

SERMONS

BY THE

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SERMON XIV.

UNDUE REGARD TO REPUTATION A SOURCE OF UNBELIEF.

JOHN v. 44.

How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only?

OUR blessed Lord here assigns a reason for that unbelief with respect to his Divine Mission which he found so generally prevalent, and for which, on ordinary principles, it is so difficult to account. The miracles which he performed were most numerous and striking, and of unquestionable authenticity. His doctrines were most just, sublime, and worthy of a Divine Revelation: yet the great majority of the Scribes and Pharisees did not believe in him. Now all unbelief is to be accounted for upon one of two principles; either that there is not sufficient evidence to justify belief, or that the mind is not in a fit state to receive the proper impression from that evidence. In the present instance, the former was clearly not the case: the evidence was full and indisputable. The latter, therefore, was the true cause; the minds of the Scribes and Pharisees were not in a fit state to give due weight to the miracles performed by Christ, to pay a proper attention to the nature of the doctrines delivered by him, to appreciate their value, or to judge impartially of their origin. And the particular reason why their minds were thus indisposed is assigned by our Lord: they received “honour one of another.” Their reputation amongst men was the chief object of their solicitude; and, therefore, they were eager to receive those opinions which the world held in honour, and reluctant to embrace those of which the reception was generally discreditable.—The disciples of Christ were, in general, not only of poor and mean condition, but considered as fools and dupes by the wise, and opulent, and honourable of that day; and therefore, a man who was influenced by regard to character *could not* believe in him. It was morally impossible that he should. Had he seen, indeed, the faith of Jesus generally received by those whose esteem he valued, he would have believed on him also; that is, he would have sacrificed to the love of reputation in another way, and made the faith of Christ to minister to his vanity. But to embrace the cause of Christ, at a period when it was calumniated and despised, required an independence of mind and a love of truth, which are incompatible with the selfish emotions of vanity. Nay more; it required a supreme desire to please God, and a just regard to his approbation as the only true honour. Whoever sought, in the first place, the honour which cometh from God, would have necessarily become a disciple of Christ; for that principle would have in-

duced him to judge by scriptural rules; to compare the character of Christ with that foretold of the Messiah by Moses and the Prophets; to give due weight to the nature of the miracles performed by Jesus; and, above all, to study carefully his doctrines, with a view both to their intrinsic excellence, and to their correspondence with Scripture. He, on the other hand, whose ruling principle, like that of the Pharisees, was ambition of worldly reputation, would be open to none of those sources of conviction, and would therefore continue to disbelieve.

This subject naturally leads to the consideration of three points.

I. The nature and evil tendency of an undue regard to reputation.

II. The excellence of the principle of supreme regard to the favour of God. And,

III. The connection between such a principle and the cordial reception of the doctrines of the Gospel.

I. *The nature and evil tendency of an undue regard to reputation.* I say an *undue* regard, because there is a *proper* regard to the opinion of our fellow-creatures which is both useful and laudable.—Samuel appealed to all Israel respecting the integrity of his life. St. Paul called the Jews to witness that he had lived in all good conscience both before God and man. But, properly speaking, it is a good character rather than reputation which a man ought to seek. The love of reputation (by which is meant the love of worldly applause) results from the gratification which that applause administers to vanity. It is therefore founded on a selfish and corrupt principle. We may value the esteem of others, especially of the good, as a test of our own character: we may value it also as an instrument of power, enabling us to do good; for a man who does not possess the esteem of his fellow-creatures can do nothing useful in society. We may seek it therefore in a moderate manner, as we seek any other of the blessings of life:—but we must not make it the end and aim of our conduct; we must not use it as a motive, or be guided by it as a rule of action; we must not value it so highly as to be elated by its possession or dejected by its unmerited loss. Our aim must be to do what is right in the sight of God, and our rule must be the word of God. If, while we steadily adhere to these, we obtain the good-will of our fellow-creatures also, it is a cause for thankfulness;—but in the opposite event, we are to console ourselves by the remembrance that they are but fallible and sinful creatures like ourselves; that their judgment may be erroneous; and that, if it is not agreeable to that of God, their approbation can confer no real advantage, nor their censure attach any permanent disgrace. “For what is man, whose breath is in his nostrils; or wherein is he to be accounted of,” in opposition to God?

