

THE
WORKS
OF
THE REV . JOHN NEWTON

LATE RECTOR OF THE UNITED PARISHES OF
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CONTAINING
AN AUTHENTIC NARRATIVE, &C., LETTERS ON RELIGIOUS SUBJECTS, CARDIPHONIA,
DISCOURSES INTENDED FOR THE PULPIT,
SERMONS PREACHED IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF OLNEY,
A REVIEW OF ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY, OLNEY HYMNS, POEMS,
MESSIAH, OCCASIONAL SERMONS, AND TRACTS.

TO WHICH ARE PREFIXED
MEMOIRS OF HIS LIFE, &c.

BY THE REV. R. CECIL, A. M.

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SERMONS

PREACHED IN THE PARISH-CHURCH OF OLNEY.
BUCKINGHAMSHIRE.

TO THE INHABITANTS OF THE PARISH OF OLNEY.

MY DEAR FRIENDS,

I HAVE principally two motives for publishing these Discourses. The one is, to exhibit a specimen of the doctrine that is taught and most surely believed amongst us, to satisfy those who desire information, and to stop, if possible, the mouth of Slander. I cheerfully submit them to examination, in full confidence that they contain nothing of moment which is not agreeable to the general strain of the word of God, and to the principles of the church whereof I am a minister, as specified in the Articles, Liturgy, and Homilies. And that what I now print is to the same purport with the usual course of my preaching, I doubt not but all who stately hear me, will do me the justice to acknowledge.

My other motive is, a desire of promoting your edification. It is my comfort that many of you live by the truths of the gospel, and highly prize them. You will not, therefore, be unwilling to view the substance of what you once heard with acceptance. But it is to be feared, that the far greater part of the congregation have need to have the things pertaining to their peace pressed upon them again and again, for a different reason; not because they know them, and therefore love to have them brought to their remembrance, but because they have hitherto heard them without effect. For the sake of both, therefore, I am willing to leave an abiding testimony amongst you. I hereby take each of your consciences to witness, that I am clear of your blood; and that, to the best of my knowledge and ability, I have not shunned to declare the whole counsel of God.

In the choice of the subjects I have selected for publication, I have not been solicitous to comprise a succinct scheme of gospel-doctrine, but have given the preference to such topics, which the peculiar circumstances of the times, and of my hearers, make me desirous might be had in continual remembrance.

The exposition of the third commandment, which was first delivered in your hearing, I afterwards preached (nearer the form in which it now appears) at London; and as it led me to touch on some particulars of a very public and interesting concern, I have given it a place in this volume. And I shall think myself happy indeed, if it may please God to give weight to the

testimony of so obscure a person, with respect to a grievance under which the nation groans.

As long discourses are in many respects inconvenient, I have chosen to publish no more than a brief summary of what you heard more at large from the pulpit. And as I aim to speak plain truths to a plain people, I have purposely avoided any studied ornaments in point of expression, being desirous to accommodate myself to the apprehensions of the most ignorant.

May it please the God of all grace to accompany my feeble endeavours to promote the knowledge of his truth with the powerful influence of his Holy Spirit! And I earnestly entreat all who know how to draw near to a throne of grace by Jesus Christ, to strive mightily in prayer for me, that I may stand fast in the faith, and increase in the knowledge of Jesus the Saviour, and that, for his sake, I may labour, without fear of fainting, in the service to which he has been pleased to call me. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all!

I am your affectionate friend, and servant in the gospel of Christ,

JOHN NEWTON.

Olney, January 20, 1767.

SERMON XIV.

BELIEVERS CAUTIONED AGAINST MISCONDUCT IN THEIR PROFESSION.

Let not your good be evil spoken of. ROM. xiv. 16.

