wish from others? How would you have them treat you? Surely you cannot but know this: 'well, treat them just in the same manner.' This is also a most convictive rule; every man that thinks a little, must immediately own that it is highly reasonable; consult your own consciences, and they will tell you, you need no other adviser, and you are self-condemned if you violate this precept. It is written upon your hearts in illustrious indelible characters: it shines and sparkles there, like the Urim and Thummim on the breast of Aaron. I am,

IV. To mention some important instances of particular cases to which this excellent rule ought to be applied. And here I shall throw a great many things together without method, that my description may agree the nearer to real life, in which these things happen promiscuously without order.

Would you desire that another should love you, be ready to serve you, and do you all the kind offices in his power? Do you expect your neighbour should rejoice in your prosperity, sympathize with you in affliction, promote your happiness, and relieve you in distress? Would you have him observe the rules of strict justice in dealing with you? Would you have him tender of your reputation, ready to put the kindest construction upon your actions, and unwilling to believe or spread a bad report concerning you? Do you desire he should direct you when mistaken, and labour to reclaim you from a dangerous course? In short, do you think it reasonable he should do all in his power for your good, in soul, body, and estate? Are these your expectations and desires with regard to the conduct of others towards you? Then in this manner should you behave towards them; you have fixed and determined the rule of your own conduct:* your expectations from others have the force of a law upon yourselves; and since you know how they should behave towards you, you cannot be at a loss to know how to behave towards them.

If you were a servant, how would you have your master to behave towards you? Consider and determine the matter; and you will know how you should behave towards your servants. The same thing may be applied to rulers and subjects in general, to parents and children, husbands and wives, neighbour and neighbour.

On the other hand, we may consider this rule negatively. Do you desire that another should not entertain angry and malicious passions against you? that he should not envy your prosperity, nor insult over you in adversity? that he should not take the advantage of you in contracts? that he should not violate the laws of justice in commerce with you, nor defraud you of your property? that he should not injure your reputation, or put an unkind construction upon your conduct? Would you expect that if you were a servant, your master should not tyrannize over you, and give you hard usage;

* —Tu tibi legem dixisti.

or that if you were a master, your servant should not be unfaithful, disobedient, and obstinate? are these your expectations and desires with regard to the conduct of others? then, you have prescribed a law for your own conduct: do not that to others which you would not have them do to you: treat every man as another self, as a part of the same human nature with yourself. How extravagant and ridiculous is it that you should be treated well by all mankind, and yet you be at liberty to treat them as you please? What are you? What a being of mighty importance are you? Is not another as dear to himself as you are to yourself? Are not his rights as sacred and inviolable as yours? How came you to be entitled to an exemption from the common laws of human nature? Be it known to you, you are as firmly bound by them as any of your species.

By these few instances you may learn how to apply this maxim of Christian morality to all the cases that may occur in the course of your lives.

Were I reading to you a letter of moral philosophy in the school of Socrates or Seneca, what I have offered might be sufficient. But in order to adapt this discourse to the Christian dispensation, and make it true Christian morality, it is necessary I should subjoin two evangelical peculiarities, which are the qualifications of that virtue which God will accept.

The first is, that all our good offices to mankind should proceed not only from benevolence to them, but from a regard to the divine authority, which obliges us to these duties. We should do these things not only as they are commanded, but because they are commanded. We cannot expect that God will accept of that as obedience to him, which we do not intend in that view. Let us apply that rule to every social duty, which the apostle particularly applies to the duty of servants to their masters: *Whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not to men.* Col. iii. 23.

The second qualification of evangelical virtue or true Christian morality, is, that you perform it in the name of Christ, or that you depend not upon the merit of your obedience, but entirely upon his mediatorial righteousness, to procure acceptance with God. Without this all your actions of charity and justice, however fair and splendid they appear in the eyes of men, are but proud philosophic virtue, utterly abhorred by a holy God. But with this evangelical temper, you will be accepted as serving God, even in serving men. And O! that with these qualifications this rule may regulate the conduct of each of us! I am sure there is reason enough for it, if the greatest necessity, or the greatest advantage can be a reason. Which consideration leads me,

V. And lastly, To show the necessity and advantage of observing this rule.

(1.) The observance of this rule is absolutely necessary to constitute you real Christians. I hinted at this in the beginning of my discourse; but it is of such vast importance, that it merits a more thorough consideration. A