There may be an undue regard to reputation prevailing even in those cas-

es in which the opinion of the world seems to be entirely despised. An affectation of singularity, a direct contrariety to the maxims or conduct of the world, may spring from the desire of reputation only directed in a peculiar channel. By a bold deviation from the ways of the world, and a professed contempt of its opinions, we may be aiming at the character of mental independence, and seeking in singularity that reputation which, in the ordinary modes of thinking and acting, we have not sufficient ability to attain. In general, however, it is by the dread of being singular that an undue esteem for reputation is evinced. We are anxious to follow the world: and to think and act with those around us. If I pursue such a line of conduct, or embrace such doctrines, what will people think or say of me? is the question which naturally occurs to minds influenced by this principle; and with them it is a question so weighty as to bear down all sense of duty and regard to the will of God. Now, the evil of being guided by such a principle is very great.

1. It robs God of the glory due to him as the supreme Sovereign and righteous Judge of the world, and ascribes to men that honour and glory which are due to him alone. For throughout the whole creation, in heaven as well as in earth, the holy and blessed Creator ought to be acknowledged and treated as God by every creature. But to treat him as God implies, that we honour and worship him with a supreme regard; that we yield him an implicit obedience: that we seek his glory as our chief aim in life; that his authority is decisive with us, and his will our only law. He therefore who is guided by the love of worldly reputation as his principle, is in a state of rebellion against God. He fears, honours, loves, and obeys the creature more than the Creator, and has transferred to man the affections and the allegiance due to God. Now, are we to suppose that this can be endured by the Supreme Ruler of the universe? Is he to be dethroned, that a creature, such as man, may usurp his place? Can there be greater moral guilt than this? If this principle were to prevail generally, it would amount to an entire subversion of the Sovereignty of God, and it would introduce into the world all the anarchy and misery which the supreme dominion of the Wisest and Best of beings can alone prevent. The order and harmony of the creation would be destroyed, and its beauty defaced. Other sins are a breach of some *particular* command: they are acts of disobedience, it is true, but they do not strike at the root of all obedience: this is the sin of rebellion, the highest of crimes, against the Sovereign Power; because it impugns the very right of legislation, and refuses obedience upon principle.

2. Again: The evil of such a principle will be apparent when we consider how base and mean is its nature, as contrasted with obedience to the Divine Will.—When a man obeys and serves God, he obeys and serves a Being who of all others is confessedly the wisest, the greatest, the noblest, and the

best:—but if he devote himself to the opinion of his fellow-man, he chooses as his master a poor dependant creature, in nature as weak, as fallible, as ignorant, and as degraded as himself: he submits to be the slave of folly, and the victim of caprice; for what rule in general is so false as that of man's opinion; what guide so uncertain as his judgment? Reformation, besides, is absolutely impossible, while this principle is pursued: for it sets up corruption itself as the standard by which right and wrong are to be measured. Our vices, whatever they may be, are sanctioned by those whom we have chosen as the directors of our consciences, but who are at the same time the sharers in our iniquity; and we secure indulgence by making the partners in our frailties the judges of our guilt. Indeed, after all, what is it but to make our *own* opinions our standard, where we seem to be guided by those of the world? The love of reputation is but the love of self. As we seek the good opinion of mankind because it flatters our pride and vanity; so we are guided by the opinions of the world, because those opinions are in general our own: nor do we ever differ from the world, except where our interest or our caprice leads to the deviation.