THE immediate occasion of this caution you may learn from the context. It has pleased God from the beginning, to permit his people, who all agree in the great and essential truths of the gospel, to differ in some things of less importance. This difference of judgment gives room for the mutual exercise of patience, forbearance, tenderness, and charity, but, at the same time, too often affords opportunity for the remaining corruptions of the heart to discover and exert themselves. The Jewish converts were for some time attached to the observance of that distinction in meats and drinks which had been enjoined by the law of Moses: the Gentiles, on the contrary, claimed a right to be free from this yoke, as a part of the liberty which they had received from Christ. The apostle does not in this place blame either party with respect to their own judgment and practice; but he reproves them for censuring and despising each other, and he especially reproves those who understood their liberty in the gospel, for not being prudent in the use of it, but rather forward to provoke and offend their weaker brethren. He confirms their liberty, but admonishes them not to abuse it, either by urging others to act against their consciences, or by treating them with contempt, because they had not entirely laid aside these scruples and prejudices to which they had been long accustomed. "Let not your good be evil spoken of." Be thankful for your liberty, but do not bring it into discredit and reproach, by acting in an unbecoming spirit towards others.

The instruction in my text, understood in this sense, has always been applicable and seasonable in the Christian church, and perhaps never more so than in our land and in our times. While believers in Jesus, who are led by the same Spirit into the same fundamental truths, and stand in the most endeared relation to each other through their common Head, place such undue stress upon lesser incidental differences, and are professed partisans for the little interests of systems, denominations, and leaders, love, the grand characteristic of their profession, is hardly discernible; they censure and grieve each other, retard the success of the cause which they would all be thought to have most at heart, and open the mouths of the adversaries to revile that which they understand not. The prevalence of this wrong disposition calls for the admonition in my text. Be thankful for your privileges; you not only claim the rights of private judgment and liberty of conscience, as men and as Christians, but as Britons you possess them. "Let not then your good be

evil spoken of;” allow to others that freedom which you expect yourselves; and, if you do not suppose yourselves infallible, suppose it possible that some may be as near to the Lord as yourselves, who cannot agree with you in every sentiment you have adopted.

But this direction may be taken in a much more general sense. It behoves all who honour the Lord Jesus Christ to be careful in every part of their conduct, that they do not give occasion for their good to be evil spoken of. To make the subject as suitable as I can to the different states and characters of all present, I shall,

1. Inquire what is the believer’s good.

2. Explain and apply the advice here given, “Let not your good be evil spoken of.”

- I. All mankind have something near at heart, on which their dependence is placed, and wherein they find their chief pleasure. This (whatever it is) is their good; and, according to the object in which they delight, is their proper character. By nature the world and worldly things are the highest good we seek after; and these, in one view or other, as tempers and situations vary, are pursued with unwearied earnestness. Riches, honours, sinful pleasures, are the poor things in view, when the unrenewed heart cries out, in its eager pursuits, “Who will shew us any good? ’ Psal. iv. 6. If your strongest desires tend this way, your good will not be evil spoken of by many. Men will praise you when you do well for yourself; you are not therefore concerned in the admonition of my text. Only take notice what the word of God declares of your good, and of you for accounting it so. Your good is vanity, your fruit is vexation of spirit, and you who set your hearts on such a good as the objects of sense can furnish, are adjudged “enemies to God,” James iv. 4. You yourselves will speak evil of this good when you come to die, if you die in your sins. Then you will see a propriety in Esau’s words to your own case, “Behold, I am at the point to die, and what profit shall this birthright do to me?” Gen. xxv. 23.

As the world is the good of the unconverted, so a covenant God in Christ is the good and portion of all who are called by his grace. They are ever looking to the obedience and blood of Jesus, applied by the Spirit of grace, as the sole foundation of their hope and comfort. God is their good in the highest sense, and everything else is good, so far as it leads to him, and assists them in maintaining communion with him. In this view we may mention several particulars, each of which they account their good, because the means of enjoying and glorifying their God.

1. The gospel, that gracious revelation by which they have been taught to know themselves, and to know Jesus, is their good. All the doctrines, precepts, and promises, contained in the scriptures, are a very precious treas-

ure, in which they rejoice more than those who find great spoil. Each of them can say, in the language of the Psalmist, “The law of thy mouth is dearer to me than thousands of gold and silver. How sweet are thy words unto my taste, yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth! O how love I thy law! It is my meditation all the day long,” Psal. cxix. 72, 97, 103. By this word they are enlightened, quickened, warned, comforted, and supported; therefore it is the joy and rejoicing of their hearts, and more than their necessary food, Job xxiii. 12.