Christian not only prays, attends upon religious ordinances, discourses about religion, and the like, but he is also a strict moralist; he is just and charitable, and makes conscience of every duty to mankind; and morality is not ornamental but essential to his character; and it is vain for you to pretend to the Christian character without morality. An unjust, uncharitable Christian, is as great a contradiction as a prayerless, or a swearing Christian. You can no more be a good man without loving your neighbour, than without loving your God. "He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother," and neglects the duties he owes to him, is really in darkness even until now, (1 John ii. 9.) let him pretend what he will. Therefore if you count it of any importance to be Christians indeed, you must do to others what you would have them do to you. No inward experience, no religious duties, no zeal in devotion can make you true Christians, or entitle you to the charity of others as such, without a proper temper and behaviour towards mankind. I would have you, my dear brethren, to be complete finished Christians. If there be any thing in the world that I have at heart, it is this: I would have Christianity appear in you in its full glory, unmaimed and well-proportioned; and therefore I would have you to be not only zealous in devotion in secret, in your families, and in public, but also just, honourable, and faithful in all your dealings with mankind; kind, affectionate, meek and inoffensive in your conduct towards them; in short, that you should treat them as you would have them treat you. You find a great deal of fault with the conduct of others towards you, but consider, have they not equal reason to blame your conduct towards them? My dear brethren, be yourselves what you would have others be. Would you have them to be better than yourselves? Would you merely resign to them that true honour? Do you desire that they should be better Christians and better men than you? What an awkward, perverse, preposterous humility is this? But,

(2.) A proper conduct towards mankind in the professors of religion, is necessary to recommend religion to the world, and reflect honour upon their profession; whereas the want of it brings a reproach upon the Christian name. The blind world has but little knowledge, and still less concern about the duties that we owe immediately to God, and therefore the neglect of them is not so much observed; but as to the duties we owe to mankind, they themselves are concerned in them, and therefore they take the more notice of the omission of them, and are more sensible of the importance. And when they see a man that makes a mighty profession, that talks a great deal about religion, and is zealous in frequent attendance upon sermons, prayer, &c., when they see such a man make no conscience of the laws of justice and charity towards men; when they observe he is as deceitful, as over-reaching, as sordid and covetous as others, and perhaps more so, what will they think of his religion? Will they not think it a cloak for his knavery, and a stratagem

to accomplish his own wicked designs? And thus are they hardened in impiety, and confirmed in their neglect of all religion. My brethren, it is incredible what injury the Christian religion has received from this quarter. The bad lives of professors is the common objection against it in the mouths of heathens, Jews, Turks, and infidels, among ourselves. There is indeed no real force in the objection: you may as well say that moral honesty is but villainy, because many who pretend to it are knaves, and make that pretence to carry on their knavery with more success. It must also be confessed, that many discover much of their enmity against religion itself, by raising a clamour against the bad lives of its professors; and that there is much less ground for the objection than they would have you believe. The true secret is this: they hate strict religion themselves, and would find some umbrage to expose it in others, in order to excuse or defend their own neglect of it; and as they can find no objection against religion itself, they abuse all its professors: and if it is evident that their visible conduct is good, they would find out some secret flaw; and if they can discover no glaring defect in their duty to God, they pry into their conduct towards man, to discover some secret wickedness: and, alas! in too many instances, their malignant search is successful; and they find some that make a mighty profession, who are secretly guilty of some mean or wicked artifices in their transactions with men. Now they think they have found them out, and surmise, 'They are all such; they pray and make a great stir about religion, but they will cheat and lie, when they can do it clandestinely, as readily as their neighbours.' This imputation, when made to Christians in the bulk, is not only ungenerous, but utterly false. But it must, alas! be owned, that the fact, upon which it is founded, is true with regard to some. And what a melancholy thought is this! The innocent, I mean the consistent and uniform professors of religion, suffer by this conduct of their false brethren; for the same artful hypocrisy will be surmised of them; and religion itself suffers by such conduct; for it gives a disadvantageous idea of religion, as though it were all show and ostentation, and made its most zealous votaries no better in reality than those that neglect and despise it. My brethren, I seriously tell you, I know of nothing in the world that would have a more efficacious tendency to propagate christianity through the nations of the earth, than the good behaviour of its professors. The impiety and bad morals of those that make no profession of religion is evident to all; and if all that profess it would live according to their profession, then the difference would be discernible to all; and even common sense would teach a heathen that it is a difference much for the better; and the world would soon conclude there is something singularly excellent and divine in a religion that sanctifies every thing within its reach, and makes its subjects so evidently better than all mankind besides: they would need no laboured arguments to convince them of this point; their