It is further evident, that such a servile regard to our reputation will be highly prejudicial to others. For it will induce us to flatter them, and to palliate and conceal the defects of their character, in order that *they* may be pleased with *us*. A man, therefore, who seeks only to stand fair in the opinion of the world, is of necessity a man of no principle. He must take the complexion of the company: he must say what will gain the good opinion of those with whom he converses, not what will be agreeable to truth: he must suppress what would be painful and unpleasant, however necessary or just. Honour, integrity, truth, justice, religion, must be sacrificed at the shrine of his own selfishness and vanity. This is his aim and object; and thus their good is entirely out of the question, and his own vanity must be gratified. The gratification of these feelings is his exclusive aim; and in this pursuit, the glory of God, the interests of religion, and the real good of his fellow-creatures are disregarded. It is an important circumstance, upon which too much stress cannot be laid, that whatever is wrong in the view of morals and religion is also in every other respect disadvantageous. This is wisely appointed by Providence, in order to promote the great ends of the Divine administration; and it generally is found to take place in reference to the present subject of consideration. Another remark, therefore, which may be made upon this subject is, that those who give up the honour which cometh from God, in order to gain the esteem of man, usually fail in their object. God is the best and kindest of masters, as he is the greatest; but the world is a hard master, difficult to be pleased, capricious in its taste, quick to discover defects, severe in its censures, and implacable in its displeasure. How many, besides Wolsey, have painfully regretted their injudicious pref-

erence of the world's opinion to that of God, or of their own consciences! The fickleness of the world, the bubble of popular applause, the vanity of dependence on man, are themes which, even to satiety, have been the subjects of discourse. And it should be well weighed by those who give themselves up to court the world's esteem, that while those who seek it the most ardently are often found to seek it in vain, it is frequently bestowed most liberally upon those who never seek it at all, but whose only motive of action is a conscientious desire to please God. So true is that expression of the Divine Sovereign, "Those that honour me I will honour;" that is, cause to be honoured; and "they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed."

II. In opposition to this false and corrupt principle, let us consider, in the second place, the nature and excellency of that principle by which we ought to be guided; namely, that of *seeking the honour which cometh from God*.

The man who is guided by this motive sets God ever before him as his Supreme Lord, whom he is bound by every obligation readily, constantly, universally, implicitly, supremely, to obey. Whether the commands of God, therefore, be easy or difficult; whether they be agreeable to the maxims and practice of the world or not; whether he shall be despised and ridiculed, hated and persecuted, or esteemed and applauded, for his obedience to them, makes no difference in his conduct. He intensely feels the value of God's approbation, and its sufficiency to compensate the loss of every earthly good. He considers, too, the extreme shortness of this life, and learns therefore, to attach little value to human approbation. He is besides convinced, that even in this short life the hope of God's favour and the consciousness of acting according to his will, communicate a peace infinitely exceeding that which the favour of the world can confer; and he looks forward to the period, soon approaching, when those who have lived to the world, and to themselves, shall call on the rocks and hills to hide them from the face of Him that sitteth upon the throne. He reflects, that a whole eternity is before him, and that through this eternity it will be the favour of God from which alone he must derive all his happiness and every good. Finally, he considers that God is not only his Judge, who will surely bring into trial every thought of his heart, but his Sovereign too, and his constant Benefactor; and that to rebel against him is the very height of baseness and ingratitude. Every principle, therefore, of reason, of wisdom, of religion, requires him, in all things, to consult his will and to seek his approbation.

Now the excellency of such a conduct is obvious and indisputable. The principle upon which it is founded is of the utmost possible *purity*: it is alloyed by no mixture of imperfection, but, consisting of regard to a Being infinitely pure, is itself infinitely pure also.—It is also the *simplest* and the *noblest*: the simplest, because it has but one end in view, which it pursues

with undeviating steadiness; the noblest, because that end is the glory of God.—It is a principle *fixed and permanent*. The opinions and taste of men vary in every age and in every climate; but the will of God is like himself, “the same yesterday, today, and for ever;” the same as revealed to the Patriarchs; the same as manifested by his Son Jesus Christ; the same upon earth while directing the conduct of the saints, as in heaven while influencing the sentiments of angels and archangels:—It is a principle *always productive of peace and happiness*; for it secures the blessing of a quiet conscience, can bear the test of the most rigid self-examination, and on retrospect is always so satisfactory as amply to compensate to every man the privations to which it may have exposed him. It thus infuses a calm of mind which no other principle can confer, and leads to a settled tranquillity and “peace which passeth all understanding.” And here applies the remark which has been already made, but which cannot be too often repeated on account of its importance, that what is right is always the most advantageous. The fear of God may expose a man for a time to suffering; but it will carry him through that suffering, and will ultimately produce infinitely more satisfaction and happiness than sinful compliance could have done. If he have God and his own conscience on his side, what need has he to fear? He has that which will support him equally in a palace and in a dungeon: he has that which will render him intrepid amidst the wreck of worlds, and even in the awful entrance into eternity.

