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1790

A
S E R M O N
ON
S L A N D E R,

DELIVERED AT THE
CHURCH IN BRATTLE-STREET,
BOSTON,

OCTOBER 24, 1790.



BY THE REVEREND
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A
S E R M O N
O N
S L A N D E R.



SPEAK NOT EVIL ONE OF ANOTHER, BRETHREN.

JAMES IV. 11.

CONVERSATION often offends against this precept. In common language, indeed, Slander is supposed to imply such false and malicious imputations only as are designed to do some essential and important injury to character or interest. But if the imputations are believed to be true ; or if they embrace only foibles, and faults of an inferior degree ; if they are retailed for the amusement of company, or to supply the barrenness of conversation, these are hardly reputed to be slanders, and, on such subjects, men, with great facility, give and receive a mutual indulgence. The prohibition in the text, however, extends to every degree of evil speaking that is not vindicated by necessity and utility. I limit my views in this manner, because there are situations

situations in which speaking evil of others may not only be lawful, but may become a duty. A parent may counsel his children against the dangers of vicious companions—a friend may endeavour to preserve a friend from the hazards of an improper connexion—a citizen may bear his testimony to the truth, when the laws of his country, or the public good requires it. But such cases are always attended with such marked and peculiar characters, as easily to discriminate them from the unnecessary and unlawful conversations which are the faults of every day.

In holding up to view this vice for your correction, I shall exhibit it in three different lights—as the imputations are malicious, and known to be false—as they are supposed to be true—and as it prevails in company, where the intention is not conceived to be malevolent, nor the faults that are repeated, to be of great moment.

I. The first is malicious detraction, founded on known and intentional falsehood. When it proceeds indeed to this extreme, it argues such malignity of disposition, that all men agree to condemn it in others, and all disclaim it in themselves. Yet, when the unfriendly passions are excited; when personal animosities inflame the temper; when the heart is alienated by opposing interests, or by the differences of party, how often do men esteem all means lawful to annoy an enemy? If his conduct will bear a malicious, or a doubtful interpretation, they

they are little scrupulous of seizing it on its worst side, and placing it in its most obnoxious light. And, altho they may not believe their own tale, yet if it makes an unfavourable impression on the public mind, they are pleased with their success, and triumph in their power of making an enemy feel their resentment. It deserves here to be remarked, that many slanders, which are believed by those who have invented them, ought to be reduced under this class; because, altho propagated at first with intentional falsehood, they come at length to be believed, merely thro the force of repetition, or the imposing influence of warm and interested passions. To this vice, and in this degree of it, ardent and sanguine tempers, especially if united with a natural loquacity, are the most prone.

Will it be said, that such deliberate falsehood, when a slanderer has not even appearances to support him, is rare? Perhaps it is so. Yet, in a more guarded and insidious way, it is far from being infrequent. On the ground of actions that have some truth, is laid a representation, that, on the whole, is false. Facts are exaggerated, circumstances are added to furnish out a heightened and consistent picture. If the interests of the narrator are little concerned, fancy adds a colouring that she thinks necessary to interest the hearer—If he conceives himself to be injured, passion colours it, to justify her resentments.

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Under this character of falsehood and malice may be ranged a great part of those dark, designing slanders, which are propagated by hint and insinuation. Nothing, perhaps, is said that can be charged as a direct violation of the truth; but every thing is suggested to the imagination; and the intentional deception is a real infraction of the laws of candour and sincerity. The slanderer hopes that every doubtful expression will be interpreted in its worst meaning, that every suppressed circumstance will be exaggerated, and that an awakened imagination will complete a history which he affects to conceal. Thus, by a hint, by a supposition, by the most distant insinuation, nay, by certain modes of silence, it is possible to be guilty of false and malicious slander.

II. The next light in which I proposed to represent this vice, is as it consists of imputations propagated and vindicated under the idea of their being true.