2. The ordinances make a part of their good. A famine of the word of the Lord would distress them greatly; and if they may but have frequent opportunities of this kind, and meet with his gracious presence in them, they can be content to be without many things which the men of this world highly value. When beset with many straits, and surrounded with troubles, they can find refreshment in the Lord’s assurance by the prophet, “And though the Lord give you the bread of adversity, and the water of affliction, yet shall not thy teachers be removed into a corner any more; but thine eyes shall see thy teachers,” Isa. xxx. 20. If this promise is fulfilled to them, they will not greatly complain of the bread of adversity, although that is joined with it. But on the contrary, they find it a hard trial to be deprived of lively ordinances and faithful ministers, however advantageous and pleasing their situation may be in temporal things, because these are not their good.

3. They account their profession a part of their good. They esteem it a high privilege to bear the name of Christ, though it exposes them to the reproach of the world. They account it a great and important trust to have the honour of the gospel committed to them, and in some measure dependent on their conduct. When they are in their right minds, they would rather die than be guilty of anything that might bring it into discredit. Wilfully they cannot, they dare not do it; but through ignorance and infirmity they are prone to mistake, and therefore need, and are desirous to observe, the caution in my text.

4. Their experiences are their good, their choice pearls; I mean, the inward dealings of the Lord with their souls: the proofs they have had of his power and wisdom in bringing them thus far safely on their way to his kingdom, the discoveries he has given them of the deceitfulness of their own hearts, the manifestations of his grace, love, and nearness to them, notwithstanding all their unworthiness and unfaithfulness. Some of these experiences have cost them dear, have cost them many a pang, trouble, and conflict; yet they would not be without them to avoid all that they have suffered; and they are content to suffer on, if by any means they may increase this precious stock. They delight to recollect how low they were brought, how wonderfully delivered, what answers they have been favoured with to

their poor prayers; and from hence to collect the all-sufficiency and goodness of him to whom they have fled for refuge, and to derive arguments wherewith to combat their unbelieving fears in time to come. Thus far their experiences are their good; not as the foundation of their hope, or the source of their comfort, for these their whole reliance is on the obedience and blood of Jesus the Saviour; but as evidences, that they have neither “followed cunningly-devised fables, nor received the grace of God in vain,” 2 Pet. i. 16; 2 Cor. vi. 1.

Thus much in general, that you may all have something whereby to try your spirits, and to know whether you have embraced the good of the Lord’s chosen people, Psal. cvi. 4, 5. If your good does not lie in such things as I have mentioned, you have no durable riches, nothing but what you must soon leave behind you. Can you be content to be stripped of all, and to enter poor, naked, and friendless, into an eternal world? O that you would take our Lord’s advice! He might command, for he has all authority: but he says, “I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich: and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eye-salve, that thou mayest see,” Rev. iii. 18.

But some there are whose hearts can go along with me in what I have said. The great God himself is your good. His word and ordinances, your profession of his name, and your experience of his goodness, are what you rejoice in. To you, then, I address the rest of my discourse. “Let not your good be evil spoken of.” I am,

II. To explain and apply this advice. The words plainly imply two things:

1. That there are many ready enough to speak evil of your good: many who despise the gospel, and you for professing it; they watch for your halting, and will be glad of the smallest occasion to expose you. The world, that loves its own, will make allowances in other cases. Indiscretions, and even vices, will be charged to the account of human infirmity, and the amiable name of candour shall be employed to conceal or palliate such things as can by no means be justified. But if you are a professed believer in Jesus, you must not expect this candour will be extended to you; rather, all your words and actions will be sifted, your mistakes exaggerated; and if any part of your conduct will bear a double construction, it will generally be viewed in the most unfavourable light. Nay, even when there is no just occasion afforded, falsehoods and calumnies have been, and will be, industriously propagated against the servants of Christ, Matth. v. 11. That it must be so, we are often warned by scripture, and it is abundantly confirmed by experience.