own consciences would afford them sufficient evidence of it, and then it would be sufficient to make a heathen a christian to bring him into the acquaintance of christians; and it would be impossible there should be such a thing as a Deist or an infidel free-thinker in a christian country. He would receive conviction from the practice of every one about him, and he would not be able to shut his eyes against it. I am sorry, my brethren, the case is so much the reverse through the generality of the christian world. It is really melancholy that the name of a christian should raise in a stranger any ideas but those of justice, benevolence, and every thing honourable and excellent. I am sure our religion, as we find it in the Bible, is such; but, alas! how different, how opposite is the christian world! Those that trade among infidels, or that are employed as missionaries among the heathen, can inform you what a fatal obstruction the bad lives of its professors is to the propagation of our holy religion. Why should they embrace a religion which leaves the morals of its followers as bad or worse than their own? This inquiry the light of nature teaches them to make; and it is really hard to answer it satisfactorily. When a Turk could turn upon a Christian, who insinuated that he lied, with this reprimand, 'What! do you think I am a Christian, that I should lie?' When an Indian can tell a Christian missionary, 'If your religion be so much better than ours, as you say it is, how comes it that you white people are no better than we? Nay, you have taught us many vices, which we knew nothing of till our acquaintance with you?' I say, when Turks and heathens can make such repartees, is there any prospect that Christianity should be received among them? Alas! no. The same thing may be applied to those careless, vicious, impious multitudes among ourselves, who do indeed usurp the name of Christians, but can hardly be said to make any profession of Christianity, as their whole lives are openly and avowedly contrary to it. If all who make a stricter profession were to live in character, it would soon afford conviction to these profane sinners: they could not but see the difference, and that it is a shocking difference for the worse on their side. And now, my brethren, shall our holy religion suffer? shall nations be prejudiced against it? shall multitudes of souls be lost by our misconduct? O! can you bear the thought of incurring such dreadful guilt! Well, if you would avoid it. observe the sacred precept in my text. On the other hand, would you not contribute all in your power to render your religion amiable in the world, to convert mankind to it, and thus save souls from death? If you would, then observe this divine rule. Let the world see that you are really the better for your religion, and that your singular profession is not a vain, idle, ostentatious pretence. I have this particular much at heart, and therefore you will bear with me that I have enlarged so much upon it.

(3.) The observance of this sacred rule of equity would have the most happy influence upon human society, and would make this world a little

paradise. If men did to others whatever they would have others do to them, such a conduct would put an end to a great part of the miseries of mankind. Then there would be no wars and tumults among the nations, no jealousies and contentions in families, no oppression, fraud, or any form of injustice, no jars, animosities, and confusions in neighbourhoods; but human society would be a company of friends, and justice, equity, love, charity, kindness, gratitude, sympathy, and all the amiable train of virtues, would reign among them. What a happy state of things would this be! How different from the present! And shall not each of us contribute all in our power to bring about such a glorious revolution?

(4.) The observance of this rule is a piece of prudence with regard to ourselves. It is of great importance to our happiness in this world, that others should treat us well. There are none of us absolutely independent of others; we are not able to stand as the butt of universal opposition; or if we are now in happy circumstances, we stand upon a slippery place, and may soon fall as low as our neighbours. Now, the readiest way to be treated well by others, is to treat others well ourselves. If you would have others to behave agreeably to you, you must do so to them; do what you expect from them. Men often complain of bad neighbours, when they are the occasion of it by being bad neighbours themselves. There is hardly any place so bad, but a benevolent, inoffensive man may live peaceably in it; but the contentious will always meet with contention; for they raise the storm which disturbs them. Therefore, if no other argument has weight with you, for your own sakes observe this divine rule.

(5.) I shall only add, that unless you conscientiously observe the duties of social life, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. Not only sins done immediately against God, and the omission of duties to him, but also sins against our fellow creatures, and the omission of the duties we owe to them, will exclude men from the kingdom of God. Of this we have abundant evidence in scripture. I need only refer you to two comprehensive passages, I Cor. vi. 9, 10; Gal. v. 19, 20, 21; in which you see that all unrighteousness, hatred, variance, strife, envy, extortion, and the like, which are offensive against men, will as certainly shut the gates of heaven against you, as idolatry or heresies, which are sins against God. The most plausible experiences, the greatest diligence and zeal in devotion, and the most promising profession of religion, will never bring you to heaven, though absolutely necessary in their place, unless you also abound in good works towards men. And shall this argument have no weight with you? Is your eternal salvation an insignificant thing with you? Are you proof against the terrors of everlasting destruction? If you would enjoy the one and escape the other, “Do to others what you would have them do to you.”

I shall conclude with one or two reflections.

(1.) If this be the rule of our conduct, alas! how little true morality is there in the world! Men seem to act as if they were entirely detached from one another, and had no connection, or were not at all concerned to promote each other's interest. Self-interest is their pursuit, and self-love their ruling passion; if that be but promoted, and this gratified, they have little or no concern besides. 'Let their neighbours look to themselves, they have no business with them.' If I shall only mention one particular case under this general rule, namely, commerce and bargaining, what a scene of iniquity would it open? Men seem to make this their rule, to get as much for what they sell, and give as little for what they buy, as they can. They hardly ever think what the real value of the thing is, and whether the other party has a tolerable bargain of it: 'Let him look,' say they, to that, 'it is none of their care.' Alas! my brethren, where are the laws of justice and charity, when men behave in this manner? And yet, alas! how common is such a conduct in the commercial world!

2. We ought to examine our own conduct in this respect, and it will go a great way to determine whether our religion be true and sincere, or not. If we make a conscience of social duty, it is a promising sign that God has written his law in our hearts. But if we can willingly indulge ourselves in any sinful and mean conduct towards men, we may be sure our religion is vain, whatever our pretensions be. Let us feel then the pulse of our souls, whether it beats warm and full, both with the love of God and the love of our neighbour. *Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, [or venerable,] whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, let us think on these things.* Phil. iv. 8.