There is a common proverb continually in the mouths of those who are most guilty, *that the truth is no slander*. And with this severe saying, they pretend to justify the most cruel attacks upon character, and the most unchristian asperities of temper. This proverb is false—and if it were not so, it is insufficient to justify remarks and histories which are seldom supported by intire truth. 1st. It is false. Truth may often become the most offensive slander. It may recall to memory, or divulge

vulge where they were never known, the faults of a good man, of which he is absolved by repentance in the sight of God. He may have forsaken them; he may be cleansed from them in the blood of the Redeemer; and who art thou, O Man! who dost not forgive, nor blot from thy memory, the lamented evils which God hath pardoned? In as much as we know not the heart, the repetition of our brother's offences must often prove a presumptuous arrogation of the divine prerogative to judge and condemn, after God himself hath laid aside its rights.

Admitting, however, that he were not penitent, the truth would, notwithstanding, be an unjust representation of his character. Every character possesses its good as well as its bad qualities; and it cannot be justly known without seeing them together. When slander speaks only of its vices, it presents to us a detestable image, which has no proper original. It exhibits an object that deserves contempt, or hatred, instead of that mixed character, so like our own, which it ought to shew us, and which would attract our benevolence or pity. Every hearer may probably recollect, that, in some instances, he has received the most unjust prepossessions, from the representations of slander, against characters before they were known, which, on the whole, were worthy and good. When, on more intimate knowledge, you come to discover your error, and to correct your opinion, you are
ready

ready to impeach the veracity of the man, who has, in this manner, attempted to infuse an unjust prejudice into your mind. Yet, it is possible he may have said nothing but the truth. His injustice consisted in not saying the whole truth. And it may be received as a maxim, that even truth will mislead, and will often become slander, when it holds up the faults only of character to view.

I add, that the truth becomes slander when it unnecessarily divulges the errors of our brethren. It tends to destroy the charity of others towards them; it flows from an uncharitable and unfriendly disposition, or discovers an indifference to their happiness and peace, unbecoming the spirit of the gospel. When you justify yourself with this false and angry proverb, *that truth is no slander*, is it not evidently the effect of prejudice and passion? All unnecessary speaking of evil is uncharitable—it does an unwarrantable injury to character, and therefore justly comes under the reproach of slander.—To convince every fair and candid hearer of the justice of this observation, let me put the case immediately to himself. Let him be the subject of these injurious representations—and surely he has faults enow to furnish out a plausible and consistent tale—let his vices be separated from his virtues, and be made the subject of ridicule or censure—would he not exclaim against the unfairness? would he not complain of malevolence and slander? But a good man ought never to forget, that
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what towards him is slander, is slander also towards his brother. So false is this proverb, on which men plead the innocence of speaking evil one of another.

But 2dly—If it were not false, it is insufficient to justify defamation, which is seldom supported by intire truth.

It requires small acquaintance with human nature to understand how vague and uncertain are those tales and whispers that are circulated and believed in every company. Examine their origin. They are not, in most instances, founded on observation, but on report. And who is so ignorant of mankind as not to know that report, in passing only through a few mouths, is so magnified, and disguised, as to lose almost all resemblance of the original? The object of it is liable, at first, to inaccurate observation—it is liable also to misrepresentation from the negligence or the passions of the narrator, or from the natural desire of being the interesting author of a curious history—it is liable to the misconception of the hearer—and, finally, it is liable to all these causes of mistake at every repetition. He that propagates a slander from report, must be either malevolent, or weak; indifferent to the peace and happiness of others, and pleased, perhaps, with an opportunity of depreciating their worth; or credulous and imprudent—inattentive to the natural growth of falsehood in common fame, and incapable of suppressing that restless itch of

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speaking that is most visible in weak and inconsiderate minds. In vain will you plead that the guilt of the scandal lies with its inventors, and not with those who only repeat a history that is already public. It is, I believe, a general truth, that the authors and the propagators of such tales act under the influence of the same unworthy motives.