2. That though it is impossible wholly to stop the mouths of evil-minded

men, yet they would not be able to talk so fast if the imprudence of believers did not too often afford them advantage. That such occasions should sometimes be given by those whose hearts and aims are in the main sincere, will not be thought strange to any person who is acquainted with the true state of human nature. Through inadvertence, want of experience, errors of judgment, sudden and unexpected temptations, and other evils inseparable from our present situation, persons, whose chief desire is to adorn the doctrine of their God and Saviour in all things, may, and do, in some instances cause their good to be evil spoken of. It is, however, our bounden duty, as we regard the honour of God and his truth, to endeavour as much as possible to cut off occasion from them that seek occasion in this respect, 2 Cor. xi. 12. 1 Pet. ii. 12.

In order to this, let us inquire, what are the most common objections which are made against the gospel preaching and profession, not only by malicious enemies, but sometimes by persons who discover no very bad intention, but are partly imposed upon by the misrepresentations of others, and partly stumbled by the faults of professors?

1st, It is objected, that our doctrine lays no sufficient stress upon good works. We dare not indeed recommend them out of their proper place, or propose them as the ground of our acceptance with God. But I hope none who attend here will dare to say, that they are not frequently reminded, that “without holiness no man shall see the Lord,” Heb. xii. 14. However, the world will judge more by what they see in you, than by what they hear from me. Be upon your guard, therefore, lest by any instances of a trifling, foolish, unkind, or unjust conduct, you let your good be evil spoken of. It will not be a sufficient apology to say, that your principles do not allow of these things, if those who know you can charge them upon your practice.

2dly, It is farther objected, that the evangelical system is a scheme chiefly made up of notions and subtle distinctions, and opens a door to a thousand disputes. This is one unhappy consequence of our many divisions and subdivisions, and the heat with which they are contended for by their respective partisans. Let this engage you to avoid a disputing contentious spirit. “Be swift to hear, slow to speak” (James i. 19.); and when a reason is asked “of the hope that is in you” (1 Pet. iii. 15.), give your answers with meekness and fear, lest you cause your good to be evil spoken of.

3dly, It is likewise a very common objection, that a usual effect of this doctrine, is to make people idle and careless with regard to the necessary concerns and business of life. Indeed I should not be unwilling to plead with candid and fair reasoners, in behalf of young converts, on this point. At first setting out, the change is so great, their views of eternal things so strong and affecting, that, considering human infirmity, it can hardly be

otherwise but that the attention will be almost entirely taken up with them for a season.

While a sense of unpardoned sin is fixed upon the conscience and a person now duly aware of the uncertainty of life, is in suspense about the greatest of all concerns, and knows not how or whether he shall be able to flee from the wrath to come, it is no wonder if this solicitude should in a great measure swallow up his thoughts, and leave him but little either leisure or ability to attend to other concerns, which, however proper in their respective places, are confessedly, in comparison of this, of little or no importance. In like manner, the removal of this burden is usually accompanied with such a lively sense of the wisdom, love, power, and grace of God, revealed in Christ Jesus by the gospel, as may for a little while almost overpower and extinguish the apprehension of inferior things. But if this indifference about common duties continues very long, or is indulged to an extreme, it gives great and just offence. It causes the ways of truth to be evil spoken of, and we hardly know what to say, but this, That the fault is not owing to the gospel, but to the neglect of what the gospel teaches and enjoins. This is no new inconvenience; the apostles observed and reprov'd it in their day. There were such mistaken persons among the Thessalonians, who supposed or pretended, that the gospel exempted them from labour. Of these he says, "Now them that are such we exhort and command, that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread;" and farther directs, "that if they would not work, neither should they eat," 2 Thess. iii. 10–12. The Sabbath is the Lord's; and the same command which forbids us to do any work then, requires us to labour on the other six days. "Let not your good be evil spoken of." Be faithful to your trust, diligent in your business, do everything heartily as unto the Lord, and not unto men. Give no one just cause to say, that since you have become religious, you care not (as the phrase is) which end goes foremost; for this would be to put a stumbling-block in their way, and to increase their prejudices against the truth.