III. Such being the general character of this excellent principle, let us, in the last place, observe *how admirably adapted it is to dispose us to a ready reception of the doctrines of Christ*; and, on the other hand, how opposite is the effect of an undue regard to the opinions of men.—We well know how much the understanding is biased by the state of the affections. It is evident, therefore, that where the love of reputation operates in the heart, the mind is predisposed to receive that doctrine, and to believe that system, which is the fairest in human estimation. But even if the error of that system is suspected, there will be no integrity of mind sufficient to secure its full investigation; no sense of the importance of truth sufficient to teach perseverance in that investigation till the truth is discovered; no fortitude of mind to bear the contempt and reproach which may follow an open confession of that truth. In fact, the man who follows the world, and seeks human esteem alone, has nothing to do with principle, or with investigation, or with truth. He has no claim to independent reflection. He is the slave of those whose opinion he courts, and must not venture to think or believe but as they bid him. It is not to a character like this, that it belongs to pursue the calm investigation of truth, even in its secret recesses; to avow it when it is in disgrace; to bear contempt and ridicule for it; to suffer for it with a martyr’s

constancy. No: this requires a sterling nobleness, a magnanimous independence of thought, a high superiority to all selfish considerations;—and it is only by the influence of some great principle operating on the mind that such magnanimity can be imparted. Such a principle is a supreme desire of the favour of God. Where that dwells in the soul, it immediately elevates it to the contemplation of noble and divine objects, communicates to it a cast of thinking by which it at once discovers the dignity and glory of Divine Truth, however despised, or degraded, or obscured; and is at once determined to pursue it as not less congenial to its own feelings, than agreeable to the will of God. Hence a pious Nicodemus, a devout Joseph of Arimathea, a guileless Nathanael, a just Zaccheus, an upright Centurion, were already disposed, by the fear of God, to embrace the religion of Christ; and, having received the truth, to suffer for it: while, on the other hand, the Pharisees, whose religion was only a disguised species of vanity, and whose hearts were alive only to human applause and worldly reputation, were the grand enemies of Christ; of Him, who neither in his person nor his doctrines professed anything which would gratify vanity, or minister to pride,—but who, on the contrary, bid his disciples take up their cross, deny themselves, and follow him who had not where to lay his head; who had no wealth or honour of this world, and taught his disciples to renounce the love of these things; who commanded them to be humble, to take the lowest place, and to set their affections on things above. The contrariety of such declarations to the spirit and temper of the Pharisees, is too obvious to need illustration. The Christian principle was as opposite to that of the Pharisees, as light to darkness, or heaven to hell.

Now there is the same evil at this day in the love of human estimation; the same power in it to indispose us for discovering and relishing the true religion. Would you therefore be the disciples of Christ, your first principle must be to value above everything the favour of God. Pray to that God from whom everything good and perfect proceedeth, that he would fill your mind with the deepest conviction of the infinite value of his favour, that you may act every day and in all things in such a manner as you think will please him. This must be your first principle; and then learn to give less weight to the opinions of men: dare to set light by their ridicule and censure, and value less their applause. Ask yourself whether the world in general fear God and act according to his will; if they do not, they are no safe guides to follow. Take the Bible into your hand, and let Christ become your Guide. If there is anything commanded by him that is contrary to the spirit and maxims of the world, be not ashamed to practise it; and, in a humble but manly spirit, avow your determination to conform yourself in everything to his will. With such a principle you will not fail to perceive the excellency of all that Christ has proposed for your belief, and commanded for

your practice. It will approve itself to you as being congenial to your views and disposition. Such a disposition will serve to correct many mistakes into which you might otherwise fall, and to discover to you many excellencies in the truths of Christianity which you would otherwise overlook. But this disposition is the gift of God. Pray for it, and it will not be denied to you: and whilst you pray, act. Be faithful and upright in doing everything which you believe you ought to do; and in giving up whatever you are required to resign for the sake of God. Then you will see the force and the truth of the words of the text, and the impossibility that those should believe aright who seek honour one of another, and not the honour which cometh from God only.