I add another remark, that equally deserves attention. Admitting an injurious history to be founded on observation, there is, notwithstanding, greater probability of its being false, than of its being true. Human characters and actions appear with different aspects, according as they are seen in different lights. We are seldom placed to them in the true point of view. They appear differently, likewise, as they are seen in different connexions. And actions cannot be justly estimated when they are viewed singly, and detached from the general train of conduct. To understand them perfectly, we should be acquainted with the motives from which they spring—with the circumstances with which they are accompanied, and with the consequences that result from them. We should be able to trace them in all their connexions and relations, otherways we shall be liable to form a wrong judgment. For example, casting the poor and wretched from your door may, in some circumstances, be an act of justice, and, in others, of hardness and cruelty. Even taking the life of a man, as it stands in different combinations, may be the highest

highest crime, or an exalted virtue. If we judge of one, or of a few actions by themselves, and separated from the train of life; if we associate them, in imagination, with circumstances and motives different from those with which they are really connected, we may contract a prejudice against the best characters. To frame an accurate and certain judgment of our neighbour's conduct, requires great circumspection, and frequently an intimate acquaintance with his most private transactions and most secret thoughts. How few of those who delight in slander, enjoy the means of ascertaining the truth? how few of those who enjoy the means, are willing to employ the necessary pains?

If negligence and indifference expose us to form a wrong judgment of actions, passions and prejudices will have this effect in a much higher degree. Opposing interests, parties in government, in religion, in opinion, different classes in society, or connexions even with different circles of company, give a strong colouring to every object they represent. They create faults; they aggravate every real imperfection, and, almost unperceived by ourselves, they distort the features which we draw of an obnoxious character. Thus it appears that personal observation is no security for truth in this vice—still less is common fame. But if the obloquy were as certainly founded as it is pretended to be [I have shewn that] truth itself is slander, when it rests on partial observation, or when it is an unnecessary

necessary infraction of the laws of Christian charity, which require us to love our neighbour as ourselves.

III. I proceed now to consider this vice as it forms a part of the amusement of society, and fills up so large a portion of its ordinary conversation. It is, unhappily, not rare to find the grossest slanders occupying and disgracing the visits of the morning, and the parties of the evening. But I have a reference, at present, to those lighter faults of character which compose the usual strain of company, and are esteemed the venial amusement of our social leisure. Here characters and conduct are produced and vilified from different views—sometimes to supply defect of conversation—sometimes thro mere loquacity—sometimes to indulge a facetious vein—sometimes to excite or gratify a frivolous curiosity—sometimes to vent a private umbrage—and sometimes to please those whom we may have an interest in pleasing, by sacrificing an obnoxious person to their resentment or vanity,—On each of these motives, I beg your attention to a few reflexions.

The first and most frequent cause of producing and aspersing character, arises from barrenness of conversation. Mixed companies are usually incapable of the elegant display of wit, or of rational and useful discussions—the laxness of our morals has rendered sentiments of piety scarcely tolerable—and usually there is too little real candour and benevolence in such circles to take pleasure in exhibiting

hibiting the amiable qualities of their acquaintance, with whom self-love and the jealousies of honour and interest have unhappily created many more points of difference than of union. In this situation, the blemishes of character present themselves as the easiest sacrifice to the general amusement. These are subjects that are competent to the capacities of all, and too likely to be agreeable to their inclinations. Faults are easily repeated. From different motives, they meet with attention and encouragement. And it is not a little surprising, to a serious and contemplative mind, to observe with what a relish the malevolence of mankind will bear the eternal repetition of the same foibles.

It is not uncommon, in the next place, to hear persons offend thro mere loquacity. Forever speaking, they seldom govern their conversation with prudence, or are able to direct it to a useful purpose. This humour is generally united with weakness of judgment, which knows not the proper time and measure of discourse; and with a prying disposition, that is ever searching into the secrets of families and characters, to furnish a fund for their perpetual volubility. In the beginning, perhaps, they err rather thro indiscretion than malevolence; yet are they often more dangerous than the most malicious men, who govern their tongue with greater prudence.