4thly, Once more, the gospel-doctrine is charged with weakening the bands of natural and social relation; that it makes children and servants heady, high-minded, and disobedient, so that they presently think themselves wiser than all about them, and are obstinately bent to have their own wills. This objection will indeed cleave to the gospel, so long as the spirit of the world and the spirit of God are opposite to each other. For cases will inevitably arise, where we must either displease God or man, and then we ought not to hesitate a moment. But professors should take care to be assured that there is such a necessity, before they act against lawful authority;

and especially when the point in dispute lies between children and parents. For though we ought to disobey and forsake father and mother when God's commands require it; yet next, under God, parents are, above all, to be honoured, consulted, and obeyed; and the excepted cases are not near so numerous as persons in the warmth of their first zeal are apt to suppose. The enemy suits his temptations to occasions; and it is no uncommon thing to be drawn to act violently in our own spirits, while we imagine we are striving in the cause of God and truth.

In short, we are directed to examine ourselves, and others are allowed to examine us by our fruits. The people of the world are not proper judges of spiritual experiences, but they can judge tolerably right of tempers and actions. Some will watch you out of ill-will, and some will observe you for information. If they hear you have begun to make a religious profession, they will take notice, to see if you are the better for it. They will observe you not only in the church, but in the shop and in the house; and if they perceive you are all of a piece, steady, quiet, humble, diligent, who knows but this may be a means in the hand of God to win upon them, and to give them a more favourable regard to the means which have wrought so effectually on you? But, on the contrary, if you are imprudent, rash, and careless, if you either conform to the world, or neglect your acknowledged duty in it, you will cause your good to be evil spoken of, bring difficulties upon yourselves, and put it out of your own power to be useful to others. Pray, therefore, for wisdom and grace, to make your light so shine before men, that they, seeing your good works, may glorify your Father who is in heaven. This is the great design and proper effect of the gospel, when rightly understood. For as it is the grace of God alone which bringeth salvation; so this grace not only enlightens the understanding, but purifies the heart, regulates the conduct, works by love, and overcomes the world. It effectually teaches and enforces (what the best schemes of morality and philosophy have always failed in) the denial of all ungodliness and worldly lusts (Tit. ii. 11–15.): and by the motives it displays, and the strength it communicates, enables the true Christian to adorn his character in every relation, and to fill up the whole circle of duty as it respects himself, his neighbour, and the God with whom he has to do. It teaches to live soberly, righteously, and godly; to avoid whatever is contrary to the purity of the gospel; to practise moderation in the use even of lawful things; and to do unto others as we would they should do unto us. It teaches the rich to be humble and bountiful, the poor to be thankful and resigned. It teaches superiors to be kind, inferiors to be faithful. Husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and servants, magistrates and people, are all instructed by this grace to a conduct answerable to their high calling, and the common relation they stand in to

him who has loved them, and washed them from their sins in his own blood. For the morality of the gospel has a nobler spring, and a more extensive scope, than the ties of social life. Their sobriety and righteousness are not substituted in the place of vital godliness, but are the fruits derived from it. The grace of God teaches them to live godly, to delight in him, to obey him, to do everything for his sake, as under his eye, and to be continually governed by a sense of his unspeakable love manifested in his Son, and “an expectation of the blessed hope set before us, the glorious appearance of the great God, and our Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us, that by his blood and Spirit he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works.” Labour to show, that you are not only called by his name, but have sat at his feet, and drank of his Spirit; and if, after all, unreasonable and wicked men will speak evil of you and your good, be not moved at it, but pity and pray for them. When he shall return to vindicate your cause, and wipe away your reproach, then “every cloud shall be removed, and the righteous shall shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father,” Matth. xiii. 43.