Friends to none, they are without friends themselves—despised by all, they have, notwithstanding,

ing, the power to render others unhappy, and to sow the seeds of dissention thro society. They who will be always talking, must be often foolish, and often wicked. And as the tongue contributes to form the heart, their own tale-bearing brings them, at length, to commit those faults thro malevolence, which, at first, were the fruits merely of weakness and indiscretion.

When company is in a gay and facetious vein, the weaknesses and errors of others are made the subject of ridicule and mirth. The *general* faults of character, that should not hold particular persons up to contempt, would be the lawful objects of its correction and amusement. But to be agreeable in this way, requires a larger fund of observation, and of the genuine spirit of wit, than is usually to be found in mixed societies. Less invention and fancy are necessary to descend upon particular characters. It is easy for ill-nature to sneer—memory alone is sufficient to represent an improper action, or to repeat a ludicrous tale. And the passions, or interests of the hearers, or their inclination to be amused, procure it an indulgent reception. Slander often assumes this form, in which the gaiety of the heart, and the pleasantry of all countenances, make us almost forget that it is a hateful and contemptible vice. Here let me again make use of our own self-love to teach us our duty; or, at least, to convince us of sin. Let us make the case our own. Let us suppose ourselves the
 subjects

subjects of ridicule or sneer, and by the keenness of our feelings, judge of the injury that is done to the sensibility of others. Indifference to their honour or happiness is a fault in the view of Christianity—but to trifle improperly with character, is the hardness of selfishness—to be sportive, is the triumph of ill-nature.

In this light let us consider those daily parties which are intended to preserve the appearances of sociability and friendship. What are they but perpetual offences against every humane and amiable disposition? Here characters are lost, intimacies are betrayed, acquaintances are depreciated, friends are sacrificed. The same uncharitable, cold, and treacherous spirit lurks, under the face of gaiety and pleasure, in every bosom; and he who smiles at your story in this company, is ready to smile at you in the next. Under the highest appearances of union, hilarity and social enjoyment, each is secretly divided against all.—Here, that sex, formed to soften and sweeten human life, whose glory it is, and who have it so much in their power, to correct the rougher passions and manners of men, may themselves become cruel. It would even seem as if the peculiar sensibility of their hearts, by making rivalships more ardent, and multiplying the points of competition, sometimes added keenness to their invective, added bitterness to their satire, and gave a peculiar poignancy to their ridicule.

Slander, in the next place, is often propagated thro

thro the desire of exciting or gratifying a frivolous curiosity. To be the first to relate a new story, is a strong temptation to rash and indiscreet loquacity. Novelty attracts attention—obloquy seems to gratify another, and equally powerful principle of corrupted nature—and a little mind is pleased with the temporary importance which the malignant curiosity of others bestows upon it. Blemishes in conduct are eagerly searched after, and displayed; the unhappineffes of families raked out, and exposed; and secrets of all kinds pried into, in order to be published. Such spirits are the pests of society. They multiply the causes of mutual indifference and contempt among those who should regard one another as brethren—they scatter contagion and diffention round them—and, provided they can satisfy this ever-listening disposition, are little concerned what unhappineffes they create, or what wounds they inflict.

I add, that this licentiousness of tongue is often indulged to vent some secret umbrage. The infinite collisions and interfering claims of the world insensibly create causes of alienation, prone to receive and impart unfavourable impressions of others. Even rising reputation is apt to be considered as, in some degree, hostile to us, and is often opposed by the most low and unworthy arts. The praise that is sometimes bestowed, by a friendly or generous tongue, upon the absent, is liable to be interpreted as implying some inferiority in the
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present, and is seldom received without being answered and allayed by exceptions.

But the most warm and loquacious animosities, and the most bitter remarks, are usually observed in persons of sanguine tempers, who are easily wrapped into fervent friendships, and as suddenly transported into violent resentments. With them, almost every man must be a friend or an enemy. They are too warm to be indifferent. This zeal passes, in their own opinion, into a character of honesty and merit. It requires the warmth of its friendships to be answered with reciprocal ardor; and friends to proceed with it all its lengths, in the pursuit of imaginary schemes. And such sacrifices are continually necessary to keep up and demonstrate the sincerity of mutual attachment, that friendships must be often broken, and friends must be often changed. But they are usually changed in a storm—and woe to that person on whom it falls! for these good and benevolent men are no less susceptible of rage than of kindness. And then faults innumerable are repeated and exaggerated—sarcasm, satire, reproach, and the most envenomed detraction, are employed to vilify a brother converted into an enemy—and all companies are tired with histories of wrongs.

I have mentioned, as the last and meanest exercise of this vice, the speaking evil of others for the sake of creeping into the good opinion of those from whose favour some advantage may be derived.

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To substitute art and cunning for truth and integrity—to trample on innocent character, in order to promote an oblique interest, are among the most unworthy actions of vice. This disposition is always united with secret treachery; and he who is now the idol to which the sacrifice of character is made, shall himself become the sacrifice, if interest varies, or the fickle smiles of fortune are changed. And it may perhaps be taken for an universal maxim, that evil speaking always indicates some rashness and imprudence of spirit, some malevolence of disposition, or some hollowness of heart, that ought to be trusted with caution.

I proceed to conclude this discourse with a few reflexions. The first is designed to correct a mistake of considerable consequence, which prevails in the world, with regard to the nature of this vice. Here slander generally implies the falsehood of the imputations. If they are supposed to be true, it is esteemed a lawful privilege of speech. But, my brethren, the spirit of the gospel condemns every degree of evil speaking that is not rendered necessary by prior and superior claims of society. If a brother be really guilty of errors, in his conduct, he needs counsel and advice; he needs only information and persuasion, perhaps, to render him a good man. What end can the repetition of evils serve, but to create enemies to ourselves, to nourish enmity in our own breasts, and to augment the contempt, the distrust, the hatred, and all the uncharitable

charitable passions that already divide mankind ? If he be not guilty, how cruel the sacrifice that is made of his honour and his feelings ? And has not every good and candid man, who knows the world, observed that the slanders of common fame have usually more of falsehood than of truth ? How often does she frame histories without any foundation ? how often does she build upon a real foundation, a superstructure of false additions ? Slander can seldom be true, from the nature of the principles from which it springs. Passion and prejudice, and all the unfriendly dispositions, tend to misrepresent their objects. And if we should take the characters of mankind only from enemies, what a hateful picture should we draw of human nature ? If, without enmity or prejudice, we hear and repeat only eternal histories of evils, what an unjust impression of characters must they create ? Characters, perhaps, in which virtue and goodness predominate, appearing only by their faults, and the infected imagination of the hearers, being left to fill up all that is unknown with similar qualities and dispositions, must be considered as abandoned in vice and folly. Let every man reflect, what injustice he would suffer, if his errors only were selected, and exposed to the world without the union of those good qualities which ought to cover them, if not to God, at least, in the sight of men. Let him, therefore, refuse to listen to obloquy—let him abhor to propagate it.

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2. In the next place, this subject suggests a reflexion on the guilt of slander. Few crimes are attended with a more pernicious effect on society—few tend more to divide and alienate mankind from one another, and to extinguish that spirit of benevolence, which is the true principle of duty and of happiness. The wounds that are given and received, by thoughtless or envenomed tongues, rankle in the heart, awaken mutual and keen resentments, and greatly multiply the miseries that afflict the life of man. Slander makes us the enemies of those whom we have injured. In vain do we excuse its lightest indiscretions, as being the fruits merely of inattention; or as a harmless amusement, derived from the small and venial failings of our neighbour—Could we be guilty of equal inattention to ourselves? Could we, in the same manner, sport with the character of a parent, of a brother, of a sister, of a friend? Is not the difference which we make in favour of these, a proof that the temper of our charity is not the same to the one, and to the other? Is it not a proof, that some secret coldness or malevolence towards our brother, lurks within our bosom, that deceives or escapes our view?

Another proof of the guilt of this crime, is the injustice it does to *reputation*, which is more valued, by a good and generous mind, than *life* itself. And, when the imputations are of moment, it is followed by unhappy and irreparable consequences to peace, honour, and character. When once a
slander

slander is committed to the public, who can answer for the degree to which it will proceed, or for the injury it will produce? Every repetition will add somewhat to it, till common fame may at length raise into a monster, what might have been originally a failing that deserved our pardon or compassion. Perhaps, without a failing, the indiscretion of one unfriendly or inconsiderate tongue, may have alarmed all imaginations, may have soured all hearts, and filled a country with the wrecks of an innocent and ruined reputation. In vain shall you attempt to retrieve your name, by proving the falsehood of the slander—You may prove it false—and still your honour shall be tarnished, and your innocence shall have received an indelible stain. In vain shall you expect reparation from the repentance of the slanderer—The injury he has done you has made him your enemy. But if he should repent, he cannot correct the evil he has done. The slander is gone from him—it is in the possession of others. Alas! what jealousies, what distrusts, what mutual alienation, what secret anguish, what unhallowed passions, what poignant miseries often flow from this guilty source? O my soul! come not thou into their secrets!—Christians! whose spirit is charity, and whose symbol should be concord, flee this pernicious vice, which is full of division and unhappiness!

3. Frequently it is seen, that the professors of religion are too little sensible of the evil of this sin,

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Fixing their view on those transcendent principles of the gospel, the love of God, and the faith of Christ, they are apt to forget the importance which the government of the tongue should hold in the system of duty. But it ought always to be remembered, that however earnestly we may contend for the faith; however fervently we may discharge the duties of devotion; yet if we have not learned to guard the tongue, we are nourishing the seeds of death; we are destitute of that humility, and that sincere and amiable spirit of love, which is the character, and the great ornament of the gospel of Christ.

4. I conclude the whole with a few directions to those who are willing to understand, and to fulfil their duty. Learn to govern the tongue—abstain from character as from a sacred treasure, that ought to be approached with reverence—as the most delicate of all possessions, liable to be tarnished with the lightest breath. Where your influence in society gives you the power, endeavour to turn such unprofitable conversations into a wiser channel. But if you must yield to the indiscretion of uncharitable tongues, learn to be silent. Silence is the school of prudence—it preserves the calmness and moderation of the mind—it will cure anger, or it will prevent its growth. The heart, when not disturbed and irritated by the petulance of the tongue, is prone to the benevolent affections that unite man to man. A licentious tongue kindles
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and augments resentments, and having once committed them to the public, they become irreconcilable and eternal.—“ The tongue is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison—it is a world of iniquity—it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature, and it is set on fire of Hell.”

In the next place, cultivate the spirit of charity—“ Charity casts a veil over a multitude of sins”—Charity delights in saying, as well as in doing good. Frequently to recount the amiable qualities of our neighbours and acquaintance, would cultivate our own benevolence, would tend to conciliate all hearts, and unite society in Christian love, as much as it is now divided by uncharitable and disgraceful passions.—Love thy neighbour as thyself—often substitute thyself in his room—do to others what thou wouldst that they should do to thee—cultivate this spirit into a habit of action, and thou canst not err in the discharge of this important duty.

Finally, improve in true humility. Let us consider our innumerable offences against God—Let us consider in how many obnoxious lights we stand to men. A proper sensibility to our own faults will make us tender and cautious of touching the failings of our neighbour. The remembrance of the injustice we have suffered from other tongues will arrest our indiscretion—and the remembrance of the supreme judgment of Heaven will prostrate in the dust that arrogance and vanity which always accompany

accompany the spirit of slander. The humble Christian speaketh no evil—thinketh no evil. Humility, in his breast, becomes a spirit of meekness and charity. As it is the reigning temper of our duty to God, it will also be found one of the great principles of the law of love to our fellow men.

Almighty God ! bestow on us, we beseech thee, this spirit of union and peace, and grant that our words may be always seasoned with grace—for Christ's sake !

A M E N !



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